



## EPISODE 9, 2004: GOLD SHIP, SOUTH EAST ALASKA.

Elyse Luray: Our first story reveals new details about a legendary ship that opened the last American frontier. It is 1897. America is in the grip of a desperate economic depression. Across the country, banks and businesses have closed. Millions of people are unemployed. Then on July 17<sup>th</sup> a ship, bound from southeast Alaska steams into Seattle harbor. On board the SS *Portland* are 68 prospectors with over a ton of newly mined gold. News of the *Portland*'s arrival electrifies the nation. It sparks a stampede to the gold fields of the Klondike. And turns the ship into a legend. Some years later, the *Portland* wrecks off the Alaskan coast – and is lost to history.

Until now. Some 90 years later a man thinks he may have found the remains of the ship that started the last great American Gold Rush. Environmentalist Gabriel Scott was exploring a remote river valley in South East Alaska when he stumbled across some wreckage.

Gabriel: The first thing we saw was a chunk of steel, a big barrel coming out of the river bed. And when we walked up and looked at it closer, you can see there's kind of wood attached to the steel...

Elyse: Intrigued, Gabriel asked local residents about the wreck.

Gabriel: There are local stories I've heard from guides that the wreck of the old steamship the *Portland* is in the Katalla River.

Elyse: Could Gabriel's wreck really be the remains of American's most famous gold ship? I'm Elyse Luray... and I've come to Gabriel's hometown of Cordova, to investigate. Gabe?

Gabriel: Howdy.

Elyse: Hi. Elyse

Gabriel: Hey. Gabriel. Welcome to Cordova!

Elyse: Nice to meet you. Show me what you got. Ah, so that's the wreck?

Gabriel: Yup. This is the mouth of the Katalla River. This is the way it looked last July.

Elyse: What do you want to know?

Gabriel: Well, I'd like to know if this is the S.S. *Portland*. And a little bit about that ship's role in the Gold Rush.

Elyse: Well, if this is the S.S. *Portland*, that would be an amazing find! I'll see what I can do! The wreck site is in an inaccessible location some 50 miles southeast of Cordova and will take a serious expedition to get there. So before I do anything, I want to find out more about the S.S. *Portland*. I'm headed to Seattle, Washington, the place where the Klondike Gold Rush began. Here at the Museum of History and Industry, I'm meeting historian Lorraine McConaghy.

Lorraine: The *Portland* really is the great gold ship of Seattle's Klondike gold rush. It is the first to return to Seattle on July 17<sup>th</sup>, with 68 very ordinary people who had found a million dollars in gold dust and nuggets. They brought it back in coffee cans. They brought it back in socks. They were astounded by their own success, and Seattleites were expecting, they were anticipating the arrival of the *Portland* because the morning paper, the *Post Intelligencer* had already announced that the *Portland* was coming.

Elyse: "Gold, gold, gold, gold! 68 rich men on the steamer *Portland*. Stacks of yellow metal." Well, this much have had a huge impact on Seattle!

Lorraine: It was phenomenal. 5000 people strung themselves out across the waterfront to see the arrival of the *Portland*. Every berth on the *Portland* going north again was sold by the end of the day. Seattle's Mayor, who was at a conference in San Francisco, didn't return. He telegraphed his resignation, and went straight to the Klondike. According to Lorraine over the next two years some 100,000 other men and women made the long and arduous journey to the frozen waste-

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lands of the Yukon – in the hope of “getting rich quick”. Facing terrible weather and treacherous terrain prospectors crossed the arduous Chilkoot trail to the town of Dawson. Here, they had to dig through some 50 feet of frozen earth – with no guarantee of success. In fact, only a handful of people made their fortune. Many more returned home empty-handed. Still, the Klondike Gold Rush put Alaska on the map. And in Seattle, money made by merchants triggered a period of explosive economic growth.

Lorraine: Seattle boomed in a fantastic way on the heels of the gold rush. And it never looked back. This is the turning point for the city. And all this began with the arrival of SS *Portland*.

Elyse: So what happened to her?

