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THE LAUNCH OF THE *ELSIE*: A SHIP MODEL BY ERIK RONNBERG, JR. LECTURE FINDING AID & TRANSCRIPT

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Video Description

This event commemorates the unveiling of a model of the fishing schooner *Elsie* that was constructed by Cape Ann Museum maritime curator Erik Ronnberg, Jr., who learned the intricate art of ship model building from his father, Erik Ronnberg, Sr. The model was commissioned by Wilbur James who is a Rockport

27 Pleasant Street, Gloucester, Massachusetts 01930 USA

+1 978-283-0455

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native, a member of the museum's Board of Directors, and the great-grandson of a former owner of the real *Elsie*, Charles Frederick Pearce. Assembled in the crowd are relatives of the *Elsie's* past captains, additional owners, builders, designer, and crew. Along with a slide show that highlights the model's incredible detail, Ronnberg speaks about the process of building such an exact replica, down to the four-strand left-hand turned anchor cable and lucky horseshoe attached to the windlass. In the course of the discussion that follows the lecture, many harrowing experiences of the crew who earned their living fishing on these great ships are recounted.

Subject list

Captain William Nickerson	<i>Elsie</i>
Captain Morton Selig	Arthur D. Story Shipyard
Thomas F. McManus	Atlantic Maritime Co. of Gloucester and Boston
Erik Ronnberg Sr.	Frank C. Pearce Company
Erik Ronnberg Jr.	Semi-knockabout schooner
Wilbur James	<i>Nautical Research Journal</i>
Grand Banks	Fishermen's Races
Gertrude L. Thebaud	Cape Ann Anchor Works

Transcript

00:14

Martha Oaks speaking:

Welcome, and thank you all for coming on such a beautiful afternoon. We have several special guests with us today, and I'm going to leave it to Wilbur James to introduce them. Each one has a direct and an important tie to the schooner *Elsie* and to the history of Cape Ann. And we're very pleased to have each and every one of you here today and look forward to speaking with you when we go upstairs to view the model. Like all the projects that we do here at the Cape Ann Museum, this was a joint effort, and as a result, we have just a handful of people that we need to acknowledge and to thank for their help. First and foremost, the Museum would like to thank Wilbur and Janet James for spearheading this project from beginning to end. Wilbur has just let us know that in time the model of the *Elsie* that we're unveiling this afternoon will become part of the Museum's permanent collection, and for that we're very grateful.

01:20

I'd also like to thank Erik Ronnberg, the model maker, for his fine skills and also for all of the time and the knowledge that he shares with the Cape Ann Museum, not only on this project but on several projects in the past, and we look forward to working with him well into the future.

01:46

And the Museum also needs to thank Bill Trayes and his crew who transported the Elsie from Rockport over to Gloucester earlier this week. And it was not an easy effort, given the height of its main mast, and it was very blustery this week, so we had to take it very slowly.

We had hoped to have Maggie Holtzberg with us today. She is the official folklorist for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. And along with Wilbur, she's one of Erik's greatest fans. She was responsible for a 2008 exhibition called "Keepers of Tradition" that was held at the National Heritage Museum in Lexington. And that was an exhibition that included some of Erik's models. In the exhibit and the catalog which accompanied it, Maggie explored the wealth of what she called "little worlds across Cape Ann" — small enclaves of people from an array of cultures and backgrounds, each with their own closely-held living traditions. Such traditions, which are usually passed down from parent to child, from generation to generation, don't always get mentioned in the history books and don't always end up in the typical museum exhibitions or programs. Despite this, folk traditions and folk arts are something that are fundamental to who we are, especially here on Cape Ann, folk art or the traditional art of ship model making. And by cultivating projects such as that, and celebrating them as we are today, we're not only documenting these important traditions, but preserving the cultural heritage they represent and which we all treasure. So, I'd like to invite Wilbur to the microphone to introduce some of our special guests and then to introduce Erik, and then we will move upstairs.

03:47

Wilbur James speaking:

Thanks, Martha. Some of you know me as Billy James. Some know me as William James, or Wilbur James. My real name is William Ellery James. I am related to the Pearce family through my mother, so that's why I have that's I have such a fond connection to the Elsie.

We all grew up knowing the Elsie. My grandfather would talk to us a little bit about the Elsie. He, Charles Frederick Pearce, was one of the owners. His father, Frank C. Pearce Company, was actually the owner, but his son worked on it. They always refer to the Elsie as "smart, able and beautiful."

Let me just sidetrack a little bit. When you look at this picture, and you think of these Gloucestermen going to the Grand Banks with a compass, the chronometer, and a sextant. And that's all they had, and this is a racing boat. This is an incredibly beautiful thing. Why did they

build these schooners like this? Fast and able are the two key words — to get there and to get back and to survive. So, it's really quite a remarkable thing that the Gloucestermen survived; but many of them, as you know, did not.

