

Saranac - A Seaside Sideshow

by Adam M. Grohman

Commodore George Dewey stood along the railing of the *Olympia*. A volley of shots cascaded across the sky above him. He ordered Captain Gridley to move his flagship closer to the enemy vessels. Gunners crews were at the ready waiting anxiously for the order to fire. Smoke billowed from the smokestacks as the *Olympia* and the rest of the U.S. Asiatic fleet steamed full speed toward the Spanish vessels stationed off Cavite. Wearing his golf cap in lieu of his service cover, Dewey turned and issued his next order, "You may fire when you are ready, Gridley."¹

Meanwhile, south of Manila at the port of Iloilo, Captain Bartaby and his crew languished at the hands of their Spanish captors. Bartaby peered through the iron bars of their cell in the direction of the harbor. He located the masts of his bark in the distance and turned to his crew. He wondered, as he looked at his men, if any of them and their vessel would ever leave the Philippines. It was the first of May 1898 and for Bartaby, his crew, and his vessel *Saranac*, the future appeared bleak.

George Cornelius Tilyou was one of Coney Island's master promoters. Along his pier, Tilyou focused on the basic tenets of his patronage to determine the best manner in which to achieve customer satisfaction. His formula for success was, as historian Edo McCullough noted, "to lapse into the alliterations of the sideshow spiel...a matchless mixture of sentimentality, shrewd psychology, a sound sense of civic expansion, and a suffusion of sophomore sex." His personal playground, a multi-acre world of fun, frolic, and frivolity along the sea, was known as Steeplechase Park. Millions of turn-of-the-century New Yorkers, tourists, and curiosity seekers were drawn to the exciting mixture of surf, sand, and spontaneity. Amidst the merry-go-rounds, Ferris wheels, bearded ladies, mitt-joints, fun-houses, iron horses, and games of chance, was an old floating curiosity. The bark, which had debuted upon the world's stage eight years earlier, was a recent addition to the list of sights. Moored to the pier, her achy and tired timbers creaked with each passing sand-bound swell. From shore her name was barely noticeable to the naked eye. Upon further inspection, however, one could clearly make the name upon her stern - *Saranac*.

Tilyou had purchased the *Saranac* in 1906. The vessel, he thought, was the perfect addition to his seaside pier of assorted amusements, spectacular sideshows, and gravity-defying rides. Tilyou's financial vision did not see the waters off Steeplechase Park as a long port-of-call for the aging vessel. Instead, Tilyou wanted to capitalize on the patriotic fervor of his patrons by stuffing the *Saranac* full of dynamite and sending her into the sky in a fiery season finale. He saw the *Saranac*'s destruction as an opportunity to admonish the bark, finally, for the terrible disgrace that had befallen her during the Spanish-American War. The vessel, in a strange sequence of events, unfortunately had sailed into the waters of the Philippine Islands and into the middle of a war between the empires of the United States and Spain, ingloriously into the history books, and lodged into the memories of many Americans.²

The *Saranac* was built at Kennebunk, Maine in 1880. She was a double-decked bark, or a sailing vessel, utilizing three or more masts, square-rigged on all masts with the exception of the aft-mast which was fore and aft rigged.³ *Saranac* was one hundred and ninety-five and a half feet in length, had a beam of

thirty-four feet, six inches, a draft of twenty-two feet, and weighed in at 1,027 tons. A cargo vessel, *Saranac* plied the seas of the world for over 18 years in relative anonymity. All of that, however, was soon to change. On February 26, 1898, Captain Bartaby was at the helm when, after having taken on the last of his cargo of coal, he ordered the mooring lines cast off at New Castle, South Wales. The *Saranac* would arrive at the entrance of her intended port of Iloilo in the Philippines on April 26, but she would not do so alone.

On the *Saranac*'s beam was the Spanish gunboat *El Cano*. The Spanish officer had ordered Bartaby to surrender. At sea, Bartaby had not received word of the hostilities between the Spanish and American



Saranac

forces. Flying the American colors proudly, the inbound bark was spotted by the crew of the *El Cano*, which stood by for the *Saranac* to sail ignorantly into her trap. Once within range, the *El Cano*'s commander informed Bartaby and his crew of their tenuous situation. Bartaby protested the skipper's intentions and received a curt reply. Bartaby would have the choice of shutting his mouth or preparing to receive a shot broadside. Unarmed and unable to outrun the more agile *El Cano*, Bartaby had no other choice but to surrender to this Spanish captors.

