From 1792 to Today…

Tall Ships Entwined in Tacoma’s History

By Ron Magden

When the first tall ship sailed into Puget Sound in May 1792, only two members of the Suquamish Tribe ventured out in their canoe to observe Captain George Vancouver’s single-masted, 100-foot sloop Discovery.

More than two centuries later, hundreds of thousands attended Tall Ships Tacoma from June 30 to July 5, 2005. The massive event marked the latest chapter in Tacoma’s long history as a destination for tall sailing ships.

In his memoirs, Captain George Vancouver lauded Puget Sound as “the most lovely country that can be imagined.” Forty-nine years after Vancouver penned those effusive words of praise, Captain Charles Wilkes anchored the 88-foot USS Porpoise in Commencement Bay. Wilkes observed that the sheer drop-off to depths of 500 feet along much of the shoreline augured well for the development of a major port. His prophecy was quickly realized. In 1853, the George Emory was the first commercial tall ship to visit Commencement Bay. It was fully loaded with lumber bound for San Francisco.

Magden – continued on Page 7
This and that
A tip of the THS hat to:
- Tacoma Athletic Commission, for publishing its massive (512-page) history of sports in Tacoma and Pierce County, *Playgrounds to the Pros*, co-authored by Caroline Gallacci, Marc Blau and Doug McArthur.
- And to Metro Parks Tacoma, for highlighting local history in its observance of Point Defiance Park’s centennial this year, with particular thanks to Melissa McGinnes, Doreen Simpkins and Bill Rhind.

Orders continue to come in for our reprinting of Herbert Hunt’s classic *Tacoma, Its History and Builders*. As a THS member you can order the four-volume set, including the expanded, improved index, for $250 plus shipping and sales tax. Or you can order the index separately for $50. Ordering details are on our website, www.tacomahistory.org. We expect the books to be available by November 15.

In memoriam: Charles “Bill” Somers, founder of the Museum of Puget Sound on Stretch Island and an icon among maritime historians, died July 4 at age 94. Death came for Bill a few days after watching the Tall Ships parade into Commencement Bay.

VISIT THE TACOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY’S SITE ON THE WEB
www.tacomahistory.org

The society gratefully acknowledges the following gifts to the Annual Fund:

**Guide ($1,000 and above)**
Michael J. Graham and L. Christine Foss
Alan Liddle

**Explorer ($500 and above)**
James R. & Joanne Bellamy
(Gift in memory of William Bellamy)

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Kyle C. and Tiffany E.D. Price
Elaine Ramsey and Jerry Ramsey, Ph.D.
Members pack exhibit center for preview event

It was standing room only at the Tacoma Historical Society’s new exhibit center at 747 Broadway on July 11 as members turned out for refreshments and a celebration.

The building is part of the Old City Hall Historic District.

Brian Kamens, local historian, described the building’s history for the gathering. It was built in 1919 as part of Bert H. Kennedy’s Used Car Exchange. Kennedy became a Stude-baker dealer in 1922 and an Oldsmobile dealer in 1928. The 700 block of Broadway remained the heart of Tacoma’s auto row for several decades.

Plans call for opening the exhibit center in the fall of 2005. The society has signed a six-month lease with an option to renew for a longer term.

THS plans to have professionally designed exhibits, changing about twice a year, that illuminate Tacoma’s history. Some smaller displays are envisioned as well, along with a small office and gift shop.

Tacoma Historical Society
Seeks Exhibit Center Office Manager

Part-time manager of the Tacoma Historical Society Exhibit Center. Duties include supervising Exhibit Center personnel, operating the Exhibit Center gift shop, and maintaining the Society’s membership, newsletter, and other databases. Supervisory, administrative, communications, office software, and bookkeeping expertise is required. Retail sales experience is highly desirable. Salary is competitive. Qualified applicants should submit an application letter and resume to the Tacoma Historical Society, P.O. Box 1865, Tacoma, WA 98401.

Mosquito Fleet Photos on Display at THS Exhibit Center

The Tacoma Historical Society opened a photo exhibit on the historic Mosquito Fleet steamers at its new Exhibit Center at 747 Broadway in Tacoma as part of the Tall Ships Festival. The exhibit in the center’s display windows will continue through the summer.

