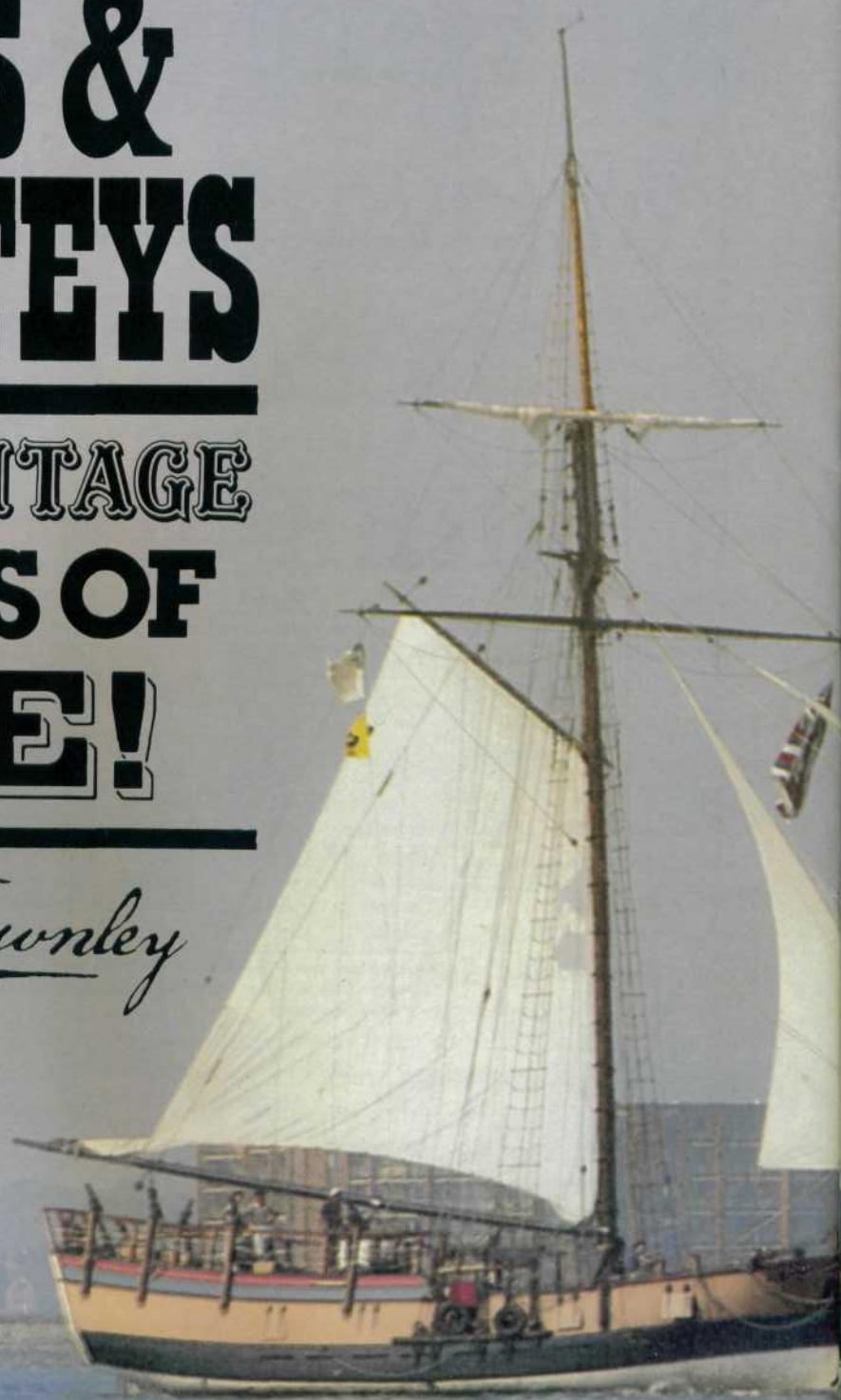


SHIPS & CHANTEYS

SEA HERITAGE
COMES OF
AGE!

by John Townley



It could have been a scene from Woodstock, or a dozen other sixties rock festivals: thousands of spectators sprawled on the grounds of Newport's Fort Adams Park with their eyes and hearts fixed on the performer above them on the scaffold stage.

