

The ships that built the west

The Scandinavian Navy, Wapama and Værdalen

Olaf T. Engvig's book tells the stories of ships and seamen from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden between 1880 and 1945. The US West Coast was built with the help of these ships and men, especially by providing lumber for improving the infrastructure of the United States.

This is also the story of very different endings of two very famous ships. The steam schooner WAPAMA once was the main vessel on display in a San Francisco museum, You will experience the personal trials and tribulations over the decades of Olaf Engvig, striving and succeeding to rescue the hybrid ship VÆRDALEN, now the sole survivor representing the famed Scandinavian Navy lumber carriers.



PHOTO: LENA KNUTLI

Lumber schooner *Værdalen*, at full speed, with engine power only, after her restoration from 1981 to 2016.

The original plan in 1981, was to have others restore the *Værdalen*, while Olaf would write books on historic ships and lumber schooners, including the *Værdalen*.

The Lumber industry and the Schooners

The stories of the lumber industry of the Pacific Coast started when seamen and explorers returning home raved about primeval forests, so large, dense and tall that no light would penetrate down to the forest floor. These were scary forests, and most sailors refused to venture into such woods, and for a long time, these giant trees were left alone.

But Scandinavians and others from northern Europe were more used to dense forests of tall Norwegian spruce, and they soon realized that these magnificent trees on the Pacific Coast represented a great deal of value.

As demand for lumber continued to grow, smart men saw that it would be less expensive to ship lumber along the coast than to retrieve and transport wood from the inland forests. Mills were shipped around Cape Horn, and set up on the Redwood Coast north of San Francisco. During the 1850s, Gold Rush, the demand for housing exploded. Soon there was a mill in every gulch and a loading ramp at every coastal indentation that could provide deep waters and some protection from the ocean.

People from all over the world came to California in search of gold. A fleet of oceangoing ships was left at anchor on the San Francisco Bay when their crew left to become gold diggers.

Before the gold rush, San Francisco had a population of less than 10,000 inhabitants. By 1860, there were

TOP PHOTO: Lumber going into the hold of the *NEWBURG*, built in San Francisco in 1898. Two more steam schooners can be seen in the background. All of them have their square sail yard half-way up the mast, tilted so it hangs over the ship's deck. Sail was still an important mode of propulsion during the first decades of the twentieth century.

CENTER PHOTO: The Union Lumber Company's the *NOYO* (they had three ships with this name) leaving Fort Bragg with one of the last shipments from this famed California lumber port. Competition from rail and trucks had taken over the trade. Coastwise shipment of lumber was coming to an end.

BOTTOM PHOTO: A hundred years ago, making undercut in a redwood 22 feet in diameter took days of hard work. Even this much smaller tree would demand heavy work by two men for an entire day for the undercut and sawing of the solid trunk. Today, a Husqvarna chain saw could do the job in less than one hour.

60,000 inhabitants. Ten years later, 150,000 people lived in the city. San Francisco became the metropolis of the West Coast in a very short period of time. Housing and other expanding enterprises demanded lumber in an ever-increasing quantity.

As time passed, the lumber industry expanded and the companies moved their operations further north. This led to an increase in the size and number of ships related to the industry, both the coastwise trades and windjammers bringing the lumber across the oceans.

The Scandinavian Navy

The coast was a rocky and a very inhospitable place, often completely exposed to the Pacific Ocean. To sail a wind-powered ship in between

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PHOTO: LAMM



PHOTO: LAMM



PHOTO: ENGVIG COLLECTION



PHOTO: LAMMI

Captain Ahlstrom with ten of his crew members, all Scandinavians according to Captain Bertelsen, aboard Olsen & Mahoney's the *Washington*, built in Seattle in 1906. This ship had several close calls and several owners, until she finally foundered on Humboldt Bay, on the rugged coast of northern California, in 1932.

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rocks under a shoot (a primitive loading ramp), to pick up a cargo of lumber was an art of navigation few sailors would dare to attempt without considerable experience with a rocky coast. The two-mast bold head schooners shipping lumber at the time were usually manned by former deep water sailors and captains used to navigating through rough coastal areas.

The Scandinavian Navy was the backbone of coastal transport, now accessing the many new piers all along the West Coast. Lumber became big business on an international scale.

The men of the Scandinavian Navy were a special breed of seafarers. They were skilled sailors, difficult to replace, and were known to be reliable and trustworthy. The ethnic background of the crew was almost exclusively Scandinavian.

