

# Voyage of the Clipper Ship *Ringleader*

Excerpts from a Journal kept by nineteen-year-old Edward P. Sargent of Salem during a voyage from Boston to San Francisco, China, and London in 1855 and 1856.

EDITED BY QUENTIN L. COONS

PART I

## EDITOR'S PREFACE

EDWARD Payson Sargent, born August 30, 1837 in Beverly, Massachusetts, son of Captain Winthrop Sargent of Salem, kept a graphic and revealing journal in two hundred sixty-four pages of his long trip to London by way of San Francisco and China. He was a sensitive, observant, religious, well-read young man and, as a passenger on the *Ringleader*, he

had time to reflect and record promptly.

The following excerpts from the first part of the voyage retain original phrasing, spelling, abbreviations, and punctuation. Material deleted includes daily logs, accounts of days at sea with no historical import, and overly lengthy passages where portion retained conveys the meaning and includes the names and events of reference value.

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*Saturday Oct. 27th 1855 3½ o'clk*  
On board Ship *Ringleader*, Capt. Matthews [Richard Matthews, born 1808 in Salem], bound for California. Left Lewis' Wrf. Boston in tow of Str. Walpole at ½ past 12 o'clk. in the midst of a sort of rain squall . . . a number of persons were assembled on the wharf. . . . On Sunday staid in my berth all day, taking nothing but water the whole day . . . on Sunday night the gale increased. The captain was obliged to lash himself to the rigging on the quarter deck . . . now and then the captain would come below dripping with water; at last I could no longer lie in my berth hearing the waves rushing with such violence against the ship directly below me with a noise like thunder, throwing down chairs, breaking bags of

beans and scattering them about the cabin, throwing the sails which had been put there from one side to the other, and the sound of breaking glass saluting my bewildered senses. I arose, and putting on what I could find, staggered to the pantry where the steward was busy swabbing up the water which had been washed in; the Capt. was standing, braced at the door, and as a sea would wash the deck, shutting it to prevent the cabin from being flooded. Five or six long dreary hours I sat; at one time, a heavy sea striking the ship she gave a lurch, and over came the stove and funnel close to my head.

*Saturday, Nov. 3d / 55* The cry of 'man overboard' sounded from the top gallant forecastle and in a minute all was hurry and confusion, numerous orders

were given to back the ship and in a few moments the ship was going stern foremost almost as rapidly as she had been moving in a contrary direction before.

The boat was hoisted overboard and both mates and four men sprang into it; before this a bench and tub had been cast over and the man was seen by some one near them. After cruising about a few moments the boat returned, and the ship was put on her course again.

It seems that the man (a native of Gottenburg) was on the lee cat-head assisting the third mate and close beside him; he had been cautioned but a moment before to take care of himself but being heedless, lost his balance, and the cry of man overboard was sounded by the 3<sup>d</sup> mate almost before he touched the water. He has a friend on board who was his school fellow and worked with him at his trade; he was the only one on board ship to shed a tear for him and almost the only one to mourn his loss. They had never been to sea before, but having no work at their trade, wishing to go to California, shipped as seamen. . . .

*Monday Nov 5th /55* The crew are repairing the rigging and sails. For dinner to-day we had roast and curried chicken and boiled salt beef with beets, turnips, potatoes, rice, apple-pudding. At the first table the captain, chief mate, & myself sit; at the second, the 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>d</sup> mates; the carpenter and boatswain eat by themselves in their room.

*Wednesday Nov 7th* For dinner to-day chicken-pie, roast chicken, beef, ham and apple-pudding. What shall we do when the apples and chickens are gone?

*Wed Nov. 14th* Last evening a flying fish flew on board and was caught by the carpenter who kindly gave it to me. I stuffed it this morning and succeeded, for

once, in receiving the 'well done' of the Capt.

*Thurs. Nov. 15th /55* Arose at half past six and drank a mug of coffee; breakfast at 7 bells ( $\frac{1}{2}$  past 7) consisting of hash &c and mush. During the forenoon I wrote and read some and observed the men at work, some mending sails, some splicing, others making mats for chafing gear, and others aloft in the rigging. The boys have been busily employed making sennit, a braid of seven & five strands.

*Monday Nov. 19th . . .* the SE trades have set in and clouds are scarce again. All the casks on deck have been filled with rain water and to day I performed my first washing. Succeeded in removing a small part of the dirt from two shirts, drawers, sheet, pillow-case, stockings &c.

