

From the *Sag Harbor Express*

## **KING OF A SOUTH SEAS ISLAND**

### **Nicer Than Life on a Whaleship**

When Sag Harbor men shipped out on a whaleship, they quickly found out it wasn't a luxury cruise. They slept on crude bunks in a jammed forecastle, the food was inedible, and a rough captain and mate could make their lives miserable. And then there was the chance of being bashed by the flip of a whale's tail. So when a ship called at one of the South Seas islands in the Pacific, it's not surprising that sailors gazed with wonder at the palm fringed beach, the scantily clad native girls waving on the shore, and fresh food you could pluck from a tree or out of the lagoon.

Harry B. Sleight's "The Whale Fishery on Long Island," published in 1931, tells the stories of several Sag Harbor men who succumbed to the temptations of these exotic islands, deserted their ships and lived long lives among hospitable natives. We can assume they had few ties in Sag Harbor and perhaps remembered winters like the one we just experienced. As late as 1890 a visitor to the Navigator Islands (now the Samoan Islands) found that "the chief of the island, father and grandfather of a stalwart race of halfbreeds," was none other than Tom Seaman of Sag Harbor. He had shipped out from New Bedford on the Albatross in the 1830s, and when the ship touched the Polynesian islands, probably to acquire fresh food, he and a pal slipped over the side, swam ashore and were hidden by native women when ship officers came looking for them. His shipmate pined away and died, but Seaman settled in nicely and many years later, at age 75, was discovered living contentedly with his wives in a hut near the beach.

Charles Nordhoff, who later collaborated with James Norman Hall in writing “Mutiny on the Bounty,” shipped aboard a Sag Harbor whaler and wrote about it in his book “Whaling and Fishing.” Compare life in the “hut near the beach” to his description of work on a whaler. “The flames, darting high above the try-works revealed the masts, rigging and decks, in an unearthly glare, among which the men jumping or sliding about decks on their various duties seemed like demons dancing about an incantation fire... The smell of the burning cracklings is too horribly nauseous for description. It is as though all the ill odors in the world were gathered together and being shaken up. Walking upon deck has become an impossibility... the safest mode of locomotion is sliding from place to place, on the seat of your pantaloons.”

Sam Brant of Sag Harbor deserted from a whaler at the Bay of Islands off the northern tip of New Zealand, married and lived ashore until a war broke out. He moved to Auckland, took another native wife and lived with Fijians until missionaries came. Apparently they disapproved of his life style so he next jumped to the Sandwich Islands (now Hawaiian Islands), and in 1894 was living in Honolulu.

Perhaps the most successful of the former Sag Harbor whalers was from Shelter Island. In January of 1877, the San Francisco Chronicle reported, “The Ada May, on her up trip, touched at Quiro Island (now Swains Island), where the celebrated and venerable Eli Jennings, an American patriarch, is like Robinson Crusoe, master of all he surveys...(Quiro) is some 200 miles north-northeast of the Samoan group. It is owned entirely by the patriarch, who has been there over thirty years. Mr. Jennings is married to a Samoan woman, and has a large family. He is well-to-do and happy as a lord.”

“Entrepreneurs and American Overseas Expansion” published in 1994 says Jennings deserted from a whaling voyage in the Pacific and claimed to have gained ownership of the atoll from a British captain, moving there with his wife Malia in 1856. One American said “the best of them (the beachcombers) have lost their grip on civilization.” The men collected beche-de-mer, a kind of sea cucumber sold to China, as well as pearls and pearl shells along the shore, a surprisingly prosperous business. Sleight wrote, “The pearl shell trade has been and is most profitable, and as no plant is required, the beachcombers and natives...can always be sure of ready money without any outlay, for the food they use is found in abundance on the scene of their labor.”

We don't know how many Sag Harbor men chose the South Seas over Long Island. We would guess not too many; it would have been a huge step in the life of a young sailor to leave his family and homeland, even with its miserable winters.

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Word count 769