ISE Sonar Survey of the Shipwreck *SS Famous*

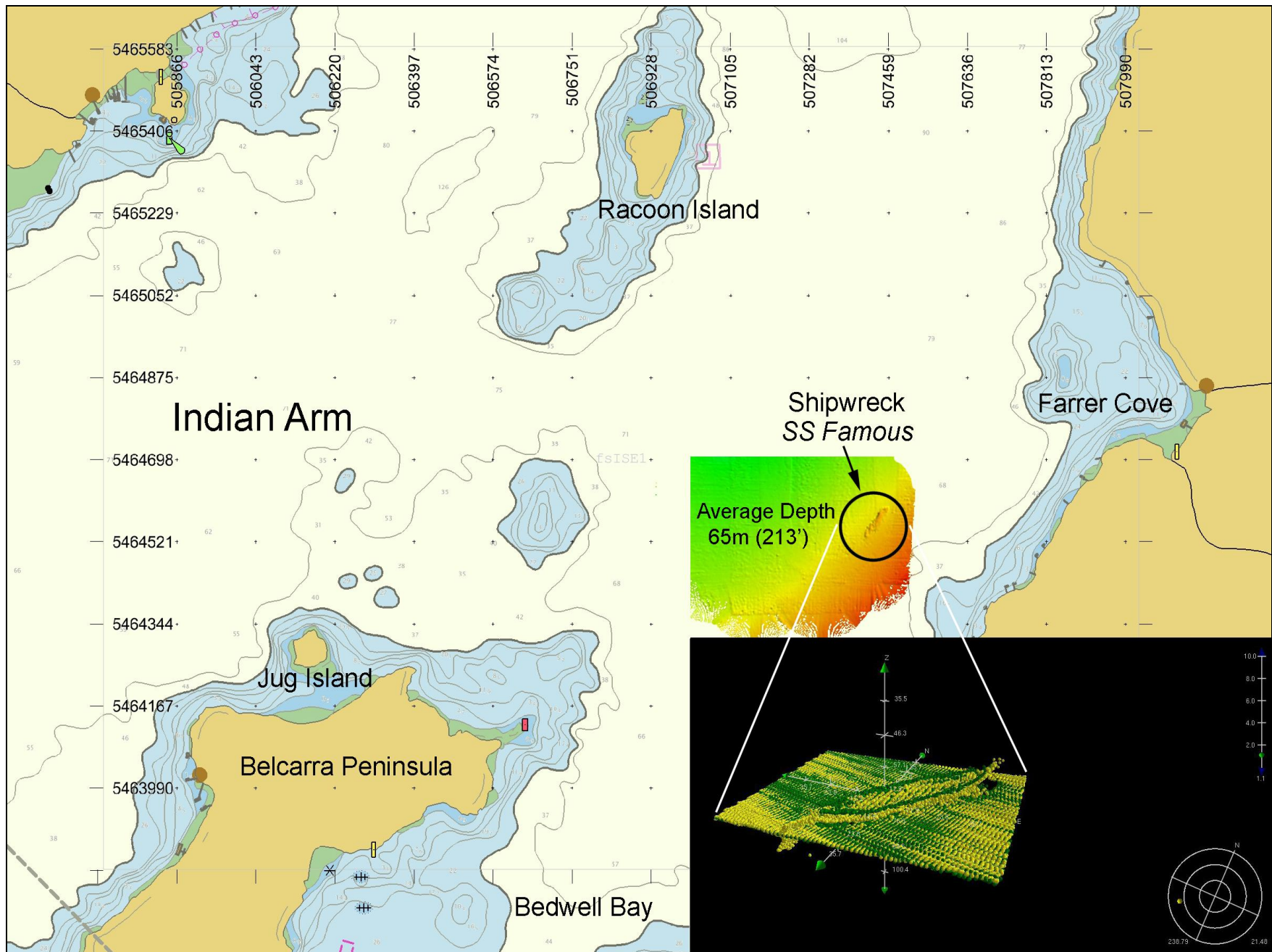Researched and written by Ralph Drew, Belcarra, BC, April 2010.

Four shipwrecks in Bedwell Bay have been documented by David Leigh Stone of the *Underwater Archaeological Society of British Columbia,* and the vessel *Famous*, originally launched in 1890, is one of the most historically important vessels sunk off the southern mainland of British Columbia (see information below).

The shipwreck *Famous* was recently surveyed using state-of-the-art sonar technology by *International Submarine Engineering Ltd.* (ISE), a local Port Coquitlam company, while testing its latest generation of autonomous underwater vehicle (AUV) being built for the government of Canada's *Project Cornerstone*. Led by *Defence Research and Development Canada* (DRDC), *Project Cornerstone* is a multi-year project that aims to assist *Natural Resources Canada* (NRC) collect data using AUV technology to support their efforts in the geographical survey of Canada's Arctic. The 'Explorer' AUVs are designed to operate autonomously underneath the arctic ice-shelf at depths of up to 5000 meters. The vehicles utilize onboard sonar systems to collect data about the seafloor and can travel 450 kilometers during a single mission.

ISE's *MV Researcher* testing the AUV 'Explorer' in Indian Arm

In September 2009, ISE handed over two 'Explorer' AUVs to NRC at a ceremony held onboard ISE's research vessel in Indian Arm. The vehicles will be deployed to the high Arctic later this year (2010) to map the seabed in support of Canada's land claim under Article 76 of the *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* (UNCLOS). Canada has ratified the UNCLOS treaty and has until 2013 to submit a claim to support its rights under international law to natural resources in the Arctic Ocean beyond the 200 nautical mile limit.

Racoon Island

Indian Arm

Shipwreck
SS Famous

Farrer Cove

Average Depth
65m (213')

Jug Island

Belcarra Peninsula

Bedwell Bay

Source: International Submarine Engineering (ISE) Ltd., Port Coquitlam, B.C.

