Publication: Brooklyn Eagle; Date: Nov 13, 1892; Section: None; Page: 16

DARING RIVER THIEVES.

The Exploits of Some of the Most Notable Offenders.

A Cool Marauder Who Stole a Hawser While the Captain of the Boat Looked on—The Judge Moore and Its Crew—Boring for Sugar and Coffee—Stealing a Canal Boat.

The recent nervy exploit of the thief who borrowed a regularly licensed custom house truck, and with its aid procured admission to the government pier and stole and receipted for eighteen bales of Havana tobacco, with duties added, valued at $40,000, brings to mind some of the bold thieveries that have occurred along our river front in recent years. This river piracy is almost all done away with now, since the advent of the river police. The police boat gives the river thief no rest, and it is a bold man who will attempt to do any large stealing with the lynx eyed police ever on the alert to catch wrong doers. A few of the more notable cases are given and a short sketch of the first police boat.

On November 18, 1885, the steamboat squad was established. A boat was purchased and named the Judge Moore, in honor of the distinguished magistrate of the court of sessions. It has been in daily use ever since and has become an invaluable protection to the vast water front of the municipality. The vessel and crew or squad are attached to the Fifteenth precinct and are nominally under the command of the captain of that precinct. It takes a little daily rest at the foot of Atlantic avenue, but nearly all of the time, day and night, it is cruising along the water front. It leaves usually at 8 A. M. and returns at 4 P. M., when the crew is changed; it then leaves again and returns at midnight. In summer it cruises all night. Its crew numbers ten men. Beside all other work it has driven out of the business of river piracy such gangs as the Smoky hollow, Red Hook, canalers, Gowanus and Bay Ridge, the Eighth ward hardscrabbles. Before the steamboat squad was instituted it was a difficult thing to apprehend the river thieves in the act. The moment they were discovered they took to the water, and it was an impossible thing to catch them. Under the pier of the Cornell property they had constructed a floor and rude walls, in which they lived, played cards, drank and consummated their plans of robbery and even murder. These river pirates displayed great boldness and cunning in their undertakings and would stoop to any crime to further their ends. Instances of their cunning are shown on every hand. On one occasion a number of men concocted a plan to steal a cargo of sugar from a vessel lying in the Erie basin well off shore. To cover their work the thieves caused it to be noised about that they would that night rob a floater, anchored at a point in the river fully a mile from the vessel they were after. The police were on hand at the wrong place, and after waiting for the pirates, who did not arrive, went back to the station, only to discover the next day that they had been cleverly hoaxed. A sharp watch was kept for these jokers, but up to the present day they have not been discovered.

One of the most notorious of the river pirates was Frank Schmidt, or, as he was more familiarly known, Dutch Frank. For years he carried on his operations without interruption. His exploits were of a most daring character and his name became familiar with all vessel owners and consignees. The authorities tried every means in their power to capture him, but without success until July 13, 1885, when they caught him and placed him under lock and key. On the day of his arrest Dutch Frank, accompanied by Bernard and Patrick Martin, two well known dock thieves, visited the British steamship Salisbury, which was then lying at the foot of Pacific street, and stole a hawser valued at $50. The Martin boys boarded the vessel and mingled with the crowd of visitors and managed to secure a quantity of rope and the hawser, which they passed over the side of the vessel to Schmidt, who had remained in a rowboat at the stern. The captain, who was on deck at the time, saw the act, and as Schmidt rowed off called to the tugboat James A. Garfield and set off in pursuit of the fast disappearing thief. Officer Martin Casey, in charge of the police patrol boat the Judge Moore, recognized in the fugitive the notorious Dutch Frank, and getting up steam followed in the wake of the pursuing captain. Frank made for Governor's island and landed two minutes before his pursuers. He struck inland for a hiding place, but was overtaken before he had gone a quarter of a mile, and after a short struggle made a prisoner. While this case was pending another of stealing $250 worth of rope was brought against him. This latter case came to trial and Schmidt was sent to prison for five years.

Another successful thief was Edwin Perry, who also eluded the vigilance of the police for a number of years, but was finally arrested and sent to Sing Sing for life for murder in the second degree. Perry built a small house on a float, and anchoring it at the foot of Montague street, carried on the business of receiver of stolen goods. Perry transacted his business with such openness that it was suspected that Watchman Hayes was in league with him. A raid was made, but the bird had flown. Nothing more was heard of Perry until the early part of 1870, when he was arrested as the murderer of Hayes, who was shot through the heart while patrolling his post in front of Watson's stores. The prisoner declared his innocence, but the evidence was too strong against him and he was convicted. He was afterward pardoned and is now, to all appearances, leading an honest life.

