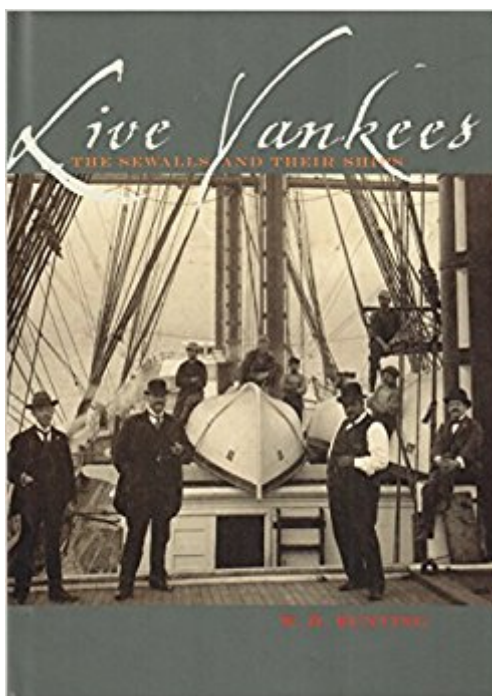


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Live Yankees: The Sewalls And Their Ships



Synopsis

For nearly a century members of the Sewall family of Bath, Maine, built and managed a fleet of stout deepwater square-riggers—a fascinating story. Correspondence from their captains offers adventure of another kind—mutinies, shipwrecks, and “cannibal isles.” No family has been more intimately associated with the history of the city of Bath, then among the most productive shipbuilding communities of any size in the world. Despite a veneer of old-fashioned formalized civility, international shipping in the late 1800s and early 1900s was a highly competitive, low-margin, and often cut-throat business. While the Sewalls’ shrewd responses to market changes make a fascinating story, the surviving correspondence from their captains offers adventure of another kind. Sewall captains were required to make regular reports to the Sewall office, and this correspondence is a treasure-trove of stories about the voyages of Sewall ships—surly crews, mutinies, plagues, shipwrecks, cannibal isles, destitute widows, and more, along with details of ship performance, weather encountered, trouble in port, and even lawsuits. The Sewalls also invested in railroads and other non-maritime securities and speculations, and also became involved in politics, but it is in the maritime world that they are best remembered. As the owners of the last surviving important fleet of American square-riggers engaged in worldwide trade, it was the Sewalls’ fate to draw the curtain on this economic enterprise. No family had worked more assiduously, more stubbornly, or with more enterprise to delay the arrival of that day.

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Customer Reviews

“A full-body immersion into the late, great age of sail.” - DownEast Magazine

"...tells the story of the family and their strong force of merchant vessels that dominated sea trade as the nineteenth century drew to a close and the twentieth century began. Drawing stories not just from the Sewall family themselves, Live Yankees also picks from the cornucopia of stories that played out on their ships. A biography of a family and a business, Live Yankees is well worth the read for those curious about business or seafaring history."

As technology changes, it is often unclear to people living at the time where the changes will lead. Few better illustrations of this point can be found than the tale told in the book "Live Yankees" by William Bunting. The book is the story of a ship-owning family, the Sewalls of Bath, Maine. While the descendants of Arthur Sewall (1835-1900), in many ways the protagonist of the story, helped fund the book, the author lays considerable stress on his efforts to avoid a tame, "official" history with all the controversies whitewashed. A previous book, also published with family support, "Sewall Ships of Steel" by Mark W. Hennessy (Augusta, ME: 1937), focused exclusively on the final phase of the family involvement in sailing ships, but was known as a panegyric rather than a history. The author is known to me from his posts to the Maritime History Listserv, a Canada-based e-mail group focusing on scholarly exploration of maritime history in all periods. I am inclined to take his claim at face value. The book does read like real history, including episodes that, were I a Sewall descendant, I would prefer not to be exposed to public knowledge. Getting back to the changes in technology, those of us who have been professionally involved in the shipping industry are well aware that reducing labor requirements, rather than ship speed, efficiency, or even energy use, has been the driving force behind the evolution of merchant shipping from the 19th century to the present. A large clipper ship of the 1850's could carry 1,000 tons of cargo and would have had a crew of about 60. Today, a containership can carry 25,000 tons or more with a crew less than half as large. The advantage in labor use gets even bigger when the ship ties up in harbor and starts unloading. No more is there an army of longshoremen streaming down into the holds to wrestle boxes, bales, sacks, or bushel baskets of stuff from the corners of the hold to a position under the hatch where the cargo net is waiting to hoist it out onto the pier. Instead, a crane operator, with a handful of men below to guide the sling into position and fasten it to strongpoints on the containers, lifts each container off the deck stack or out of the hold and onto a waiting truck or railroad car. As a result, an ever smaller number of ships and seamen have been able to carry a rapidly expanding world trade at lesser and lesser cost per ton-mile. Today, many products that used to be made in the US or Europe are made in China and shipped to consumers in the former countries of manufacture, and

