

[106a, 106b, 106c]

The Bulk Trades and Sailing Ships

In these files, there have been numerous photographs showing ships engaged in the fishing trade, the salmon trade, and the lumber trade. The last days of commercial sail were filled with three problems that grew to overwhelming proportions: a labor problem, a paying freight problem (how does the ship pay its way?), and the biggest problem of them all—competition from more efficient systems, whether rail or powered ship. When compound steam engines became the norm, rather than the exception, commercial sail could no longer compete with known arrival schedules and rapid turn-around time. Instead, sail could compete best with bulk cargoes where free warehousing (several months in the hold of a sailing ship) was the norm. From the 1880s through the 1920s, another persistent challenge was to find a crew with a skill set commensurate with the rigors of a large sailing vessel. The smart able-bodied sailors opted for the easier life in steam. While there was no want of capable officers, the lack of competent sailors became critical well before 1900. In a brief article I read from the *San Francisco Call Bulletin* around the turn of the century, there was a brief newsy note about a well-known master of a big 4-masted bark that was “day sailing” around the Bay trying to get his newly-hired (shanghaied?) crew into some sort of sail-drill shape before venturing forth on a voyage. While that kind of training is laudable, it is also revealing of the lack of sailing fundamentals available wharfside in latter-day sail.

What were the cargoes available to sail in its latter days? Photograph 106a, a colored postcard, is illustrative. Front and center is a French-built bark at the coal wharves in San Francisco south of Market Street. Sailing ships routinely carried coal up and down the west coast and across the Pacific and it was a paying “retirement” trade for older sailing vessels. The historic clipper *Dashing Wave* was a particularly fetching coal tramp in its latter days and there are several photographs of this clipper in and around San Francisco hauling coal long after the glory days. Ironic that sailing ships carried the fuel that nourished the boilers of steam engines that were putting the windships out of business. However, such was the reality.

Grain was another bulk cargo, and odd as it may seem now, California was once a world breadbasket for grains of several kinds. Wooden ships carried the wheat through the 1870s and 1880s back to the east coast. Starting in the 1870s, European (primarily British, but not exclusively so) sailing ships loaded wheat for Europe and by the end of the 1880s dominated the trade.

Photographs 106b and 106c are of another boom bulk cargo that lasted well into the twentieth century and still prevails—lumber. Photograph 106b shows Port Blakely, Washington, awash in large latter-day sailing ships loading finished lumber for ports all around the world. The Hall Brothers maintained an important shipyard co-located with Port Blakely. Sailing ships hauled finished and semi-finished lumber to Hawaii, Australia, and all over the Pacific. The streams of lumber ships after the 1906 earthquake and fire were prodigious. Photograph 106c (taken 26 July 1910) reveals, even though faded, large sailing ships (and a steamer to the right) loading lumber from the Hastings Mill at Vancouver, British Columbia.