

Chance Pacific Meeting brought Sydney's "Old Salts" Together

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By John Willis

It was in September of 1902 that two seafaring men, Captain A. W. Pearse and Dr. R. Scot Skirving, met on a voyage from Vancouver to Sydney. They yarned of ships they had known, of voyages they had made, of strange encounters in the ports of the seven seas.

From that chance meeting in mid-Pacific grew the League of Ancient Mariners of New South Wales, which to-day has a membership of nearly 400, including State Governors, Rear-Admirals and among its honorary members, a Lieutenant-General and an Air Commodore.

For as they yarned, in the fashion of sailormen the world over, Pearse and Scot Skirving had grown nostalgic.

They had lamented the passing of sail and its effect on the breed of the men whose apprenticeship had been served wrestling with frozen canvas in the blinding snow squalls of the Horn.

And before they reached Sydney they had decided it would be worth trying to organise master mariners and other deck officers of the merchant service into a body, so that they could meet at intervals, swap yarns, and preserve the traditions of the sea-and of the sailing ship in particular.

Now Sydney's old salts meet regularly to roar out their sea chanties, to drink to the days that have gone, and to yarn. Above all, to yarn...

LISTEN to Captain A. E. Jolly, now in his eighties, telling of his change from sail to steam.

"In March, 1894, I was sent to Caen, in France, to join the Firth of Forth as First Mate. What was to prove my last voyage in sail did not have an encouraging start. When I reached Caen I found that the ship had capsized on to the wharf and sunk.

"It was a big job to repair her, but we sailed in April for New York. On the passage across the Atlantic we struck heavy weather, the cargo shifted, and the ship was thrown on her beam ends. Somehow we managed to get the ship before the wind and arrived in New York.

"Next morning, not surprisingly, we found the crew had deserted. We loaded for New Zealand, after signing a coloured crew at substantially cheaper rates of pay. It proved false economy. The blacks gave us a lot of trouble and one of them spent the last three weeks in irons after kicking my front teeth out in a brawl.

"When we eventually returned to London I was appointed Master, but by this time I'd decided that the day of sail was done for me. So I went into steam by joining the Port Line. In 1951 I took command of the Fort Stephens, and it was in this ship that I regretted having forsaken sail.

"It was on a voyage from Timaru, New Zealand, to Sydney that after passing through Foveaux Straits we encountered heavy gales and high seas. Because we were sailing light, the ship was pitching heavily, and we had to head to the south-west.

"Twenty-four hours later we were well south of all steamboat tracks. It was then that our tail-end shaft broke, leaving us to roll helplessly in the trough of the heavy seas.

"Our situation was serious. We rigged a sea anchor from derricks, cargo nets, and canvas in an effort to keep her head-on to the seas. It didn't last long. We then started to make all sail possible out of the canvas we had. Although this succeeded in bringing the ship before the wind, immediately we started to make headway the sea acting on the propeller caused her to broach to.

"Not knowing how long it would be before we were picked up, if ever, we went on to short rations and I saw to it that the men were kept busy enough to keep their minds off the situation.

"We had drifted about 600 miles and were in the vicinity of the Auckland Islands when, at three o'clock one morning, we were over-joyed to sight a sailing vessel. She picked up our distress signals and bore down on us. It was the barque Ravenscroft, which, fortunately for us, had also been blown hundreds of miles south of her course by the heavy weather. She took us off and back to Dunedin."

The subject of heavy weather serves to prime the memories of Captain Jolly's audience. One Ancient Mariner recalls having taken 41 days to sail from Melbourne to Fremantle in the teeth of a westerly gale and big seas.

Captain Percy Everitt is reminded of his cabin-boy days, fishing on the North Sea's Dogger Bank. "We picked up a Dutch brig in distress, waterlogged, and towed her into Cuxhaven. Next trip was in the full rigged ship Benlarig, We were on passage from Newcastle, N.S.W., to Frisco, with coal when the cargo shifted in a gale and put the ship on her beam ends. Then, on entering the Golden Gate we touched the bar, but she had just enough way to take her over."

Captain Everitt is reminded of other ships, other seas. "In the Bermuda, a hurricane deck vessel, I made the longest voyage of my career, 186 days from Antwerp to Seattle, with cement. It was on that trip that I saw my first burial at sea - that of a young Finn who fell from the main upper topsail yard and broke his neck through striking a ventilator in the fall.

"Then there was the Melanope, a fine little barque. We sailed with lumber from Port Blakely, Washington, to Cape Town and for over a week off the pitch of the Horn we were logging 315 to 325 miles a day.

"That trip was also memorable for the mutiny we had on board. With the rest of the crew in irons, the afterguard - the chippy, sailmaker, another A.B, and myself worked the ship for a week.

"The Rio was the first barquentine I shipped in as A.B. and donkeyman. She was christened the intercolonial submarine in view of her propensity for sailing more under water than on top.

ANOTHER Of Sydney's Ancient Mariners, Captain Ivor Griffiths, now lives in retirement at Watson's Bay. He was apprenticed in sail at the age of 17 and at 33 was master of one of the Burns Philp fleet of steamers.

"I'm one of the last generation of square rig sailors," Captain Griffiths will tell you proudly. "There is no training for seamanship equal to that gained in sail. There may be better navigators to-day but certainly not better helmsmen."

Captain Griffiths admits that he is fortunate to have reached his sixty-seventh birthday. He declined the position of Chief Mate of the sailing ship Denbigh Castle on the voyage in which she disappeared without trace.

Wrecked on the Chilean coast in his sailing days, a passing vessel floated a lifebelt down to him, secured with a heaving line. "Fortunately, I jumped in where the lifebelt happened to be. You see, I couldn't swim a stroke," Captain Griffiths adds simply.

Captain George Langford grew six inches in height during his first voyage. Sailing from Cardiff in October, 1896, it was three years and two months before the barque returned to home waters by running ashore on Yarmouth Sands.

SYDNEY'S Ancient Mariners may no longer have the keen eye and sure grip that once meant so much to them. Many of them may even admit to an occasional twinge in the joints.

"But their passion for the sea, their deep content in the company of ships and sailormen, will endure until they finally cross the bar".

Photo: CAPTAIN A. W. PEARSE