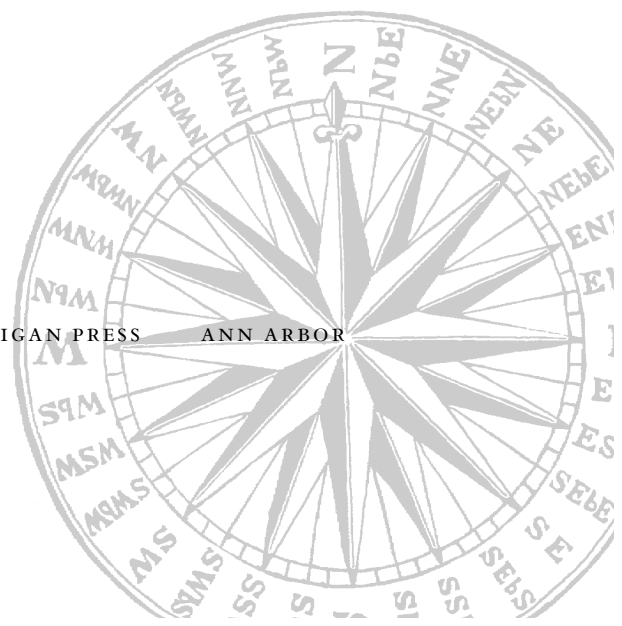


Lives and Legends of the Christmas Tree Ships

LIVES & LEGENDS
of the
CHRISTMAS TREE SHIPS

Fred Neuschel

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To Sue, who launched the project

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Preface

Dream no small dreams for they have no power to move
the hearts of men.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

*I*t is possible to live your whole life in a community bordering one of the Great Lakes and never know what a role commercial sailing craft played in the history of the region. Even for people who lived near the lakes a century ago their maritime heritage was but a dim memory—perhaps only stories that they heard at the knee of their parents or grandparents.

Bruce Catton, the famed historian of the Civil War, was one of those who grew up by Lake Michigan and yet was unaware of the role that sail craft and sailors played in that part of the world. Like many boys of his generation, Catton was captivated by trains, and, late in his life, he wrote a beautiful memoir of his youth entitled *Waiting for the Morning Train*. By then, however, he had discovered the sailors who had quietly slipped from the scene within a decade or two of his birth and whose role had been recorded only in hard to find fragments. He heard about a sailor from Wisconsin whom he described as the “owner, captain, cook and entire crew of a small schooner” and who made his living by sailing over and over again to a rocky shore on the Michigan coast where he gathered, by hand,

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load upon load of cobblestones to sell in Milwaukee for the paving of streets. This man, Catton was surprised to learn, was but one of many who made such a living on the lake. Equipped with little more than a humble sailing craft, a strong constitution, and an entrepreneurial spirit they assumed a place as hands-on builders of their community.¹

All around the lakes there are cities, towns, and villages that were birthed and built by mariners. On Lake Michigan there are the renowned cities (Chicago and Milwaukee), the lesser cities (Green Bay, Manitowoc, Michigan City, St. Joseph, Muskegon), and the many towns (Kewaunee, Kenosha, South Haven, Pentwater, et al.). Still others had their day and are gone. Even the outlines of their streets and buildings have been obliterated as the land they stood on has been reclaimed by the forest or buried by the sand. Lincoln, Silver Creek, Alaska, Twin Creeks, Horn's Pier, Singapore are no more, their memory preserved, if at all, by no more than a roadside sign. But even the communities that still flourish have become disconnected from their maritime heritage. The succeeding eras that brought the railroads and highways by which their economic life is now sustained have obscured the earliest times.

Algoma, Wisconsin, is one of those towns where the maritime heritage of the region has faded but has not been entirely forgotten. Fishers, both men and women, keep alive Algoma's relationship to Lake Michigan. A few old fishing shanties still tell of the days when the shellback fishing boats worked the local waters. On the bluff just north of the river stands the house that residents remember as the former home of the keeper of the lighthouse. But the days of long ago, when the town's name was Ahnapee (Anna-PEE) and Mackinaw boats, sloops, schooners, and steamers came and went daily from April to December, are lost to all but the devoted few.² Still, it is possible to piece together some of the history of those days, and doing so provides a unique opportunity to see the lives of Great Lakes sailors for what they were in the days of commercial sailing.

In the dreams of many of its earliest Euro American citizens, Ahnapee was destined to become one of the great port cities on the Great Lakes. As they envisioned it, a vast and limitless hinterland stretching

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to the Mississippi River and beyond would produce a prodigious flow of crops and goods for an ever-expanding and insatiable market east to the Atlantic's shore. The happy residents of Ahnapee would be able to direct the flow of nature's bounty and humanity's ingenuity, and for their efforts they would become prosperous and influential leaders of society. Others would see the dream materializing and come from near and far seeking their own security in the jobs that would be produced. The town would grow, and all would benefit from the fulfillment of the dream. Everyone would be rewarded fairly in proportion to the efforts they made. Harmony would exist in the community, and the twin ideals of democracy and capitalism would be actualized.

In the heart of the community was the harbor at the mouth of the Wolf River, and the dreamers foretold that the gifts of the earth would literally flow to this point, brought downstream to docks and piers where boats would come to carry them away to other markets. Those same boats would bring back the goods that the town's prosperity would allow everyone to own. Still other boats would move in and out of the harbor with catches of fish, adding to the community's wealth. Passenger boats would arrive carrying new seekers with new talents and ambitions to enrich the town. As time went by, piers and breakwaters would be built at the mouth of the river, and boats would come to Ahnapee for refuge from Lake Michigan's storms just as people had come seeking refuge from the political and economic tyrannies of life elsewhere.

