

## Wapama: Life and Death of the Last Steam Lumber Schooner

Donald Bastin

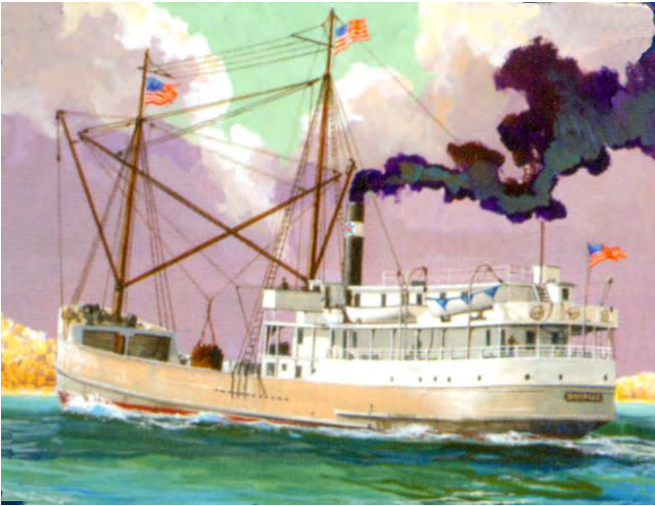


Image taken from poster issued by SF Maritime Park. Artist, Wayne Bonnett.

San Francisco Bay and the California coast have spawned the development of ship designs seen nowhere else. In our Summer 2016 *Bulletin*, we looked at the hay scow *Alma*, last surviving member of a unique SF Bay craft that hauled cargo on the bay and delta until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this issue, we will review the history of the *Wapama*, a steam lumber schooner, another unique type of craft which evolved to meet the demands of California's coastal lumber trade. Like the *Alma*, the *Wapama* was the last of her kind. But while the *Alma*, which is part of the San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park, still exists and regularly takes passengers out for a Bay sail, *Wapama*, sadly, is no more.

The San Francisco Maritime Park is the home of the *C.A. Thayer*, also a lumber schooner, but powered by sail. She was restored in 2006 at a cost of around \$15 million. Additional restoration has recently been completed and she is again open for inspection. The SF Maritime Park did in fact own the *Wapama* for many years, and the initial plan was to restore the vessel for permanent display. The challenge of this restoration proved to be too costly, however, and the old boat was dismantled in 2013.

The lumber schooner was designed to serve the lumber trade on California's rugged coast. Lumber mills were scattered along the coast from Oregon to San Francisco Bay. Until the development of good roads and reliable trucks, the sea was the only real option for moving milled lumber (mostly redwood and Douglas fir). The nature of the coast determined the design of the lumber schooner.