04:56

I'd like to thank Rhonda Faloon, and Martha Oaks. They've done a tremendous job, and the whole staff here at the Cape Ann Museum. What they have done over the last five years is they have created a living institution. There was a time when the Cape Ann Museum was a place that archived things. Now we actually open up the Museum to people, and we have events like this, that really bring the community together. You probably don't really appreciate Cape Ann until you leave it. And then you come back and you really don't want to leave it again. There's an incredible tradition here. And the tradition that brought the artists here was the fishing fleets, the granite quarries, but there's a great sense of independence that exists today. This is a really wonderful community that exists during very trying times.

05:48

Slide two, please. That's my mother, Ruth Bradley Pearce James at the wheel. You can see the little guy to the right of her — That's uncle Fred, and Erik will talk a little bit about uncle Fred in his presentation. And the gentleman with the hat is Captain Nickerson. Captain Nickerson was the captain aboard the Elsie when the Pearce family owned it and he actually was the captain in the 1929 and 1931 fishermen's races. My mother went on to work at IBM and she never sailed to the Grand Banks but the little guy in the back — he did. He went to the Grand Banks once when he was 14 years old, and he never went again.

06:32

We have here today some special people, and I'd like to talk a little bit about who they are. Yesterday we heard that Mort Selig. I've always heard the name Captain Mort Selig. His first command was aboard the Elsie in 1925. I assumed that there were no Seligs around anymore. Well guess what? Mort Selig's two daughters, Madeline, 92 and Louise, 85, are here with his granddaughter, Carla Grillo.

And some of you knew Mayor Grillo? Well, that's Madeline's husband. He died at 100 years old. We're going to talk a little bit about.... they're going to have an opportunity to share some of their memories from their families. But they've got some great documents. If I'd known, I'd have had a picture of Captain Grillo up here as well.

07:32

Next slide, please. That's Billy Nickerson. Billy Nickerson was quite a character, apparently. In 1931, they took the engine out of the Elsie and he used to take the Sea Scouts on cruises, among them my uncle. But Captain Nickerson is a famous guy. Erik will talk a little bit about him. But his son William Nickerson was here... was going to come here. Did he show up today? This is a great honor.

Can you imagine, can you imagine ...and there's more to say here. And so, of course we've got the captains who built this. Well guess what? The Story shipyard in Essex — the Arthur D. Story. So, is there anybody here from the Story shipyard? Sure, there is, Brad Story, the grandson.

08:28

We were hoping to have Captain McManus's grandson here. I don't think he made it but he's been in touch with us. This was designed by Captain Thomas McManus, great naval architect. He designed the boat. And apparently the grandson couldn't be here.

So now let's get on to the Pearce family. We have quite a few Pearces here. We have my aunt, Carol Davis Pearce, who was actually born in the house in Annisquam that she grew up in. She was my uncle's wife and my uncle Fred Pearce died a few years ago. They were married almost 65 years. So, she's the matriarch of the family.

We've got her son, Charles Frederick Pearce, III — he obviously goes back a long way genetically on to the ocean. We've got Lindsay Pearce Cowin, a great granddaughter; and we've got Whitney Pearce Fitz, another great granddaughter; and we've got Chandler Fitz, a great great granddaughter here today. So, we've got a lot of them here. And we've got my sainted wife, Janet who is also here, and, I am as you know, the great-grandson of the owners of the Elsie.

Erik Ronnberg. Next slide, please.

09:42

This is... I've got to touch on this one. I was in Erik's studio a few months ago. Erik is very meticulous and he has a great archive and he had a bunch of pictures on his desk. And I said, let me look at those more closely, and there was just a little bitty individual, and I said that must be my grandfather. And of course, I couldn't tell, but there was some intuition that I had. So, we blew it up and I took it to Carol, and indeed that is my grandfather with a bow tie. And now I understand why I wear one. But this is aboard the Elsie in the 1929 Fishermen's Races with Captain Nickerson, who was at the wheel. Can you point out where he is, Erik, with your laser? There he is, right there.

10:25

So, I grew up in Rockport. I went to the Universalist Unitarian Church with Erik Ronnberg, some 61 or 62 years ago. Erik was an unusual fellow, still is — very interested in many things. I think he was interested in biology and things back then, Erik. But Erik's father, Erik A.R. Ronnberg, had a little accent. He was a Swede, and he had been around the Cape of Good Hope on the Axel Runa, which is a square rigger. He ended up in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and he became a rigger in the fishing industry — rigging fishing boats.

And I go over to their house in the evening and they would clear off the dining room table and they would set up a shipyard very similar to the Story shipyard, and they would build models.

