

The *Halcyon*: An Infamous Opium-Smuggling Schooner and her Notorious Crew, 1886–1896

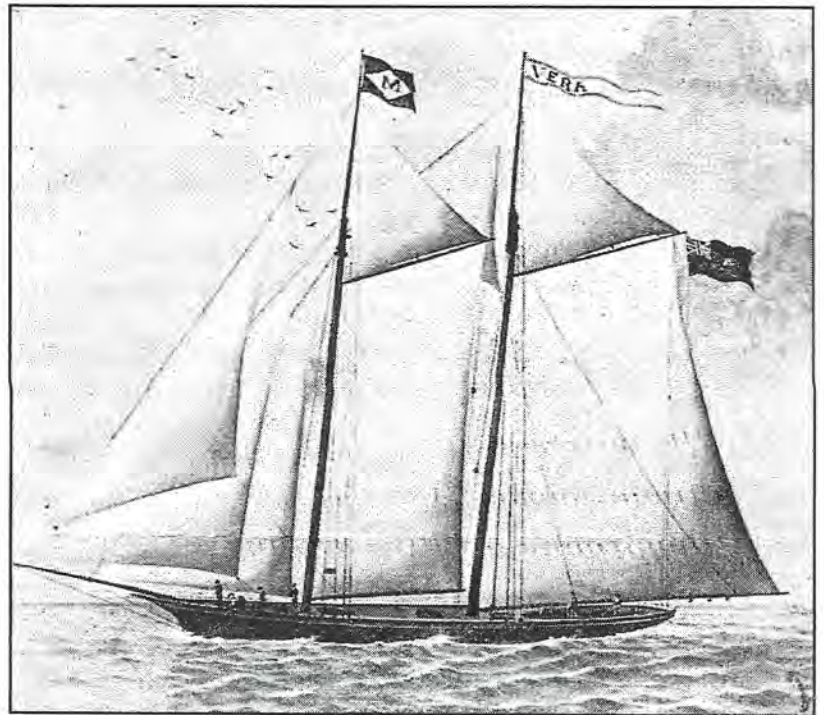
by Trish Hackett Nicola

In the late 1880s and 1890s, a notorious schooner, the *Halcyon*, roamed the Pacific Ocean from China to the west coast of the United States and Canada, smuggling opium and sometimes undocumented Chinese workers. Opium was not illegal at the time, but it was smuggled into the United States to avoid paying the duty imposed on shipments. In 1883 the duty on opium was increased from \$6 to \$10 per pound. Evading the tariff became a very profitable temptation to smugglers, customs officers, and sometimes even court officials.¹ In 1885, San Francisco special agents reported that it was difficult to collect the duty and that the fee increase had stimulated opium smuggling.²

A typical voyage for the *Halcyon* began in China and went east across the Pacific to Hawaii, followed by stops in British Columbia and Washington state. She then headed down the coast, usually ending in San Francisco but sometimes traveling as far as San Diego. At each stop, she unloaded part of her cargo of opium without going through customs. Her speed and ingenuity allowed her to elude U.S. and Canadian customs officials for years.³

Early Days

The *Halcyon* was built in San Francisco in 1883 under the supervision of master carpenter William J. Stone. The seventy-four-foot wood schooner with two masts had one deck, was almost twenty-two feet wide, had a hold eight and one-half feet deep, and weighed sixty-one tons.⁴ Originally commissioned by Harry Tevis,⁵ the *Halcyon* was first a sloop yacht



"Schooner Vera, formerly the Halcyon." Royal BC Museum, Victoria, British Columbia, BC, Accession No. 193501-001, file d-09878.jpg.

and raced for the Pacific Yacht Club in Sausalito. She was bought and sold several times before becoming a vessel for smuggling and a master at outmaneuvering customs agents.⁶

The *Halcyon* Begins Her Illicit Career

In July 1885, the ship was acquired by J. D. Grant and Robert Morrow. Morrow was already under investigation for various criminal activities, and in 1887 the *San Francisco Bulletin* reported that he had sold the *Halcyon* to former customs translator Ewen W. McLean and a partner and that she was being fitted in for a sealing trip.⁷ McLean's partner was William "Old Bill" Whaley, a former revenue inspector and a notorious West Coast smuggler. Whaley was enthralled with the *Halcyon*

and her "reputation of being able to out sail anything on the coast."⁸ Whaley and McLean opened factories in Vancouver and Victoria, where they would process the opium from China.⁹ The *Halcyon* then delivered the processed opium from British Columbia to a remote part of the San Francisco Bay area, where it was transferred to small vessels to be brought into the city. Over time, hundreds of thousand of dollars of opium were smuggled into the port.

