

Forest History Foundation, Inc.  
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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW  
with

Caspar Hexberg  
San Francisco, California

March, 1953

by John W. Larson

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Interview with  
CASPAR HEXBERG  
March, 1953 - San Francisco, California  
by John Larson, Forest History Foundation, Inc.

I am 69 years old, born on December 11, 1887 on my father's farm (Hexeberg) in the County of Sorum 21 miles east of Oslo, Norway. I migrated to the United States June 22, 1904 and started to work for Acme Lumber Company, a subsidiary of Union Lumber Company January 10, 1907. In 1914 I was promoted to freight, terminal and passenger agent for the Union Lumber Company steamer operations (National Steamship Company, a subsidiary of Union Lumber Company) and in 1918 was promoted to port captain for the Union Lumber Company in charge of all Union Lumber Company steamers and personnel.

At that time, 1918, the Union Lumber Company owned and operated the steamers "Brunswick", "Arctic", "Coquille River" and gas schooner "Coquell"; also under charter steamers "South Coast" and "Cleone" and also under charter from Charles Higgins Company the steamer "Sea Foam" and occasionally the steamer "Fort Bragg". We also operated for the Goodyear Redwood Company steamers "Helen P. Drew" and steamer "Phoenix".

Prior to that time, the Union Lumber Company owned the steamer "National City", which was sold to South America and the wooden steamer "Noyo", which was wrecked in 1914. The steamer "Arctic" was wrecked July 5, 1922. After the loss of the steamer "Arctic", Union Lumber Company purchased the steel steamer "Admiral Goodrich", which was later named "Noyo". This steamer was wrecked at Point Arena July 10, 1935. To replace her Union Lumber Company purchased the steamer "Griffdu" and named her "Noyo". All of these steam schooners operated between San Francisco, Point Arena, Mendocino, Fort Bragg, Cleone, and Mattole Landing, Needle Rock and Westport. We also took the last load of split stock out of Timber Cove with the steamer "Coquille River" in 1920.

All of the places we called at are called outside ports, or open roadsteads, and in most cases loaded the boats under one or two wires from the landing to the steamer, except at Fort Bragg, where the Union Lumber Company had a wharf. There was also a wharf at Point Arena where a small boat could go along side; for instance, the steamer "Sea Foam", which made regular weekly calls at that port.

In the early days many of these outside ports had no loading wire so the steam schooners and sailing schooners were loaded from a chute which extended from the landing over the water to the steamer. The lumber, or ties, were slid down these chutes onto the deck of the vessel. About half way up the chute, or as near as possible to the water, they had

what was called a manual operated brake in the chute. When the lumber, or ties, came down these chutes the brake was applied so that the material would not go down too fast. For instance, in the case of loading ties, some of these being sinkers cut from the butt end of the tree, they would be very, very heavy and if the brake was not put on en route they would go so fast that by the time the ties hit the boat's deck they would bounce right overboard into the ocean and would sink to the bottom. There was no way of salvaging these ties unless you sent a diver down, which of course would be impossible in these open roadsteads.

These steam schooners loaded lumber ties and oak tan bark. The tan bark was peeled during the time the sap was in the tree and then piled up in the woods for drying, piled in cords, hauled to the landings and loaded aboard steam schooners for shipment to San Francisco, Redwood City, Benicia and as far north as Portland. At Fort Bragg, Union Lumber Company was shredding the tan bark for shipment in sacks for export to Japan.

Most of the Union Lumber Company captains were brought up in the company steamers. They would start in as sailors and eventually get to be mates and then captains, depending on their ability to handle men and their intelligence to pass the navigation school and get captain's papers. Most of these captains were Swedes and Norwegians, except one was a German by the name of Charles Linder. Some of these men came around the Horn, like Captain Bostrom, who came around the Horn as a sailor at the age of 14. He was the oldest Union Lumber Company captain in years of service and Master of the Union Lumber Company's last steamer Noyo, formerly the Griffdu, which was sold to Siam in 1939.

Nearly all of the deck crews on these schooners were Scandinavians and Finns, except prior to World War I we had one entire deck crew of German sailors on the steamer Brunswick. They all disappeared, however, when the war started. The war regulations did not interfere very much with the steam schooner operations. They, of course, had to comply with Government regulations. The steamers had to pass inspection going out and coming into ports, but due to the fact that they only operated between California ports, there was never any delay on account of harbor regulations.