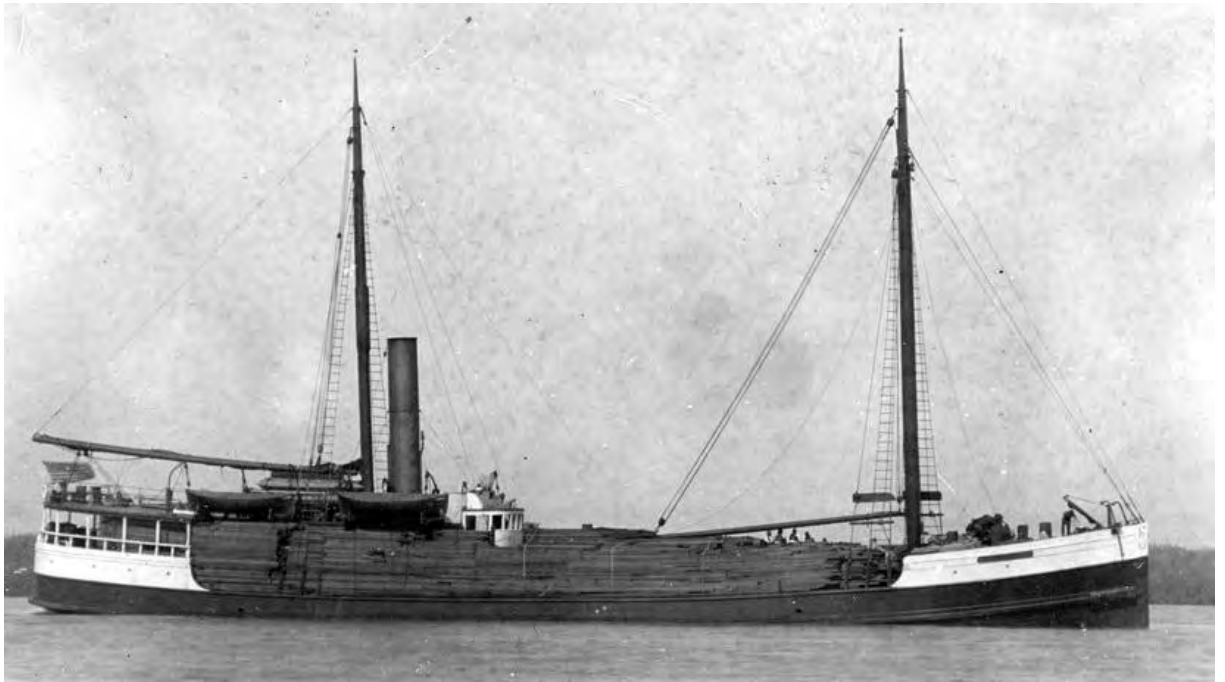


Massive lumber yard in Pittsburg, late 1800s. 2 sail lumber schooners at left. CCCHS Photo.

Unlike the East Coast, our western shore is deficient in good, safe harbors. The coast is rocky and, for the most part, battered by onshore winds and swells. Wharves cannot stand up to the pounding for more than a short time, so in order to pick up cargo, craft were obliged to nudge close to a dangerous shore and load sawn lumber either from a long chute, or hung from slings which in turn hung from a long cable stretched across the cove. This process was termed loading “under the wire.” The rocky coves were termed “dog holes,” as they were described as too small for a dog to turn around in.

The demands of this dangerous trade resulted in the development of a ship design that was unique in many ways. Shallow draft was essential. Deep-draft boats simply could not negotiate the shallow, rock-strewn coves or come close enough to the shore to pick up the lumber chute or wire. A wide beam was necessary to allow a maximum amount of lumber to be stowed below and above the main deck. The necessity of storing a hefty load on the deck also resulted in the steering station and living quarters being moved aft, rather than being placed forward, as was usual.

*Right: Typical steam-powered lumber schooner (name, place and date unknown). Her decks are heavily loaded with sawn lumber, almost obscuring the pilot house. CCCHS Photo.*



The term “schooner” refers to the rig used by the sail-powered craft designed specifically for the lumber trade. Beginning in the 1860s, and continuing until 1905, when the last of around 500 sailing lumber schooners was launched, the typical rig consisted of 2 to 4 (or even 5) masts, generally of equal length, using fore-and-aft (triangular) sails. This rig allowed the boats to sail much closer to the direction of the oncoming wind, necessary in negotiating dangerous anchorages.

*Two 3-masted schooners tied up at a wharf in Antioch, unloading lumber. CCCHS photo.*

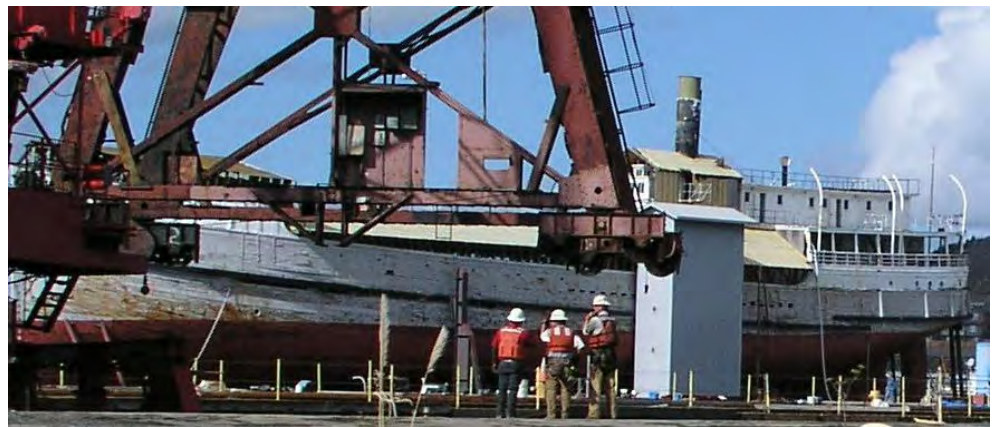
Steam began to replace sail in the lumber trade in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the term schooner remained. The steam vessels still carried masts, but they were now used to assist in the loading and unloading of the cargo.