Whaley and McLean's exploits were no secret. As early as February 1888 the authorities knew that the *Halcyon* was being used in the opium trade. Two San Francisco newspapers reported that the *Halcyon* was actually being used to smuggle opium.¹⁰ The deputy surveyor of the Port of San Francisco was allegedly aware of the smuggling, and possibly complicit.¹¹ A Victoria, British Columbia newspaper named William Whaley as one of those involved in the opium ring.¹²

Whaley and McLean were also part of the Ciprico Ring, which forged Chinese certificates. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 required Chinese laborers to carry a certificate of identification. These records were kept at the Custom House.¹³ From 1883 to 1885, Whaley, McLean, Fernando D. Ciprico, and William A. Boyd, all employees or ex-employees of the Custom House, created a complicated system by which they sold as many as 15,000 fraudulent certificates to Chinese people in San Francisco and China. An associate, Adolph Hinz, was apprehended in 1888 and agreed to testify about the conspiracy to the grand jury.¹⁴ Ciprico, Boyd, McLean, and Whaley were arrested and brought to trial before the U. S. Circuit Court in 1889, but in the end Hinz received a mere thirty days in jail and the other charges were dismissed for lack of evidence. The results were discouraging for the government, which had expended two years and thousands of dollars on the trial.¹⁵

After the trial, the *Halcyon* headed for Victoria, Whaley and McLean both proclaiming themselves innocent of opium dealing.¹⁶

In the late summer of 1890, a strong wind storm caused the *Halcyon* to wreck off the coast of Japan. Upon boarding the schooner, Japanese custom officers found sixty-three cases of opium (about \$60,000 worth) stored in a freshwater tank.¹⁷ The Japanese authorities decided that since there was no evidence the opium was destined for Japan, they had no grounds to confiscate the cargo. They kept the ship in harbor until late April 1891. Her discharge papers gave her permission to land *only* at Victoria, British Columbia.¹⁸

But her owners interpreted this differently. They met up with a schooner off the Hawaiian island of Oahu in order to transfer about two tons of opium. The *Halcyon* then came into the port with empty room for a legitimate cargo.¹⁹ Its crew claimed they did nothing wrong by transferring some of her cargo to smaller boats outside of the harbor in Hawaii—technically they were not *inside* the harbor during the transfer.²⁰ The *Halcyon* lingered in the vicinity for about a month. She often roamed the harbors at night with her lights off and scurried away whenever a vessel came near her. So much opium was pouring into Hawaii that the price dropped from \$75 to \$23 per pound.²¹ In April 1891, revenue officers took the steamer *Claudine* from Honolulu with a crew of guardsmen, policemen, and twelve sharpshooters and gave chase but could not catch the *Halcyon*.²²

The ship could go up to fourteen knots an hour, faster than any government revenue cutter.²³

In May 1891, the U.S. government offered a reward for capture of the smugglers.²⁴ From San Francisco, the revenue cutter *Oliver Wolcott* headed out in pursuit,²⁵ while from San Diego the schooner *Fearnot* left with an armed crew.²⁶ In June, a former crew member of the *Halcyon* told a reporter that the *Fearnot* had recently accepted 300 ginger jars of opium from the *Halcyon* somewhere off the California coast.²⁷ Even the promise of a reward had not been enough to keep the *Fearnot's* crew from temptation.

Up and down the coast nervous port officials were on the lookout. Customs officers exchanged telegrams about *Halcyon* sightings, attempting to

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guess which port she would visit next. Hearing that the *Halcyon* was in the vicinity of Victoria, the U.S. consul went to Canada and demanded that she be seized, but Canadian authorities did not know her whereabouts.²⁸ Some of the *Halcyon's* opium had been transferred in Hawaii, but the rest was thought to have been removed to a lumber schooner in Puget Sound. By avoiding payment of the \$12-per-pound duty, the opium was worth about \$1,200,000 on this shipment alone.²⁹

The *Halcyon* and her smugglers laid low for the next few months, but they did not refrain from meeting reporters or bragging about their exploits. "Maybe we do smuggling, but has anyone ever caught us at it?" boasted Louis Greenwald. "No one ever has, and it's doubtful if anyone ever will, because the work of the gang is so smooth that detection is almost impossible."³⁰ In an article titled "A Case of Open Smuggling," an Oregon newspaper writer gave this account:

The *Halcyon* is said to have three joint owners. Two of them, James Whalley [sic] and Louis Greenwald, are known. The third of the trio always remains in the background. Whalley is big, handsome and debonair. Greerwald is small, slight and unassuming. Whalley is a high-roller and money spender, a hale fellow, well met, an entertaining story-teller and a rounder. Greenwald is also popular but remains in the background. Whalley commands and Greenwald executes.³¹

Late in 1891 Whaley "retired" to Honolulu. According to an article published in *The Daily Inter Ocean*, Chicago, 13 December 1891, he was living in luxurious style:

... spending his money freely and giving entertainments to his friends. He is tall and slightly inclined to portliness with a dark complexion and a jet-black mustache, having a quiet voice and an almost perpetual smile. A straw hat, a negligee shirt, with a wide black silk sash and a tennis blazer, are the conspicuous points of his attire ..."³²

Meanwhile, Greenwald settled in Victoria,³³ where he allowed a reporter from Olympia, Washington to follow him around for a few days:

He gave instructions and received reports from a dozen men; he would be signaled in the street, would excuse himself and transact his business and return. He always goes ahead on the cruise, spends his money freely, and is prepared at a moment's notice to put up bail in any amount, should it be demanded by any of his lieutenants. If the customs officials were to search the Chinese wash houses of Port Townsend, Seattle or Tacoma in the next five days, they would be surprised at the large amount of unstamped opium that would be turned up. The reporter asked Greenwald how much he was going to make out of the present venture. "Maybe \$60,000," said he, "and maybe only a small part of that. I'll drop you a line before we leave here and give exact figures." Then he smiled that quiet exasperating smile and suggested a parting drink.³⁴

Getting Back to Business

In August of 1892 a seaman who was familiar with the *Halcyon's* movements reported to U.S. Secret Service agents in Victoria that the *Halcyon* had left Victoria with a cargo of opium and Chinese laborers and was heading down the coast of California.³⁵ Customs officials had only enough equipment to cover about 180 miles of the more than 1,000-mile unsecured California coastline. It was relatively easy for the *Halcyon* to slip into a cove undetected and transfer her cargo to a more innocent-looking vessel.³⁶ She could easily out-manuever any of the government cutters.³⁷ "The *Halcyon* is one of the fleetest schooners on the coast, and with a good wind can cover from fourteen to sixteen knots an hour," reported the *San Francisco Call*. "In such a breeze there is no revenue steamer on the coast which could come near her."³⁸

The smugglers were so confident that they would even provoke the revenue agents. In 1892, McLean stopped in San Francisco to visit Special Agent Joseph F. Evans, assuring him that the

Halcyon was doing regular business, not smuggling opium.³⁹ Evans could only sit there and listen, knowing he did not have the resources to catch the smugglers.

In August 1892, the *Halcyon* left Victoria, British Columbia with 2,500 pounds of opium and sixty Chinese workers. In late September, she landed a cargo of opium at Diamond

Head, Honolulu. She had hovered in the bay near Honolulu waiting for the opportunity to land her cargo, but customs agents had made no effort to seize her. A local resident, H.C. Adams, told a reporter that the smugglers "could just as well land it on the wharves in bright daylight for all the risk they would incur."

Adams suggested that the United States could effectively stop the traffic if a few agents were sent to Honolulu, but added, "They would have to be remarkably honest to withstand the offers from the smuggling."⁴⁰

In September, the *Halcyon* landed some of her cargo near Santa Barbara, off-loaded the Chinese workers near Monterey, and sailed to Tacoma, where she transferred some opium to a smaller vessel.⁴¹ By now, U.S. authorities had a plan. Anticipating the *Halcyon* would reappear in Victoria, they stationed a government agent there to watch for the ship.⁴² They hoped to intercept her before she made her next trip into the United States with her illicit cargo.⁴³ When the *Halcyon* finally docked at Victoria in early October 1892, the revenue agents were waiting. They seized her for entering the port without proper papers: in the words of the affidavit, for having "entered the waters of a British port in an irregular manner."⁴⁴ The *Halcyon* had gotten off on technicalities many times before, but she was finally caught.⁴⁵

After the *Halcyon* was confiscated, she was sold to E. B. Marvin & Co. of Victoria for a fraction of her value. The new owners had her overhauled and fitted for sealing.⁴⁶ Her flag was changed from American to British,⁴⁷ and the ship was renamed *Vera*.⁴⁸

What Happened to the Smugglers

Following the sale of the *Halcyon*, several of the key smugglers transferred their operations to the sloop *Emerald*. In early January 1894, authorities arrested George Wichman, a San Francisco candy store owner, and Louis Greenwald on charges of smuggling opium and Chinese migrants into

northern California. They were sent to county jail. The customs authorities found the *Emerald* anchored, deserted, and dismantled in nearby mud flats.⁴⁹ A grand jury returned indictments on conspiracy charges for Wichman, Greenwald, and McLean.⁵⁰

On 19 May 1894, Wichman and Greenwald were found guilty.⁵¹

Each was fined \$6,000 and sentenced to six years in San Quentin prison.⁵² E. W. McLean had jumped bail and fled to Canada.⁵³ From there, he offered to give information in exchange for immunity, but the offer was rejected. McLean was never apprehended for his crime.⁵⁴

Meanwhile, William Whaley was in Japan, running a saloon in March 1895.⁵⁵ He also set up a successful vaudeville theater business in Manila called the Alhambra.⁵⁶ In March 1902, he and a partner were convicted of defrauding a widow in their theater business, but there is no evidence that Whaley ever went to prison. He then relocated to the Philippines.

In 1907, broke and dying of Bright's disease,⁵⁷ Whaley traveled to San Francisco in the sick bay of the U.S. army transport ship *Thomas*. He died at sea on 28 July 1907.⁵⁸

For almost ten years the *Halcyon* and her smuggling crew ruled the West Coast opium trade. Hardly a week went by without a sensational sighting of the ship or the smugglers. She even appeared in Jack London's sea stories.⁵⁹ After her confiscation by Canadian authorities, the *Halcyon's* crew dispersed and the ringleaders were either jailed or went into hiding. Renamed the *Vera*, the legendary ship herself ended up in Alaska serving as a support vessel for a whaling company. She came to her final end in 1918, lost in a storm.⁶⁰

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