Whaling Terms For Landlubbers: "Gamming"

We promise there will be no swabbing of the decks, scaling to the crow's nest or flogging via cat-o-nine tails. If you already know what it means to have an appetite for a salt horse, would look forward to gamming (not gaming), or could definitely steer a sea vessel two points on the weather bow then you have no need for this article. Saunter off or perhaps deride this article as being written by a rube. If you are like me — a landlubber — and have an interest in the lexicon, jargon or cant of the old seafarers and whaling history, then climb aboard. Mutiny will be tolerated as long as it's in the form of corrections, additions and constructive feedback. No walking the plank.

These articles will be light, easy reads. One term described in a few sentences or paragraphs as opposed to the novellas I end up unintentionally writing. Once a term is broken down and explained, and perhaps its context furthered by an historical anecdote, there is really no point in carrying on. So after I blather for a few paragraphs, I'll finish off with a few of those fantastic, vintage images that the New Bedford Whaling Museum and Spinner Publications possess and allow us to use. In a sense, the text within the article is a cleverly disguised way to showcase these photos. Hopefully you'll extend me a bit of liberty since even if you don't enjoy the writing, you will be subsequently rewarded through the photos.

There is an enormous wealth of general naval terminology that was utilized by seafarers in general and even more added to that mountainous pile in the way of specific lexicon of whaling masters and crewmen. I'd imagine if one of us landlubbers was transported through time, or were alive in the whaling heyday and had the misfortune to libate too much during a burlseq…ahem…silent movie and woke up at sea, we'd be at a loss for words among the conversation aboard. Pardon the pun. If you're around a few mechanics, a group of musicians, or carpenters, you know what it means to feel lost in the conversation. It *sounds* like English, but shop-talk is virtually incomprehensible to lay people. You may even be familiar with some of the words, just haven't the faintest clue what they mean within context. Sailors have their own language, if you will, and whalers had their own dialect within this language.

Sailing is such a large part of the world's history that many terms are woven right into the language during everyday conversation amongst the general populace. Often, we use naval terms unawares. For example, how many of you have been traveling on foot with company and do as I hope many adults would do: look both way before crossing the street? Though this isn't a popular habit with many of New Bedford's pedestrians who prefer to leap into traffic then look, I'm assuming that isn't you. Anyhow, you look both ways, turn to your partner and without blinking say "The coast is clear." Coast?! We aren't out to sea!

All joking aside, the lexicon is rich, full of euphemisms, innuendos, and meaning. It is a beautiful language in its own right. Shop-talk is born out of necessity. Out to sea, where

loss of life was common and frequent, all needed to be on the same page. Communication needed to be packed with information using the fewest amount of words as possible. A difference of a few seconds, out at sea could mean at best a loss of profit, and at worst, loss of souls. Of course, that may depend on your perspective. If you were a wealthy landlubber, back at home in your estate counting your fortune, you may feel the inverse is true.

Gamming was a great way to blow off some steam (Spinner Publications)

Like any language or dialect, it would be a shame to lose it to history. New Bedford's success over the years is due in large part to whaling. New Bedford will forever have its history interwoven with that of worldwide whaling. New Bedford's history IS world history. To lose the naval jargon of whaling, would be to lose part if its history and what made New Bedford. So let us dive into this language and have a little fun!

"Gamming" according to the Free Dictionary is:

1. To visit with.
2. To spend (time) talking or visiting.

Technically speaking a "Gam" [excluding the slang term for legs] is a social visit between whaling vessels, whalers or

the crew. It was coined in the 1840s and generally means pulling alongside another whaling vessel and "hopping" aboard to enjoy a social.

Being out to sea for years at a time, staring at the same ugly mugs can be monotonous, cause mental fatigue and breed conflict. Gamming was a way to perhaps break out some grog, musical instruments and dance a jig. Anecdotes, tall tales told of exaggerated bounties, and the obligatory "one that got away" stories could be swapped.

In essence, it was a way to blow of some steam, boost morale and recuperate.

The term's etymology has been suggested as deriving from the British "gammon" which is a term that describes misleading or deceptive talk, alluding to the tall tales that were surely told during these socials. Some have suggested it is related to "gaming", which also surely took place. The image that serves as the banner of this article is from the 1949 movie "Down to the Sea in Ships" and shows a Captain's wife in a gamming chair being transferred from one ship to the other. If a vessel pulled into port or alongside another ship, the gamming chair would be used to transfer women to the ship.

The movie takes a conservative approach and suggests the chair was used to transfer wives to the boat. However, if you returned to port after years, there would be no reason to bring your wife on board, since one was heading home. In all likelihood, it was used to bring women of lesser repute aboard while at some faraway port to replenish supplies, receive maintenance or repairs.

Considering that the gamming chair would have provided a great view of…ahem….a women's gams, one has to wonder the words aren't somehow related.

Looking for other terms to enjoy?

"Hove Down"