

SS Baychimo – The Wandering Soul of the Arctic

Written by Andy Owen



There are ships that sail, and ships that sink.

And then... there are ships that *endure*...

In 1914, as Europe teetered on the precipice of catastrophe, a ship was born. She was not grand, nor gilded, but she was built to last.

Her name was SS Ångermanelfven – a name only her mother country could love. It means 'Angerman River' - the name of one of Sweden's longest rivers.

The name itself is derived from the Old Norse word "anger," meaning "deep fjord".

She was long, lean, and unremarkable.

Two hundred and thirty feet of cold northern metal, with a triple-expansion steam engine that throbbed like a beating heart.

She could muster 12 miles an hour on a good day. She weighed 1,322 tons.

She had no soul yet. But the sea would give her one.

In her early years, she plied the familiar Baltic routes - Hamburg to Sweden, back and forth, ever diligent. She carried coal, wood, steel and salt - the dull, necessary things of commerce.

But she learned the rhythm of tides, the pull of the stars and the taste of wind in her rigging.

She was seaworthy. Trustworthy.

A quiet presence in the background of war.

She continued to serve Germany's Baltic ports throughout WWI, protected by the Imperial German Navy. And when the First World War ended in ruin and fire, she was claimed by the victors and handed off like a trinket in the spoils.

Following the Great War, Ångermanelfven was ceded to the British government by Germany in 1920, as part of war reparations negotiated at the Treaty of Versailles. All German ships over 800 tons were confiscated and divided between France, Great Britain and the USA.

Ångermanelfven was sailed out of the Baltic Sea for the last time by a British crew, destined for London, where she was put up for sale to commercial interests.

The Hudson's Bay Company purchased her for £15,000. They gave her a new name. *SS Baychimo*.



The Hudson's Bay Company - a titan of trade and wilderness - had acquired her to serve the lonely frontiers of Canada's Arctic.

She was to collect furs, ferry supplies and stitch together a world of snowbound trading posts, where the white silence was an all-encompassing cloak.

At first, there were whispers. She was Swedish-built, wasn't she? Used by the Germans? Taken as reparation? Could she be trusted?

But steel is steel, and Baychimo was solid and reliable.

She sailed true. She soon became beloved. She was no longer a mere ship. She was *their* ship.

And the north welcomed her with frozen arms.

The Baychimo did not roar or boast. She simply got on with it and endured. And in the silent world of the Arctic, endurance was everything.

For nine long years, she served faithfully, gliding through the ghost-white passages of the north like a silver arrow. She visited outposts so remote, their inhabitants counted the seasons by her arrival.

They would spot her funnel rising on the horizon, a smudge of smoke against the sky - and their hearts would lift. She was no longer just a cargo ship - she was an emotional connection to civilisation in a cold, harsh wilderness.

She completed voyage after voyage, a steady pulse against the cold indifference of the ice. Baychimo didn't just carry furs - she carried letters, voices, laughter, salt pork and stubborn hope.

And sometimes passengers - though not legally. Those who wished to travel had to earn their passage by joining her crew.

She welcomed them nonetheless, offering them bunks in her steel belly, asking only that they respect her ways.

But the sea, cold and indifferent as ever, was watching.

And one October, the ice decided to test her resolve.



It began innocently enough.

Another routine voyage, furs collected, homeward bound. The Baychimo steamed south along the Alaskan coast, her cargo hold heavy with pelts, her hull crusted with frost.

But the Arctic is a trickster.

One day, calm and clear. The next - blindness.

It was October 1st, 1931. A storm swept out of nowhere, as if summoned by forces older than memory. Snow fell sideways. The wind screamed.

Ice formed in great rafts and pressed in. The Baychimo, gallant though she was, could not break free. She groaned as the floes closed around her, trapping her in a frozen vice between Point Barrow and Icy Cape.

Her crew – experienced men, hardened by storms and solitude - understood the peril. There would be no escape.

Not now. Not until Spring, perhaps.

They made the painful decision to abandon her.

Half a mile away, the Inuit town of Barrow offered them shelter. The men trudged through snow and silence, their ship behind them - still proud, still upright, still hopeful.



She waited, her decks bare, her engine stilled. She had never known loneliness before. Not like this.