*Thurs. Nov. 22d/55* Studding sails were set, as fine weather is expected, hence to the Horn. Pernambuco is now about 30 miles distant, but no land is to be seen. The boys are making sennit, the carpenter is caulking the poop deck, the steward is, or was, paring squashes, part of the watch are fitting studdingsail gear, two men are weaving sennit with a sword, one is tending fire on deck, over which a kettle of pitch is boiling to fill the seams which the carpenter is caulking. Lost another hat overboard this forenoon.

*Sat. Nov. 24th* Just after eight bells this afternoon an auction was held at the cabin door, at which two chests and their contents were sold by the boatswain for about \$25 while their true value was  $\frac{1}{2}$  of that sum. It was evident that some of the men were quite unused to the business—as they would even over bid themselves.

*Tues. Nov. 27th* The Capt has ordered the steward to prepare for thanks-

giving, and kill a certain fat little pig. Cannot help thinking of things at home during this happy week, of the farmers at the market, the cool weather, the housewives busy with the making of pies, puddings and other good things, the thanksgiving sermon & best of all, the thanksgiving dinner. Long to return to the land, which at this distance appears to be overflowing with plenty and joy; what a life a sailor leads! Henceforth I shall, the better know, how to pity him.

*Thurs. Nov. 29th* Thanksgiving day in old Salem, but not on the S. Atlantic Ocean; yet we had a good dinner which consisted of Mock Turtle Soup, Roast Pork (fresh), Cranberry and Mince pies, all which are "good enough" for any who are "foolish enough" to go to sea.

*Friday Nov 30th/55* . . . the ship to leeward ran up the Stars and Stripes; never did they look so beautiful . . . in five minutes "Noonday" was seen floating from the stranger . . . remarkable that we should have thus fallen in with and over taken this ship which sailed from the same wharf 11 days before us . . . Capt Gerry of the N. said he had seen no American vessel before.

*Monday Dec 3d /55* Vivid flashes of lightning were seen at short intervals during the greater part of the night, and on the trucks of the masts and on the top gallant yard arms balls of fire called corposant were to be seen . . . the ship pitched and rolled heavily. Sleep was impossible. A top mast studding sail was lost overboard by the parting of the halyards, and the captain cut the tack to keep the men from being dragged over.

Robert [Robert C. Adams of Boston, one of "boys" in crew] is quite unwell; he was obliged to go below in his dog-watch yesterday, the Capt. gave him a

dose of castor oil (the cure all on ship-board) and paregoric this morning and he is now better.

*Friday Dec. 14th* . . . the lookout saw land about three points on lee bow, and it was evident that we were fairly in the entrance of the Str of Le Mais. No land has been seen since we left Cape Cod and after 45 days we find ourselves in the entrance of these straights but 12 miles wide. I first discovered Barnevalt's Is. at 9 o'clk and a few minutes after saw the solitary peak of the Horn to the Westward.

*Sat. Dec. 15th* We have no real night . . . the sun is at its greatest Southern declination at the 20th inst and this together with the new moon combines to render the night lighter than it would otherwise be. We passed within 5 miles of Diego . . . we have seen no Cape Pigeons.

*Sunday Dec. 16th/55* . . . gales . . . ship creaking, pitching, jerking, rolling; at times, hardly able to stand on deck, impossible to sleep.

*Thurs. Dec. 20th* Cape Horn is famous, I believe for the sudden changes in the weather. At 8 o'clk the sea was smooth as a mirror . . . a pair of albatrosses . . . the bolder of the two alighted close by, swimming gracefully like a duck or goose (they are webfooted) . . . such a large bird resting in the water within 10 or 12 feet of you is very beautiful. Gradually the placid smoothness was disturbed by a long, undulating swell. . . Within two hours a very fresh wind was blowing . . . bow high in the air . . . next moment . . . the end of her jib-boom under, every timber in motion, straining every nerve, as it were, . . . the water came over the bulwarks and actually dinned the mainsail under.

*Tues. Dec 25th* Another Holiday has

come, at least it would be such at home, but on shipboard there is nothing to remind us of the fact but an unusually nice dinner of fresh pork; we "salts" prize such luxuries and make "merry" only in thinking of home & the prospect of our reaching that delightful spot in the course of 8 or ten months.

