

William Pearce's Ordeal:

The **Off Beat History** column printed in **The Evening Telegram**, May 28, 1964:

A long swim.

This column has recorded remarkable feats of endurance. None is more remarkable than the feat of a man named William Pearce of Elliston, Trinity Bay. This incident occurred at least twenty-five years ago, but probably much longer than that.

Pearce was a member of the crew of a banking vessel hailing from Catalina. Crossing Trinity Bay one stormy night Pearce was knocked overboard by a swinging boom. He was not missed at first in the darkness and confusion; when his friends realized he was gone, they gave him up for lost.

When Pearce saw the schooner was going away without him, he kicked off his sea boots and started to swim, or rather concentrated on staying afloat. The water was cold and he did not expect to last too long. Yet he lasted all night and was still swimming when another vessel picked him up just after daylight, SEVEN hours later!

And the following note from **The Evening Telegram**, June 2, 1964 :

Sir:

In Off Beat History in your issue of 28th May there is recounted the experience of William Pearce of Elliston, Trinity Bay. I never saw him, but I recall his death there, which occurred in the year 1906 at the age of sixty-four.

He used to say, in reference to his all-night swim and struggle for life, that he had been "in the valley of the shadow of death".

The last banker to hail from Catalina went out on her last trip from that port in or about the year 1912. I should date Mr. Pearce's ordeal about 1890.

N.C. Crewe,

29 May 1964

The **N.C. Crewe Collection**, Provincial Archives, St. John's, NF. contains the following poem written by William Pearce's nephew, Aubrey: [ref. N.C. Crewe File, PANL, P4/13.]

The Sailor Boy

On the East coast of Newfoundland

Lived a boy who loved the sea,

The son of humble parents

In a place called Maberly.

He was trained to be a sailor

As his father was before

And his mind was bent on fishing

Up North in Labrador.

When the summer winds blew softly

And the time for fishing came,

Many sailing boats were ready,

Fishing for cod was the game.

And with many other fellows

On a day in early June

He set sail from Catalina

On a pleasant afternoon.

Many were the jokes and stories

By the buddies loudly told

To this lad of eighteen summers

Who was now a seaman bold.

All went well until at nightfall

When the swinging of the boom

*Caught this lad and sent him reeling
Out into the ocean gloom.
Not a man aboard the vessel
Saw him fall into the deep
For they thought, like other sailors,
He was in his bunk asleep,
Until hours had passed when someone,
Looking at his empty bed,
Gave a cry that he was missing
And, on searching, thought him dead.
So with anxious hearts the sailors
Into every hole did peep
Looking for their sailor laddie
Who they knew was in the deep.
"Its no use", their Captain muttered,
"Its no use our turning round
For our boy is dead and lying
Somewhere on the fishing ground."
To return to Bill, our hero
Who unconscious struck the deep
And, on coming to the surface,
He did now his senses keep,
For the cold of the Atlantic*

*When he struck the ocean blue
Had revived him, and emerging,
He looked round, and then he knew.
That the vessel had departed
And that no one saw him fall
But he trusted in the presence
Of the One who cares for all.
Though alone upon the ocean
He still knew his fate was known
To the Lord of all Creation
Who would some how bring him home.
After struggling hard he managed
His sea boots to cast aside
That was dragging down his body,
Deep beneath the ocean tide.
He knew nothing about swimming
But managed to stay afloat
Just by lying on the water,
Buoyed up like a little boat.
How he stayed there without sinking
All that long and lonely night
Will remain to all a mystery
Except one who knew his plight.*

*Twass to Him he prayed for succor
And his prayer was not in vain,
For at dawn he saw a vessel
Sailing o'er the ocean main.
Soon a boat was quickly lowered.
Gentle hands his body bore
To the ship for kindly treatment.
Like the ship he sailed before,
She was bound from Catalina
The last of a score or more
That intended to go fishing
Up north in Labrador.
The young skipper of this vessel
Captain Hiscock was his name,
He belonged to Catalina
A fishing place of fame.
To this kind and gentle seaman
Our lad soon his story told,
How his prayer for help was answered
As the Bible had foretold.
They continued on their journey
And our lad recovered soon
From the chill of the Atlantic*

*When struck by the heavy boom.
And each night and on awakening
In the early hours of day
He would thank God for his goodness
And he earnestly would pray.
What a wonderful reunion.
What a feeling of great joy
When the sailors saw their laddie
They gave thanks to God on High.
And may you who read these verses
Know that God is ever near
To any that look for succor
And will answer every prayer.*

*The young hero of this story
William Pearce was his name,
With an only son, Elijah,
From whom this story came.
And may you who read this writing,
Though in doubt, you may recall
There is One who careth for us
Who is God and Lord of all.*