Between the 1850s and the 1930s dozens of steamers carried people and freight among the many towns and on Puget Sound. The glory years of the historic Mosquito Fleet (so-named because the small ships were so ubiquitous) began in the 1880s and lasted well into the 1920s. The Seattle-Tacoma route was the most profitable and was carried out by such famous steamers as the S.S. Flyer, Indianapolis, Iroquois, and Tacoma. The Tacoma was the fastest Mosquito Fleet steamer.

With the building of the highway system and the ever-increasing use of automobiles and buses, regular passenger and freight service steadily diminished and finally came to an end in the late 1930s. Highway 99, one of the first four-lane highways in the country, was completed in 1928. It provided a convenient auto, bus, and freight transportation link between Tacoma and Seattle that the Mosquito Fleet could not compete with.

Beginning in the 1920s, a number of Mosquito Fleet ships were converted to auto ferries, and some of them found inland passenger and freight use in other areas. All but one of them was eventually scrapped. That ship is the Virginia V, a National Historic Landmark Vessel, and the last surviving ship of the Mosquito Fleet.

Stop by 747 Broadway and take a look.

Where credit is due: Robin Paterson and Robert Tschida helped select the Mosquito Fleet ships to feature. Polly Medlock had the negatives and prints made and mounted them in the frames. Jim Hoard researched the ships and wrote the captions and story boards. Jim and Jean Hoard curated the exhibit and installed it at the exhibit center. Robin Paterson loaned the large photo of the S.S. Tacoma.
The Kid Who Waited for the Big Tall Ship to Come Back
By Robert Tschida

On June 15, 1933, Old Ironsides arrived in Tacoma in tow of the U.S.S. Grebe. The Grebe was a minesweeper which towed the U.S.S. Constitution from Boston, visiting ports on the East Coast, the Gulf Coast and finally up the West Coast.

On that Thursday afternoon my family and I stood for hours up on Stadium Way, waiting for Old Ironsides to come around Point Robinson on the eastern tip of Maury Island. At last we saw the small speck of the Grebe, and then there she was — Old Ironsides! Wow! A great cry arose from the thousands on Stadium Way. “There she is!” “It’s coming!” As she came into the harbor the crowds moved down to Seventh and Commerce Street and wound down to Fourth Street and on down to McCormick Dock to see our country’s pride and joy.

Oh wow! This was it, boy oh boy! When Old Ironsides was secured at McCormick Dock we wanted to go aboard right now!

Sad to say, due to the lateness of the day no one was allowed on board till Friday, June 16th. That morning crowds filed aboard from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. My Aunt Emma arrived to set up the first aid facilities. She and my Aunt Marie were registered nurses. Aunt Emma was one of the nurses selected to tend the aid tent on the wharf.

Aunt Emma asked me if I’d like to go with her to the McCormick Dock. Wow! Would I ever, so after getting approval from my mother, off we went. My two older brothers Joe, 13, and Dan (Happy), 11, also went along to keep an eye on me.

Next day, having gotten up extra early, I waited for Aunt Emma by her car, just to make sure she didn’t leave without me.

Boy oh boy! Now I knew the ropes, and the ship was mine to roam as I pleased. At times, for me, it was a big pirate ship. Now and then I checked in with my aunt in the first aid tent. Never getting tired, I spent all the time possible on the “Dream Ship.” Gee, a 9-year-old kid on this big ship! Surely this must be the next thing to heaven.

My aunt just accepted the fact that her nephew would be waiting for her each morning. My mother made a peanut butter sandwich for me along with an apple and maybe a cookie or two for my lunch.

More and more visitors came each day, and later on the hours were extended to 8 p.m. to accommodate working people.

On Sunday June 18 the visitors really started coming. People came from all over by every mode of transportation. There were some big cruisers in the harbor and maybe nine destroyers as well, paying a visit to the city of Tacoma.
I had to resist the urge to climb the lower “ratlines” or shrouds. (Funny thing — I did not ever see any rats on the foot ropes. Years later I learned why they were called ratlines. It was because seamen had to scurry up them when the order was given.)

Eventually the urge to climb did get the best of me. No longer content to roam the ship at will, up I started. (I kept in mind the old saying about one hand for the ship and one for yourself. At the time I couldn’t figure out how one could hold on to a ship with only one hand and hold on to yourself with the other hand – years later I learned what that meant.)

