

Once Upon A Time There Was a Seaport

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Once upon a time, which seems a long, long time ago, there was a fabulous seaport known the world over for its beautiful harbor. Many wonderful ships came from across great oceans, from ports with strange names, and from the far reaches of the seven seas to dock at its piers and unload their cargoes. In its heyday, this great port - SAN FRANCISCO - was the major West Coast shipping port to places with exotic names, and to seaports all over the world as well as for coastal liners running north and south. Berths existed in abundance for wireless operators at this time for both arc and spark systems.

During this affluent period of San Francisco's greatness there were certain inward bound ships coming from the Orient that used to arouse the ire, the indignation and the unbridled irritation—to the boiling point—of so many of the coastal and off-shore operators. These were the Japanese liners the *Shinyo Maru*, the *Tenyou Maru*, and the *Choyo Maru* of the T.K.K. line. As they approached San Francisco they would tie up traffic with KPH for hours at a time with their d--n "picture bride" messages which with great monotony repeated, message after message after message, "Arriving Tuesday meet me." This was the time when these ships used to bring in large numbers of so-called "picture brides." These girls had to be met and claimed at the dock upon their arrival or they were not allowed to land. Hence the wireless messages.

Engaged in the lucrative Australian trade, operating out of San Francisco to Australia and New Zealand were the Ocean Steamship Company's vessels the *Sonoma*, the *Sierra*, and

the *Ventura*. Unless my ancient memory is playing tricks with me, I feel certain that they were equipped with the Poulson arc wireless system. At this time the Oceanic S.S. Co. had the "downunder" trade all to themselves.

Also operating out of San Francisco to Hawaii at the same time were the Matson Navigation Company's fleet of ships carrying both passengers and cargo. To provide more readily accessible cargo space amidships, this company designed its ships with the engine aft after the fashion of oil tankers. The Matson fleet at this time consisted of their two larger ships the *Matsonia* and the *Maui*, followed by the lesser constellations, the *Manoa*, the *Wilhelmina*, the *Enterprise*, and the *Lurline*. I spent 14 delightful months on the *Lurline* with Willie Hicks (now deceased) as my second operator. He was a swell guy. The *Lurline* was the only one of the fleet on the "triangle" run from San Francisco to Seattle, to the Islands, and back to San Francisco in those days.

As an amusing aside, I must mention a couple of incidents that happened during my tenure on the *Lurline*. While in Puget Sound we would fill the cargo tanks we had aboard with fuel oil. This would be discharged in Port Allen, Kauai whereupon the tanks would then be steamed out and filled with molasses. This would be discharged upon our arrival in Puget Sound. I watched two different amusing (to me) events take place with the discharge of molasses, which incidentally was not for human consumption but was to be used as a binder in "brick form" cattle fodder. Of a certainty, these events were anything but amusing to certain other people!

One time, in the winter when the temperature of the sea water was very cold, the molasses gets very difficult to pump. At such a time the tanks are heated with steam to make

the molasses more fluid. This particular time the engine room crew, whose job it was to turn the steam through the heater pipes in the tank, forgot to turn it off when the molasses got to the proper temperature for pumping. The result—the molasses sugared! Someone was put on the roasting pan for this.

The other time, the molasses discharge hose sprung a leak and much molasses flowed on deck just forward of the midships housing. I was coming back on board from shoreside and one of the crew members and myself arrived at the gangplank at the same time. He was bigger than I was, so I let him go up the gangplank ahead of me. When we got to the top of the gangplank we could see this molasses on the deck. It wasn't more than perhaps an eighth of an inch thick, perhaps a little more in places. After looking the situation over the sailor apparently decided that he would cut across it and up the ladder to the deck above, and thence to his quarters where he could clean up. He stepped off the gangplank onto the deck. He took about two or three steps when his feet slipped out from under him and he landed right plumb on his "ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay," rolled over, and got up. The messiest mess you ever saw! We all know that molasses in small amounts tends to be quite sticky, but in quantities spread over a surface it is as slippery as crude oil! After seeing this I decided that there were other ways of getting aboard, a little harder, but more to my liking.

To get back to our narrative, the Goodall Perkins Company, perhaps better known as the Pacific Coast Steamship Company, operated its vessels in the coastal trade. They ran from Seattle to San Francisco, San Pedro, San Diego, and returned. Their ships were the well-known *Congress*, *Governor*, and *President* (see "Pre-Cambrian Age of Radio," *Sparks* Vol. 1, No. 2, Spring 1974, p. 11). They had other ships on the Alaskan run out of Seattle. More about this at a

later date. Of these ships, I sailed on the *President*, which was skippered by old one-eyed Captain Cousins (a special act of Congress through a friendly congressman made this possible). He was the bane of all wireless operators who served under him. He hated their guts, and his greatest sadistic pleasure and delight was publicly humiliating his wireless operators in the presence of his female passengers. For my money he was an old "b*st*rd"!

The Pacific Steamship Company, later known as the Alexander Steamship Company, also the Admiral Line, operated a fleet of ships on the coastwise run out of San Francisco. These were all the "Admiral So-and-so." For instance, there was the *Admiral Schley* (do it on the Schley) on which one of my boyhood pals Vic DuCette, SOWP #1178-P, served; the *Admiral Dewey*, which was my home for some time, and many other "Admiral" ships, many on the Alaskan run.