The boldest deed ever committed by Brooklyn river thieves was the attempt by five men, to steal a canal boat. This quintet of dare devils consisted of Walsh, Sullivan, O'Neil, Bell and Callahan, who having learned that the captain of the canalboat, the John Bates, had gone to the theater, seized a rowboat on the Brooklyn shore and rowed over to the Wall street ferry, New York, where the Bates was anchored. When they arrived there the thieves found the canalboat lashed to the side of a steamer; but this fact did not trouble them as they quietly cut the ropes which connected the two boats, and hailing a passing tugboat were towed over to the Boston dry dock, where they commenced to unload a valuable cargo of wheat. Roundsman McMahon of the Eleventh precinct was an interested spectator of what had passed, and recognizing in Walsh an old time river thief he made up his mind to stop their little game. Going back to the station house, he secured the assistance of Captain Reilly and Detective Looney. The three arrived on the scene just as the bags of wheat were being put upon a wagon and the sudden appearance of the officers upon the spot so surprised the thieves that they were overcome with but little resistance. At the trial which followed Callahan assumed all the responsibilities of the crime, saying that he had hired the men to do the work. On this testimony Walsh, Sullivan, O'Neil and Bell were released and Callahan was sent to the penitentiary for four years and eleven months. After serving three years of his sentence he escaped, but was captured three months afterward in New York and brought back to serve out the remainder of his time.

Almost as bold a robbery was experienced by Luther Westerbrook, a truckman, over thirteen years ago. Westerbrook had a commission to deliver 800 pounds of sugar to the captain of a vessel lying at a dock near the South ferry, on the New York side. It was in the afternoon when he undertook to deliver the goods. When he arrived in New York he could not find the vessel and leaving the truck he went in search of it. He found it, but when he came to look for his truck it was gone. A diligent search failed to discover it and Westerbrook returned home with a heavy heart. Ten o'clock that evening the truck was found in South Brooklyn with all its load of sugar gone. The perpetrators of this robbery were never discovered.

Another style of river piracy, where the captain of a vessel combined with the thief to rob the owner, was unearthed by Roundsman McMahon. Jack Walsh and his brother Mike one dark night boarded the John Cody, lying in the Erie basin, and with the assistance of Captain Lacken carried off twelve bags of wheat. McMahon watched the men unload their boat at the dock and saw them go away for a truck. One returned a quarter of an hour afterward and was arrested and taken to the station. The roundsman came back just in time to capture the other thief, who had returned with the truck. Mike Walsh was discharged from custody, but his brother did not fare so well, being sent to the penitentiary for three years and six months. Captain Lacken, who was afterward arrested, was sent to jail for twenty-nine days.

The Silver gang was broken up some eight years ago by the arrest of its leader, Thomas Hunt, for stealing some block rigging, valued at $46, from the Boston dry dock, and was sent to the penitentiary for three years and six months. The arrest and conviction of Hunt broke the gang up. It was composed of a dozen young desperadoes. None of the gang followed the river business after the disbandment, with the exception of Burns, who was arrested in about a year, but was not convicted.

Another gang, known as the combination gang, was made up of seven men. Three lived in Brooklyn and disposed of all the goods they stole there in Staten Island, where their companions carried on their work. From Staten Island the remainder of the gang sent the goods they seized to their Brooklyn companions, who got rid of them easily without fear of detection. The combination was broken up by the arrest of George Hoffman, the leader, as he was coming from Staten Island with some stolen property. Hoffman languished in jail for a while, but was finally discharged, as no owner for the property could be brought forward.

A party consisting of Sergeant Eason, Sergeant Bellow, Roundsmen Harold and Downing, Detectives Roddy and the late Sergeant Detective Lowery and six officers were sent on August 22, to the foot of Joralemon street to apprehend a number of thieves who had planned to rob a lighter. At the dock the sergeant placed his men in concealment and started out to reconnoiter. He saw that the thieves were hard at work, but could not tell how many were engaged in the business. A signal brought the officers to the spot, and before five minutes had passed, three pirates were handcuffed, the rest escaping. The property recovered by the police in this haul was 16,000 pounds of sugar and two boats, all of which was returned to the owner.

The Smoky Hollow gang is now another thing of the past. Its main headquarters were in the Sixth ward, in the neighborhood of South ferry, but its operations extended as for south as Red Hook and east to Wall street ferry. Few of them possessed the courage of the genuine river pirate. The numerous shanties and deserted huts and sheds in the neighborhood, the tall grass of the salt meadows, Gowanus canal, offered them secure places in which to store their plunder and to dispose of it with impunity. Some of them must have been readers of yellow covered literature, as time and time again, police have discovered dens along the basins, filthy retreats in derelict canal boats, and deserted huts that were fitted up in the most approved style of dime novels and that contained odd collections of spoil from their many criminal exploits.

One of the successful methods of thieves practiced by the river pirates before the river patrol was organized was to row under the docks, where, safe from observation, they could bore up through the timbers of the wharf into the sugar hogsheads which were stored above. Along in the evening two men in a stout whitehall boat would slink under the pier and with a large pump augur bore up through the wharf into the hogsheads above and then catch the sugar as it ran down in bags which they had provided for the purpose. Four or five hundred pounds could be carried away by this means, and as the pirates never took the trouble to plug up the holes enough sugar has been wasted in this way to sweeten the East river. Coffee was occasionally stolen in the same manner, and it is not extravagant to estimate the loss at hundreds of thousands of dollars stolen and wasted. Things came to such a pass that there was an investigation one fine morning and the consequence was that a number of the dock watchmen were discharged and a wharf patrol was organized.