

History of Valvai Chapter - Seafaring Town of Valvai

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Subject VVT boat arrived in USA

Posted by Ranithevan

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Annapoorani built in Valvai by Valvettithurai Shipbuilding Experts
On its way to USA renamed as Florence C Robinson

VALVETTITHURAI's SEA FARERS -1

GLOUCESTER., Massachusetts USA. August 1, 1938. We have folk stories and mythologies. And then, we have a history most people have either forgotten or are not aware of. This is a real-life story about one of the last sailing vessels built in Valvettithurai, making a long journey to the Atlantic Coast of United States. But, closer to home, these vessels made their home ports at Valvettithurai and Parithithurai(Pt. Pedro). Most of them, while being built and operated by sailors from Valvettithurai, were owned by the wealthy Chetty families from Tamil Nadu. The rest were owned by the Chetty traders who had settled in Valvettithurai since the opening of secure sea lanes in Indian Ocean by the Portuguese(from Arab & Far Eastern pirates). (They might have been there since before Chola's time.) Building and maintaining large ocean going vessels in those days required a large sum of capital; it can be afforded by only few families who had already well established themselves as reputed trading families.

These vessels, up to World War 2, plied the sea-routes the Tamils had used for centuries before. They made ports-of-call in South India, Vizhakupattinam to Cochin(occasionally even Calcutta), Rangoon, Far Eastern destinations, ports in Middle East(such as Eden). In Ceylon itself, they made frequent trips to Galle and ports in between. They carried rice, spices, roof tiles, timber(teak, sandalwood, etc), palmyra products, dried fish, tobacco products, etc.

In 1938, the ship Annapoorani was leading other sailing vessels in the annual parade of ships in Valvai Muthu-mariamman kovil's theerthath thiruvizha. This practice continued up to today, now with fishing trawlers, vallams and fibre-glass boats. Annapoorani caught the eyes of a visiting wealthy American, William A. Robinson. It was a cargo vessel modeled on the popular British frigate-type ship; it was known for its speed and maneuverability. A wealthy young man from Ipswich, Massachusetts, who made his fortunes in journalism decided that he should have this vessel. Within the next 2-3 months, his wishes were fulfilled.

The owner-family in Tamil Nadu sold it for a handsome price. The vessel sailed to Colombo with its Valvettithurai crew of 4 under Thundayal ('chief of crew') Kanagaratnam Thampipillai. In Colombo, the brigantine was re-christened as Florence C. Robinson in reference to Robinson and his amour - Florence. The brigantine, once insured by Loyds of London, set sail to Cyprus under Thampipillai's command where it would come under the command of a captain from Gloucester. Gloucester was one of the busiest sea ports on America's eastern coast; it was where the popular schooner-type of vessel saw its shape take place.

My own research on Annapoorarini was prodded by the book "Valvettithurai Sea Farers Sail to U.S"., E.K. Rajagopal(1991). My Ammama(grandmother) provided the inspiration as well. Through few trips to Gloucester, about 30 miles north of Boston, I have found old paper articles from Gloucester Times and Boston Globe. I'm thankful to a friend who helped me out in this venture, the enthusiastic people of Gloucester(particularly a Librarian) and the resources of Boston Public Library. Even though all this took place two summers ago, I have allowed the paper articles and ship port-of-call registration documents to gather dust. Because of other obligations, I wasn't able to follow on my research to ascertain the final status of Annapoorani.

CEYLON BRIG ARRIVES AFTER LONG VOYAGE. Capt. MacCuish with Hindu Crew Presents Rare Spectacle - Light Winds Extended Trip to 80 Days.

[Gloucester Times, August 2, 1938]

A strange boat, a strange crew but, a well-known skipper, Capt. Duncan A. MacCuish, local master skipper, rounded Eastern Point yesterday noon, when the hermaphrodite brig Florence C. Robinson, with five Hindus handling sail, completed her 80-day passage from Candia, Isle of Crete, a distance of some 5000 miles.

Her new owner, William Robinson of Ipsich and the wife for whom the boat is re-named, were at the Walen warf to greet her. Before a half hour had passed, hundreds had gathered to catch a glimpse of what resembles the ghost of His Majesty's ship Bounty returning to the seas to haunt Cape Ann. As she passed the sch. Gertrude L. Thebaud, it was as if east had met west in schooner design. Lumbersome as she looks, however, Capt. Norman A. Ross of the Marconi-rigged sch. Blue Dolphin is authority that the stranger can sail.

The Long Trip.

