

Loss of the tug *Marjorie McAllister*

By Benjamin Wunderly

The wreck of the motor towing vessel *Marjorie McAllister* on November 2, 1969, is a tragic story still recounted and sometimes debated among people in Carteret County. The sinking of this state of the art tugboat during a heavy storm off Cape Lookout and the tragic loss of six crewmembers was keenly felt in the Down East community of Williston, North Carolina, whence many of the men hailed.

The story of this particular tugboat began with the design and construction of a line of towing vessels for McAllister Towing that were intended to be the best of the best, a combination harbor and coastal tug made of welded steel, 3,600 hp single screw diesel and capable of a 5,000 hp bollard pull. Built in 1968 in St. Louis, Missouri, the tug was then sent down the Mississippi River on a camel barge to New Orleans, Louisiana, where she experienced her first taste of coastal waters. The *Marjorie McAllister* headed to the New York Harbor to begin her career, but barely a year would pass before her fateful trip in November of 1969.

The following timeline, pieced together from a variety of sources including newspaper accounts and official U.S. Coast Guard documents, recounts the events leading up to the loss of the *Marjorie McAllister*.

At noon on October 30, the *Marjorie McAllister* departed New York City for Jacksonville, Florida, without tow. The vessel stopped for a partial crew change in Norfolk, Virginia and then promptly continued on its way. The six member crew was made up of Robert T. Davis, Captain, Williston, NC, age 51; Edwin G. Piner, Captain and First Mate, Williston, NC, age 49; Edwin K. Piner (son of Edwin G.), Deckhand, Newport, NC, age 22; Lincoln "Tink" E. Piner, Deckhand, Williston, NC, age 43; Joseph B. Clark, Engineer, High Falls, NY, age 54; Antonio Lomba, Cook, Jersey City, NJ, age 61.

At 10:00 a.m. on November 1, the Master of the *Marjorie McAllister* reported to the dispatch office in New York that they were roughly fifty miles south of the Chesapeake Light, experiencing 8 foot seas and 25 knot winds. This would have been approximately due east of Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. The Master was advised that a fellow McAllister tug had sought refuge in Morehead City, North Carolina, due to weather conditions. He was also told of the gale warning that had been posted from Florida to Cape Hatteras. The Master responded that he intended to also put in at Morehead City if refuge becomes necessary. This would be the homeport for the Captain and three other crewmembers. Later that afternoon, at 4:30 p.m., the *Marjorie McAllister* reported to dispatch that they had made headway to approximately 15 miles south of Diamond Shoals and were experiencing southeast winds of 23 knots.



The *Marjorie McAllister* was launched October 29, 1968 in St. Louis, Missouri. In order for the vessel to be floated down the Mississippi River, it had to be outfitted with specially made sponsons pictured here in order to maintain a draft of 7 feet. After reaching New Orleans the *Marjorie McAllister* completed its final trials. Image from McAllister Towing courtesy Craig Rising.

By midnight of November 2, the salvage vessel *Curb*, which was located about 60 miles southeast of the last known location of the *Marjorie McAllister*, records experiencing northeast winds of 48 to 55 knots and seas of 30 to 35 feet. Three hours later the winds were up to 70 knots.

Meanwhile, at 12:25 a.m., the United States Coast Guard Group Ft. Macon received a call from the *Marjorie McAllister* stating that she was taking on water in the engine room and experiencing electrical problems. They reported their position as 6 miles west of the Cape Lookout Shoals Buoy 14. The Master also stated that no assistance was needed at the time but to standby. By 12:49 a.m., the *Marjorie McAllister* contacted U.S.C.G. Station Ft. Macon again, this time to request assistance. Upon an attempt to shift radio frequencies, communication between the vessel and the Coast Guard was lost, but the nearby *Curb* overheard the *McAllister's* transmission and replied that they will relay the tug's position to the Coast Guard. The Master acknowledged this service and asked the *Curb* to standby. This is the last word from the crew of the *Marjorie McAllister*.

An extensive search for the vessel ensued, but for all intents and purposes the vessel had vanished. Almost three years passed before the doomed vessel was found. According to a report in the July 3, 1972 edition of the *Carteret County News Times*, divers of the Barnacle Bumpers diving club found the *Marjorie McAllister* southwest of the Cape Lookout Knuckle Buoy lying in 100 feet of water. The divers—Claude Hull, George Purifoy, Tommy Styron and Ben Day, all of Morehead City-- were told by Captain

Buddy Harris about an oil slick in the vicinity of a possible unidentified shipwreck and were taken there the next day aboard Captain Harris's charter vessel the *Offshore III*. The four men confirmed it was the lost tug *Marjorie McAllister*.

In June of 1978 the salvage company Ocean Agents, out of Southport, North Carolina, raised the *Marjorie McAllister* from her resting place on the sea floor. The salvage crew, led by Denny Breese and Wayne Strickland, eventually towed the vessel to the port in Morehead City where its damaged remains sat visible for all to see, almost as a warning to mariners about the dangers of life at sea.

The tale does not end there however. The *Marjorie McAllister* was eventually sold, restored and put back into service. She never again held the same name though, and after working for several different companies ended up back with McAllister Towing with the name *Mary L. McAllister*. The loss of the vessel has been attributed to a combination of factors including human error, vessel design and extreme weather. The only ones who really know what happened during that fateful night were lost when the *Marjorie McAllister* sank to the bottom of the Atlantic off Cape Lookout. ■