

CELEBRITY SEA CAPTAIN

Pursuing the Real "Matt Peasley"

By Joe Follansbee

COLUMBIA The Magazine of Northwest History, Summer 2006: Vol. 20, No. 2

Ed Van Syckle wanted the truth about Captain Matt Peasley. He knew all the adjectives people applied to Peasley: "daring," "picturesque," "a lusty sailorman." But doubts chewed at his reporter's instincts. Was this man everything people said about him? Peasley gave him a chance to find out when in 1927 he invited Van Syckle to sign on as an ordinary sailor on his schooner *Vigilant*. "Be down here at 7 a.m.," Peasley ordered.

Van Syckle literally missed the boat. He packed a bag and put it on board the night before shipping out. The next morning he headed down to the dock in Grays Harbor, a small port on the Washington coast, but an open drawbridge blocked his way. He arrived at *Vigilant's* berth a half-hour late. His bag was on the dock and the ship was gone.

Van Syckle bawled. The 25-year-old imagined the *Aberdeen Daily World* firing him for missing an exclusive. ("What a scoop!" his boss predicted.) The *Cappy Ricks* books and *Saturday Evening Post* stories had made Captain Matt Peasley a household name. He was the archetypal sea captain, a living cliché. No other merchant skipper would match his fame. And he was sailing away.

Van Syckle brightened when he saw that the *Vigilant* was still in the channel. He ran up and down the wharf searching for a boat that could take him to the ship. He begged a fisherman for a ride. "Naw, can't do it," the fisherman said. Van Syckle called on a tugboat captain. The man agreed to ferry the reporter.

A quarter of an hour later, the tug came alongside *Vigilant* and Van Syckle climbed aboard. Peasley, dressed in a high pressure cap, black topcoat, and sea boots, extended a mallet-like hand to the young man. "He said something like, 'Well, it's about time,'" Van Syckle remembered. Peasley seemed authentic so far.

Van Syckle had a long face, a high forehead, some extra nose, and a good reporter's eye for detail. He reminisced about his voyage and the now forgotten Peasley in a memoir published in *On the Harbor: From Black Friday to Nirvana*, a history of the Grays Harbor area. The Peasley trip fell in his lap only a year after he started at the *Daily World*. He would sail from Aberdeen to Honolulu on the five-masted, 1,600-ton topsail schooner *Vigilant*. Her masts were 130 feet tall, and she measured 260 feet from bowsprit to taffrail. Her cargo was 1.6 million board feet of lumber. "I daydreamed all the time about sailing on that gorgeous lumber schooner," he wrote.

Van Syckle watched the 61-year-old Peasley give orders from the *Vigilant's* poop deck. The six-foot-one "complete lord and master of his ship" weighed 190 pounds, had clear, blue eyes, and a walrus mustache that framed a quick smile. Peasley had no time for Van Syckle as the ship

approached the North Pacific. The mate ordered Van Syckle into the forecabin. He assigned him to "watch on watch," four hours on and four hours off. Van Syckle memorized the names of the masts with his fingers: fore, main, mizzen, jigger, and spanker. On deck, Peasley checked the trim of the sails. "He'd look over the stern, too, and in the tropics, he'd always check 'the morning bank,' the big bank of clouds all purple and orange on the horizon." Peasley steered *Vigilant* south to the coast of Mexico, then west to Hawaii. "After you caught the trade-winds, all you had to do was lash the wheel and she'd sail herself," Van Syckle wrote. "I'd lie on my back and watch the wind in the sails; the dolphins would play at the forefoot and flying fish would dart away."

Van Syckle's assignment gave him the special privilege of spending evenings with Peasley in the officer's mess. The meal was often codfish "tongues and sounds," a delicacy "boiled with some sort of sauce." The fare disagreed with the landlubber reporter: "Sometimes I would sneak a potato or a cabbage head."

The captain spun yarns over a drink. Ralph Erskine "Matt" Peasley was born in Jonesport, Maine, on May 30, 1866. His father, Henry C. Peasley, farmed, fought in the Civil War, and commanded ships. His mother, Elizabeth Rose, taught school. Her son left school at age 14 to learn seamanship from Grand Banks cod fishermen. Ralph commanded his first ship, a two-masted, square-rigged brig, at age 22. He came around Cape Horn to Seattle around 1888 and worked for a logging crew before finding his way to Aberdeen, where his sailing career took off.

Peasley earned a reputation for daring. West Coast mariners talked about his time as master of the schooner *Louis*, which he brought to the mouth of the Yangtze River after a typhoon. He had never seen the river before, but he did not trust the Chinese pilot. He took the ship up the river himself, brought the *Louis* safely to port, and set a passage record.

But his reputation in 1927 had as much to do with fiction as fact. Around 1900 Peasley met Peter Bernard Kyne, a clerk for the Dolbeer & Carson Lumber Company, Peasley's employer at the time. Kyne reviewed ship master's reports, and most were dry, factual, and managerial. Peasley's, on the other hand, carried more color. His writing was "terse, laconic, and not treating with dignity those things staid old shipping offices expected to be treated with dignity," Kyne wrote. Kyne penned short stories and novels in his spare time, and Kyne magnified Peasley the man into Peasley the character. In 1915 Kyne published *Cappy Ricks or the Subjugation of Matt Peasley*.