Heavy railroad ties and bundles of long lumber needed strong and able men to land the loads safely, stow them quickly and secure them properly.

The Scandinavian Navy was up to the challenge.

The best aspect of the lumber trade was that the voyages were short, allowing sailors to settle in and around San Francisco and to start families. Captains and crews of the Scandinavian Navy on lumber schooners were able to see their families quite often as compared to sailors working on vessels in worldwide trade, when years could pass before they had an opportunity to go home. For the Scandinavian Navy, food on board the lumber ships was fresh, plentiful and nourishing. The pay was twice the salary of deep water sailors, mainly because the men also collected a longshoreman salary due to their handling of the cargo.

A steep decline for the Scandinavian Navy came with the stock market crash of 1929. Black Thursday on Wall Street resulted in a severe reduction in production throughout the industrialized world. The 1930s became the decade of the Great Depression. Many steam schooners were converted to serve different projects, leaving many of the remaining lot to be sold abroad. Officers and sailors were forced to find other work.

Major events during the era of the Scandinavian Navy

During the latter part of the 1880s, steam propulsion became more common, roads were still scarce and used only by pedestrians, horses and carriages. Railroads came late in the development of an overland connection.

Many small railroads were laid to carry lumber to the sawmill by the coast and for local transportation of loggers, foremen, inspectors, and whoever else needed to go to and from loggers' camps. For other transport the use of seagoing vessels, large and small was the only option, as most people lived along the coast or by navigable rivers. The water provided the best means of transportation until overland connections were established. It began with primitive dirt roads, but the world was changing slowly towards the use of land for primary transportation.

The Scandinavian Navy was still going strong after the rebuilding of San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake and fire. This cataclysmic event not only destroyed San Francisco, it left sawmills in ruins for 200 miles north of the city.

The 1920s saw a major development that contributed to the decline of the old ways of taking care of cargo transportation and passenger traffic on the coast. Automobiles on inland roads were taking over. The railroad took care of the bulk and heavy cargo. Roads along the coast provided simple and speedy transportation. The slow and rocky voyages on a ship fighting the waves of the Pacific Ocean were gone.

The Wapama

By 1948, only one lumber schooner was left in steaming condition on the Pacific Coast. It was the *Tongass*, previously known as the *Wapama*. She was a good-sized ship, built in Oregon, with two masts, four long booms operated by steam winches and a large hatch for lumber cargo. The schooner was then towed to San Francisco for installation of the boiler and engine and other hardware to be fitted with the interior finish, such as the passengers' and crew's quarter. The schooner was a miniature ocean line, with an elegant mahogany-paneled salon and a social



PHOTO: SFMNH

The *Wapama* arriving in San Francisco in the 1930s. The ship traveled light. A few dressed-up passengers can be seen as the crew readies the line on the bow.

area with a grand double staircase leading down from the hallway to a state-of-the-art dining room—a major attraction. This reminded immigrants from Europe of their experience on board the majestic ocean liners speeding across the Atlantic Ocean. The *Wapama* showed that the people of the West Coast also traveled in style.

She was, however, primarily built and operated as a lumber and general cargo carrier, with a large hold for lumber. She was issued to carry 750,000 board feet of fine Douglas fir, but could take aboard one million board feet of lumber if required.

The *Wapama* was mainly manned by Danes, Norwegians, Swedes and Finns. When the ship was new, she had 31 crew members.

Her passenger capacity was an extra bonus as she and other steam schooners called on ports that did not have regular passenger service. The grand hallway and stairs to the dining room was a major attraction.

The Great Depression and dwindling coastal transportation eventually affected the *Wapama*. She was in need of repairs, stores and supplies. Many former Scandinavians manning the ship and friends ashore helped the ship survive.

Passing through several owner's hands, the schooner was renamed

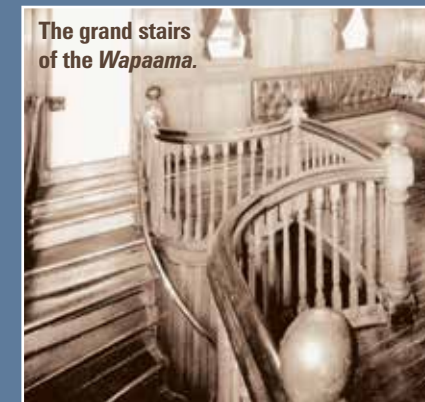


PHOTO: SFMNHWOODHAVEN HISTORIC NH 03253

The grand stairs of the *Wapama*.