And it was pretty interesting. Now I can see why Erik does what he does. But Erik, no man is a prophet in his own home. So probably a lot of us take for granted the fact that Erik Ronnberg exists in this community. He is one of the best model makers in the world and I consider him to be a national treasure.

11:43

Next slide, please. So, this is a picture that Erik assures me it is not what I wanted it to be. This is when the Elsie was a trial horse for the Gertrude L. Thebaud, and I tell Erik that the Elsie beat the Thebaud, but he assures me it did not. So, Erik found a picture where the Elsie is slightly ahead of the Thebaud. I just put that up there to fantasize a little bit that this old 25-year-old boat could beat this racing boat.

Next slide, please. So, this is the scene in Erik's house. You can tell which one is Erik. Obviously, he's refined his skills considerably since then.

12:22

I'll leave with one last thought. I love the ocean. I respect it. I fear it. How these great fishermen did what they did, I have no idea. But I bought...well, we bought a 73-foot sloop with all state of the art navigation equipment. We had captains and crews on it and we would sail around on this thing. And my wife, after three years, explained to me that she got seasick. And she kept that hidden for three years. But she suggested we should sell the boat. So, we did, and since then, I've been asking her if it would be alright if I commissioned to build a schooner, because of my passion for sailing and for schooners. And for two years she argued no, no, no. Finally, last year, she said I could in fact, commission to build a schooner, so long as Erik Ronnberg built it. So, I'd like to introduce you to my friend, a national treasure, Erik Ronnberg, to come and launch the Elsie.

13:45

Erik Ronnberg speaking:

Thank you very much. We'll start with what is probably the earliest known photograph of Elsie. She was actually owned by the Boston firm of the Atlantic Maritime Company, but she landed quite a few trips in Gloucester, and this shows her sailing out of Gloucester harbor — still pretty new. Her main topsail there still hasn't stretched out to its full size.

14:20

She was, as Bill James mentioned, she was designed by Thomas F. McManus in 1909. She was his design number 152, and she was built in 1910 by Arthur D. Story. This type is called a semi-knockabout. The knockabout schooners had no bowsprits, and the Indian Header schooners that preceded them had very long bowsprits. The semi-knockabout was a compromise between the two. You have this this very rounded bow here. But the bowsprit was much shorter and the jumbo stay was set up inboard of the stem head. And that was basically the distinguishing

feature of the semi-knockabout schooner. Otherwise it was quite typical of other fishing vessels.

15:30

Next slide. Now here we see her in a more businesslike state. I believe this picture is taken sometime in the mid-1920s. And I think this is also the Frank C. Pearce, part of the Frank C. Pearce waterfront property at 401 Main Street. It's where Silvana Smith had previously had his establishment. Next.

16:13

This is actually the fourth model of Elsie that has come from my and my father's tabletop shipyard. The previous ones were much smaller and less detailed. This model is to scale 3/8th inch equals one foot or 1/32nd actual size. You'll see, it's about five and a half feet long and some five feet high. Bear in mind that the original Elsie was about 120 feet over the rails and 170 feet from the tip of her bowsprit to the end of her main boom. Next.

17:05

The display of this model was taken very seriously. We wanted to keep the decorative cabinet work really to a minimum so that the character and grain of the wood that we used for the base and the case would speak for the model. And this also applied to the way the model itself was mounted to the baseboard. The sails are genuine Egyptian cotton sailcloth. They were treated with acrylic varnish and a little acrylic paint to smooth the contours and get the sails to look a little bit more like the Sea Island cotton sails that the Gloucester schooners preferred.

The model, as you can see, is mounted at an eight-degree angle of heel. It's also at an angle on the baseboard to avoid formality of the usual symmetrical mounting. And the oak pedestal that supports the keel is also asymmetrical, and its cross section in keeping with the heeling attitude of the model.

Next.

18:50

The baseboard was built up with tapered oak veneers a quarter inch thick. The individual strips were matched for symmetry to give a radiating pattern representing or reminiscent of a vessel's wake, and also to give a sense of forward motion. The simplicity of the case design required very careful engineering, and I have to thank Larry Murphy, who's with us today from West Gloucester. He helped tremendously in the design and engineering of this case. The base for the case alone weighs about 200 pounds. And it in turn has to support I would say well over 200 pounds of glass, and that took some very careful designing of the framework, but also very careful assembly and gluing and fastening of all the parts. And the other thing, too, was Larry and a colleague in New Hampshire worked on its construction and finishing. And a case of this simple design really calls for the best craftsmanship, because there is nothing that will conceal

any mistakes or imperfections in the joiner work and the finish. So, a big thank you to those people for what they've done. Next.