Let us not forget the two "Great White Chargers," the "collegiates" *Harvard* and *Yale*. These ships plied alternately between San Francisco and San Pedro in an overnight run, and were commonly referred to as "the floating Dens of Iniquity."

There were two large, beautifully equipped and extremely fast ships that were regular callers at San Francisco. These were the *Great Northern* and her sister ship the *Northern Pacific*, engaged in the Flavel, Oregon to San Francisco run. Flavel was really nothing more than a railroad terminus and a dock adjacent to Astoria, Oregon. These vessels were feared by coastal steam schooners and fishermen alike because of their knifelike bows and speed, which, due to a tight schedule, resulted in their cutting down very little in their speed in foggy weather. They just plowed right on through, whistle howling, seemingly saying to all within range, "Get out of my way or take the consequences!" These two ships were railroad magnate Jim Hill's answer to

the barring of his railroad from San Francisco by the other railroads. He brought his passengers from Seattle and Portland to Flavel by rail. Here they boarded the *Great Northern* or *Northern Pacific* for the balance of their journey to San Francisco. Their ads at that time read, "Six-deck, triple screw, 24 knot steamers, *Great Northern* and *Northern Pacific*—best part of the trip in daylight—Seattle to San Francisco and return—meals and berth included—Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday—\$38.40."

During WW I, these two vessels operated as Army transports, carrying a phenomenal number of troops to France without harm. They were so fast they never travelled in convoy, always going it alone. After WW I they were homeward bound for the Pacific Coast from New York to become a part of the Alexander Steamship Company operation. It was planned that they would run opposite each other in an express run between San Francisco and Seattle. The Fates decreed otherwise, however, as when the *Northern Pacific* was abeam of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina she caught fire, burned up, and sank. A total loss!

After her arrival in San Francisco, the *Great Northern* was renamed the *H.F. Alexander* when she was formally taken over by the Alexander S.S. Co. She ran as an express vessel between San Francisco and Seattle for some time. In addition, she also operated as a chartered cruise ship between San Francisco and Hawaii on occasion, under the auspices of one organization or another. In her day, she had trouble on the West Coast. In 1915, when she was still the *Northern Pacific*, on an outward bound voyage from Flavel to San Francisco, she had no more than dropped off the Columbia River bar pilot and headed for San Francisco than she dropped her rudder. She had to be towed across the bar and up the Columbia River to Portland, where there was a drydock to which a new rudder could be shipped. Then in 1922 when she

was the *H.F. Alexander*, she tried to push over Cake Rock, close by Cape Flattery. But like Don Quixote jousting windmills, she met with essentially the same lack of success. Out of this caper she got a badly busted nose and the plastic surgery to put it back in shape again cost \$250,000!

The years of San Francisco's greatness saw other famous old-time steamships sailing in or out of there. Two of these were the *Beaver* and the *Bear* on the San Francisco—Eureka—Portland run. Tragedy ended this. Then there were many steam schooners and lumber schooners sailing in and out of the Golden Gate. One large group plied between Coos Bay, Gray's Harbor, and San Francisco.

Sailing to the Orient were the ships of the Pacific Mail S.S. Company such as the *China*, *Manchuria*, and *Mongolia* on the San Francisco—Yokohama—Hong Kong run. In addition, the American-Hawaiian Steamship Company operated a large fleet of ships in the sugar trade. Their ships were all named after states such as the *Texan*, *Virginian*, *Floridian*, *Iowan*, *Oregonian*, etc. It was the *Floridian* (WLR) I recall, that on a trip to Australia sent her 8:00 PM position report to KPH directly EVERY night for 4,500 miles from San Francisco. This was in the spark and crystal detector days too. It would be interesting to know who that operator was. Perhaps some member of SOWP does. I listened to him a good many of these nights, but lost him finally.

From the oil companies' various docks in Richmond, Martinez, and Oleum came the oil tankers, large, small, and middle-sized with their liquid cargoes. Sometimes, in order to transport more fuel, they towed behind them a barge such as, for instance, the Standard Oil Company's *Barge #95*. This barge was the long-time home of "Galena Charlie" Soderstrom. If you don't know about Galena Charlie, you're not an old-timer on the West Coast. This was also the one-time home of SOWP President Emeritus Frank Geisel. When I was on the Standard Oil

tanker *Captain A.F. Lucas* (WTV) we towed *Barge #95* for many and many a nautical mile. I learned later that some time after my habitation of WTV it was under the operating hand of Frank Geisel at the key.

Climbing up over the western horizon, coming in from the Orient, came to San Francisco another group of beautiful, big, and superb freighters operated by our British cousins. These were the "Blue Funnel Liners," ships with the strangest of names, all gleaned from Greek mythology. Such names as *Ixion*, *Agamemnon*, *Menelaus*, *Bellerophon*, etc. and operated by the A.F. Holt Company.

This, in retrospect, is a sort of "bird's eye view" as it were, of the great seaport of San Francisco in its heyday of operation as the West Coast's greatest seaport. No attempt has been made to list each and every shipping company operating out of San Francisco, nor of every ship sailing through the Golden Gate (no Golden Gate Bridge in those days!). Many fine ships and companies have been omitted in the interest of brevity. A few have been named simply as a representative cross-section.

How sad as a seaport San Francisco is today!! Thanks to Mr. Uno Who!