But the performer wasn't the Rolling Stones or the Jefferson Airplane — it was a 73-year-old sailor, the last living man to have led the crews of the tall ships of yesteryear in the work songs and chanteys that raised sail and anchor and propelled the great ships across the rolling oceans and around the world.

From the ovation the crowd gave to Welshman Stan Hugill, it might well have been the Beatles or the Stones that were up on stage. And judging from the teeming crowds that packed Newport, R.I., it might have been a scene from the bygone sixties when rock, folk, and jazz brought music fans from across the country to swell that sparkling seaside resort.

The scene is similar,
but the focus is new.
What brought
so many

thousands of people to Newport for three days during the last summer of the '70's was the National Maritime Heritage Festival and its array of tall ships, sea songs, nautical crafts, and maritime history. Marine experts and nautical aficionados from all over the world gathered to sing, party, and exchange knowledge and lore with the public in what was the largest of a series of sea happenings spawned by the great Bicentennial tall ships gathering.

It's always risky to predict trends, but it's a safe bet that there will be a lot of similar festivals happening in the near future all over the country. The tall ships have infected America with sea fever, and the songs and lore of our maritime past, much neglected for so long, are seeing a nationwide renaissance that may rival the folk boom of the sixties.


At nearly every seaside town that ever called itself a port, maritime museums, replete with resident square-riggers, are materializing and stirring interest in the memories of America's great days of sail when our clipper ships ruled the oceans and made us the foremost trading power in the world. Tall ships, large and small, are sprouting at places like Mystic, Philadelphia, Boston, New Bedford, Baltimore, New York, Hawaii, San Diego, Newport, and even Menominee, Michigan. And everywhere the great yardarms are raised, people are flocking to the

accompanying exhibits of sea lore and crafts such as scrimshaw, macrame, boats in bottles, tattoos, sailors' knots, chanteys, and tall tales.

It may seem like an overnight happening since the Bicentennial tall ships sailed into New York harbor, but it's not — it's something that's been nurtured by the love, care, and money of a few devoted sea lovers for a long time and which only now, is coming into its own. While the folk and rock of the sixties held the country's attention, a handful of sea dogs and chanty singers were carving out the beginnings of today's sea revival.

The sea revival's seeds were sown at New York's South Street Seaport, cradled under the Brooklyn bridge and downwind of the Fulton Fish Market. There, in 1969, as the beginnings of the restoration of New York's old seaport were getting underway, a few sea singers gathered nightly aboard the fishing sloop Lettie G. Howard to trade sea chanteys and foc'sle songs with anyone who wanted to come aboard and join in.

Dozens of singers and sea buffs crossed that deck, and by the early 1970's a regular singing group had emerged from the experience called the X Seamen's Institute. Through the ensuing years, during which sea music and lore were relatively unknown, this group of salty singers continued to



When this sloop sailed the seven seas, singing chanteys was as useful a tool as a winch or a hawser.



The British Frigate, HMS Rose



Bernie Klay and the X Seamen

hold forth all summer on the docks of South Street and anywhere else they could find an ear for their rolling rhythms and often X-rated (hence their name) lyrics. By the time the bicentennial celebrations were in the making, several hundred people were gathering every Tuesday night on the piers to sing along with the rousing choruses of chanteys, ballads, and drinking songs native to sailors around the world.

But it was, of course, the tall ships parade in 1976 that really put sea consciousness on the map on a national scale. The sight of dozens of the huge, graceful square-rigged ships made an indelible mark on the memories of all of us, and was the spark that set off the current sea revival.

