

[#26]

Socoa

Rig: Steel 3-masted ship

Launched: 1901

End: 1927

Built: Bayonne, at Chantiers de St. Nazaire

Dimensions: Unknown

Tonnage: 2613 tons

Dawn of 18 April 1906 broke after a tremendous earthquake in San Francisco, California. Early in the morning the earth shook magnificently. The greater damage, however, was done by a fire coincident to the earthquake and most of the great port city of San Francisco either fell to the earth or was burned to the ground, or both. When news of the disaster, ships from all over the world loaded building supply cargoes for the rebuilding of San Francisco. *Socoa* was one of these ships.

Laden with barrels of cement on a voyage from Stettin to San Francisco, *Socoa* stranded in thick weather near the Lizard, off Cadgwith. No one in living memory recalled a ship getting off the Lizard's rocks once holed, and the *Socoa* was abandoned to the underwriters. Sold for a paltry sum, salvage operations began in earnest—hoping to make headway before the next storm destroyed *Socoa* totally. After off-loading most of the cement cargo (the residual buoyancy of cement being a significant hindrance to salvage), three tugs managed to pull *Socoa* free to Cadgwith Bay where temporary repairs renewed *Socoa*'s watertight integrity. Towed to a yard, repaired, then sold, the *Socoa* changed names to *Thiers* and continued to sail under the French flag until laid up in 1921. *Thiers* was sold to the breakers in 1927.

Socoa, later *Thiers*, was a French bounty ship—the French government passed a law allowing government subsidy for building ships and many such ships were built. The subsidy took effect in 1893 and lasted for ten years. The subsidy actually sounded better than it proved to be in practice. Owing to the requirements of the French government, French crews could not be paid off until the completion of the voyage—a law that increased operating expense for French owners. Other requirements also exacerbated the perceived “golden egg” that was the subsidy. The subsidy had other design-related results, as well. Note in the photograph the longish poop deck. *Socoa* (*Thiers*) was not as exaggerated as some French ships, but the subsidy paid on gross tonnage. Therefore, it was to the builder's advantage to have long decks and in so doing increase gross tonnage. Some French ships of the period had only the briefest of well decks amidships, and others were built flush-decked to gain tonnage. French-built ships of the late 1890s and early 1900s were very distinctive in this regard. The British could build ships cheaper, so some French owners also contracted with British yards to construct ships. Often these British-built ships can be distinguished by the French port-painted bulwark habit (the British and Germans painted ports, if at all, on lower strata of the hull). Yet another distinguishing practice was the rounded or turret poop. British practice was to build the turret poop right up to the break of the

poop, then abruptly chopping the turret off. In contrast, the French would fair or turn the steel of the turreted part into the sides of the hull creating a much more pleasing or harmonious look, in my opinion. *Socoa (Thiers)* seems to have one of these French poops.

This is a great photograph on a clear day. The sunken ship hung on the rocks emphasizes the salvors skill in freeing the ship to sail again.