Then, just two days later, as if stirred by some silent yearning, she broke free.

She was alive again!

The men rejoiced. They returned, took up station, plotted course for home.

But the north had not finished with them yet. Not by a long chalk...

October 8th. Another entrapment. This time it was much worse. Colder.

And the ice gripped harder...

When they realised that the ship was in danger of being crushed, the crew and passengers left her and crossed the frozen sea on foot to get to 'dry land'.

In response to an S.O.S., twenty-two of them were uplifted on or after 15th October, by ski-planes.

This was a dangerous and laborious procedure, as only a few men at a time could be accommodated for the six-hundred-mile flight to Nome in western Alaska.



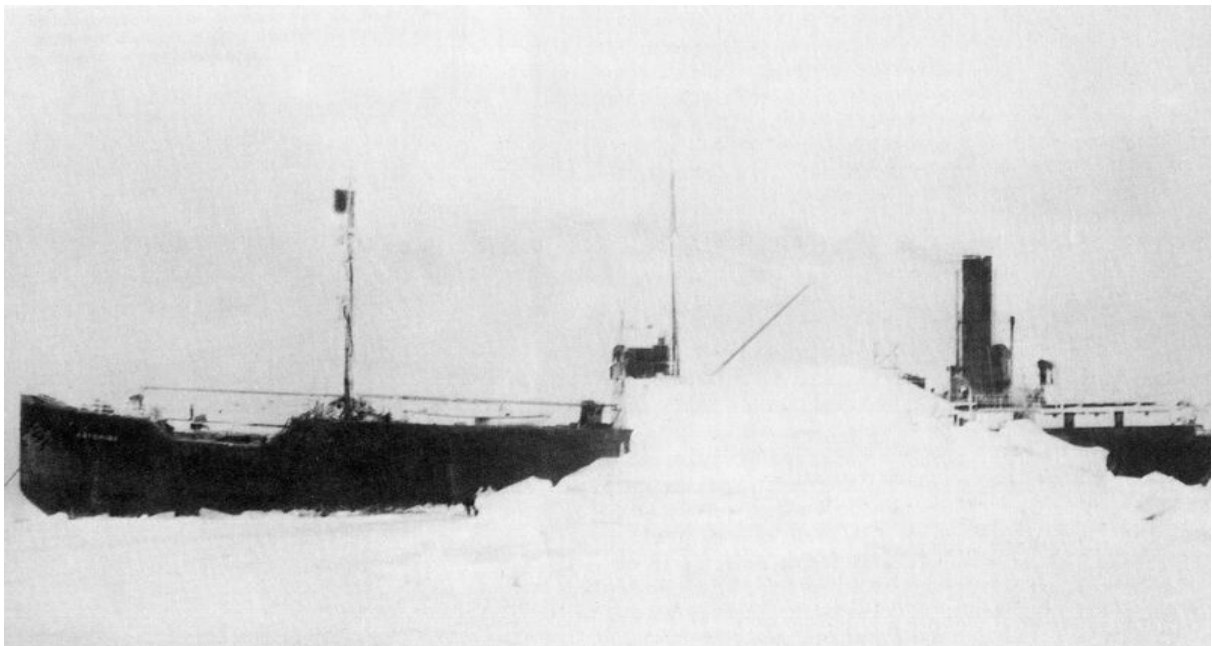
But fifteen stayed. Brave fools, or faithful sons?

Neither...

The cargo in her hold was estimated to be worth \$58,000, of which \$42,000 dollars was in furs. A great deal of money in those days...

Among the group was Captain Cornwell, the ship's quiet guardian. He and his men built a wooden hut near the shore, a crude shelter in the white nowhere.

And from there, day after day, they returned to the ship, tending her, clearing ice from her rudder, brushing frost from her steel bones.



Baychimo waited. She endured. But something had changed.

In the night, the wind seemed to whisper. The creaking of her timbers grew strange, almost speech-like. One man claimed to hear footsteps along the deck.

Another swore he saw a light in the wheelhouse, where none had burned since the engine died.

And then... the storm came.

November 24th. A blizzard of unspeakable violence.

The storm forced the men to stay inside their ice-bound igloo for three full days, huddling against one another to keep warm around the gasoline drum they had converted into a stove.