As before stated, the Union Lumber Company steamers operated mostly between California ports, but occasionally the steel steamer Noyo would go as far south as Mazatlan, Mazanillo and Guaymas, Mexico. On one occasion the steamer Brunswick also went to Honolulu with 400<sup>M</sup> feet of redwood lumber and returned with a cargo of canned pineapple. Union Lumber Company also shipped considerable export lumber on steamers loaded at Noyo Harbor, where we loaded these steamers under two wires from the landing. Most of these shipments went to Australia and New Zealand. Considerable lumber was also shipped to Honolulu on the Matson steamers which also called at Noyo Harbor.

One of the largest vessels ever loaded at Noyo Harbor was the Norwegian steamer Kalfarli. This steamer formerly belonged to American Hawaiian Steamship Company. She loaded case oil and sugar pine lumber at Richmond and completed cargo at Noyo, so that when loaded her total cargo equalled about 6 million feet. When sailing from Noyo Harbor her draft was 31 feet forward and 33 feet aft.

Up to the time that Harry Bridges took over the Stevedore's Union the Union Lumber Company crews consisted of very fine and able seamen and we were able to operate the steamers very efficiently. About 1937 the steamers were held up anywhere from two to three days in the various California ports for no reason at all. After they were held up two or three days, or more, steamers were allowed to go out and Bridges offered the excuse that it was all their fault and consequently the steamer could sail, but on the next return to port it was the same thing over again. All he seemed to be interested in was tying up the ships so as to make it impossible for the companies to operate the steamers at a profit. Consequently, today there are only three or four large steel steam schooners operating.

The Union Lumber Company steamer Noyo, which was a very large boat, carried one million feet in packages. That is one thing that Bridges objected to - that we carried all our lumber in units - because there was practically no handling necessary on the lumber carried in units and in spite of the fact that the sailors would rather be on that ship than any other for the reason that they did not have to handle the lumber. The reason for Bridges' objections, of course, was that we did not take enough time to turn the ship around on each voyage and we saved a lot of lumber handling on the wharfs.

On the run between San Francisco and Fort Bragg the steamer Noyo would make this trip in three or four days, so when the steamer was held up two to four days per trip the cost of operating naturally doubled and in some cases tripled. Another thing - we figured the steamer deliveries at a certain time and when delayed unnecessarily and unexpectedly this caused a lot of disappointment to our customers. The result was that we had to go over to rail shipments, so that today the Union Lumber Company shipments all go out either rail or truck.

When I first took over the Union Lumber Company steamers, getting our men was quite a task - the sailors would quit and then we'd have to go along the water front and hit nearly every saloon there was and pick up one here and one there. In some cases the sailor would say, "What ship is it?" You'd tell the name of the steamer and they'd say, "Bring her up here so we can take a look at her." And then in some cases we'd even have to go so far as - oh, buy them a number of drinks and then try to persuade them to get aboard the ship. I've even seen cases where the mate would get them drunk and then load them - in a wagon those days, no machines, you know - and haul them down to the ship and dump the men aboard so that they'd have their full capacity of men for a crew.

Steam schooners, particularly Union Lumber Company steam schooners, had perhaps less trouble than any of them because we had very good captains; and we had the reputation of feeding very, very well. For instance, on the Union Lumber Company steamer Noyo - occasionally I would go down there for breakfast - I would have fruit of some kind, choice of ham and eggs, bacon and eggs, and codfish, hot cakes and coffee, occasionally mush. There was always a cool lunch served - standing there on the counter for the men between meals and particularly after supper at night. We didn't call it dinner; we called it supper on board ship. For lunch we'd have a hot meal - two or three courses, and prepared by the very best of cooks. And usually Scandinavian cooks - mostly Norwegians. Then for dinner, supper as we called it, again there would be two or three courses, or if they had steak, there would be only steak - but, soup and vegetables and dessert. Union Lumber Company fed better than I could ever feed in my home. Well, the men worked hard and naturally you had to feed them good. The feeding of good and ample food was an attraction for the ships. And the old saying was that you could always tell the ships that fed good because the sea gulls followed them all the way out to sea. The ones that didn't feed good, the sea gulls wouldn't follow.

When loading the steamer Noyo at Fort Bragg we loaded her with units made up in size 48" wide by 40" high, two lengths per unit 10/14' in unit and 16/20' in each unit and so on. When those units were lifted on board the ship by the high crane from the wharf, the units were landed in the hold or on deck and were hauled by overhead cables to proper position in the hold. The units were lifted with rope slings that were left right on the units and the ends tied together with rope yarn so that they would not fall down beside the units. If the ends did fall down, the sailors had a long iron hook they caught them with when they were ready to discharge units, so all the sailors had to do was unhook when loading and hook the bridle onto the loads when discharging.