Tongass in 1938. About a decade, and several mishaps later, she was written off and sold to breakers in Seattle for scrapping.

About the same time, plans developed for a memorial ship park at Hyde Street Pier, next to the Maritime Museum in San Francisco. The *Tongass* was purchased for \$16,000, given her old name back, and was taken back to San Francisco. After restoration, the *Wapama* was opened to the public and immediately became the crown jewel of the collection.

However, the elements were taking their toll on the schooner, still in the water. She remained outdoors, and with many years of lack of maintenance the vessel began deteriorating.

A "Save the Wapama" group was hastily formed at Norway House in San Francisco, and they incorporated as the



PHOTO: ENGVIG

The *Wapama*, an old wooden ship, needed protection from the elements in order to survive. But no governing body helped to construct a museum building to keep her from destruction. She was broken up after having been saved by the State of California, and by the Department of the Interior, for 56 years.

Pacific Steam Schooner Foundation, which became a national organization. They reported that the *Wapama* could be saved if proper action was taken.

However, the powers that be were not willing to provide funding, as it would keep money away from other ships.

During the last leg of the *Wapama*'s long journey, she went from being a fresh and cleaned-up museum ship in the early 1960s, to becoming an obsolete vessel and rotten hulk.

The story of saving the *Wapama* did not have a happy ending. She was the last steam lumber carrier and packet ship of the West, serving coastal waters from Alaska to Mexico. She was an icon of the first order. The *Wapama* had a special story to tell. Of all the historic ships saved and protected on the Pacific Coast, the *Wapama* was the most significant. She represented the fulfillment of coastal transportation that started before the Gold Rush, and was further refined over a hundred years until transportation over land took over all aspects of what used to be coastwise transportation.

Sadly, in the summer of 2013, the *Wapama* was broken up, ending the dedicated effort by Olaf Engvig and numerous others who fought for decades to preserve a national treasure representing a part of Pacific Coast history that cannot be brought back.

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The Værdalen

The last existing lumber schooner in the world, has an incredible history. Her eventual restoration by Olaf Engvig is a tale of emotional highs and lows, friendships, luck, persistence, gatherings of like minds, and the determination to see it through.

The ship was built in Norway in 1891, for the lumber company Værdalsbruket, a sawmill and forest estate owner on the eastern shore of the mighty Trondheimsfjord.

Using plans from the wooden Pacific Coast steam schooners, the *Værdalen* was created from iron and steel, thus saving space for more lumber in the hold. At that particular time, ship builders of iron tonnage were converting to steel as the main material almost overnight. It is firmly believed that the *Værdalen* is the last surviving ship built in Norway where they still used iron during the construction.

Certified to carry about 32,000 board feet of lumber, she has both a sail and small steam engine driving the propeller.

At that time in Scandinavia, there was a tremendous increase in building and a huge demand for lumber—as there was around the world. The *Værdalen* was used for the same purpose as the Scandinavian Navy ships, namely carrying lumber, general cargo, mail and passengers.

Also at that time, emigration from Norway to America was formidable from everywhere in Scandinavia. Going to America became a “fever” as letters from across the Atlantic told about great opportunities for people willing to work hard. Mail to and from America was the way to keep in contact. In addition to the local and national Norwegian mail, the *Værdalen* carried *Amerikabrev* (letters from America) in great quantities. The schooner had a postal officer on board in the late 1890s, who was responsible for the mail.

A favored ship, at one point, she was the only fjord steamer that made a profit. During peak season, she could be seen towing barges with lumber.



A beautifully-restored *Værdalen* on the coast of Norway.

PHOTO: LAMMLENA KNUTLI

In 1908, at seventeen years of age, the *Værdalen* was sold to the municipality of Verdal, and sold back to Værdalsbruket after eight years.

Sold again, the schooner spent the next 20 years more as a passenger vessel connecting the inner part of the Trondheimsfjord with Trondheim.

The *Værdalen* sailors experienced interesting lives during World War II. After the German Navy’s invasion of Norway on April 9, 1940, the *Værdalen* continued its passenger route. She soon became involved in clandestine operations, working for the resistance forces, continuing her wartime sailings, with radio operators on board.