But afterwards, when the snowstorm finally died down and they dug themselves out of the snow, the men returned to Baychimo - and found only emptiness.

Broken ice.

Sky.

Sea.

Baychimo was gone.

Captain Cornwell said nothing at first. Then he whispered, "*She's gone under.*" The men began to weep - not in fear, but in sorrow.

They had loved her. She had been more than steel and rivets. She had been their companion. Their home.

But fate had other plans.

Two days later, an Inuit seal hunter arrived with news that froze the blood in their veins. He had seen her. The Baychimo. Alive. Adrift. Forty-five miles away.

They were jubilant. They travelled across the bleak terrain. And they found her.

And she welcomed them...



But that first night aboard, something felt strange. The ship was cold, but not from the temperature.

Every man felt it.

The way the lamps refused to light. The way the shadows pooled in corners.

The way the wind seemed to hum through the ship like a sorrowful lullaby.

They stayed only long enough to retrieve the most valuable furs. Then they left. They did not say goodbye.

And thus, she was left - truly alone - for the first time in her life.

Not scuttled. Not wrecked. Not sunk.

Just...abandoned.

And then the sea took her.

She had no crew. No compass. No captain. But, she sailed.

In the months that followed her abandonment, SS Baychimo began to appear like a dream - half-seen through fog, whispered of in camps, spoken of in low voices beside fires.

Hunters, trappers, prospectors, all saw her.

Drifting.

Waiting.

Breathing.

They would find her aground in ice, boards groaning, windows shattered by the wind. Then, days later, she would be gone.

Some tried to board her. Some succeeded.

Others claimed she simply vanished when they approached - swallowed by snow, or turned ghostly and pale in the moonlight.

They called her The Ghost Ship of the Arctic.



In 1933, a dogsledder saw her near Nome, calmly pacing the shoreline like a hound searching for its master.

Months later, prospectors came upon her, open to the sky, silent as a cathedral.

She took them in. She held them through a storm. She never harmed them.

But they left with a chill they could not shake.

Six long years passed - and in 1939, a certain Captain Hugh Polson found her and made a valiant attempt to rescue her - perhaps even to bring her home. But as he and his men prepared, the ice crept in again, like a hand curling shut.

He was forced to flee.

She had been spared, or perhaps... she had refused.

And so it continued...

Year after year. Sightings. Whispers. Attempts to reclaim her.

Each time she slipped away. As if she no longer trusted the world of men.

She wandered the cold waters of the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas - coastlines where silence reigned and stars looked down like sentinels.

She belonged to no one. No nation.

She flew no flag. She asked for nothing.

She was no longer cargo ship, nor war prize, nor working vessel.

She had become something else.

In the years that passed, many a tale was told about her. The Baychimo became a legend. But no one could possibly imagine what was to happen next...

Suddenly, in 1962, Inuits saw her once more.

Still drifting.

Still alone.

But, like an apparition, she disappeared into the mist again. For another seven years.

And in 1969, an astonishing **thirty-eight years after she had been abandoned**, she was seen one final time - encased in an ice pack, her body weathered, her once-proud hull bruised by time, but still afloat.

Still defiant.



And then...*nothing*.

She was never seen again.

The world forgot. Or tried to.

The ice closed over her trail, like a secret. The logs yellowed. The insurance men had long since stopped asking questions.

But for those who had seen her - for those who had stood upon her deck and felt the strangeness in her bones - they could never forget.

Some say she lies at the bottom of the Arctic Ocean, a silver skeleton beneath the ice, her mast like a reaching hand. Others say she still sails, invisible to satellites and sonar, following some ancient current only she can feel.

And a few - just a few - whisper that she chose her exile. That something awoke in her when they left her behind.

That she knew what it meant to be abandoned - and chose never to trust again.

They say she was not haunted - but was herself the ghost.

And if, on a still night, you find yourself near the frozen edges of the world, and the wind changes and the moon casts a path across black waters, you might hear her.

The creak of her timbers.

The slow turn of her rudder.

The soft, weeping sigh of a ship who only ever wanted to be loved.

No one truly knows where SS Baychimo rests now.

But I want to believe she's still out there. Alone, yes - because that was the choice she made.

But not defeated.

Somewhere between sea and sky, she sails on...

I SO want that to be true...



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