Theirs was a long crawling hindered by lack of wind, days of endless calm when the Atlantic was like a mill pond, a mirrored surface without a sign of any breeze. Capt. MacCuish left here by steamer for the island port to get the craft and bring her here. Her crew consisted of five Hindus from Jaffna, northern Ceylon, that little tea island south of India. The craft itself, a 90-foot affair, was built at Jaffna some nine years ago on the British man-o'-war which ever hit into that area at the beginning of the 19th century. That model was the much the same as the Bounty on which a crew mutinied and became white settlers of Pitcairn Island. The natives have never changed the mould, and though larger one are built, the sch. Annapoorani as it was known, is the popular cargo ship plying the trade in the Indian Ocean. Her crew of Hindus have manned her from Ceylon to Burma, and to ports of India since her launching. She had dodged all manner of monsoons and stood the strong winds of those water.

Capt. MacCuish and his dusky quintet sailed from Candia, May 3, and were 31 days before touching at Gibraltar. Here they took on an extra helper, Alexis Doster, Jr., of Litchfield, Conn., 20 years old., who had just completed a first-hand course in European politics, of two years, and was glad to greet the Goddess of Liberty again. He had rubbed elbows with Nazi conquerors of Austria, had met self-assured fascists of Italy, and had swapped bullets with the Spanish Communists to the point that he was wearied of the whole mess and saw the wisdom in returning home again to get some more "book-larnin." The boat hardly touched at Walen's Warf before he reached over the rail, planked down his fist hard on the spiles, and gleefully remarked, "America, it is really you!"

Left Gibraltar June 8.

Leaving Gibraltar June 8, they were 41 days reaching Hamilton, Bermuda. It was a slow passage with not enough wind stirring most of the time to ruffle a sail. They were equipped with a 50-horsepower Belinda marine engine but the engine had gone out of commission, six months before. Capt. MacCuish had provisioned for 30 days believing that would be plenty. The first month slipped by, however, and America was still on the far horizon. The skipper then headed the craft for Bermuda, and rationed out the food and drinking water. The Hindus cooperated by foregoing their daily habit of anointing their heads with fresh water in carrying out religious rites, and instead substituted salt water. It was a great sacrifice to them, but they knew their god would understand.

That helped solve the water problem. The grub difficulties were much harder. Finally, they fell back on rice. They had a Hindu cook named Manian who knew rice inside and out. It became rice for breakfast, more rice for dinner and still more rice for supper, until yesterday. Capt. MacCuish vowed that if ever Mrs. MacCuish placed rice before him, he would "go off the handle."

They landed safely at Hamilton even though ravenously hungry Doster could not get to the Princess hotel fast enough to surround himself with a thick, juicy steak splashed with onions. Capt. MacCuish himself soon got acquainted with some good food and Saturday, July 23, the voyage was resumed to this port.

A First Rate Crew.

Capt. has had many experiences afloat in his long day. had been in Bering waters, in the South Seas, globe trotted several summers in fine yachts, been skipper of craft during taking of moving pictures especially for the filming of the famed "Captain Courageous," and man and boy has wrung countless gallons of sea water from his oilskins. He has had all manner of crews, both good and bad, both those who can and do obey to a smattering of "sea-lawyers." So when he says the Hindus made him a first-rate crew, they must have been capable. None of the five ever bothered about shoes or stockings, making the run of the ship in bare feet, even to climbing the rigging into the cross-trees of the top masts. The skin between their toes had become hardened, yet flexible. None ever heard of oilskins or "sou'westers," and content themselves with their native turbans as head-gear and "shorts" or pants with sweaters. They appeared to have one boss, a husky-bearded sailor who answered to the name of Pullai. He speaks English and of course, more fluently, his

native tongue, Tamil in which he would relay the skipper's orders to the crew. Proud of his esteem, he saw to it that the other boys promptly obeyed orders. A rigid discipline could easily be observed aboard yesterday.

The Sacred Ash.

Some of the Hindus sported a yellow dab on the forehead. The inquirer was informed that that dab was called the "sacred ash," and its presence bought their god, Siva, closer to them. Siva knew all personally who wore that mark, they said. A spot on the forehead is whitewashed, and then powdered, and the dab stuck on that spot. The Hindus who belong to a high caste in Ceylon. held their weekly worship on Friday night, their Sunday, by the way. Friday evening, they would gather in the forepeak of the vessel, scooch around a lighted lamp, and chant their prayers of thanksgiving to Siva in a weird rite that was the more sincere in its emphasis.

The trip was their first voyage west of the Suez Canal. They were baffled by the fogs encountered in crossing the Atlantic. They had experience light fogs in northern areas of the Indian Ocean, according to Pullai, but this fog was so thick that they felt as if "life was shutting" its doors to them, and lifting them to another world amid the clouds." Capt. MacCuish's presence reassured them there was little danger. The Hindus are all British subjects and were allowed to land under custody of Robinson who is responsible.