Center stage in the dream, of course, were the sailors who worked on the boats that visited the harbor. When there were only the crudest of roads and railroads were yet too big a dream for even the biggest of the dreamers, it was the sailors who provided the lifeline for Ahnapee. The limestone to build the school, the steam engine to operate the sawmill, the dry goods to sell in the mercantile establishment, the circus to amaze and entertain, the street-corner evangelists to seek the souls of the lost, the steam shovel to excavate the harbor, the harvesting machines to extend the farmers' yields, the water pump to fight fires, the encyclopedia salesman to enlighten the mind, and the occasional flimflam artist to populate the jail—all of this and

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much, much more came by boat, while, in return, the products of the forests and the farms flowed out on the same vessels. The work of the sailors' hands was everywhere in this maritime community.

As is usually the case, the dream did not materialize, at least not fully, and certainly not for everyone. A look at a map provides some immediate evidence of why Ahnapee never became that lakeside metropolis. Its northern latitude guaranteed an intemperate climate. Ahnapee was far removed from the arable plains that were destined to become the nation's breadbasket. The topography of the land offered no obvious path by which to access an expansive hinterland. Even the tree cover included few of the coveted pine, while it held an overabundance of trees of much less monetary value that had to be cleared before farming could take place. Finally, the lakeshore provided nothing close to a natural harbor. There would never be a haven for ships there.

Human nature, too, had its role in spoiling the dream. Competition, greed, prejudice, and blindness to the needs and contributions of others were part of life in Ahnapee just as they were in any other community in the country. Its citizens were highly attuned to the differences that divided people into class, sect, and party. In other words, Ahnapee was neither a harbor of refuge to protect ships from lake storms nor a refuge to which people could flee from the social tempests of the age.

But debunking the dream and seeing the forces at play in the community only helps us to see more clearly the importance of the role that sailors played among their fellow citizens. What follows is the story of Ahnapee's sailors. They belie the image of the sailor as a nomadic ne'er-do-well whose home is wherever the ship last dropped anchor. The lives of these sailors were firmly anchored in the community. They had a personal stake in how tensions were handled and a specific role in changing the balance of power within the community.

The sailors of Ahnapee also had a direct and profound effect on each other. In doing similar work, taking similar risks, dealing with similar issues, and finding similar solutions they formed a fellowship among themselves. There were raucous good times and painfully bad times. The sailors could compete and try to shut each other out, and

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at other times they could welcome into their circle the newcomer who looked to the water to make a living and keep body and soul together. Frequently, those who gravitated to the water had suffered hardship and deprivation on land, and such was the case with two Ahnapee farm boys named August and Herman Schuenemann. As is so often the case with sailors, the Schuenemann brothers became more famous through their deaths than they did through their lives. But a visit to the Ahnapee of their childhood and young adulthood, and an acquaintance with the other sailors of Ahnapee who formed their fellowship, provides a vibrant and vivid picture of the day-to-day lives of the Great Lakes sailor. Like the sailor from Wisconsin referred to by Bruce Catton, the sailors of Ahnapee ploughed the same furrow through the lake over and over again, bringing the most basic building blocks of society to the places where they were needed.

Bruce Catton clearly believed that these sailors deserve their own eulogy, but he would not allow it to be filled with saccharine sentimentality. He refused to romanticize a life of drudgery even if it was accompanied by fair lake breezes and more than one's fair share of beautiful sunsets. "That Wisconsin sailor who traded in cobblestone," he wrote, "may indeed have been a free spirit who had not yet been crowded out by the truck and the diesel engine, but he must have been leading a dog's life just the same." Catton the historian cautioned his readers against becoming prisoners of the past who see virtues that were not there and conclude that the golden age is somewhere behind them.³

So, while the temptation is still there to burnish the past with a rosy glow, the goal here is to answer Catton's call for truth and see the life of the mariner in the maritime community for what it really was in its nitty-gritty, day-to-day actualization.

As it turns out, that life was not pure drudgery, human exploitation, or crippling poverty. Those things are part of the history, but there were also accomplishment and reward and a sense of being part of a community larger and more important than oneself. There was opportunity to lift oneself out of the dead-end life of a farm laborer or mill worker. There were comradeship, humor, adventure, challenge, perseverance, loyalty, ambition, and achievement. And, truth

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be told, there were also unconscionable acts of risk taking, foolish acts of pride and stubbornness, selfish deeds of thievery, and all the other things that human nature seems to pass on from one generation to the next.

As the nineteenth century closed, the sailors' tools and talents became obsolete, and as the opportunities began to fall away, many of them moved on to other pursuits. Some became farmers or fishers. Some found a place in industrial endeavors. A few moved to steam vessels. Others used their monetary, social, and intellectual capital to start new businesses. But not all moved on. Some clung tenaciously to the life of an independent mariner and tried to survive as small fish in the big pond. Theirs was often a less happy fate. To do their work they took risks that seem unimaginable today. Experience had so inured them to danger that it gradually lost its threat and became part of their accepted routine. They showed flawed practical judgment in exposing themselves and others to danger and hardship, and they stooped to behavior that suggests the need for thoughtful examination of their moral judgment. But, together with their more socially mainstream comrades, they all contributed to the picture of the mariner in the maritime communities across the Great Lakes.

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