20:55

Fishing schooners are my specialty and 3/8th inch scale is my favorite scale, thanks to the late marine artist Tom Hoyne, for whom I constructed eight of them as posing models for making his paintings. Tom's collection was very similarly detailed, including the fishing gear, but they didn't have the crews and the sails, and unfortunately, he died before the preliminary plans we'd hatched to fit those models out with sails and crew could actually happen, and that has left that little matter of closure to this model.

22:07

The model took about 1800 hours to construct. Next.

Now, fishing is a multi-step process, from the fitting out and sailing to the fishing grounds, catching and preparing the catch, and then returning to port and unloading. No one model can show all these steps simultaneously. So I, the model maker therefore has to pick a point in the timeline of a fishing trip to just capture that particular moment, and in this model's case, I wanted to show her as she was approaching the grounds, still under full sail, getting out there as quickly as possible. But at the same time, the crew are getting the dory gear in shape, ready to put into the dories. And there will be some activity aloft getting the topsails furled in due course.

Whatever is shown on board should agree with that particular moment in the process, and the crew activity should give purpose and direction to it. Now, even then I had to make a few exceptions, which you'll see in the next couple of slides. Next.

24:04

But before we get to that part, just starting aft, this gentleman is Captain Bill Nickerson at the wheel, and these two fellows here are the last ones to be baiting up their dory, dory number 10. This fellow is cutting up herring for bait, and this fellow is baiting the hooks for one of the trawl lines. Next slide.

This will give you a better view of that activity — the herring and the barrels for it. But here you can see the trawl tubs — tubs of trawl as they're called — the empty ones, and these are the trawl lines here waiting to be baited. There's about 50 fathoms on a trawl line, with 50 hooks on leaders or gangings, and each one has to be baited, and then the whole thing has to be carefully coiled into the trawl tub. You can see here these kegs with these little dowels with the black ball pennants on them. Those are the trawl buoys, which mark the ends of a trawl line once it was set. The trawl line was anchored at both ends with these little iron trawl anchors. And then an anchor line went up to the buoy. Next.

25:58

There you can just see what looks like chaos, but it really isn't, because the gear is grouped by dory. And the black ball pennants will give you some idea of what's been stowed where. At this point, these pen boards are very useful to keep law and order with all that gear. And from there they will be getting the gear to the side where it be put into the dory once the dory is put overboard. Next.

26:46

Now, this is looking down on the two nests of dories, and here's where I had to make an exception. Because the vessel was under full sail, I really couldn't have the dory alongside with the gear being placed in it. So, what I did to the top dory on the starboard nest, was to show where all the fishing gear goes on board, with some more to be added; and then this dory on the port side shows the basic gear that's usually left in the dory even when it's nested. They didn't take everything out and put it away. What could fit in the bottom and still have another dory sit on top of it — it was simply left there.

But there would be six tubs of trawl, two trawl buoys, two trawl anchors and the anchor lines. And then in addition to that, you have oars, you have thole pins. You have the pitchfork for pitching the fish on board the schooner. There's a boat hook; there's a [?]. Not yet loaded on board are the little water kegs that are for the crew when they're out fishing. So, they're really pretty full of gear before they're even getting the fish in. Next slide.

28:22

And then just a side view — as you can see, each dory is numbered to correspond to the gear that's put aboard it. And those are those water kegs that the cook has filled, and they're ready to go on board once the dories go overboard. And you can see also the dory tackles are on the bow and the stern beackets, so the dory can just be lifted up and put over the side.

Once it's overboard, that's when one of the crew men will go aboard it, and then the fishing gear will be handed down to him. And then the second man goes on board. Then they can either, if the vessel anchors to fish, they'll either row away, or if they're making flying sets, you'll just have all these dories in tow and then at regular intervals they'll be dropped off to fish and then the schooner will come around and pick up the crews for a mug up, then make another round so they can get on board the dories and haul in the catch. That cycle is repeated throughout the day. Next.

29:55

And looking forward, as you can see, the fishing country pretty much ends back here and then forward of this is the domain of the head sails and her ground tackle. Next slide.

And, of course, the famous fishermen's anchors that were made in Gloucester by the Cape Ann Anchor Works. They're of particular interest because the stocks can be removed. They are wedged into the diamond eye of the anchor and then these rope seizing lines or puddenings are actually nailed in place to keep the wedges from slipping out. Also, notice how long that

anchor stock is, and that was designed so that once that anchor hit the bottom, it would immediately turn so that the flute would dig into the sand or the bottom and take hold. That was a very important aspect of the fisherman's anchor. It had to hold fast and it had to hold quick. Next slide.