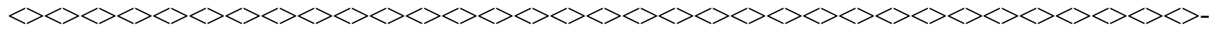
A "Hermaphrodite Brig."

The dictionary gives the definition of a "hermaphrodite brig" as a two-masted vessel square-rigged forward and schooner-rigged aft" which fits the description of the Robinson of the Robinson to a "T." In Great Britain, this type of vessel is called a brigantine. The same dictionary in speaking about Tamils, as these Hindus call themselves, says "the Tamils are members of the most enterprising branch of the Dravidian race, mostly Hindus, though a few still are animists. They are numerous throughout South India and northern Ceylon. The language is the oldest, most cultivated and best known of the Dravidian languages. Modern Tamil uses an alphabet descended from the Brahmi character. The typical Dravidian is short, very dark, with plentiful and often wavy hair, and broad nose." Jaffna, the port from which these Hindus sail, and where the craft was built, is on the northern tip of Ceylon, separated from the southwest tip of India by the Gulf of Mannar.

Greeted by Tug.

The first to sight the craft here was Carl. D. Hill, light keeper at Eastern Point, who relayed the news to the waterfront at 12:45. A short while later, the tug Mariner, Capt. Loren A. Jacobs, steamed out to take the vessel in tow to the warf as the sail were furled. Those who caught a glimpse of her as she rounded the Point were treated to an unusual sight.

Another craft to speed out to her was one of Joseph Mellow's party boats, having aboard Mrs. MacCuish, the skipper's wife and their son. Capt. MacCuish received a thrill to once more greet his family after a three month's absence. Vouching for her speed was Capt. Norman A. Ross of this port., skipper of the Marconi-riggerd auxiliary sch. yacht Blue Dolphin. Capt. Ross was in Massachusetts bay yesterday with the yacht owner and others aboard and happened to come abreast of the strange craft. The Dolphin using auxiliary power was unable to keep up with the brig even though the latter had only sail. Capt. MacCuish declared he would be willing to put the Robinson up against the Canadian champion Blue Nose in a race.



VOYAGE ENDED BY BRIGANTINE

A Rare Spectacle Provided by Arrival from Ceylon by Nat. A. Barrows

Boston Globe, August 2, 1938

GLOUCESTER, Aug 1.-- Like a chapter straight from one of the Malay sea stories of Joseph Conrad, a picturesque crew of square-rigger sailors came reaching into port before a quartering breeze today aboard the 89-foot brigantine Florence C. Robinson - last windship of her kind, in all probability, that will ever cross the Western Ocean under canvass alone.

Bringing a tale of storms, doldrums, thirst, short rations and near collision, the trim little brigantine's company of seven - a grizzled old Gloucesterman, five turbaned, beskirted Ceylonese Hindus and a youthful, bearded American adventurer - tied up alongside a waterfront dock at noon, 50 days out of Gibraltar via Bermuda.

The famous old fishing port, which has seen many a colorful arrival in its day, turned out, skippers, dorymen, tourists, for a sight that had not been seen in a hundred years, if then.

Coast Guard

lookouts flashed the word to town even as the vessel stood in the offing, her Hindus climbing the yards with a bare-footed agility that left the old-timers gasping in admiration.

Boats Greet Arrival.

As she worked past Ten-Pound Island and stood up for the inner harbor, a score of boats raced out in greeting. From his home at Ipswich, her owner William Albert Robinson, famed author, explorer and sea rover, hurried down with his wife, the Florence Crane. A steady shant on the inner quarter had sent the brigantine scudding up from Bermuda nearly a week ahead of the expected time.

She has been two years reaching here from Ceylon, where she was built eight years ago on the lines of a British brig of war of the 1840 period. Robinson himself took her leisurely through the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea as far as Crete.

Six Ceylonese, from the seafaring town of Valvettithurai, in Northern Ceylon, came out with her and only one has returned home.

In March, Capt. Donald. A. MacCuish of 5 Lookout St, one of Gloucester's saltiest and best-known skippers, went over to Crete to Bring her across the Atlantic.

Bad Storm Near Crete.

"I've had 42 years at sea man and boy, but that storm we hit in the Mediterranean, just after we cleared Candia(in Crete) was one of the worst I've ever pulled through.," Capt. Dan said today as he took his leisure on the poop deck, amid a salvo of greetings from ashore and harbor. She's a tidy little vessel, built of honest workmanship and good hard-wood, or we'd not be here to tell the tale. There we were, running under bare poles, with the seas breaking white over the bow and the day inky black like night. "We were driven 250 miles off our course.: With him at that time were the six Ceylonese - "and a fine lot of men, too, if you treated them right and respected their religious beliefs."