The steamer Noyo's gear was very heavy. The booms were 74' and 76' long by 18" diameter at the center, 12" at the heel and 11" top. With these long booms we could discharge the lumber on three lines of tracks along side of the wharf and could land the loads on cars or trucks, whichever was required. These units were, of course very heavy but we could lift 6 or 7 tons without straining the gears. On other ships where they did not have the unit system they had to handle the lumber piece by piece and when unloading had to make up units on board the ship, which was a very slow operation. The steamer Noyo, as before stated, carried one million feet in packages and very often this could be loaded aboard the ship in one day at Fort Bragg and very seldom over a day and a half's time.

Sometimes, if the steam schooners got into a very bad storm, the deck load would probably shift a little and sometimes they would even lose part of the load, but the steamer Noyo, fortunately, never had this trouble. The deck load on the steam schooners, particularly on the Noyo, was 16' to 18' above the deck, as the steam schooners were all built so as to carry about two-thirds of the cargo on deck for the convenience of loading and discharging.

All of the steam schooner captains were very wonderful, daring and able seamen and specialists in the steam schooner trade, for the reason that they were all brought up on the steam schooners, which was very tough sailing and very hard work. Especially, the sailors had to be good boatmen to begin with, because the steam schooners tied up at these outside ports. No matter how rough the sea was they would go in the so-called work boat. Two men would go in this boat with the running line, then they had to take the running line and run it over to the buoys. Then haul the 8" line from the ship and make it fast at the buoy and when the steamer was fully tied up it consisted of two 8" stern lines and two 8" bow breast lines. The mooring lines were 8" circumference 125 fathoms long.

The Union Lumber Company captains were:

|                |                 |                   |
|----------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| John Bostrom   | Ingwald Rossen  | Captain Elleffsen |
| Tony Wahlgren  | Victor Jacobson | Captain Simondsen |
| Gudmund Olsen  | Charles Linder  |                   |
| Christian Lind | George Hammer   |                   |

Many of the steam schooner captains on the Pacific Coast had nicknames. Union Lumber Company's Captain John Bostrom was very fittingly called "Hurry-up-Jack", Captain Lind was "Fisken". Some of the others:

|                        |                           |
|------------------------|---------------------------|
| Caspar Charley         |                           |
| Rough Pile Johnson     |                           |
| Port Wine John         | Captain Elleffsen         |
| Midnight Olsen         | Captain Gudmund Olsen     |
| Russian Finn Kelley    |                           |
| Hog Aleck              |                           |
| Big Sharkey            | Captain Hendricksen       |
| Little Sharkey         | Captain Gronner Gallis    |
| Whispering Pete        |                           |
| Noisey Johnson         |                           |
| Long Legs Chris        | Captain Chris Bergersen   |
| Safe is Open Gundersen | Captain A. B. C. Johanson |
| Nosey Higgins          | Captain Walter Higgins    |
| Stumpen                | Captain Olsen             |
| Whiskey Pete           |                           |
| Long Legs John         | Captain John Odland       |

One of the most famous captains on the Coast was "Midnight Olsen" - Gudmund Olsen. He derived his nickname from crossing over the Humboldt Bar when nobody figured he would be able to do so. He particularly crossed the bar with the steamer Acme on Christmas Eve when everybody figured he was not going to be back in Eureka for Christmas Eve. He made a bet before sailing for San Francisco with some people in a saloon in Eureka that he was going to be back in port by midnight Christmas Eve. He had heavy southeast storms on the way to San Francisco which delayed his arrival, but on arriving

in port he worked right through discharging and started right back to Eureka. A few minutes before 12:00 midnight on Christmas Eve, when the boys were lifting their glasses at Captain Olsen's expense, the steamer Acme blew her whistle alongside the wharf indicating that she had made it on time and won the bet. Consequently, Captain Olsen was nicknamed "Midnight Olsen".

After leaving the steam schooners Captain Olsen became a pilot for one of the Eastern Lines and piloted large freighters in and out of all California ports. He finally left the sea and bought the Siegler Springs Summer Resort at Lake County, which he still owns and operates together with his son and family. He is undoubtedly the most well-known and respected skipper on the Pacific Coast - a wonderful man in every way and a very fine and able captain.