31:35

Just a little close up on the detail where you can see the puddening around the stock. Also, there's this puddening on the ring, which protects the hemp cable from being frayed by the iron ring itself. And you'll also notice that this is a proper, fishermen's anchor bend here, a couple of turns and then it comes around and through and then back and then it's seized. This cable, I actually had to spin up to get the four strands in the left-hand direction of turn. The other thing you'll notice is the iron cap heads which were standard in the 20th century schooners for keeping the anchor fast to the rail when it's on board. Next.

32:33

And her windlass, in this case on the starboard side, you have these heavy wooden whelps to take the anchor cable. This actually serves to not only get a better grip on the cable with these whelps and the whelp studs here, but it increases the diameter of the windlass, so as it won't strain the fibers of the cable and break them. And then this is how the cable was belayed to the riding bit in the windlass head for riding on the Banks. This side here just has some iron straps for whelps for the anchor chain, which is just kept in a box further aft. This is the out haul for the jumbo boom to stretch the foot of the jumbo and the fore staysail. And of course, you have to have that lucky horseshoe for these vessels, and of course you gotta hang it this way (open end up) so the luck doesn't spill out. Next slide.

34:00

Around the foremast, you can see a winch and a gasoline hoisting engine attached to these winches with a reduction gear so they can get the sails up using power. Also, there was a sprocket wheel and a sprocket chain, a messenger chain that could be hooked up to the windlass, so they could actually use the windlass with power. That's the engine box there and then the clutch lever to engage it. You can see the anchor cable there. They usually had anywhere from 200 to 250 fathoms of three-inch diameter anchor cable for a vessel that was in the cod fishery. And then this thing poking its head up, that's actually the base for a ventilator. They could fit it with a cowl vent, in port, but at sea, they just usually had a glass insert so that it served as an additional deck light, like these two deck prisms here. Next slide.

35:29

And then on the port side, the four shrouds. Here's the engine, the hoisting engine in the box here. The shrouds were all eye-spliced and then served their entire lengths, according to my father's directions. He had done quite a bit of this when he first came to Gloucester — the Gertrude Thebaud was being fitted up to go south and he was part of Harry Christiansen's rigging gang who worked on her. And then a lot of the sword fishermen were similarly fitted out with the schooner [?]. And also, hard to see here, but this is a real working grommet with

thimbles, and the various lines in the running rigging are eye-spliced in keeping with actual practice. And you see the lantern board here in the brackets mounted in the shrouds, and then just below is a triangular spreader that prevents the top most shroud from hitting the running light. Next slide.

37:03

This is one of the most complex parts of the model mechanically — the end of the bowsprit. So much comes together at this point. You have a four-eyed band called the “wye” — right here, and there's a shoulder band to buttress that, and then you have the nose iron that goes around the bowsprit pole, and then inside the wye and then it turns up and locks into place. And then there's an eye bolt here with a working nut down here with shackles for the balloon stay. And then there are working shackles here for the turnbuckles and the jib stay. These turnbuckles actually work — they have right and left-hand threads. And I was actually able to adjust the reefing tension using them.

38:15

And here you see the foot ropes, but then hooked to the eye of the shackle pin at the top, there are the back ropes, which kept the men from falling off, falling backwards off the bowsprit. The other thing, too, is you can get a better view of the seam work here that had to be done for the sails. There is a very fine row ...I had to use a sewing machine to stitch down the tablings here. The selvage seams were just ruled in pencil and that was enough for the effect, but then the bolt ropes, which are on the other side, they had to be sewn by hand, and the only way I could get through that very tight Egyptian cotton sailcloth was to run a row of just blank stitch holes along the tabling, and then use those to sew in the bolt ropes. Next.

39.28

The figures were a lot of fun. They started as Britannia metal armatures which Chris Murch at the pewter shop cast for me. The armatures were just basically the outline of the human form and with provisions where they could be easily bent at the various limb joints. So, I could actually work the armature into whatever pose I wanted it. I would then take, I would then fill in the armatures with sculpey and bake that so it had the hardness of plaster, and then over that I painted it with, primed it with gesso, adding a little modeling paste and I was actually able to paint on a lot of the detail — some of the finer facial features, the hair texture, the wrinkles in the clothing, and then once that was done, the figures were painted in color.

40:55

What was really fun was shaping the hands so they could actually grasp. So, this guy's got a good firm hand hold on those shrouds. And, in the case of the feet, just temporary tiny wires to lock them into place or to set them on deck. Next.

41:26

These gentlemen are up in the foremast, they're overhauling the weather tack of the fore topsail in preparation for getting it furled. But this guy here was a lot of fun, getting him to

behave himself, because he's actually standing on the upper part of the peak halyard, as they did on the actual vessels, while he's bending over the spring stay and hanging on for dear life with this right hand, while with his left hand he's grasping the topsail tack, and this gentleman here is helping him. Next.