ISE sonar survey of the shipwreck *SS Famous* located in Bedwell Bay, Belcarra, B.C.

Four shipwrecks in Bedwell Bay have been documented by David Leigh Stone of the *Underwater Archaeological Society of British Columbia* (UASBC) in the books *"Vancouver's Undersea Heritage – Shipwrecks and Submerged Cultural Sites in Burrard Inlet and Howe Sound"* (UASBC, 1994) and *"Historic Shipwrecks of the Lower Mainland"* (UASBC, 2007). The following is excerpted from those books:

Famous — The vessel *Famous* was originally launched as the *SS Amur* in 1890. [*Sic* — the vessel was built and launched at Sunderland, England, in 1890 as the *Famous*. The vessel was renamed the *Amur* when it was brought to British Columbia in 1898, and the name reverted to *Famous* when the ship was sold in 1924.] The *Famous, ex-Amur,* is one of the most historically important vessels sunk off the southern mainland of British Columbia.

She was a steel, steam-screw, awning-deck freighter built by the *Strand Slipway Company* in Sunderland, England. Her dimensions were 216 feet in length by 28.1 feet in breadth. Her depth was 21.2 feet from the keel to the main deck. She displaced 907 tons gross, 570 tons net. Equipment included three masts, electric light, three cemented bulkheads, and a water ballast system incorporating fore and aft peak tanks and a double bottom divided into cells.

Her triple compound steam engine was built by the *Northeastern Marine and Engineering Company Ltd.* in Sunderland. It had 20, 33, and 54-inch cylinders with 33-inch strokes which produced 170 nominal horsepower. She had one steel Scotch boiler from the same manufacturer rated for 160 pounds pressure. A single propeller gave her a top speed of about 12 knots.

The new steamer was registered in London as the property of the *Amur Steam Ship Company Ltd.* Later she belonged to the *Lombard Steam Ship Company*. This was probably a technicality — both firms were managed by the same Mr. J. White.

She left England for her namesake river in eastern Siberia. Her cargo was a fleet of dismantled riverboats destined for use on the waterway. Later she was a China coaster. During the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-5 she served as a transport for Japan. Then she traded in Australian waters. She crossed the Pacific in 1898. Her passage via Borneo and Honolulu was extremely rough. She was thrown on her beam ends, her coal cargo shifted, two boats and the charthouse were stove in. She made Victoria in February.

Her new owner was the *Klondyke Mining, Trading and Transportation Company*. The firm was gearing-up for a hectic summer ferrying miners and supplies to the *Gold Rush of 1898*. The *Amur* hurriedly got a new pilothouse and temporary accommodations for 200 passengers, most in steerage below, some in first-class quarters on the upper deck. On March 3rd she set-off on her first run from Victoria to Wrangell. In May she rescued the passengers and crew from the sternwheeler *Iskoot,* which had stranded near the Skeena River. The Gold Rush wound-down by the end of the year and she went on the block again. She fetched barely half of her real value.

In 1899 she was briefly registered in the fleet of the "Governor and Company of Adventurers of England", better known as the *Hudson's Bay Company*. Later that year, the 'Bay' joined with some competitors to form the *Canadian Pacific Navigation Company*. *Amur* served the C.P.N. on routes to Alaska, the west coast of Vancouver Island, and the Queen Charlotte Islands. She carried 60 passengers and tons of freight.

In January 1901 the C.P.N. fleet was bought by the *Canadian Pacific Railway*. *Amur* carried-on with her old routes. In 1906 the *Amur* took medical personnel and tons of

relief supplies from the citizens of Vancouver and Victoria to the victims of the San Francisco earthquake. In 1911 the new *Princess Sophia* took over the northern run. *Amur* was retired and her long-time master, Captain Louis P. Locke, transferred to her ill-fated replacement.

In 1912 *Amur* was sold to Captain James Griffiths of the *Coastwise Steamship and Barge Company Ltd.* He refitted her at Tacoma and for a dozen years she carried ore to that city from Britannia Beach and Anyox. Then she wrecked.

British Columbia Archives (BCA G-00377)

SS *Amur* on the beach after striking rocks in Wrangell Narrows — June 3, 1911

Accidents were a way of life for the old coasters. In 1901 she had run aground in Chilkat Inlet, Alaska. She was declared a total loss but was repaired and returned to service. In 1903 she broke her propeller and shaft on a reef near Port Simpson, and in 1905 she grounded at Wrangell. The next year she went ashore near Metlakatla and struck an uncharted rock in Hecate Strait. In 1911 she stranded at Wrangell again. In 1921 she ran aground in Porlier Pass.

The original *Amur* was bought by Captain Albert Berquist and renamed *Famous.* He used her for general cargo service out of Vancouver and in the pilchard oil trade on the west coast of Vancouver Island. For a time she was chartered to *Frank Waterhouse and Company of Canada Ltd.* Then she wrecked again. On April 4th, 1926, she went up on

Louise Rock in the Skeena River. The *Vancouver Dredging and Salvage Company* freed her but the *Famous* was laid-up soon after.

Around 1928 she was sold to *Leith, Murray and Company*, of Vancouver. They salvaged her brass and steel, then beached the hulk in Bedwell Bay. The eyesore soon drew complaints from cottagers, and the *Vancouver Port Authority* responded by ordering her removed. The *Famous* was scuttled on September 6th, 1932. The Harbour Master supervised, the *Pacific Salvage Company* did the deed. She went down in deep water in Indian Arm north of the entrance to Bedwell Bay and just south of Farrer Cove. The wreck lies on a 034° / 214° bearing on a flat silt bottom not far from shore at an average depth of 65 metres (213 feet).