At sea, Captain Bartaby was unaware that the owner of the vessel, William Simpson, Jr. of New York City, had shifted the vessel's American registry to the British. Under the watchful eyes of the *El Cano*'s crew and gunners, the bark slowly tacked into port. As the vessel passed its mooring lines to the docks, word of the *Saranac*'s fate quickly spread. The Spanish seizure sent shockwaves across the Pacific. The *Saranac*, a non-descript cargo vessel, attempting simply to deliver a shipment of coal, was soon the focus of an international uproar.

Tied up to the piers at Iloilo, the *Saranac* had her cargo of coal off-loaded and liberated by the Spanish authorities. Meanwhile, William Simpson, sequestered at his office at Coenties Slip, offered little information to the hawking journalists. He stated only that the bark "had been taken," but that he hoped that the information was "untrue." The vessel, which had been surveyed in New York two years earlier, was, according to a rating in *The American Shipmaster's Record*, worth forty-thousand dollars.⁴ Unfortunately for Simpson, the information being cabled from the Philippines to the United States was accurate. While Simpson sat idly in New York awaiting word of the fate of the bark, British authorities continued their efforts to gain a reprieve for the vessel and her crew. While the discussions continued, the vessel was damaged by its

Spanish captors. Finally, word was received by Lloyd's of London that the *Saranac*, her captain and crew were finally free to leave Iloilo.

Though the *Saranac* was released, its involvement in the war marked her for the rest of her days at sea. Tilyou, in his infinite entrepreneurial manner, believing, of course, that as a businessman you had to give the people what they wanted, decided to offer them *Saranac*. Tilyou believed that he could not only put an end to the disgrace identified with the *Saranac*, but that he could draw hundreds of thousands to his park to watch it go up in smoke, as well. The dynamic destruction of the bark was to be the climatic end to the 1906 summer season.

The Mardi Gras at Coney Island marked the end of another season by the seashore. Tilyou's plan for the fiery finish of the *Saranac* on September 22, 1906 was dampened by several days of driving rains.

The *Saranac*'s wooden timbers were too saturated to burn. A fire marshal and multiple firemen stood by for the intended detonation of the "cursed" ship, but no spark could be obtained. The *Saranac*, unharmed but tarnished during the Spanish-American War, had received a pass from a fiery demise.⁵ Tilyou's financial gamble had gone bust.⁶

At the start of the 1907 summer season, *Saranac*, now commonly referred to as the wreck or wrecked *Saranac*, remained a part of the sights of Tilyou's Steeplechase Park. In the early days of summer, over 300,000 visitors trekked to Coney Island to

enjoy the first weekend of nice weather and Luna Park, Dreamland, and Steeplechase Park all did a brisk business. One of the highlights for attendees at Steeplechase Park was the wrecked *Saranac*, which Tilyou had transformed into a seaside stage for his next entertainment extravaganza. The bark had become the nautical playhouse for a waterside show that featured a company of diving canines. The dogs, however, may not have drawn enough paying customers, and they were soon joined by a troupe of trained seals. Tilyou's gamble paid off, and according to a review a month after the addition of the seals, the popularity of the wreck, its diving dogs and their aquatic animal counterparts was once again drawing big crowds. The show remained a mainstay for the 1907 season but was replaced for the start of the summer of 1908 season with a group of lifesaving dogs and their attendants.

When and how the *Saranac* ended her days as a seaside sideshow in the waters off Coney Island remains unclear. The only United States flagged vessel to be captured by the Spanish during the Spanish-American War, reprieved from a fiery funeral pyre, ended her days half sunk, as if just another character amidst the odd attractions of Coney Island. It is most likely that once the public interest had waned on the diving dogs, splashing seals, and lifesaving Labradors, the *Saranac* was deemed unworthy of saving for another season. She was either towed into deep water to be unceremoniously sent to the bottom or she finally succumbed to her age and injuries and broke apart, casting her last vestiges along the shoreline in some unrecorded storm. What is known is that the *Saranac* and her legacy in the Spanish-American War will forever remain a small but interesting part of American history. Offered up for redemption by

Continued on page 37

In Our Waters

Saranac - A Seaside Sideshow

by Adam M. Grohman

Continued from page 36

George C. Tilyou, the master of showmanship and business at Coney Island, *Saranac* ended her days, a sad relic of another time - a shipwrecked seaside sideshow - in our waters.