I hadn’t gotten very far up the ratlines, maybe 5 feet, when yells went up, “Get that kid the hell off of there right now!” Two or three crewmembers snatched me off easy-like, and the big guy had me escorted off my beloved ship. Later on I found out he was one the mates. (My Uncle Dan used to tell me about “Bucko Mates” – some were nasty and brutal.)

Until Old Ironsides left on Thursday June 22nd I always referred to him as the “Bucko Mate” — but not when he was within hearing distance. My short career of wanting to be part of the crew was shot down by disobeying regulations. I made no further attempt to climb any of the rigging.

On Tuesday June 20th my aunt and I arrived early at the dock. She had a parking pass so we were right beside the warehouse. Being the first in line at the bottom of the gangway and impatient for 10 a.m. to come, I clambered aboard my ship. When 10 a.m. rolled around there was a crewmember and a man called a chief at the bottom of the gangway issuing instructions to the visitors. I could not understand why they called him chief. He sure didn’t look like an Indian chief. He didn’t wear any headdress or buckskin clothing. He was certainly white and had red hair, so how could he be a chief?

At the top of the gangway there was — oh, no! — that big Bucko mate and two seamen. He held out his hand to my chest, stopped me, and said, “Kid, are you going to behave yourself today?” I said, “Yes, sir, I will.” He said: “Well, if I catch you doing anything bad, off you go and you will be barred from ever coming on the ship again.” What did he mean, barred?

Later I asked my aunt what ‘barred” meant. She said it means you can never go on the ship again, not ever.

Not ever again?

“Yes, Bobby, never again.”

Wow! That was good enough for me, so good I had to be.

On June 21st, the last day of visiting the ship, I was extra good and kept out of the way of the crewmembers. I stayed on board as long as I could. But at length my aunt came and yelled up to me that it was time to go home. I took one last look at my ship as we drove down Dock Street, and that was the last time I saw Old Ironsides.

**Part II**

About three months later, after Old Ironsides sailed away, school was in session again. On Saturdays especially, I would ask my older brothers if they would take me down to the docks. Of course they knew the reason why, and that was so I could see a tall ship. Over and over they would explain to me that there were no longer any windships coming to Tacoma.

Now and then they and their friends would let me tag along while they fished off the docks. They kept an eye on me all the time. Okay, then, if I could not see any tall sailing ships when we were at Commercial Dock (present site of Thea’s Park), we could go to the Foss Launch & Tug operations.

Foss was on the extreme north end of Commercial Dock. For me, there were only two kinds of vessels in all the world – windships and tugboats. Boy oh boy! All kinds of tugboats, big ones, medium-size ones, and little monkey tugs.

The monkey tugs were like sheep dogs that rounded up and herded sheep. The little tugs were able to dart in and out and go in shallow water; they were the little workhorses.

I never got bored or tired hanging around the tugboats, and that occupied me until it was time to go home. As the years went by and I turned 13 I no longer needed my brothers to be on constant guard looking out for me. Kids in my age group could
wander the waterfront on our own. Yes, we knew practically ever square foot of the City Waterway and every building and what sort of business went on there.

Never did I lose my yearning to see a stray windship come into Commencement Bay. Maybe just maybe one would come in. Through the years small sailing ships did visit our city, such as the Nonsuch, the Golden Hind, Adventuress, Zodiac, many times the Lady Washington, and our own Odyssey and Red Jacket. In 1989 as we celebrated Washington State’s centennial, a flotilla of craft visited various ports, including some small sailing vessels.

In late July 2002 we were fortunate to be host to the largest gathering of Tall Ships since the 1920s. Chuck Fowler of the Working Waterfront Maritime Museum helped greatly to organize the fleet.

Under sponsorship of WWMM and the Foss Waterway Development Authority, the windships gathered off Point Defiance on July 29 and in full sail departed at 3:30 p.m. for the race into the Thea Foss Waterway to the Dock Building moorage.

The Robert C. Seamans, built by Tacoma’s Martinac Shipbuilding Corporation, made its way to the Foss Waterway, racing the brig Lady Washington and schooners Quissett / Coaster II, Red Jacket, and Suva. Their race was propelled by a good northeast wind. This was a prelude to a planned gathering of ships from around the world.

