

Brethren:

Did you know that the Knights Templar, our Masonic brethren, were great sailors as well as the many other things that they excelled at?

In the beautifully ornamented Rosslyn Chapel, just outside of Edinburgh, Scotland, hundreds of Masonic symbols can be seen on the walls, the pillars and even on the ceilings. However, one item that I find of great interest is the engraved American aloe and maize which were totally foreign to Europe. Rosslyn Chapel was completed in 1487 but Columbus didn't land in the Bahamas until 1492, Puerto Rico in 1493 and Cuba in 1494. So, it is fair to say that the Knights Templar had to have already been here before any other European with the exception of the Vikings. Some believe that the Knights Templar buried their treasures on Oak Island in Nova Scotia. There is a great deal of evidence that the Knights Templar landed in the new world well before Columbus and many have tried over the centuries to find that treasure to no avail.

However, that is a lengthy and amazing story which I cannot do justice to at this time. However, I can tell you about my knowledge of modern sailing vessels or rather about ocean going ships. I have been on hundreds of ships but have never sailed. Perhaps someday V. Wor. Bro. John Lyness can tell us about his adventures in the Merchant Marine.

My connection with these ships is that for the past thirty-nine (39) years or better, I have worked as a longshoreman in the Port of Hamilton, loading/unloading ships from every corner of the globe. A strange saying considering our globe is round.

Mind you, I haven't physically laboured for the past eighteen (18) years as my current position is to dispatch the men to work each day, sometimes as many as three (3) times per day. My friend R. W. Bro. Paul James worked for a number of years on the docks as has W. Bro. Roy Brown.

Whenever Paul acted up in lodge, some of the members of our lodge, Buchanan Lodge No. 550, would signal to me with the right index finger pointing downwards and saying "down the hold". This was to indicate to me that I was to dispatch Paul to the backbreaking job "in the hold of the ship" the next morning. Right away you would see an instant improvement in Paul's attitude. Of course I am only joking! Paul was a good hard worker. Working in the hold of a ship is certainly hard work but with the lift-trucks in the hold handling steel products, the work is not quite as hard as it used to be.

Many years ago, we would work twelve (12) hour days unloading products from around the world such as rubber, cocoa beans, ingots of zinc, personal effects, automobiles, shipments of shoes, watches, sugar and just about every other item under the sun. We often would lift out of the hold 30 foot long Rolls Royces that were sitting on top of our cargo and then, once our cargo was unloaded, we would reload the huge automobiles back onto the ship which would take them to their designation in Chicago or some other US port of call. The rubber came in 260-pound bales and sugar was shipped in 240-pound bags. Often we had to use crowbars to separate the rock solid bags, prior to loading them onto pallets and winching them out of the hold onto the dock. We often wondered why they shipped the sugar in such big bags. One explanation is that they paid taxes on the number of bags shipped and not the actual metric tonnage.

While it was true that we always had more imports than exports, we did ship many items such as lumber, army trucks, locomotives, tinplate and steel coils. One time, while landing an army truck 'tween' decks, we found it was a inch or two too high to clear the coaming above so we could position it in the corner of the 'tween' deck; however the problem was solved in a jiffy when the foreman directed we let some of the air out of the tires of the truck and then it slipped under the coaming without a problem.

It was certainly a sight and a thrill to drive a ship's swinging derrick and pick a locomotive right off the dock. The ship's winches would howl and finally ever so slowly the locomotive would start to leave the dock but not until the ship would list twenty degrees or more towards the dock from the enormous weight.

Last year the movie "Cinderella Man" was filmed in Toronto and on the docks in Hamilton. Ron Howard directed the film and it is the story of Depression-era fighter and folk hero Jim Braddock, played by Russell Crowe, who defeated heavyweight champ Max Baer in a 15-round slugfest in 1935. Prior to becoming World Champion, Braddock made his living as a longshoreman in New Jersey and in the film; the Hamilton docks represented the docks in Jersey. Fifteen of the members of my local, Local 1654 of the International Longshoremen's Association AFL-CIO-CLC including my brother and my nephew had parts in the movie. They worked along side Russell Crowe and had a great time. The movie is to be released by June 2005 and it will be great to watch my friends, family and co-workers in the film.

You have probably heard many stories of “On the Waterfront” but in actual fact, most of the men working on the docks are dedicated and proud men working hard to bring home wages to support their families.

We, as Masons, have learned in the Craft that earning one’s bread by the sweat of the brow is honourable and dignified.

It might be interesting to point out that an article appeared last summer in the Hamilton Spectator reporting a job lottery for dockworkers in the L.A. area. The article stated that the longshore union and port shipping officials were sifting through 300,000 applications for the proposed 3,000 positions needed. The “cattle call” for workers, a rare occurrence in the shipping industry, drew an overwhelming response. It comes in the wake of a crush of cargo from the Far East that has created a dire need for dockworkers at the twin ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach.

In 2003, fully registered longshoremen earned an annual average of \$89,484.00 (\$116,223 Cdn.) according to a report by the Pacific Maritime Association which represents shipping companies on the west coast. The highest-paid 72 per cent averaged \$106,520.00 (\$138,000.00 Cdn.) a year, while the 19.1 per cent who clocked the most hours were paid an average of \$141,058.00 (\$183,200.00 Cdn.).

Our contract expired on December 31st, 2004 and we are in the midst of negotiations. I wonder if I should take that article to our next meeting. I suppose it wouldn’t do any harm.

Now, how did I do that, from the Knights Templar to working on the docks in just a few minutes.

On this Valentine's Day, let us all remember when we go home tonight to give our warmest and sweetest words to our special lady for permitting us to attend this meeting tonight.

Brethren, thank you for your kind attention.