Lorraine: In the decade after its arrival in 1897 the *Portland* has a long career as a workhorse taking miners back and forth from Seattle to points north. We do know though in 1910, in a terrible blizzard, the *Portland* wrecks off the coast of Alaska

Elyse: Two pieces of the *Portland* are now in display in the museum the ships wheel and the ships clock rescued from the *Portland* before it sank. Lorraine doesn't know exactly where the *Portland* was wrecked. But has something that might help.

Lorraine: We have a photograph in the collection that shows the ship sighted in this bay, heeling over as she begins to sink. So I'm headed to the newsprint collection at the Cordova Historical Museum. Here you can find original copies of the Cordova Daily Alaskan. I'm looking for November 12, 1910, the day of the ship wreck.

Elyse: Ah, here it is: “STEAMER PORTLAND STRIKES ROCK” Here's a description of the incident: “During blinding snow storm, vessel meets with accident...” and listen to this! “and is beached at the mouth of the Katalla River!” That's just where Gabriel says he found his wreck! Okay, this is from Monday, November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1910. “Steamer *Portland* a total wreck, waves battering her to pieces”.

It says here “the steamer *Portland*, which struck a rock off Martin Island on Saturday morning is a total loss”. Then it goes on to say, “If the present storm continues, there will be very little of the vessel left in the morning.” And here is the next day's headline: “What Remained of the Steamer After Being Battered By the High Seas Has Finally Gone to the Bottom”.

If the *Portland* did disintegrate, it seems unlikely this is the same wreck that Gabriel saw poking out of the water. I want to talk to someone who knows about shipwrecks... I'm meeting maritime historian Mike Burwell who keeps a database of wrecks for the state of Alaska. Mike, tell me a little bit about the area where the SS *Portland* went down. Were shipwrecks common in this part of Alaska?

Mike: Yeah, the whole Gulf of Alaska is very treacherous, it probably has 500 to 1000 wrecks.

Elyse: Wow. Mike tells me there are two to three times more wrecks on this coast than the Bermuda Triangle. Here ship captains face violent storms and dangerous tides with few safe ports for refuge. And do you have the SS *Portland* in your database?

Mike: I never did have it in the database, but I did come across the wreck report.

Elyse: Oh, good, let's look at this. So this confirms the date of Nov. 12<sup>th</sup>, 1910, and it says that the *Portland* was going from Seattle to Cordova, and she hit a rock on Palm Point?

Mike: Yeah, Palm Point's right here, and that makes sense because it's coming from the south, it's going around Cape St. Elias, and it's coming in this direction, and there's a lot of shoals here, even before you hit Palm Point.

Elyse: According to Mike the area is so dangerous, there are eight or nine known wrecks in Katalla Bay alone. So what are the chances of Gabriel's wreck being the *Portland*?

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Mike: It's hard to know. We'd have to go to the location and investigate.

Elyse: To get there, I'm going to need some help. State Archaeologist Dave McMahan is also intrigued by Gabriel's discovery. And he's willing to work with me to put together an expedition.

Dave: Well, you can see the old town site of Katalla, where the wreck site is, is a little bit east of the Copper River Delta. And you notice on the map there are no roads. Like many communities in Alaska, the only way to get there is by bush plane or by boat.

Elyse: Dave and I choose a team of experts and make plans to charter planes to the Katalla River. A couple of days later, we gather in Cordova. The team includes a nautical archaeologist, John Jensen, our maritime historian, Mike Burwell and a historical archaeologist, Karl Gerkey. Our destination lies over mountains, wetlands, and rocky coastline. The pilots land on the beach at the mouth of the Katalla River and we hike overland to our base camp.

Elyse: So this is the site?

Karl: That's right, according to Gabe it should be right over there but we've got several hours before low tide.

Elyse: While waiting for the tide to go out, I show archaeologist, Karl Gerkey the 1910 photograph of the Portland to see if he can match the landscape. What do you think?

Karl: Uh, I think so. Look at that ridge line there, and the mountain peaks.

Elyse: But there are some discrepancies.

Karl: The vegetation has changed quite a bit, but you know, that's been 90 years, and then, uh, you've got the silting in over the years.

Elyse: Karl also tells me that, that in 1964 Alaska experienced its largest ever, recorded earthquake.