cost less than they did when made in the consumers' countries. This is a two-edged sword: less cost per item means a higher standard of living in general, but with collateral damage to the workers whose jobs have been "outsourced", and even to those seeking a seagoing career as fewer and fewer seamen are required to man the world's fewer, but larger ships. The Sewalls had a hazy idea of only part of this dynamic. It was part of their traditional New England world-view to recognize that to make money, you had to participate in what later became known as the "race to the bottom" - you had to undercut the prices of your competitors, and the easiest way to do that was to reduce your own overhead and other costs. Accordingly, they neither built nor owned any clippers, even though between 1850 and 1854, because of the premium that cargo shippers and passengers were willing to pay for a fast ship, many clippers earned their owners the price of their construction in one voyage - and a clipper's construction costs were quite a bit larger than an ordinary ship of the time. The Sewalls recognized the advantages of increasing ship size, but as the Age of Sail was winding down they failed to recognize that steam power had the potential to reduce crew costs in addition to helping to make more dependable passages. Instead, they focused on the added cost of the steam engine, its engineers, stokers, and fuel, compared to the wind, which seemed to be free. In reality, the wind is free, but the masts, sails, and rigging to capture it and turn it to use, as well as the crewmen to handle them, are not - and when it doesn't blow, or if it blows from the wrong direction, the money spent on sailing equipment and sail handlers is not being amortized. The steam engine, by contrast, keeps chugging along the whole time the ship is under way, and every turn of the shaft is making money for the owners transporting cargo (as well as consuming fuel and labor). A steamship could often cover fewer miles between ports because it did not need to steer an indirect course to take advantage of stronger or more favorable global wind patterns, so even when sailing ships could go faster under favorable conditions, steamers could sometimes make faster passages and always more consistent ones. Mr. Sewall did recognize that a larger ship was more economical, even though it cost more to build, and he pushed wooden ship construction to its limits, or maybe somewhat beyond, in an effort to build larger ships without abandoning the infrastructure that had grown up around Bath for shipbuilding in wood. Eventually, he decided to make the jump to steel (by then, iron was already obsolescent, although still in use in many shipyards). Furthermore, instead of having his metal ships built on the Clyde in Scotland where most of the skills and facilities were at the time, he sponsored the erection of an entire new shipyard to do the work, right there in Maine. (I'm sure this ended up costing more). So, the picture that emerges of the Sewall ship-owning empire is not of a faceless bureaucracy but of a gifted, opinionated curmudgeon dominating his contemporaries with his uncompromising convictions - indeed, a very human face to the end of the

Age of Sail. Like many people, Arthur Sewall had mastered his career employment, the business of running a shipping line and shipyard, and he couldn't let go of it even when faced by what must have been obvious evidence that sail power was obsolete. He was a good enough manager to hold it together until his death. We learn the trades the ships ran in, the cargoes they carried, and quite a lot about the captains who commanded them and their frequent problems with their crews. The book is a fat tome, over an inch thick, with both extensive text and black and white photos of the ships, locations, and people we meet in the course of the text. It is a well made book, showing that the subsidy from the Sewall family was not wasted; indeed, it compares favorably to books actually created at the turn of the century, around the year 1900 when Arthur Sewall died, except for my pet peeve, the footnotes being at the end of each chapter instead of the reader-friendly Victorian layout with them at the bottom of each page. With today's desktop publishing, there is no longer any excuse for relegating footnotes to the back of a chapter when a few keystrokes in Microsoft Word will arrange them at the bottom of the page. "Live Yankees" is unlikely to be replaced any time soon as the definitive history of the Sewall family business, and in addition, it is an entertaining read filled with riveting anecdotes. Its subsidy from the family has not corrupted it in any obvious way, and the author's use of the papers stored in the maritime museum comes through on practically every page, making it a priceless historical record. While I, as both reader and reviewer, chose to fixate on one character, Arthur Sewall, and imagine a more dramatic tale from his point of view, Mr. Bunting should be praised for having much more discipline than I do. I would have made the book into more of a biographical novel, but that would have reduced its value as a historical document. The book fills in a sparsely covered period in the decline of commercial sail, skimming quickly over the technical features of the ships and concentrating on the business aspects. Future scholars will be in the author's debt, and casual readers will still enjoy the book if they don't try to absorb too much of it at a sitting.

wonderful, absorbing book on a Maine ship building family, the process of ship building in New England in the 19th century and the hazardous trips these ships made around the globe.

The story is extraordinary, as is the writing -- evocative, surprising, utterly engaging.

