

Captain Bill

Dennis Kennedy was a Bayman. His grandfather was a sloop and steamboat captain. Dennis said, "Granddad used to tell us about carrying cargo and passengers. I remember one story in particular." He poured another cup of coffee, stirred the wood-stove, lit a stogie, and began, "Captain Bill wasn't very big, but he had a fake arm made of wood. It wasn't much good for hauling on a sheet, but it was good for giving us kids a whack. He had a mutton chop sideburns, and mustache, he had only a few teeth, smelled of pine tar and some kind of lilac aftershave like you get in an old fashioned barber shop. He told us about some of the trips. These were not Atlantic crossings, but at most a twenty-mile trip from Keansport or Port Amboy to the docks where the South Street Seaport Museum is today and the former site of the Fulton fish market. None of us kids liked it much when Captain Bill (we all called him Captain Bull) would nudge us with that arm. But we all loved it when he finally settled down and told us stories."

Captain Bull began, "Once – I was the mate on the Susan B. the last sloop carrying cargo and passengers to and from the City. Before I lost this wing, we had to take a group of swells from the City, we was docked at pier 12 on the East River, and we first got a gander at these swells. They was going to the Bayshore for a vacation, why anyone would want to go live in a shack on the beach when they could live in a place with an indoor shitter -- well I guess I seen swells before, but these took the cake. The one who was thinking he was the captain of the sheebang was all of 14 years old, wet behind the ears, and wearing some kind of yachting outfit, short pants and a Navy sailor's top shirt, and the stupidest hat you ever seen. I figgered that that cap would last two minutes on the Bay well anyhow, this sailor boy kept pretending we couldn't hear nothing, and didn't understand, pretending he knew boats. His soft shoes and white hose was spoiled almost before we got underway, but the thing that I remember most about that trip was the sight of Amy, seventeen, it turned out, and with the deepest blue colored eyes and that hair all bound up in a proper bonnet, asking questions she did all the way to Keansport, and me stuttering like a fool trying to impress her.

Well her Daddy didn't like me then, when he first laid eyes on me on the dock in Keansport, and saw how I was looking at his daughter, and didn't like me better five years later when your grandma Amy died when giving your daddy his life. But starting that day on the sloop, I never loved anyone else or more. It was the most beautiful day. The wind was out of the South West, the sun off the chop, and the smell of the salt, was better than it ever was, and I can remember every tack, every place your grandma stood, and every smart question she asked. She stood near me, not because I thought she was interested in me, in my sweater and oilies, smelling like bait. I had never thought I smelled bad before, but I kept thinkin', "why do I have to smell like fish today?" She knew stuff about boats, but never let on like her fancy little brother, she asked about the rig, and wanted to know the name of every block, and sheet, and halyard. She waited patiently until I asked if she wanted to steer, and then, took the big wheel, and with the lightest touch, I'd ever seen on even the most experienced helmsman, she steered the boat from mark to mark, and reach to reach. We starboard tacked through the narrows, and broad reached on the port tack off Hoffman and Swinebourne to the entrance light at Keansport. At first I stood close to see if she would need help, and later because I couldn't move, I couldn't stand the idea that this trip would come to an end, and I wouldn't ever smell her hair again, or see the way that the breeze caught her skirts, and whipped her hair from under the bonnet. Her brother, your great-uncle Fred, who never got on a sloop again, but would only take the steamer or the train, was puking over the rail into the wind, and his sailor suit was covered with his lunch.

The Sloop looked smaller than I ever remembered, maybe because I was ashamed of its work boat finish, or maybe because it didn't seem large enough to contain your grandma's happiness. She smiled the entire time, sometimes at me, and said over again, 'never in my life, never in my life.' I had been on boats since I was eight and for the first time saw in someone else the pure joy of a small ship, tuned right, and sailed well, as a joyous thing.

Captain Bill told other stories as well, but never about how he lost his arm and almost died when he got caught in the winch hauling a net full of bunker. In those days a captain, might take a look at a net full of fish, and make an on the spot decision that the fisherman might be in

trouble but the net full of fish was the day's catch and men's pay. Bill continued to work boats, and later in the sheds till the day he died. There were no retirement benefits.