The *Wapama* was launched in 1915, and remained in the coastal lumber trade until 1930, when it engaged in coastal passenger trade. It was fitted with a locally built power plant, which represented the pinnacle of steam piston engine development. Referred to as a “triple expansion engine,” it consisted of 3 cylinders, two of which utilized the power of the exhaust steam of the adjacent cylinders. This design was a result of long tinkering by marine engineers, who, by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, noticed that, as steam pressure became greater, the exhaust steam was also rising, but providing no useful power. With the addition of two additional cylinders, of proportionally greater diameter (to take advantage of the successively lower pressure of the exhaust), a high degree of efficiency was achieved. The triple-expansion (or compound) engine served until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and powered all of the Liberty Ships produced by American shipyards during World War II. Simple, robust, and reliable, it was eventually replaced by the much more sophisticated and efficient steam turbine (which was the engine that powered the Victory Ships, including the Red Oak Victory, berthed in Richmond, California).

In 1937 *Wapama* headed north and operated on the Alaskan coast until she was laid up in 1947. She sat neglected for more than 10 years, when she was purchased by the California Park Service as one of the last remaining examples of her type. After undergoing modest restoration, she was transferred to the National Park Service in 1977. Designated a National Historic Landmark in 1984, ownership was assumed in 1988 by the San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park. By this date, however, the future of the old ship did not look promising.

The life of a lumber schooner was relatively short. 20 years was the average life span and *Wapama* was already over 70 years old. Built of Douglas fir, which was readily available in suitable length and thickness, the material had much to recommend it. However, it was susceptible to dry rot and by 1980 it was recognized that *Wapama*'s wood frames and planking, particularly above the water line (the salt water below the water line tended to preserve the wood and prevent dry rot) were riddled with the condition and a complete re-build would probably be necessary to save the vessel. Until a plan could be worked out and money found, it was decided to place the boat on a barge to protect it from sinking. As the *Wapama* settled onto the barge, a loud crack was heard; her keel had snapped. Her back was broken.

While some plans were still discussed to save the old ship, in some fashion, *Wapama* was moved about the Bay, in search of a permanent home. In 2000 she was moved to her final berth, in old Shipyard 3 in Richmond. There



she remained until July of 2013, when the wrecking crews arrived and began the dismantling. Bits and pieces were saved, including the pilot house and the engine. Careful records were kept of the entire process and important construction details were captured. The San Francisco Maritime Park will use the materials to create a permanent exhibit to tell the story of the *Wapama* and the other roughly 225 steam lumber schooners that once were a common site along California's turbulent coast.

*Above: Wapama in Richmond drydock. Foreground: Whirley Crane being lowered onto her support rails beside the Red Oak Victory, November 4, 2005. Photo by author.*

*Lift: Wapama's engine, on display, Hyde St. Pier, SF Maritime Park. Photo courtesy SF Maritime Park.*

## Annual Membership Meeting Features Prominent Railroad Historian Phil Sexton

On Saturday, January 12, at the Alamo Women's Club in Alamo, Phil Sexton, former Deputy Director of the California State Railroad Museum, and well-known California and railroad historian, presented a fascinating account of the Chinese contribution to the building of the transcontinental railroad.