My vision and dream came true for on June 30, 2005, a fleet of many vessels sailed into Tacoma, with two magnificent windships or Tall Ships. Yes, I had waited for 72 years for a great sailing vessel to arrive in Tacoma; never did I give up. The kid knew that someday, somehow he would get his utmost wish.

Truly Tacoma should be designated as the “Seaport City of Puget Sound.” Tacoma has returned to its origins of 125 years ago during the great age of sailing ships.

Robert Tschida is a frequent contributor to the City of Destiny Newsletter. An active Tacoma Historical Society volunteer, he received the society’s Murray Morgan Award in 1999.

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Making History, How to Remember, Record, Interpret, and Share the Events of Your Life  By Kim Pearson

Clearly this is a reference manual. However, those who wish to record a personal history will eagerly grab it when writers’ block hits. The book begins with a rationale for telling your story. It ends with a philosophical venture that provides some of the motivation needed to tell a personal story.

The fledgling memoir author is spared the daunting task of explaining the often very private and visceral need to write an autobiography.

The heart of the book teaches the first-time author the methodologies of remembering, interpreting, editing, and finally, sharing ones’ life story.

Pearson has gone to extraordinarily helpful lengths to write 19 chapters, eight with recognizable national and international events. These pages are designed to assist the autobiographer desiring to connect personal stories to world events. The book includes numerous timelines with major headlines of the day, giving a fledgling author plenty of grist for the mill. Amateur authors will utilize this 348-page text as a frequent reference tool to create the drama and the detail to often lacking in memoirs of so-called “ordinary people.”

Kim Pearson teaches writing and history. She has written three fiction and two poetry books. Making History is available at www.booksurge.com.

— Jerry V. Ramsey, Ph.D.
By 1972, the tall ship replica era began with the visit of the *Nonsuch*,¹ a representation of the famous Hudson Bay Company bark. The *Nonsuch* was followed by copies of the 16th century *Golden Hind*,² 17th century *Lady Washington*³ and the 18th century *Endeavour*⁴. The turnouts were large, setting the stage for Tacoma’s mightiest effort of all, the 2005 Tall Ships Tacoma Festival.

“This event was a landmark in our history,” said Clare Petrich, a Port Commissioner, chair of Tall Ships Tacoma and former president of the Tacoma Historical Society. “The people of Tacoma and Pierce County understand that our maritime heritage is our past, present and it is a foundation for our future.”

**End notes**

1. The eight-gun ketch *Nonsuch* was constructed in Essex, England, in 1650. She was the ship responsible for the founding of the Hudson Bay Company in 1667. The replica is now at the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature in Winnipeg, Canada.

2. The *Golden Hind* was captained by Sir Francis Drake and circumnavigated the world between 1577 and 1580. The replica built in 1973 has circumnavigated the globe and is now a living history museum, moored on the Thames River in London.

3. The original *Lady Washington* was built circa 1750 on the Essex River in Massachusetts. The replica of Captain Robert Gray’s brig was built at Grays Harbor Historical Seaport in Aberdeen, Washington, and launched in 1989 as a Washington State Centennial project.

4. *Endeavour* is a replica of Captain James Cook’s famous ship of discovery, 1768-1771. The replica was launched in 1994 and is homeported in Sydney, Australia.

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Dr. Ronald E. Magden is a Tacoma writer and historian. He is a member of the founding faculty at Tacoma Community College. His article is printed by permission of the Port of Tacoma.
October 10, 2005 – Monday, 7 pm • Tacoma Public Library

“Tacoma Through the Magic Lantern”  
John Potter, native Tacoman and history buff, will use his early-1900s magic lantern to show maritime scenes and vintage views of Tacoma. He has been collecting negatives and magic lantern slides for more than 30 years.

☛ Election of officers and board members

November 14, 2005 – Monday, 7 pm • Tacoma Public Library

“Fifty Years of Caring”  
Howard Baumgart, former administrator and chaplain at Rainier School, will discuss his newly revised book on Washington State’s treatment of mental retardation.

☛ Book signing

December 12, 2005 – Monday, 7 pm • Tacoma Public Library

Program to be announced.

www.tacomahistory.org — 253-472-3738