

Filmmaker brings his true sea adventure to Newport

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DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER Jon Craig Cloutier will be in Newport this weekend to show his award-winning *Coaster*, a movie about one man's dream to sail a wooden, wind-powered cargo ship and the wreck of that dream when the ship sank on its maiden voyage.

Cloutier had followed the dream of Maine shipbuilder Ned Ackerman since he laid the keel of the John F. Leavitt in 1976, and he was on board when the Leavitt, loaded with lumber and chemicals and bound for Haiti, sank in 60-mile-an-hour winds 288 miles southeast of Long Island on Dec. 19, 1979.

TO THIS DAY, says Cloutier, no one really knows why the Leavitt sank, although it had been taking on water. One of the engines used to help raise its sails had spilled hydraulic fluid across the deck, and no one could gain enough footing to get below to find out what was going on.

When he was lifted into the rescue helicopter that saved him and the rest of the crew, Cloutier

says that "the whitecaps were as big as the boat. After that I never saw it again. There was not even one sighting of the boat afterwards . . . not one piece of wood. The only thing the Coast Guard found the next day was one life raft."

Because the ship was laden with barrels of chemicals and because it had its own buoyancy, Cloutier believes that it's still "probably adrift a couple of hundred feet below the surface. I hope it turns up in Newport Harbor this weekend. I heard recently that it was sighted off Nova Scotia, but I think that that's just wishful thinking."

When the Leavitt went down it took \$100,000 worth of Cloutier's film-making equipment, although as the ship was foundering he put most of his film in waterproof cans and saved it.

"I was shooting as much as I could," he says of the Leavitt's last hours. "I spent a lot of time wiping lenses. I wasn't really paying much attention to what was going on. I had one eye closed and had a TV-monitor's view through the other. It wasn't very real until I stopped shooting and realized what was happening."

CLOUTIER'S RELATIONSHIP with the Leavitt happened by accident. The Manchester, N.H., native had spent his boyhood summers on the Maine coast, but says he never really had a feel for the area's maritime heritage until he was planning a film about it in 1975. After 10 months of planning, he realized he needed a real boat for his film. Just 16 hours before the Leavitt's keel was to be laid, he found out about Ackerman and the shipbuilder agreed to let Cloutier film "as long as it didn't cost him any money or get in his way."

At the time, Cloutier recalls, no one believed Ackerman would ever be able to get the Leavitt afloat. So not only was money hard to find for the shipbuilder, it was also tough for Cloutier to raise the cash necessary to get his film project going. "I had to mortgage my house a couple of times."

In the end, it was worth it. *Coaster: The Adventure of the John F. Leavitt* won the 1982 American Film Festival Award as best documentary as well as the Cine Golden Eagle from a group that selects films it considers worthy of representing America abroad.

THAT'S WHY he'll be at Newport's Casino Theater at 7:30 and 9:30 p.m. today and tomorrow to introduce his film and answer questions afterward. The showing is co-sponsored by the Armchair Sailor Bookstore and the Wooden Boat Show as a benefit for Flickers — The Newport Film Society. Tickets, at \$4.50, are on sale at the bookstore, the boat show and will be sold at the door.