*Wednesday Dec 26th* . . . proved to be the barque Oregon of New York from Bordeaux to San Francisco 110 days out while we are only sixty . . . vessel at sea, all sail set, is beautiful, the more so perhaps since it breaks . . . monotony, and the sight of human beings on the lonely ocean, though they be strangers, is very cheering to us solitary travelers.

*Tues Jan 1st/56* A happy new year to the kind friends at home. I long to see them all and wonder how the new year finds them. Perhaps a drifting snow storm is raging or a January thaw. . . . I suddenly saw Masa Fuera situated about 2 degrees West of Juan Fernandez.

*Sunday Jan 6th/56* We are now rolling along, first to one side then to the opposite one, like a horse going to mill with  $\frac{1}{2}$  a dozen bushels of corn on his back, dipping the studding sails under. Three islands were in sight yesterday . . . St. Felix & Ambrose . . . distance of 30 mls. 71 days out.

*Thurs. Jan 10th/56* . . . a storeroom in the cabin was emptied in searching for a rat.

*Tuesday Jan 15th/56* . . . a cool breeze moderates the heat of a tropical sun . . . ; have been reading Parker's "Aids to English Composition" . . . . We expect to cross the Equator by Sunday. . . . Two rats and a swarm of cockroaches made a visit to the officer on deck last night, from the booby hatch. About four dozen of the roaches were killed . . .

an equal number for the last three or four evenings.

*Wednesday Jan 16th/56* I saw to day for the first time the fish called the "bonita" . . . they are very shy of the hook and dodge the iron.

*Thurs. Jan. 17th/56* . . . to see the flying fish leap out of water and the bonita stand ready to catch them—even the smallest which are not over two inches in length—is a very interesting sight. The bonita is from two and a half to three ft in length . . . , its back of a bright purple color.

*Friday Jan 18th 1856* Capt. M. hove the ship to, to let the whale ship run down to us. Down she came at the rate of a mile in 10 minutes . . . the Capt of the spouter came aboard in his red shirt, and tattered straw hat . . . He had been out twenty six months from N. Bedford, but was in port two month e ago and had then heard of the fall of Sebastople . . . he also reported seeing the Napoleon, the Sea Fox and Hercules, all whalers . . . left with the Capt. five letters to be mailed in San Francisco . . . ; he had got 500 barrels & had sent home 300. Capt Parsons, Ship Garland.

*Saturday Jan 19th* Two of the fish which have been sporting about the bows were speared to day by the steward who appears to have more skill in throwing the harpoon than the whalers themselves of whom there are three on board.

*Tues. Jan 22* I found in Mr Scott's trunk a volume of "Stray Meditations" by Rev. Dr. Thompson of New York which I read with much pleasure. He relates it as significant of the social condition of the French that their language has no word corresponding to the Saxon "Home".

*Wed 23d* I requested the mate to call me at five o'clk that I might arise and see

the first dawn of daybreak, the first glimmering of light in the East, said by Dana to be the most beautiful, or rather most interesting, part of the morning. From the main royal yard, at an elevation about equal to the height of Dr. Emerson's steeple, I watched the dawning of the day.

*Sunday Jan 27th* The goat was killed or rather murdered yesterday by the cook. A part of it was sent into the fore-castle & one of the men, who had been in the habit of feeding it, refused to eat his portion. Indeed everyone says they would have relished it better if it had not been *that* goat. She has given about a gill per day, which combined with an equal quantity of water, has furnished milk enough for the only one who uses it—myself.

*Wednes. Feb 6th* This is the day on which we had expected to reach port, but from present appearances we must wait six more days at least. Four large birds of the albatross species were caught yesterday PM with hook & line. The steward declared he could stuff one. The bird is 80 in from tips of wings & 32 in long.

*Fri Feb 8th* The first porpoise was struck; his back bone was taken out whole and together with the upper jaw is now towing astern . . . The lower jaw broke adrift. From it a valuable oil is taken, used in lubricating very nice machinery.

*Sun. Feb 10th* California adjacent to the bay of Monterey lies in full view, at a distance of 15 miles. . . . With a fair wind we could be in the Bay . . . by sundown. The porpoise tasted much like beef & not at all like fish.