42:26

And this was another liberty I took in this particular project. Now, you'll notice that the “Elsie, Gloucester” here is all carved into the taffrail and gold-leafed. Well, originally this was not Gloucester, it was Boston. And when she was sold to Gloucester interests, someone just took a piece of sheet metal, nailed it over “Boston” and painted in none-too-artistically, “Gloucester,” and that was more than I could allow myself to do. So, I let that little lapse happen.

Also, this fellow here is Wilbur James's uncle, Frederick Pearce, who was just sort of keeping an eye on the vessel while she's sailing along, even though this would be a little out of time for him at that particular stage of his life. I guess that's it.

44:14

Wilbur James speaking:

That was pretty good. We have lots of things that we could talk about. I don't know if there'll ever be a gathering like this where the relatives of the designer, the builder, captains, owners, crew members will be in the same room in Gloucester. So, at some point, I'd like to have a couple of them come up and talk a little bit. But why don't we first have you ask Erik some questions. And then we'll have a few of the others come up and just talk a little bit about their relatives' experience on the Elsie.

Yes, sir.

44:50

William Cross speaking:

Maybe you could address this question, but I'd love to hear from others as well who might know about this. What was the experience of serving on the Elsie like for the men who did serve? How long were they out? And what was it like when they were out? And how long did the trip take to the Grand Banks? Did they ever fish for anything but cod and what was it like on shifts?

Erik Ronnberg speaking:

Well, what it was like....

Wilbur James speaking:

Did everybody hear the question? What was it like to be on the Elsie as a crewman? What did they fish for, what was it like? In other words—how tough was it?

45:32

Erik Ronnberg speaking:

Well, I think the question is really the business of fishing, and how long the process of an individual trip took. And as for the life on board, you're just going to have to hunt down some of these old guys and get their opinions. I would also recommend the writings of Frederick William Wallace, who is a Canadian journalist who probably wrote some of the finest accounts of life on the Banks. He made six trips on fishing schooners, including the famous Effie E. Morrissey. And he wrote, I would say more realistically, and took better pictures of the activity on board the vessel—the whole sequence—than any other writer and photographer who's gotten into the fisheries and tried to explain that aspect.

46:45

Now for as far as the lengths of the trips are concerned, I would suggest that you try the National Archives, New England branch in Waltham, which has a lot of the reports for the vessels — the clearance and re-entry reports for vessels as they made individual trips, and that'll give you the times they were out. Also in this library, they do have some excellent old cod fish bounty logs from the 1850s that will give you some idea of what those trips were like.

Wilbur James speaking:

But Erik, it was months, it wasn't weeks.

47:34

Erik Ronnberg speaking:

It was weeks in some cases.

Wilbur James:

In the salt cod industry, how long did they, in the early days, go out for? They used to dry the cod out in the...

Erik Ronnberg speaking:

Well, the cod was dried back here. They salted it, they wanted to get out and get back as soon as possible...

Wilbur James speaking:

Two weeks?

Erik Ronnberg speaking:

So, they could get out and be on the Banks in, say, half a week to a week, depending how far they ventured, and then get as much fishing done in two to three weeks as possible, and then get back. They made faster trips than that, especially with the fresh fish industry.

48:09

Wilbur James speaking:

Family lore, when my uncle went out on his one and only trip to the Banks, you had to take your own mattresses with you. And he slept above the cook stove. And when he came back, his mother took the mattress and burned it. I assume that was not a good sign.

48:30

Ron Gilson speaking:

In answer to this gentleman's question, in 1951, I sailed on one of the last trips dory fishing with the Adventure, Captain Leo Heinz of Gloucester. We were 27 men, 12 dories, 24 men in the dories and the skipper, engineer and cook stayed aboard the vessel to handle the dories, putting them overboard and taking them back. Life aboard the Adventure in 1951 was dismal at best. And the vessel was ending her career at that time. And the youngest man aboard the vessel was 50. That was Captain Heinz. The next youngest was 57. And the rest of the crew were all over 60 — up to age 75.

I write in my book.... in chapter 14, about this entire episode. And I say there, that once you go aboard the vessels for, in our case, for an eight-day trip, personal hygiene stopped — brushing teeth, all those kinds of things, except for myself, as young boy, but the rest of these men didn't shave, and they slept in the same clothes that they went aboard in for seven or eight days, unless they got soaked in the dory or bad weather and then they would have to change clothes.

They, you know, practically crawled into the bunk. They were up and about at least 12 to 14 hours of every day. And when they fished on the tides as we did that trip, we would eat breakfast at about midnight, breakfast! And set the dories out at two in the morning and be back around seven for lunch or dinner. And then around two o'clock in the afternoon, we're having supper and then we went up and baited up, dressed the fish and put them down aboard, and that's when they turned in for a night's sleep, around three o'clock in the afternoon — and all because it was dictated by the tides and you fished on the Banks on a full tide.

