

Forest History Foundation, Inc.
St. Paul, Minnesota

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Captain Midnight Olsen
San Francisco, California
March, 1953

by John Larson

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Interview with
CAPTAIN MIDNIGHT OLSEN
March, 1953 - San Francisco, California
by John Larson, Forest History Foundation, Inc.

I was born in Norway, in Stavanger, and came out here when I was about fifteen years old. I had no trade or anything so I went to sea, in coastwise shipping. My first trip out was in May, 1892. My first ship was the Roy Somers, a sailing vessel. It was a merchant ship; the owner was a hay merchant. I sailed from 1892 to '98, then I went to Alaska fishing. When I got back from Alaska in '98, I went into steam. That was during the war - Spanish War. It was quite a change from sailing to steam.

I became second mate on the vessel then. The second mate got sick out at sea and I was picked to be second mate. I got the name "Midnight Olsen" because I used to go in and out all the bars day or night, anytime. Whenever I got there, I went in.

I started working with the Union Lumber Company in 1899. We had good crews in those days. It's different now; the sailors just about run everything now. The crews then were mostly Scandinavian; some of them had had experience over in the North Sea before they came out here. Food was good on those ships, best feed of any; then the oiltankers came next.

One time I came up to the bar at night. There was a thick fog, and there was quite a few ships laying anchored out there - wouldn't go in. That was at Eureka, Humboldt Bay. I went in and loaded and came out again and they were still there. I went to San Francisco and discharged and then came up again, and there were ten ships there then. I went in and loaded and came out and then they came in. Some were smaller ships than mine, some were bigger.

I never had any trouble with crews. Like during the war, ships were laid up for weeks sometimes, couldn't get a crew, but I never lost an hour. Had a good reputation for feeding and everything, and never had any trouble.

When we loaded lumber, the loads came out and landed on the deck and then we picked up the load there and packed it. We loaded whenever we got in. It took about five days, five or six days, to make the trip from San Francisco to Fort Bragg. We took up general merchandise and equipment, and loaded up with lumber.

We were loading at Fort Bragg when I had my accident. The timbers landed across the deck just about ready to go over the side. Well, I

grabbed the sling and went out on the timbers, and crawled over the end of the timbers to get them on deck. Of course, when I got out there that was a little too heavy and overboard we went. And my right foot was jammed between the timbers. We had already started to let go the lines, so she was surging forth and back. When we got down to the railing, the timber turned over and we went in the water. I nearly drowned. By that time they had a rope around my waist, but they couldn't pull me clear. I had to go to the hospital. I was first officer then. That night when they went out, they hit the reef.

That was in 1906. I just came out of the hospital at the time of the earthquake. I had been in the hospital then for nine months. First I was out after six months, and then I went and took the National City as captain. When I was up there loading, the leg started to swell up and pain something awful and I had to go to the hospital when I got the city again. The doctor had to operate again because there was some more bones coming out. The bone was all crushed. I had no movement in the ankle at all. So I was in the hospital nine months altogether. At that time nobody was responsible when you were hurt, but we didn't think anything of it.

Broback was in charge of the docks at Fort Bragg. He's an old-timer; he's retired. He's the one that got me out of the hospital up there. The doctor wouldn't let me go, said I wasn't fit to go, wouldn't live. I said, "If you don't send a wagon over here to take me down, I'll crawl down". The doctor said he wouldn't be responsible. It was funny though. After I got to the hospital, one of the nurses seemed to take quite an interest in me. I kept talking about the horse doctor. Then she says, "That's my father." I pretty near dropped through the bed.

I was home in San Francisco at the time of the earthquake. I went home and I didn't feel so good that afternoon; I thought I could go back in the hospital in the morning and get the leg dressed. In the morning I woke up and said, "It seems to be awful close. I think I'll go open up the windows."

"No," said my wife. "Don't do that," because the baby was lying close by the windows. Then I heard a rumbling just like a milk wagon running on the cobblestones. Then the earthquake hit. The walls were moving just like a sheet hanging on the clothesline, and the alarm clock which was on the bureau seemed like it was walking across the bureau until it fell off. My wife grabbed the kids and ran out in the back yard. But I - I laid there. Then there was an awful crash up on the roof. I looked out of the window, and I thought that was the best way to get out. But then the earthquake stopped.