In the year following the Bicentennial, a flurry of new sea activity got underway. The year before, the "X" were the only resident chantey group at any seaport in the country — but before a year had elapsed since the Bicentennial, there were suddenly groups in Mystic, Boston, San Francisco, and even an all-female group of sailor singers in Philadelphia! And along with the

music came a host of other sea-related activities, so that the practically lost arts of scrimshaw, macrame, and boat-in-bottle building found new young artists and craftspersons flocking to their trades.

Still, it was all an underground movement in the wake of the Bicentennial until the summer of 1978 when Seattle held its first harbor festival and with it a tall ships chantey festival. Featuring singers from as far away as Britain, Canada, and the East Coast in a week of workshops, concerts, and public gatherings, the festival brought formal organization to what had been only a loose movement of sea fanciers. The success of the Seattle festival, loosely organized as it was, was bound to be only the beginning.

And so it was. Shortly thereafter, Bernie Klay, the leader of the X Seamen's Institute, decided that it was New England's turn to take the lead and organized the beginnings of the Newport Sea Heritage Festival. Joined by the American Sail Training Institute's Barclay Warburton and John Sheehan, the concept was turned into reality — and the results were startling. Newport found itself jammed with festival-goers, despite minimal publicity and the sudden gas crunch.

Crowds in the tens of thousands reveled with the Morris dancers, bagpipers, and chanteymen at Fort Adams Park and joined hands-on workshops to learn sea crafts and eat traditional sea meals just as sailors did on the clipper ships in the South China Sea. Adults and children alike sat hushed to hear the harrowing tales of storms off Cape Horn, shipwrecks, sea serpents, cruel captains, and narrow escapes told by old sailors whose faces reflected the experiences they had been through so many years before.

Concert-goers brought home not just memories, but albums, paintings, carvings, and sculpture that were living reminders of the life, joys, and hardships of the seamen of the age of sail. There was a feeling of really

having participated in that hardy life as you sang the songs, felt the rough wood of the capstan aboard the ships docked at the festival, and heard the tales of gales, flash girls, and foreign ports from sailors, chanteymen, and craftsmen.

The success of the Newport festival is an indicator of things to come. Already sea festivals are in the works for San Francisco, San Diego, Boston, New York, and Baltimore, as well as a repeat of the Newport gathering. The sea fever is spreading across the oceans as well, as tall ship ocean races spark sea festivals as far away as Europe and the Pacific Ocean. Clearly the tall ships and the life that went with them are an idea whose time has come again.

But is it just another pop fad, like the fifties revival or roller disco? Not likely. Maritime museums are receiving commitments from local and federal sources that will ensure their endurance for a long time to come. The supporters are a broad range of Americans who are awakening to a very special part of their country's history that evokes both pride and understanding of the part we still play in the world today. The sea has always been one of our greatest resources in our national lifestyle. This sea revival is helping many to deeply understand its historical and contemporary effect upon us.

In fact, the current tall ships revival may be more pervasive than we think.