50:54

Wilbur James speaking:

What is your name, sir? Ron Gilson? Very good.

Unknown speaker:

Erik, you mention salting down the fish. In the '20s, were they fresh fishing or were they salting?

Erik Ronnberg speaking:

Both. You could go salt fishing, you could go fresh fishing, or you could go shacking, where when in the early part of the voyage you would salt the catch, and then at the end, as you approach the end of the fishing work, you would ice down the fish fresh and you'd bring in a mixed catch of salt and fresh fish.

Unknown speaker:

How did you ever get all the dimensions for this boat? Did you have drawings?

51:48

Erik Ronnberg speaking:

Oh yeah, well, Howard Chapelle had surveyed the vessel, and I was also the beneficiary of a lot of good information from the late Edward S. Bosley, who saw that vessel and quite a few others. And I drew up, I had to draw up plans of my own, that were to be published by a ship model making outfit. And I subsequently published my findings in the nautical research journals. So, I've left a paper trail on that.

Wilbur James speaking:

If anybody doesn't mind, I'd like to.... Go ahead, do you have a question?

52:35

Frederick Tarr speaking:

A quick remark. That's why the Bass Rocks station was built on Nugent Stretch (in Rockport) by the back of the Babson Museum, more or less... so that the swells who were coming down as summer visitors to stay at the fancy hotels wouldn't have to go through Gloucester where all the flake yards were and smell the fish drying.

Wilbur James speaking:

Does anybody here remember coming down 128 when it was built, smelling Gloucester when you were about 30 miles away?

Someone says "still do."

There's lots more questions for Erik. Why don't we take a little bit of a break? And can we get a member of Captain.... Actually, would you be comfortable, Captain Nickerson's son, William Nickerson, to come up and share a few words with us, or not?

53:30

William Nickerson speaking:

I can't tell you very much because I was a very young boy at the time I was in cahoots with the Elsie. The Elsie had been taken up by the Boy Scouts of America, Sea Scout branch, and they planned to have three one-month trips from Gloucester or Boston, down to the southern space. And it turns out that on the night before they were to sail from Gloucester, the yachting skipper they had hired held out for a higher rate. And at the time, they didn't have any higher rate. So, they went to the Gloucester meeting room of the Master Mariners Association, where my father was playing cards with his cronies. They knew he had to have a very good handle on handling sail because he had grown up under the sails. They hired him. They had their three trips. And that was the first time I had a chance to have a short sail, it was Gloucester to Marblehead. That was great. And sometimes along on that route, we were doing 14 knots under four lowers. And as we came out and passed Manchester, a great big, I would call it a

racing machine, came out and tried to catch us. She heeled way over, where we were not heeling so far. We left her completely invisible.

56:05

Wilbur James speaking:

Thank you. That's very, very kind of you to share that with us. The picture of Captain Nickerson, that's when he was on the Sea Scout boat I believe. Would you know, is that correct? Yes? That was? Okay.

Anybody from the Captain Selig family, the Grillos, want to share some insights? You want to come up and talk up here?

Louise (Selig) Corliss speaking:

I'm gonna try right here...the light is better here. I have a loud voice...I'm like my father, he had a booming voice...

Wilbur James speaking:

So, the people in the back can hear... This is Louise Selig, the younger daughter of Captain Selig, who was the captain of the Elsie in 1925.

56:46

Louise (Selig) Corliss speaking:

There were three daughters, my oldest sister, who is 89. I have a middle sister, who passed away at 78, and I was the baby. I was always the baby, for too long.

Anyway, when my dad was living, during his lifetime, and after he retired, many, many articles were written about him and his ventures from home. This one, in particular, he was down at my sister's in New Bedford – where she lived at the time. And this gentleman from the newspaper wanted to interview him, which he did. I'm going to read this side here (of a newspaper story she is holding). This other side is more about other things that he did. But this definitely is a trip on the Elsie.

Louise moves around the room, looking for a place where the light is good to read, saying "I've got new glasses.... It's awful to have new glasses, I'm sure you know."

Okay.

58:00

Louise begins reading: Almost from the moment he arrived on the western banks fishing grounds, Captain Morton Selig knew that he and the men of the motor schooner Elsie were in for a very rough time. (Audience asks for her to be a little louder.)

The fish were plentiful, and the seas calm with only a small groundswell. (Okay?) But in those days, before New England fishermen had radio, radar and long-range weather forecast, a man's life depended on his knack for seeing beyond the obvious. Selig and his Gloucester men noticed the fish they hauled in were full of rocks. Stoney blasts, a sure sign of trouble ahead. The gulls, too, were preparing for a storm, sitting on the water, picking and oiling their plumage in response to some unseen warning.

