

Historic Ships on a Lee Shore

Getting Historic Ships Off a Lee Shore: A Better Approach for the 21st Century

by Melbourne Smith

“...or shall our ships, like the pyramids and mummies of Egypt go down to posterity in silence, ignorance, or conjecture, without a page to define the art that brought them forth?” —John W. Griffiths, American Ship Designer, 1854

The likes of Karl Kortum, Peter Stanford, and Peter Throckmorton were giants in rescuing forsaken sailing ships from the knackers. Few people cared a fig for these abandoned hulks back then, but with sheer determination and their last nickel, they and a few others mustered enough support to save them. Eight of these merchant sailing ships are on display in the US today. All are iron icons of foreign design, and they fight for their upkeep costs with admissions, donations, and grants.

We need a better approach than just showing these faded ladies as static urban props. Keeping a sailing ship at a dock is like keeping a naked eagle in a cage. The curious come to look, but they cannot fathom what the great bird can do. Without his feathers, the unhappy bird can no longer fly. With all the skill and enthusiasm we now have, money could be better spent rehabilitating such endangered species. Taxidermy, even with life-like glass eyes, is no longer the acceptable solution.

Better ways to save our maritime heritage are emerging. Ships that have been restored or replicated with a functioning life fare much better. It would be difficult to justify restoring a Stradivarius violin by charging people just to see it, but a hundred times more can be gleaned to hear a maestro play the rare instrument. Ships, too, need to be sailed if they are to be understood and appreciated. The emerging fact is that a ship costs less to maintain with a sea-going crew than when



Endeavour doubled Cape Horn in 2001.

left as a stage in the hands of a *Pinafore* cast.

Many smaller sailing vessels have already discovered this sea-going advantage, but in the larger-class ships we must look beyond our borders to witness real successes. This becomes immediately apparent if you step aboard the barque *Picton Castle*. She has sailed around the world a few times and has just left port to do it again. You know the ship, her crew, and her American sailing master are the real things. Captain Cook's *Endeavour* is another excellent example. There, you see hempen standing rigging that has fought stormy seas for twelve years, all properly serviced and tarred to last twelve more. She, too, has a crew that wrings salt water from their stockings. There's no mistaking a real ship in seagoing trim.

If we are to save more ships, and by this I mean our American vessels, we must restore them and keep them in sea-going condition wherever possible. National Historic Trust guidelines allow that when a maritime artifact no longer exists, an experimental approach of replication is the accepted alternative in three stages: research, construction, and deployment in original environment. It is the scholarly way to recover our heritage. When it is impossible to restore, we can replicate.

There is another caveat in saving our ships to sail. We can also foster the art that brought them forth. The finest trumpet is just another piece of polished brass until it is played by a master like Wynton Marsalis. Every time the horn is heard another dozen kids ask if they too can learn to play. A living heritage breeds respect and a love for the art. A broken instrument in a pawn shop only breeds indifference.

If we really want to start saving ships in this century, we must establish our priorities.

All our ships cannot be saved. Those dearest in the hearts of our people must take precedent. It should be the vessels best illustrating American ingenuity and design superiority or representing our best moments in history. The British can have their *Cutty Sark*, the French their bounty ships, the Spanish their galleons, and the Swedes their *Wasa*. Let the world admire some of our unique creations. Ships from the American Revolution, the War of 1812, a whaler that helped open Japan, a five-masted schooner, a great Down Easter, and an American clipper to celebrate the pinnacle reached in the history of sail are but a few.

By saving the historic sea-going gems of distinctive New World design, we as a nation will have something to cherish. Coupled with our youth training and workable business plans for promotion and good will, we



Onboard the US Brig Niagara, furling aloft is a daily routine.

will find people at home and abroad waiting to see and support our sailing best, just as *Picton Castle*, *Endeavour*, and others have found. Only we can recover our ships—no one else will. Europeans are not interested in saving our ships as we have saved theirs. The clever design innovations, superior workmanship, and daring seamanship is our distinctive heritage alone to reclaim. Foresight and a better approach can be our leg to windward. ⚓

Co-chairman of NMHS Advisors and a former sailing master, Melbourne Smith is a ship designer and builder responsible for such vessels as the brig Niagara, *Pride of Baltimore*, *Californian*, *Spirit of Massachusetts*, and *Lynx*. At present he is planning the replication of the whaler John Howland to celebrate the rescue of the Japanese scholar Manjiro, and the clipper ship *Sea Witch* as a trade ambassador for Shanghai Expo 2010.