After the war, her owner utilized the *Værdalen* as a backup ship, but in 1946, sold her, since there were now more efficient ships available. A few more ownership transfers ensued; she was still working when she was more than 86 years old. Abandoned and scheduled to be filled with rocks as a breakwater for smaller pleasure crafts, she was abused by theft, graffiti, weathering and a general lack of care.



Homeless and drug addicts occupied the hull, together with local graffiti artists who covered the vessel with art.

PHOTO: ENGVIG

The Værdalen restored

Engvig’s goal to restore this historic vessel was a major challenge. He fought for support from numerous organizations—including the Norwegian government, many of whom refused to get involved.

A tenacious Olaf Engvig spent 36 years of his life restoring the *Værdalen*, and locating her original parts. “Unfortunately,” he writes, “due to burglary, theft and vandalism, we had to stop and restart the project many times over. Juvenile delinquents and drug addicts did their best to destroy the *Værdalen*, but 100-year-old iron plates became too intimidating even for them.

After each set-back, my helpers and I had to pick up the pieces and start all over again.” He adds, “Today...I am definitely not in debt to any official body of government as their representatives only made things more difficult. Writing applications for public funding for what is undoubtedly a historically very valuable ship without getting any money for 20 years in a row was extremely discouraging. Thankfully, I got help from friends, family and various companies and finally succeeded with the restoration after more than three challenging decades.”

How this ship and a few others have survived environmental challenges and human abuse for so long is almost a fairytale. One of the main reasons is that most of



PHOTO: MONA ENGVIG

The stolen steering wheel from 1891 was returned to the ship before the *Værdalen* was ready for sea trial.

the surviving ships with their original material left were iron built, not built from wood or steel.

Engvig writes, “For the first time, people of today can view a true hybrid ship, a lumber schooner with the sails set on the foremast and the propeller pushing from behind, giving this old heritage ship a speed of 12 knots.”

The final section of *The Ships That Built the West* includes facts about iron ship building relevant to the *Wapama* and *Værdalen*. One of Olaf Engvig’s main areas of research is the use of iron in ship building.

Preserved old iron ships show that ship quality iron from the middle of the nineteenth century has had much better endurance over time than newer and originally better quality steel.

Editor’s note: I found Olaf T. Engvig’s book a fascinating read. As he writes, “Written material on ships and sailors is close to non-existent.” Engvig lays out his book in logical sequence and shares historic and technical information in an easy-to-read format. Living in the Pacific Northwest, I can appreciate his West Coast points of interest.

I also appreciate Engvig’s tenacious determination that lead to the restoration of a vessel representing an era—not only of ships and sailors, but of nations and the world.



PHOTO: MONA ENGVIG

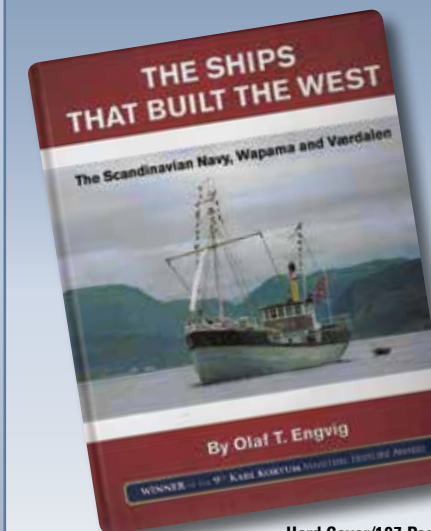
Olaf Engvig in the wheel house of the lumber schooner *Værdalen*. The photo was used on a thank-you card sent to all those who contributed to the restoration of this historic treasure.

Olaf Engvig’s *The Ships That Built The West The Scandinavian Navy, WAPAMA and VÆRDALEN* is the winner of the 9th Karl Kortum Maritime History Award, a program of the Friends of Pacific Maritime History!

Engvig’s 1977 book, *Gamle Dampen (The Old Steamer)*, became a bestseller in Norway for Christmas that year. It contains the history of almost one hundred local steamers that had served on the Trondheimsfjord or in the middle of Norway since 1850s.

A GREAT CHRISTMAS GIFT FOR ANYONE WITH A PASSION FOR SHIPS AND THOSE WHO MAN THEM.

ORDERING INFORMATION



Hard Cover/197 Pages

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