Unearthing little-known facts about the Chinese in early California and their outsized importance in construction of the road, this lively and animated speaker kept the large group of listeners engaged and attentive. It was generally agreed that we were fortunate to have Mr. Sexton address our event.



We were also fortunate to be the recipient of a generous donation, from the Welch Family, of an original map of the Rancho Las Juntas, which was granted to William Welch in 1844.

*Members of the Welch Family are at the left in this photo. From right to left: Steve Welch, cousins William Welch III and his brother Ross Welch, standing by wife Karen.*

*At the right, receiving the donation, are CCCHS Executive Director Priscilla Conden, President John Mercurio, and Director and tech guru, Scott Saftler. Our sincere thanks to the Welch family.*



We had one of our best turnouts ever for our annual meeting. Maybe this was because, for the first time ever, we skipped over the holidays and opted to do the event in January. So not much competition for folks' attention at this down time of the new year. A special thanks to the Alamo Women's Club for the use of their space. Turns out it is exactly the right size for our events.

See you next January!?

## Contra Costa County Rocks!

The history of rock music in Contra Costa County has not been presented in any detail, but the Contra Costa County Historical Society is about to remedy that deficiency! We have booked Richie Unterberger, noted music historian, author and music reviewer to present a talk using film clips, pictures, and records of Contra Costa County rock bands of the 1960s and early 1970s. Creedence Clearwater Revival were by far the biggest of those groups, but bands based in Contra Costa County itself will also be featured, including Frumious Bandersnatch, Savage Resurrection, Country Weather, and Two Things In One. The Contra Costa connections of Country Joe & the Fish and the Grateful Dead will also be noted, as will the venues that hosted both local acts and touring international superstars like the Kinks.



Please join us for this very special event on Saturday, February 9 from 3pm-5pm at the Campbell Theater, 636 Ward Street in Martinez. A \$10 donation is suggested. Please RSVP at [mkting@cocohistory.org](mailto:mkting@cocohistory.org), or call: 925-229-1042.

## A Crawling Success!

Tara Weber



7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade winner and her younger sister w/ Andrea Blachman and Tara Weber

September 2018 marked the first Martinez Archives Crawl and what a success it was! With over 100 participants, the Archives Crawl provided a fun learning opportunity for so many that had not visited the archives or the City of Martinez before.

Crawlers were introduced to the County archives located within the County Clerk Recorder's Office and at the CCCHS History Center as well as local archives at the Martinez History Museum and the Martinez Public Library. Upon completion of a series of questions, the Crawlers received a "stamp" in their passport and entered into a drawing for a new i-Pad.

Upon returning to the Veterans Memorial Building to enter the drawing, Crawlers were greeted by additional archive locations throughout the County: **Alhambra Cemetery; CCC Genealogical Society; Clayton Historical Society; Concord Historical Society; Crockett Historical Society; National Park Service, John Muir Site; Point Richmond History Association; Richmond Museum of History**

Winners were announced the following week with the two younger winners being presented with their prize in person (see above). Both students happen to attend Martinez Junior High School. A big thank you to Monica Higgins, the history teacher at MJHS, who encouraged her students to attend the event by giving them extra credit in her class. Her idea paid off!

The winner of the adult age group lives in San Francisco and experienced the City of Martinez for the first time. Her comments mirrored that of so

many participants – she wrote “I had an absolutely great time at the Archives Crawl. It was my first visit to Martinez and what an exciting way to discover the town than through its history and archives! Everyone I met on the Crawl was so nice and welcoming, and many seemed to be volunteering in some capacity - at a museum/ historical society, helping to put on the event, or showing up on a Saturday/ off-work hours. These passionate keepers of history expressed a pride and joy that was infectious, and for this Crawler that was perhaps the best part of the experience... and going home with adorable coasters!”

Stay tuned for the date of the next Martinez Archives Crawl. [www.MartinezArchivesCrawl.com](http://www.MartinezArchivesCrawl.com)

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Your membership renewal date can be determined by checking the address label on this newsletter. If you receive your newsletter via e-mail please call the History Center at: 925-229-1042, or e-mail [info@cocohistory.org](mailto:info@cocohistory.org) to renew.