The 109-year old schooner Ernestina is one of the few original Gloucester fishing schooners still actively sailing, though each year is a struggle to keep her finances afloat.

The World's Last Surviving Whaleback, SS Meteor

by Judith Liebaert

Bring Back the Whaleback”, a slogan coined by the Superior Ship Acquisition Committee in the late 1960s, launched a successful campaign to return SS *Meteor* to her birthplace in Wisconsin. Today, the same goal is shared by a growing number of historians and ship enthusiasts who want to return the last remaining, non-submerged whaleback freighter to a well-maintained and preserved condition.

SS *Meteor* was launched at Superior, Wisconsin, in 1896 and christened *Frank Rockefeller*. Designed by Captain Alexan-

der McDougall and built by his American Steel Barge Company, SS *Meteor* is an example of the technically-innovative steel-hulled ships that influenced shipbuilding and the transportation of bulk cargoes on the Great Lakes at the turn of the century. Their design marked an important step in the progression toward the 1,000-foot freighters sailing the Great Lakes today.



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Meteor, one of forty whalebacks built in the Twin Ports of Superior and Duluth (Minnesota), was originally fitted to

carry coal and iron ore. Throughout her working career she changed hands and was refitted three times—the last in 1942 when Cleveland Tankers, Inc. rebuilt her as a petroleum tanker and renamed her SS *Meteor*. She continued to sail the Great Lakes until she went aground in Marquette, Michigan, in 1969.

Cleveland Tankers offered *Meteor* to the City of Superior in the hopes that she would be maintained as a maritime museum, and the volunteer efforts of the Superior Ship Acquisition Committee brought the ship home. Operated by Superior Public Museums, Inc., she is land-berthed at Barker's Island, just a few blocks from where she was launched. Since 1971, tens of thousands of visitors have toured her.

Nonetheless, time has taken its toll and the ship is in great need of repair and restoration. A concerted effort is underway to preserve her. An Historic Structures Report is the first step in this preservation project. This comprehensive study will examine the vessel's history, document her current condition, and outline a plan for repair and restoration. The HSR is costly and time consuming. To help defray the cost, in 2003 the National Trust for Historic Preservation awarded a Preservation Services Fund grant to start the funding effort. Other contributors followed including the Wisconsin Coastal Management Program and the City of Superior.

In 2004, The Wisconsin Trust for Historic Preservation added SS *Meteor* to



their annual list of “Ten Most Endangered Historic Properties.” This designation is helping to bring awareness of the ship's significance and its plight beyond the community to a state and national level. Last September, the Jeffris Family Foundation awarded SS *Meteor* a \$50,000 challenge grant. The Duluth Superior Area Community Foundation responded with \$8,000 in matching funds, leaving \$42,000 yet to be raised. This growing interest and support of the effort to restore SS *Meteor* is encouraging, but more help is desperately needed. Additional funding is being sought, and SPM is actively planning public events that will raise further awareness.

With 73 years of working service astern and nearing 35 years in service as a museum, *Meteor* now awaits the completion of her legacy as a well-maintained historic property. Once her restoration is completed and future preservation secured, she will survive to share the story of her role in Great Lakes shipping and shipbuilding, of her designer Alexander McDougall, and of the longest serving and last remaining whaleback in the world. †

For more information about SS *Meteor* and how you can help, contact Superior Public Museums, 906 East Second St., Superior, WI 54880. Ph. 715 394-5712; or visit www.superiorpublicmuseums.org.

HISTORIC PHOTOS FROM THE K.E. THIBO COLLECTION, COURTESY LAKE SUPERIOR MARITIME COLLECTION, U-W SUPERIOR

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