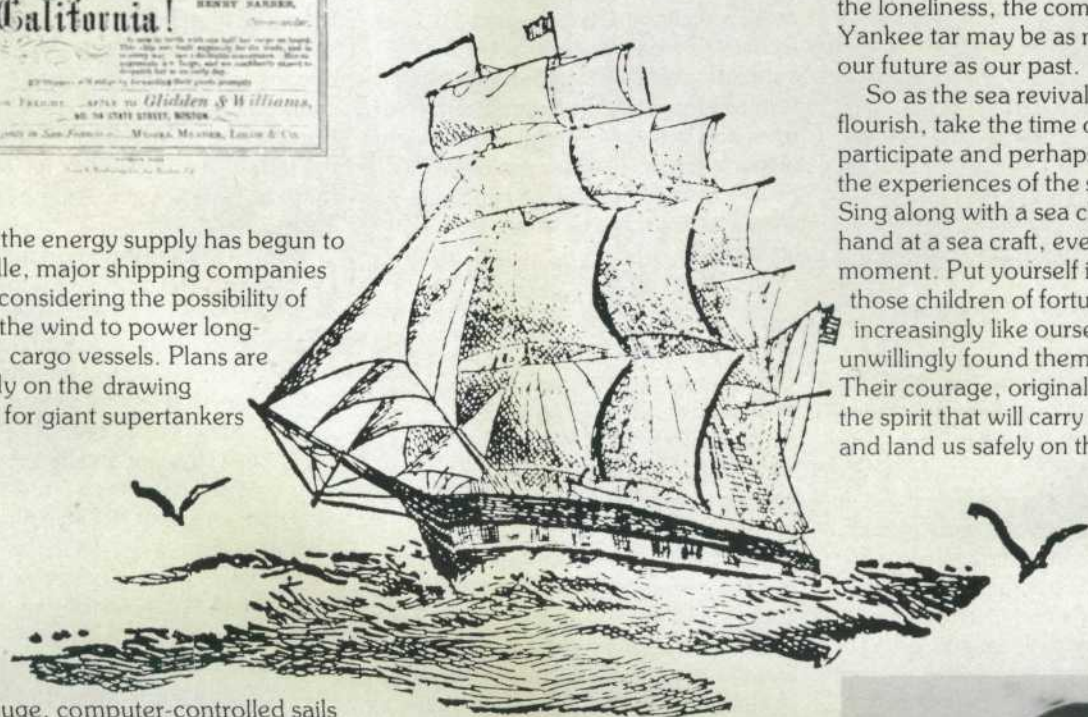


It's unlikely that there will be much use for heaving and hauling chanteys aboard sailing vessels in the future, for sea music on land. There are literally dozens of sea chantey groups about, following in the mold of the X Seamen's Institute, and there are likely to be as many more in the near future. Contemporary artists such as Gordon Lightfoot and Gordon Bok are still

and yet stay in perfect tune with his environment, the sea, in order to reach lands foreign or unknown. Enclosed in his vessel and dependent upon his skills and ability to traverse hostile winds and weather, the sailor has far more in common with the astronaut than does the cowboy. In the sailor's eyes, we see the reflection of ourselves, not only as we were but as we are yet to become. The courage, the loneliness, the comradie of the Yankee tar may be as much a part of our future as our past.

So as the sea revival continues to flourish, take the time out to participate and perhaps mentally relive the experiences of the seamen of yore. Sing along with a sea chanty, try your hand at a sea craft, even if only for a moment. Put yourself in the place of those children of fortune who, increasingly like ourselves, willingly or unwillingly found themselves at sea. Their courage, originality, and cheer is the spirit that will carry us all through and land us safely on the shore. □

Since the energy supply has begun to dwindle, major shipping companies are reconsidering the possibility of using the wind to power long-range cargo vessels. Plans are already on the drawing board for giant supertankers



with huge, computer-controlled sails that will use the trade winds to push them around the world, just as the clipper ships of a century ago did before the oil-powered engine took over. These giant sea birds of the



future will use nature's own freest resource — the wind — to replace the ever-decreasing underground resources we have come to depend on. And, oddly enough, sailing ships might actually get there not only cheaper but faster — world speed records for cargo ship routes are still, to this day, held not by steam-powered ships but by their predecessors, the Yankee clippers!

writing songs of the sea — and even getting hit records out of them! It may not pay to be a sailor anymore, but it can certainly pay to sing about them.

What is it that is causing this new upsurge in the song, lore, and lure of the sea? What is happening to American consciousness that has revived an empathy with the people who made America the world's greatest seafaring nation under sail?

In a way, it's very similar to the great hero cult of the cowboy, so dear to our own generation in years past — the rugged individualist, meeting every challenge of a hostile environment and making an indelible mark upon the world. But there's something much more wistful, and more modern, about the sailor. Like most of us, the sailor has run out of more land to conquer. Instead, he must endure hardships