About the Author

Adam M. Grohman is a researcher, author, and chief diver of the Underwater Historical Research Society based on Long Island, New York. He is the author of *Claimed by the Sea - Long Island Shipwrecks* which includes detailed histories of the *S.S. Savannah*, *Lexington*, *Circassian*, *Seawanhaka*, *U.S.S. Ohio*, *Oregon*, *Louis V. Place*, General Slocum, *U.S.S. San Diego*, *Andrea Doria*, and *Gwendoline Steers*. He is also the author of six research publications and two novellas. For more information about this vessel, the various research projects of the UHRS, and to order any of his books, please visit www.uhrs.org

¹ The famous lines uttered by Commodore Dewey have become a part of rich, U.S. Navy history and were published in *Autobiography of George Dewey - Admiral of the Navy* in 1913.

² Though many still "Remember the Maine" war cry, the *Saranac*, in the years following the Spanish-American War, was still a well-known and resented reminder of the conflict. "To Hell with Spain" was the second line of the famous war cry.

³ The use of a fore and aft rigged mast provided for ease in handling and required less crew



than would be needed for a square rig arrangement.

⁴ The cargo of coal was insured by the Atlantic Mutual Insurance Company of New York City.

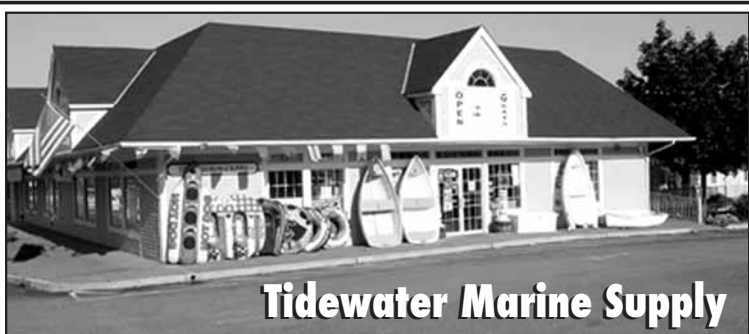
⁵ Several images of the *Saranac* as she lay next to the pier have survived through the years. All show the bark in one piece, but a recently made available image shows the *Saranac* in a much different condition. The undated black and white photograph shows the *Saranac's* bow with a large portion of her stern missing. Unfortu-

nately, little information has come to the surface to determine exactly what caused the damage.

⁶ Though the *Saranac* had not exploded, the driving rains most assuredly did not sink Tilyou's profits for the closing weekend of the season. A religious man, Tilyou's competitor's jested that he attended church each week to pray for only two things - profits and rain. Steeplechase Park was one of the most popular destinations on rained out days and nights at Coney Island.

The North Shore's Best Stocked Marine Supply Store

Guaranteed Best Prices • Excellent Stock On Hand
Expert Sales Staff To Answer Any Questions
Open 7 Days a Week



WHERE SMART BOATERS SHOP!  yachtpaint.com

Marine Electronics • Taylor Products
Mercruiser Parts/Propellers • Seahawk Batteries
Camp Zincs • Teleflex • Perko • ACCO Chain
Maptech Pettit Paints • Osco Manifolds
Rule Pumps • Marinco • Waterproof Charts
Watersport Toys • Walker Bay Boats

WE WILL NOT BE UNDERSOLD!



81 Fort Salonga Road
Northport, NY 11768

ALL MAJOR CREDIT CARDS ACCEPTED

Good® Automatic Windlass Proudly Made in the USA

We're here for you, let's beat this recession

\$\$ Recession Beating Prices \$\$
Call and check for the Best Price Yet!



F850 Rope/Chain Series



500 Rope Series

Windlasses - New & Re-manufactured
Nylon anchor line with or without chain
Spring into Action, Refer to Ad RP5/09
Prices Good thru July 31, 2009

Call 1-800-780-4655

** Refer to Sale RP 5/09 **

Good® Automatic Windlass, Inc.

357 Route 72 ~ Barnegat, NJ 08005

PH: 609-698-4402 ~ 800-780-4655 ~ Fax: 609-698-3698

www.goodwindlass.com