At Gibraltar, Capt. Dan put in for water and supplies, and there he picked up a Connecticut youth of 20, Alexis Doster Jr. of Litchfield who had been roaming about Europe and the Near East for two years. At the instigation of the American consul, Capt. Dan signed young Doster as a workaway.

Becalmed at Gibraltar.

Doster told of the difficulty in getting away from Gibraltar. "We couldn't get a spot of wind," he related, "and there we were, becalmed." The vessel's 'kicker' was out of order and we had to depend entirely on our sails. "The skipper of a big American freighter agreed to give us a tow, but when some of the seamen saw our crew and saw we were flying the Stars and Stripes they shouted down vile remarks about a union crew. We got the tow, all right, but we had not cleared the harbor when the hawser broke suddenly - close to the freighter's after deck. It is my opinion that this hawser was cut."

"We were four days drifting about the harbor before we could get a slant of wind to carry us out." Out in the Atlantic, Capt. Dan tried to stay with the trade winds and, for a while, made a good passage, although the brigantine never reached the 18-knot speed Robinson found one day in the Red Sea when he was coming out from Ceylon. The wind failed them in mid-ocean and for days on end they idled about.

Coleridge Paraphrased.

"We were a painted brigantine on a painted ocean," said one of the Ceylonese, Sabaratnam, who with two others in the native crew speaks English fluently. The water became too rusty for drinking. The food became low. Capt. Dan headed for Bermuda, carrying every inch of sail to catch whispers of wind. After 41 days, the Florence C. Robinson - which the owner named for his wife, and sailing companion - reached Hamilton, amid a reception that Capt. Dan will never forget. They got underway for Gloucester nine days ago and picked up a wind that did much to make up for the black days in the doldrums. Making up for Nantucket Light, with a soupy fog clinging low, the brigantine had a narrow escape from being cut down by a transatlantic liner. Capt. Dan blewblasts on his mouth foghorn and the crew in the yards, -(text couldn't be deciphered) They could see the towering masts and even the sides of the big liner and there was little they could do in the absence of wind. She cleared the brigantine by yards and went on her way without a sign of recognition.

Doster Glad to be Back.

Doster was the first ashore today as the headlines caught on the bollards. "What a glorious feeling, what a sensation, to get my feet on American soil again," he exclaimed. "I've been all

over Europe, and in Asia and the Near East, and this is the best thing I've seen in two years - a bit of the United States."

The Ceylonese, first of their race to touch Gloucester in many years, glanced casually at the shore. They were more interested in making the brigantine ship-shape and in seeing their old friend and skipper, Robinson.

When he appeared, they greeted him with the exultant excitement of children, shouting greetings long before he was aboard. Robinson took them ashore to see a lobster pound and they stared in fascination. But, they were eager to back aboard their vessel. Robinson said the brigantine will "stay for a while" here, while she is being repainted and overhauled. He was not certain just when he will make a cruise in her, he said.

Old Salts Amazed.

Until the vessel hauled out into the stream, a steady line of old Gloucester salts stood in wander, gazing at the lines and exclaiming at her ironwood planking - teak and a native Ceylonese wood known as Margosa.

"She is built to last 100 years, if not longer, if not longer," said Robinson with a touch of pride.

When he bought her two years ago she was named "Annapooranyamal" after a Hindu temple in Benares. This name is still indented on her side. She was originally schooner-rigged, but Robinson whose epic trip alone around the world in the Ketch Svaap stamps him as an authority, had her changed over to the brigantine along the lines of the old British brigs of war.

Doster heavily bearded and bronzed by many suns hastened to Boston for a meeting with his parents. His luggage bore legends that revealed he had been in recently in Franco territory. But, he dismissed that phase of his adventure. "I'm back in the states now and there is nothing like I'nothing that mean more to an American."

-- That's it ---

Names of the crew that landed in Gloucester:

Kanagaratnam Thampipillai(48)
Sinathamby Sithamparapillai(28)
Thamotharampillai Sabaratnam(28)
Pooranavelupillai Subramaniam(29)
Aiyadurai Ratnasamy(24)

Some information from the book by Rajagopal: a small diesel engine was installed in Colombo before being insured. It was to get the vessel moving when the sea turns dead calm without any wind in sight. The small book aslo contains some adventerous stories told by the old sailors, about Valvettithurai's past and about the few families that controlled the sea trade.

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