Karl: That uplifted the whole area ten to twelve feet! That may explain why the ship has reappeared.

Elyse: The uplift would have increased erosion and revealed objects hidden deep in the mud of the sea-bed. So this could be the place where the *Portland* ran aground. But we won't know for sure until we examine the wreck itself. We watch and wait as the tide goes out. Eventually, we see the wreck for the first time. It's larger than archaeologist Dave McMahan expected.

Dave: Well, that's really something. It's hard to grasp the size from the photographs.

Karl: There's a lot of machinery, there.

John: A lot's buried, too. I mean, just looking at the way it's oriented on the bank, there's a lot more here than what I thought from those original pictures.

Elyse: We've only got a couple of hours till the tide comes back in, so we have to work fast. The first thing we look for is the direction the ship was heading. If it's the *Portland*, she'll be pointing up river. Fortunately, the bow is still visible.

Dave: Well it's something, looks like the bows pointed upstream at about 60 degrees.

John: Yea well they sure as heck weren't gonna turn it around this a pretty narrow stretch of water.

Elyse: Next we need to confirm the wreck is the right size to be the Portland. Unfortunately, too much is missing to get an accurate measurement of the ship's length. But nautical archaeologist John Jenson hopes we can measure the width.

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John: You're gonna go over to the side of the ship, the wood that's sticking up.

Elyse: Okay, right here?

John: The vessel could have spread out quite a bit because of when it opens up so it may not be a real accurate measurement of the width.

Elyse: The Portland was 36 feet wide when it was built, we're hoping for a similar measurement.

John: This is a little bit wider, but if you look at the way that the wreck is all opened up, you know, if it's going to be anything, it's going to be bigger. If this measurement was smaller, we'd have a problem, but bigger's OK.

Elyse: All right, well, that's a good thing.

John: Yeah!

Elyse: Then we try to identify what type of ship it was. The Portland was a steamship, so we're looking for boilers among the wreckage. And that's just we find.

Dave: Wow, that's a huge boiler.

John: She was supposed to have been—had new boilers in 1893, and this is exactly what they would've put in. A lot more efficient than what she would've had in 1885. Just screams the right period.

Elyse: John feels our best chance at a positive identification lies with the engine. According to the 1895 Record of American and Foreign Shipping, the Portland's steam engine has two cylinders. But what about the wreck?

John: It looks good! We're looking at a compound steam engine. It's consistent with what was on the Portland.

Elyse: And tell me, what's this C 22 44?

John: C is for cylinder, and 22 and 44 tell us the sizes of the cylinders. And we can see those if we look over here. There's a smaller cylinder, which is the high pressure cylinder. It was the first place that the steam came from the boilers. It would be used once to drive that cylinder, then the steam would pass over to the second, larger cylinder.

Elyse: So that's the 22 and that's the 44.

John: That's what we hope. Yeah, it looks a little bit-- it's not real exact, though, can't get a good, clear measurement, I think we might be able to do better if we climb up top. Looks really good -you get a really nice clear look at the top of the cylinder, of the flange around it, get an unobstructed measurement. I'm running it across the top.

Elyse: These results are going to be a real surprise for Gabriel. I can't wait to tell him what we found. We've flown Gabriel in from Cordova to give him the news first hand. I tell him his wreck is the right width, the right type, and pointing in the right direction to be the Portland. OK, Gabe, the last thing we needed to do was to found out if the measurements of the engines were the exact same size. To be a match, the cylinder's diameter has to measure 44 inches.

John: look at it, this cylinder, it looks 44 inches to me.

Elyse: So, there's no doubt in your mind.

John: These measurements match the Portland.

Elyse: Judging by all the contemporary accounts, and judging by the tests and the measurements that the expedition

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team took, we now believe that this is the lost gold ship, the SS Portland.

Gabriel: That is very cool!

Elyse: Group photograph! Everyone ever here! Now that Gabriel's wreck has been confirmed as the S.S. Portland, the state of Alaska will nominate the site for the National Register of Historic Places, protecting it for future generations. And the Katalla River Valley makes the perfect resting place for the ship that launched the Klondike Gold Rush.

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