I was not hurt by the earthquake. I was on crutches so they took pity on me; they took care of me. The house was full of people. There was an empty lot next to us, and one night it started raining. And I said,

"Gee, we can't let them lay out there in the rain." So I went out and told them they could come in out of the rain. So we had people all over the living-room, dining-room, kitchen. In the morning when my wife was going to get up and make breakfast, why she had to step over people - they wouldn't get up.

The earthquake didn't affect the ships in the harbor at all. But it was really a Godsend to the lumber companies. Of course, then they could sell everything. Lumber that had been laying up in the yard for years and years, just refuse, they could send it down. As long as it was lumber, they could sell it. It lasted about a year, then it tapered off.

During the first World War we were very short of men. When I first came with the Union Lumber Company, I was there as first officer for quite a while. Then they were going to buy the Artic and the captain wanted to know if I wasn't going to go up and apply for it. So I said, "If they want me, they know where to find me."

Captain Ellefson went up to the office and when he returned he told me, "They've got a big list of applications." I wouldn't go. But I found out afterwards that he had gone up and recommended me very highly.

Then the Captain came aboard and he said, "Olsen, you're getting slower all the time. I got to fire you."

"Well," I said, "I thought it was about time I was taking a vacation."

And he said, "You go hunt me up a first mate. You know more about mates than I do. So I went up and found him a good mate, and he says, "Tomorrow about 10 o'clock you go up to the office and speak to Cochran." Right then I thought there was something in the wind, but he never told me anything. So in the morning I went up there and I came in to Cochran's office. He asked me a lot of questions. "Well," he says, "Get your grips, and if you can come up to what Ellefson said about you, you'll be all right." That was 1906. I became captain on the Artic right after I came out of the hospital.

Nowadays, the automobile, trucks, you know, they have done away with a lot of the ships. Lots of them will go from the mill right to the house being built. Saves a lot of money. Still they are trying to start up a little shipping now. Of course, that's the inside ports with landing barges. But they have trouble with the unions. They make them have so many men and they only use half of them. One of the main reasons for giving up shipping was difficulty with the men. The unions made it too expensive. When I was sailing, the sailors were good men, too. We were fighting about the loads, to get the loads. Now they fight not to get them.

We had bunks on the ship, two high, one above the other. We used to call the mattress a donkey's breakfast. The mattress had straw in it,

just straw. When you slept on it for a day or two, why there was nothing under your backsides, the straw in the center of the mattress having been pushed to both ends. You had to buy your own bed clothes. It's different nowadays. They must have white sheets.

When they were in port and loaded cargo, they worked eight hours a day. If they worked longer, it was overtime. A seaman got \$40.00 a month and his food. For that time, he was pretty well paid. When I first went to sea, I got \$35.00 a month, and there was no overtime on a sailing vessel. The quarters were about the same as on the steamers. Of course, it depended a whole lot on how you took care of it; you had to take care of it yourself. You had to take care of your dishes yourself, too. So we used coffee to wash dishes. Poured the coffee on the plates and wiped them. That was the only hot water we had. If you bothered the cook too much he'd chase you out.

We had pretty good cooks. One fellow we had we couldn't get rid of him. There's a skylight opening in the top of the galley, you know. We went up there and had a great big hook and line and when he was walking around the stove we hooked him in the pants and yanked him up. His hands went on the stove and got burnt. He had to leave then because he couldn't work. Most of the cooks were Scandinavians.

Those days we really had good men; we got a lot of work done. One time we loaded her in one day at Fort Bragg. Came in in the morning and went out at night. There was a derrick crane on the dock and the timber came down to the dock on small cars. That was the Artic. When I got back (I left here and got up to Fort Bragg in the morning) there was a big fog. I knew I had to be careful because there were two other ships there that were supposed to leave the night before. So I blew the whistle for coming in, but they blew me out. Then I saw a boat coming out. The captain of the Brunswick came out. That was my first trip, and he said, "We got orders from San Francisco to come out and help you come in."

So I says, "You can come up here, but you don't take me in. I'll take her in even if I take her in over the North Reef.

"That's all right," he says. He came aboard but he just stood in back. So when I came in, it went fine. The head man's name there was White. So White telephoned to say that I was in and that they sent Ellefson out as per instructions but the captain refused assistance.

I retired in 1922.