

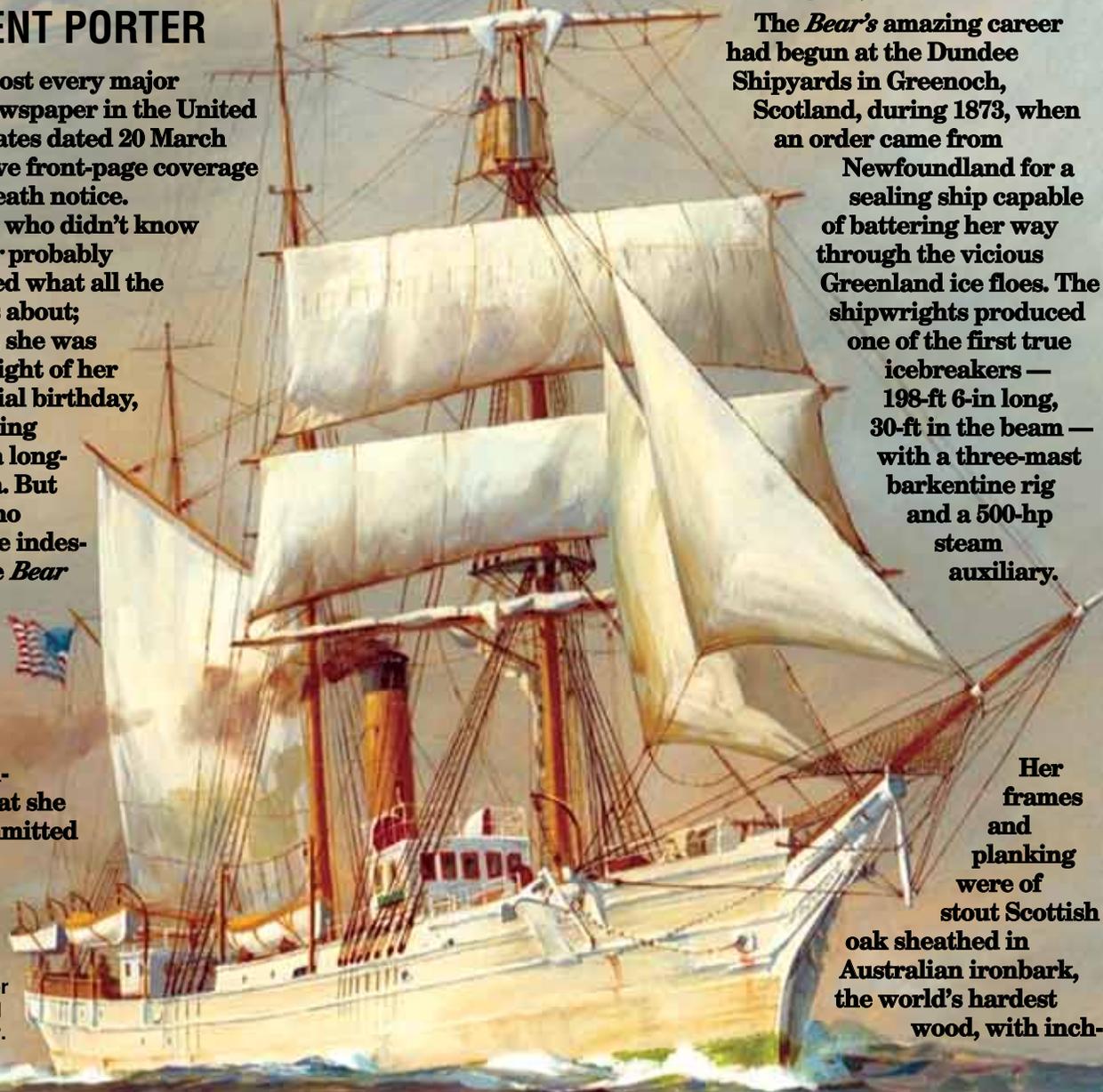
THE INCREDIBLE BEAR

For nearly nine-decades, the barkentine *Bear* seemed indestructible. Just when she was considered past her prime, she would rise above former glories. But finally, when called upon to perform as a floating restaurant, she suddenly and mysteriously sank as if escaping the ultimate indignity

BY KENT PORTER

Almost every major newspaper in the United States dated 20 March 1963, gave front-page coverage to her death notice. Readers who didn't know the *Bear* probably wondered what all the fuss was about; after all, she was within sight of her centennial birthday, the floating relic of a long-gone era. But those who knew the indestructible *Bear* — and there were many who did — could only conclude that she had committed suicide.

Oil painting of Revenue Cutter *Bear* under steam and sail power.



The *Bear's* amazing career had begun at the Dundee Shipyards in Greenoch, Scotland, during 1873, when an order came from

Newfoundland for a sealing ship capable of battering her way through the vicious Greenland ice floes. The shipwrights produced one of the first true icebreakers — 198-ft 6-in long, 30-ft in the beam — with a three-mast barkentine rig and a 500-hp steam auxiliary.

Her frames and planking were of stout Scottish oak sheathed in Australian ironbark, the world's hardest wood, with inch-



Bear and an unidentified whaler contend with Alaskan Arctic sea ice.

thick steel plates on the bows and forefoot.

They called her *Bear* and launched her in time to participate in the spring sealing season of 1874.

For the ten-years of her first career, the *Bear* successfully competed in the brutal sealing trade. Each spring, at a signal from a cannon, the St. John's seal ships raced from the harbor and slammed their way northward into the ice packs. For a month or six-weeks, they slaughtered seals by the thousands, processing and skinning the animals until the ships were crammed with seal products literally to the point of strain. Then the race was on

again for St. John's, with a fat premium for the ship first to return.

In 1883, her tenth season, the *Bear* set the sealing record for St. John's, first in and laden with an unprecedented 30,298 pelts. She was built for power, not for speed, and probably never made over ten-knots, but that she was admirably suited to her job there was no doubt.

The moment she docked at St. John's the following February, after an overhaul at Dundee, the *Bear's* captain received the US Consul, who delivered the stunning news that the *Bear* was now a US Navy vessel. The Navy had purchased the *Bear* for \$100,000 to rescue a stranded

Arctic expedition headed by Maj. Adolphus Washington Greeley (see *Sea Classics* April 2018). The 26 men of the Greeley expedition had gone to the northern end of Ellesmere Island in 1881, expecting to be picked up a year, or at the most two-years, later. Through a number of snafus and shipwrecks, the party had been stranded for nearly three-years now, and the government had good reason to fear for their lives.

With her new naval masters in command, the *Bear* hustled to Boston to prepare, along with three other ships, for the Arctic rescue mission. The supply of time was as perilously short as