**Please consider CCCHS in your estate planning. It is simple, and any gift is tax deductible. We have a Schwab account that makes it easier for members and others to donate shares of stock to the Society, a good way to make a year-end or other contribution.**



**THANKS TO ALL OF OUR  
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**\$25+**

Roxanne Lindsay

**Thank you again. You make all the difference!**

**New CCCHS Endowment Fund**

Looking to our future, the CCCHS board of directors voted to establish a permanent endowment fund. Like all such funds, its purpose is to ensure our continued viability and success, long into the future. The fund will be governed by the Uniform Prudent Management of Institutional Funds Act (UPMIFA), and will help to provide a reliable revenue stream for our successors. Withdrawals from the fund will be strictly limited to income above the principal, and no withdrawal will be made before the fund reaches a minimum of \$50,000. If you wish to donate to this fund, and help to insure our future, please indicate this preference at the time of donation.

## From the Executive Director



Dear Friends,  
I am still in awe after our recent Annual Meeting at the Alamo Women's Club. We had great attendance, a great speaker in Phil Sexton, wonderful food, and an amazing raffle. Directors Greitzer, Mercurio, and Weber were re-elected to their posts, and the Board unanimously elected John Greitzer as our in-coming president.

2019 has begun with a bang. Contributions are still coming in for our Annual Appeal, and just last week, I had the pleasure of meeting Sheriff David Livingston, Undersheriff Mike Casten, Sgt. Sean Welch, president of the Deputy Sheriff's Association, Scott Daly, and Jim Knudsen, retired deputies. They came to the History Center to present checks from the Sheriff's Charities, Inc. (\$2,500), the Contra Costa County Deputy Sheriff's Association (\$2,500) and the One Hundred Club of Contra Costa County (\$250) in honor of the research we helped with last year! Scott and Jim were hunting for information about one Mr. Johnson, who was the first sheriff's deputy to be murdered in Contra Costa County. We provided documents pertaining to Johnson's killer and the judge who oversaw his trial in 1854. Though the killer was convicted, he never did time, as the judge was indicted for bribery charges that preceded his having heard the case! Using their research, Scott and Jim have been able to have Deputy Johnson's name placed on a monument in Washington, D.C. and they are working on one in Sacramento now. I was surprised and very happy to receive these funds and to meet Sheriff Livingston and the others.

Among my goals for this year is to visit more organizations and retirement homes to inform them about the Historical Society and the History Center. If you have suggestions that would help, let me know.

I'd like each of you to make a resolution to come to visit the History Center this year. We give great tours. You will enjoy your visit, I promise!  
*Priscilla*

## From the President

There is a **general** rule that historic places cannot be officially recognized until they have passed the milestone of fifty years of age. There are exceptions, and at the Contra Costa County Historical Society, we preserve material that is often less than fifty years old. If a County document or photo is made available to us, we make every effort to accept it. Examples of this are the files of newspapers we have acquired that date from the 1970s through the 2000s.



Our zeal to preserve has a cost, however, and that is the space that these items consume. We have about 5,000 square feet at the Center, and it has become a challenge to use it most efficiently, and we must work to acquire additional space that meets the special needs of our archives.

Another 50 year mark is that of psychedelic rock music that is now fifty (or more) years old! In honor of that milestone, the Society will feature a noted rock historian, Richie Unterberger, who will present to us rock music history with a special Contra Costa County emphasis. Richie will speak at the Campbell Theater in Martinez. If you have not been to the Campbell, it is a great venue. See the article in this issue for details on this upcoming program.

Finally, this is the last column I will be writing, as president, for the Bulletin. My two-year term is up and we have selected my good friend, John Greitzer, as our new president. It has been an incredible experience and I have learned so much in the process. I have also met many like-minded people, such as the readers of this newsletter, who love history and support our mission. We appreciate everyone's support, because without you, we would not be able to thrive.

*John Mercurio*

