

## [Erickson Recalls Windjammer Days]

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Erickson Recalls-Windjammer Days .

Anyone could tell from the cut of his clothes and the gnarled, seawater-hardened hands that he is an old “canvas man” of the old school when “iron men sailed wooden ships”. Down and out and on the beach as the old familiar sailors' saying goes he nevertheless hopes to some day get another berth and again do his trick at the wheel or go aloft to furl sail.

Speaking with an accent that leaves no doubt about his nationality, his sky blue eyes shaded by unusually heavy brows and lashes twinkling with fire as he remembered a humorous incident and then to suddenly dim with tears not so far away as more tragic events were recalled, he told of days of early childhood and seafaring days in the prime of life.

“I was born 55 years ago, in Norway, not far from the coast but I don't know what city or town it was in. My father was a seaman and mother had to move so many times from one place to another that I don't remember what place it was. But that doesn't matter anyhow I remember when I was about six years old of going to school and the winter days were bad. Snow often covered the low houses and one time Mother and me had to dig a tunnel from the front door to the main road—the snow had drifted so high, those were the good old days, 2 for after school all the boys and girls would go skating and sleighriding just as soon as our lessons were done. Mother died when I was 13 years old and then I went to live with my uncle who also was a sailor. He took me aboard the schooner he worked on and the captain gave me a job as cabin boy. My job was to wash the dishes, sweep the cabin - -they call them mess rooms now- - bring the grub from the galley to the table and be a general monkey - - that means do anything that anybody told me.”

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Some of the sailors were good but sometimes when I did not do things quick enough I got many a kick in the pants or a slap along the side of the head. But I had it good at that- - plenty to eat, a good place to sleep and — no school to worry about.”

“We sailed along the Norwegian coast and down to Hamburg, [?] and other ports on the German coast. A couple of trips we made to Holland—that place where they used to wear wooden shoes and big wide breeches. In the meantime I was learning to be a real sailor, could tell all the points of the compass and tie all the knots they use aboard a ship. I'll never forget the first time the mate gave me a marlin spike and told me to splice a rope. I jabbed that marlin spike 3 into the rope so hard that it went clean through and into my leg. O yes, I got the scar yet.

When I was about twenty I signed on as able-bodied seaman on one of the five masted schooners owned by the [Rickmers?] of Germany and we made one trip to India, China, Japan and the Dutch East Indies. We brought back a big load of wood used to build ships, (teakwood) tea and spices, coconuts and a lot of other stuff, I still got a Chinese cabinet about so big and so wide and that high (approx 10 x 5 x 10 inches) that I bought from a Chink in Shanghai for a German dollar.” (Worth about 75 cents in those days)

“I have seen many countries and sailed nearly every sea and I could tell you plenty yarns that you would believe. One time, back about 1895, we were going down to London in a barkentine and when we were in the North Sea off the coast of England, a bad storm came up. The waves got so high and the weather was so dirty that the sea swept over the ship from stern to stern all the time. One of the sailors on watch was washed overboard by one wave and the next waves threw him back on deck but it broke his leg and I had to do double shift. That storm was so bad that even the mate got seasick. Was I ever shipwrecked? No, that I never went through.”

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In 1900 I deserted ship in Pernambuco and got another ship to New York where I quit and went to the Seamen's Mission near the Battery. I got a job as laborer in one of the shipyards and settled down to live a quiet life. I made money and saved money and when I was 32 I got married. My wife was a Norake like me and she worked as a servant girl for a rich family. They gave us a fine wedding and many presents but Hilda only lived a few years after our wedding for she died when our baby was to be born. Since that time I have been sailing and bumming all over the world, taking any kind of work ashore to make a few cents so I can buy something to eat and smoking tobacco. Sometimes I make enough to keep myself for a few days but when jobs are scarce then I have to come to the mission to get something to eat."

"Where do I sleep? Sometimes in a freight car near the docks, sometimes on a dock and sometimes just outside any place. No, I don't mind the cold weather - I's used to it."

"You know, the steamers knocked the old sailing ships out of business and an old timer like me can't get a job on a steamship - they want young fellows. That is all right too because they don't have to be sailors nowadays, just a bunch of clerks and a few janitors. What do I mean by janitors? These fellows that clean up - the stewards on big ships and the deckhands on smaller boats. There ain't a sailor in a dozen of them fellows nowadays."

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"Someday I will get another job on an old time windjammer and then I'll be happy again."

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(Note that no attempt has been made to set down the exact language and dialect used — it is almost impossible to transcribe the pronunciation of words as spoken by those from the north of Europe—especially so the Stavanger-(Norwegian-Danish-Swedish) "brogue".

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M. H. ARENDS 12/7/39