59:05

The second day out on the banks, the swells grew much larger. But the men of the Elsie continued to fish with good success. The catch was so good, in fact, that on the third day the Elsie was fully loaded and ready to go home. But it was too late. Seas by now were mountainous, and it was clear the Elsie was about to suffer her second August gale.

In those days, it was called an August gale, but in these days, it would be a hurricane, which wasn't even heard of in that day. Captain Selig, now 86, leaned forward in his chair on the sunporch on his daughter's home in New Bedford, obviously, relishing the re-telling of one of the favorite yarns of 40 years at sea. His daughter, Marie, wife of the Reverend Phillip C. Douglas, of Grace Episcopal Church, sat in the sunshine beside her dad and smiled as went on with his tale.

60:11

Somehow, before the full force of the gale hit, the Elsie managed to pick up a stray dory man and return him to his vessel, also a motor schooner. The frightening magnitude of the storm struck home for the men of the Elsie as they moved away from the rescued man's vessel and blocked from view all but the very top of the schooner's 80-foot mast. Almost immediately, the gale erupted and wrenched the Elsie over. Selig ordered the foresail down, and all fish still on the deck, over the side. The crew then went below to hold on and pray. That night, instruments at Sable Island recorded winds up to 105 miles an hour. Imagine, man, 105 miles an hour, Captain Selig gasped, still awed after 47 years, 27 of them in retirement in Gloucester. Fishermen today, he said, wouldn't think of going out in one of the graceful old motor schooners that once were the backbone of the fishing fleet, without their electronic aids, said Selig.

61:40

Then down here (pointing to the story) he said that he really thought they were all going down. And he said he prayed to God, he said — Just bring me home to my family. That's all I ask. Well, when he could get down on the deck, the storm had subsided, and the winds had calmed down, he saw this shiny thing on the deck. This is what it was. It was, I believe, a St. Christopher's medal. Well, he knew then everything was going to be alright, his prayers were answered. He carried that all his life in his wallet. And it was so thin, that it looks like a piece of paper, and he lost it, I don't know how many times, but he'd always, always find it somehow. And I know my sister still has that coin someplace in her house — I don't know where, but I think it's in one of mom's pocketbooks!

62:55

Wilbur James speaking:

What do you find most epitomized the ability for a schooner to be also a racing schooner?

Erik Ronnberg speaking:

Well, you've got two different vessels, you're talking about two different vessels.

Wilbur James speaking:

What was the, again.... the problem... when we had our boat, we went aside the Bluenose II, and it's a very large boat. And I suggested to the captain of the Bluenose II that in fact, the Bluenose was a racing boat, not a fishing boat. And he said, why do you say that? And he said, because my grandfather owned the Elsie. So, he invited us on his boat and he admitted that the Bluenose was built simply to race. So, I think the Elsie, in my opinion, was the last fishing boat that was actually in the Fishermen's races.

63:47

Erik Ronnberg speaking:

I would agree. I would agree with that statement. I would also add that if there hadn't been any fishermen's races, all the other racing schooners would never have been built.

Wilbur James speaking:

Right. Well, thank you all. Oh, wait...another question, Yes?

Unknown speaker:

Erik, I wonder what your father would say about this model... if you could tell us what he might say... some of the comments you could imagine him giving to you about your final piece?

Erik Ronnberg speaking:

Well, I think he'd give it the gimlet eye, and if he saw anything wrong with it, he'd be sure I knew it.

64:35

Wilbur James speaking:

Yeah, we haven't called the Story (family).... The Story boatyard built it. He (Brad Story) doesn't want to say anything, but have you ever seen some of the great sculpture that is coming out of the Story boatyard these days? It's absolutely brilliant and impeccable. You should take a look at that. So, I won't embarrass you by calling on you.

Any Pearce, any Pearce have anything to say about the fishing industry? Freddie? Nobody?

Okay, in that case, I'll speak for the Pearces.

Thank you all for coming. I've really got to thank the Cape Ann Museum for bringing the community together. I mean, this is really what this Museum is all about. It's the history, it's the tradition, but the DNA, the genes are in all of you that have made this community what it is. Thank you for coming...and let's go see the Elsie.

65:20

End of presentation.

Audience moves upstairs to view the Elsie and enjoy a reception. Erik stands next to the model and answers questions about the transport of the model and case, which arrived in separate pieces, and tells of an episode when moving the model from his studio to the truck, a puff of air took her sails and he had to bring her about quickly to avoid a near disaster. The dialogue is hard to hear, and ends after 3 minutes.