Cappy Ricks tells the story of a fiery young ship's captain named "Matt" Peasley and his relationship with Alden P. Ricks, president of the Blue Star Navigation Company. The two men are stubborn, bullheaded, and unwilling to give an inch on any issue. They are, however, cut from the same cloth: Peasley is the master mariner and Ricks the master businessman. Two more *Cappy Ricks* books followed. "When I started the Peasley stories," Kyne wrote, "I took Capt. Ralph Peasley as my character, intending to write only one story. But he furnished so much good stuff that I could not stop."

The books propelled Peasley into celebrity. People wanted their picture taken with him. A pair of photos, probably from the 1920s, shows Peasley and a pretty young woman with luxuriant dark hair. She is identified as an "actress." A stiff breeze blows a light dress away from her bare legs and feet.

Businessmen sought Peasley for his name. In 1919, an Aberdeen shipyard run by Gordon Frazer Matthews fell on hard times. Other yards had work and he feared his shipwrights would defect.

He decided to risk \$250,000 and build *Vigilant*, the biggest ship he had ever constructed. His main problem: He didn't have a buyer and the *Vigilant* was fast draining his available cash. His solution: Ralph "Matt" Peasley.

The story goes that Peasley was standing on the poop deck of the *Fred G. Wood* as it passed by Matthews' yard. *Vigilant* stood on its blocks only partially complete, but Peasley liked what he saw. Peasley's brother, who was traveling with the him, said, "Ralph, there's a fine new five-master building. Why don't you go over and take her out as master?" Matthews spotted Peasley at the same moment and thought to himself: I've known Peasley 20 years; if I could convince him to command *Vigilant*, I could raise the money to finish her.

Peasley, however, was under contract to the E. K. Wood Lumber Company, owner of the *Fred G. Wood*. Peasley told Matthews: If you can convince my boss to release me, I'll sign as *Vigilant's* captain. Matthews traveled to San Francisco and met with C. A. Thayer, the secretary-treasurer of the company. "Peasley's one of the best skippers we've got," he told Matthews. "But if it'll help you out, we'll see what we can do." Matthews then spoke with Walter Wood, president of the firm. Matthews and Wood struck a deal. Another captain would step forward to buy Peasley's interest as master of the *Fred G. Wood*. This would release Peasley to captain the *Vigilant*. In return, Matthews sold E. K. Wood Lumber Company a 60 percent "managing interest" in the *Vigilant*. Now Matthews could parade Peasley in front of other potential investors. Matthews quickly sold the remaining 40 percent of the vessel and recouped his quarter million dollar investment, and she was launched at 11:15 in the morning on December 20, 1919.

Vigilant nearly wrecked on her maiden voyage. Twenty-five days out of Grays Harbor, bound for Sydney, Australia, the deck load of lumber shifted in a gale. *Vigilant* listed six degrees. The lumber threatened to tear away the masts and rigging. In one account, *Vigilant* drifted helplessly toward the Great Barrier Reef. The "current was within a hair's breadth of grinding her on the reef" when it suddenly shifted and "carried her clear," Peasley told a reporter. Fifty miles from Sydney, he radioed for a tug, which brought him and the cargo safely into the harbor.

The story was vintage Peasley. Newspaper reporters met the ship and its skipper at every port, salivating for a new hair-raising tale. In 1920 hurricane-force winds destroyed whole forests on the Olympic Peninsula and nearly sank *Vigilant* 100 miles off the Washington coast. Peasley called the storm "the most terrifying" of his career, worse than a typhoon he had experienced off the coast of China.

The *Vigilant's* captain would get into tight races with other sailing ships; one losing captain complained he didn't know he was racing. Peasley lectured about the race to an Aberdeen women's group. "Marine and Fiction Character Addresses Optimists," read the headline above the newspaper account: "Give me a ship that sails," Peasley declared. "I want no screech of a whistle nor throb of engines; the sight of straining sails fills me with a never-ending pleasure. There will never be any steamships for me."

Van Syckle listened as the seaman sipped his whiskey. Peasley milked his "down east" persona. "Pay her off a mite, he'd tell the man at the wheel," Van Syckle recalled. "Then he might say, 'Steady as she goes.'" The reporter wondered whether the man was real or imaginary. "After a while, he began living the role that Kyne had created for him—talking with phrases from the books, and taking his morning constitutional, strutting back and forth across the poop, a cigar stuck in his mouth."

Peasley's fame sometimes made him uneasy. People hailed him on the street by his fictional name, "Matt." A sailor once teased Peasley about his nickname. "That's all right, call me Captain Matt," Peasley said. "That's because I don't care anymore.... When those stories first began," Peasley added, "I used to be mightily embarrassed—yes, and pretty mad about it too. I'd never turn my head an inch when I'd hear someone call me that—even the pretty girls! But a person can get used to anything."

Van Syckle and the *Vigilant* arrived in Honolulu 31 days after leaving Grays Harbor. The return trip from Hawaii to Bellingham on Puget Sound took 27 days, and there Van Syckle signed off. In 1930 Peasley gave up command of the *Vigilant*. ("I never had a more noble ship.") In 1931 his last command, the 45-foot auxiliary sloop *Linda*, had a 50-horsepower engine. He died in 1948 at the age of 82.

Van Syckle worked at the *Daily World* for 43 years. He died in 1986. Did he find the real Peasley? The man was "bigger than life, and he lived up to his character," Van Syckle wrote. "In later years, I think he worked it up a bit," he added. "But it wasn't conceit. It was just part of being 'Matt' Peasley."

Joe Follansbee is a Seattle free-lance writer and journalist specializing in maritime history. His has been published in Seattle Magazine, Gastronomica, and a number of maritime publications. He is also project manager of Maritime Heritage Network (www.maritimeheritage.net).