*Mon. Feb 11th* Last eve just before sundown a large clipper ship was seen . . . the Skylark from New York & by table in "Shipping News" found that he sailed 37 days before us.

*Tues. Feb 12th* There was not sufficient wind to steer the ship during last night . . . During the morning there was a light breeze . . . the Skylark gradually gained . . . but the breeze freshening allowed the Ringleader to show what she could do; now (5 PM) . . . the Skylark is almost out of sight astern. . . .

. . . we received a pilot on board. From 12 midnight till ½ past 5 o'clk we were tacking every few minutes and at last got abreast of Fort Point . . . when a fair wind sprung up wafting us flying abreast of Telegraph Hill . . . at 7 o'clk the ship was fast to the wharf . . . stevedores wishing to take the job of unloading . . . a customs house officer, men soliciting the supplying of the ship with provisions & to engage crews. There are four lights . . . Boneta point, flash light on the South Farralones, one on the Fort Point and another on Altrez Island in the harbour. Two years ago there was not a single light house.

*Wed. 13th* . . . a gentleman came into the cabin . . . it was Mr. Quarles [of Salem]. At breakfast time William Warner [another old Salem friend], Caddy Quarles' husband and the brother in law of Capt Matthews came on board . . . whether there were any letters for me . . . there were none. I found *Wm* Quarles on the wharf, looking as natural as ever, the same old sixpence. I went with him to his house—up, up Clay Street. His mother and Caroline were very glad to see me & the sight of so many Salem folks made it appear quite home-like. Saw also the dagueratypes of Salem friends. Previous ly I went into Flint & Peabody's counting room with Capt M and was introduced to Edw & *Wm* Flint.

Going from the wharf there are numerous places for a short distance in the

street where planks are missing and where some say a hundred persons or more have been lost during the winter. The city gov. is too poor to provide means of repairing them. As the whole lower portion of the city is built upon piles and many of the streets are not filled up with gravel under the planks, it is very difficult and expensive to keep the street in good repair and also almost impossible to rescue a person fallen through.

In the evening I took a walk with *Wm Q* & went to a prayer meeting in the vestry of the Rev. Mr Brierly's church where some 40 persons were assembled in a neat and plain room. Mr. Brierly, whom I should have known wherever I had seen him, sat by a melodeon in the centre. Capt M took tea at Mr. Warner's.

*Thurs. Feb. 14th 56* The Pacific Mail Company's steamers stop at the wharf . . . everything is done in a fast way . . . boats . . . as for instance "Wells Fargo & Co's Express" rushed to a lower gangway, near the paddle box to obtain the packages . . . then rowed ashore as rapidly as possible. The Golden Gate is one of the most beautiful ships on the Pacific side; she brought 750 passengers but can accomodate twice that number. I have been on board . . . also on the Uncle Sam, a fine steamer. By the previous steamer I received a letter from Mother and papers. By this one, a letter from home, a long one from Alfred [Alfred Symonds Peabody, a Salem friend], one from G. Chaney [George Leonard

Chaney of Salem], one from George [?].

*Friday Feb 15th* . . . walk about the wharves . . . saw the Edw Hoppoptoh of Salem, Capt Eagleson, advertised to sail for Port Philip. Capt. Dewing of Salem is here and Ben Howard [Benjamin Cheever Howard] to whom I have been introduced. Robert's uncle came on board at noon and obtained leave for three days for him. Have seen a Capt. Edwards who came out with Miss Quarles & Tom Hutchinson an old friend of Dane's.

In the afternoon took a walk up town, stopped at Sweetser & Hutchins where *Wm Quarles* is, . . . stopping at Chars Pollard's who keeps an apothecary store and once went to the Phillip's School.

Dined at Mr Warner's . . . spent the even. at Mr. Harvey's who lives in the same house. There were about 12 of us all from Salem except one, a Mrs. Baker. Mrs. Warner played on the piano and sung the "Old Folks at Home". . . .

A very severe shock of an earthquake was felt last night, awakening every one in the city, threw down brick walls, caused a great many to run into the streets, and shook the ship . . . as if a heavy sea had struck her.

*Saturday Feb. 16th* . . . walk to Southern part of town on the road to the mission, stopped at Mr. Adams on the way, he suggested my staying in Cal. if I could find a situation, thought that some of my friends here could find one. Mr Quarles also advises it on condition that I . . . stay for several years.

*To be continued.*