Live Yankees, the Sewalls and their Ships is a fascinating and sweeping history of one family from Bath, Maine, which built and operated over one hundred merchant ships, mostly square riggers in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It offers a complex and intriguing portrait of the shipbuilders, ship

owners, captains and crews who helped drive the meteoric rise of the US sailing merchant fleet in the mid 1800s and presided over its fall in the wake of the arrival of steamships. Bill Bunting accepted the daunting task of taking 315 linear feet of documents that comprise the Sewall Family Papers and translating them into a coherent and entertaining account. In the hands of lesser writer, the book could have ended up as a dry and plodding scholarly work. Fortunately "Live Yankees" is anything but. In addition to wonderful writing, the book is full of fascinating photographs of both the people and the ships described within its pages. The characters Bunting illuminates, often through the use of private and business correspondence, as well shipyard records and ships logs, are vivid and engaging. The Sewalls come off as being shrewd and tight-fisted, ready to squeeze every penny from the often low margin business of shipping. The portraits of the family patriarchs, from William Dunning Sewall of the early 1800s to Arthur Sewall who died in 1900, are nuanced and revealing. It is difficult not to feel both admiration and unease with these men, to admire their enterprise and also be put off by the avarice beneath their usually genteel exteriors. Arthur Sewall, in addition to being a shipbuilder and ship owner, was also a bank president, director of a railroad, and the Democratic Party vice presidential candidate in 1896 on William Jennings Bryan's first run for president. He was indeed a larger-than-life figure yet Bunting does an excellent job infusing him with flesh and blood; full of confidence and contradiction. Bunting describes him as "small town, dry humored, even quaint, Down East nabob. ... As unflappable and phlegmatic as ever - an enigma wrapped in a veil of pungent cigar smoke..." The images Bunting presents of the captains, mates and the ships they sailed are also fascinating. He follows the ships and their masters through gales, fires, shifting cargo, groundings, mutinies and the outright disappearance of ships without a trace. We catch a glimpse of the various trades - wool, guano, sugar, coal, timber, case oil as well as general cargo - that drove the ships and men around the globe. The captains and mates of these ships were intriguing and complex characters. You have to admire their seamanship and courage while often being horrified by their brutality. It is hard to judge from more than a century later how much discipline was actually required to manage the unruly sailors of the day. All the same, the world-wide reputation of the Yankee "blood-boats" was, no doubt, well earned. The Sewalls were roundly criticized for the treatment of their crews, particularly toward the end of the nineteenth century, as smaller crews were asked to sail larger and larger ships. Nevertheless, the best and worst of the Sewall captains and mates are fascinating to read about. Captain Ned Sewall, one of only two members of the family to choose the sea for a career, was a disaster, notable for his brutality, drunkenness and complete mismanagement of vessel accounts. On the other hand, Captain Thomas Burton "Burt" Gaffney, as captain of the Arthur Sewall, one of the Sewall's iron

ships, faced horrific weather, fire, shifting cargo and constant leaking from failed rivets and seams, yet never had reports of "sailor troubles," as the charges of brutality were euphemistically known. On April 2, 2007, the Arthur Sewall under the command of Captain Gaffney sailed from Philadelphia with coal for Seattle and was never seen or heard from again. The Sewalls missed their great opportunity to invest in steam ship lines and resolutely stuck to their square-riggers and schooners. As the markets turned against them, the old ships were sold off. The four masted bark Edward Sewall was sold to the Texas Company in 1916, who then sold her to Alaska Packers in 1922. Her last voyage was to Japan in 1936, after which she was scrapped. In 1915, the Sewall ship William P. Freye became the first American ship sunk in World War I, when she was sunk by a German commerce raider. The four-masted Sewall bark Dirigo was sold in 1915 and sunk by a German submarine. The Sewall ship Indiana built in 1876 and sold in 1898, ended her life in Hollywood, being featured several movies. She finally blew ashore in Long Beach, California and burned that year to celebrate Harbor Day. And so it goes - so many ships and so many stories. Bill Bunting has done a marvelous job in pulling them all together in one book, in the story of one extraordinary family. Live Yankees, the Sewalls and their Ships is close to five hundred pages long, including appendices. When I first sat down to read it, I wondered whether I would learn more about the Sewalls than I cared to know. That was not the case. Like all well written history, I left wanting to learn more. Live Yankees, the Sewalls and their Ships is well written history indeed. Highly recommended.

W.H. Bunting is in my view one of the great social historians of our generation. His newest book, Live Yankees, The Sewalls and their Ships, is a history of an old American family, shipbuilding merchants of Bath, Maine in the great age of sail, kin of the famous Judge Sewall of the Salem witch trials ... a saga, and richly illustrated with photographs. Bunting can wring more information out of a vintage photograph than anyone I ever ran across, and see things I wouldn't see if I stared at the thing for a week. He also writes like an angel and may have the largest working vocabulary of anyone alive. (All those nautical terms and obsolete names for 19th c. tools and work techniques). A pure delight.

Some families form family businesses, and some families form business empires that lives on for a century. "Live Yankees: The Sewalls and Their Ships" tells the story of the family and their strong force of merchant vessels that dominated sea trade as the nineteenth century drew to a close and the twentieth century began. Drawing stories not just from the Sewalls family themselves, "Live

Yankees" also picks from the cornucopia of stories that played out on their ships. A biography of a family and a business, "Live Yankees" is well worth the read for those curious about business or seafaring history.

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