

An Australian Seaman

The auto-biographical notes of
Sydney Mercer Smith Snr.

[I was] born in the latter part of the [eighteen] fifties at St. Leonards Sydney at School in Fort Street till the age of seven then removed to Brisbane where my Father was appointed Captain of the "Williams" trading between Brisbane and Rockhampton calling at Maryborough and Gladstone.

At school again. at the Normal and the Valley. Lived first in Wharf Street and later in Bowen Terrace where my Father, his Chief Officer and Chief Engineer all had homes built for them.

On my Christmas holidays I used to have a trip with my Father to my great joy and kept a log on the voyage and had wonderful things to relate on my return to school.

Of course the ship's Officers kept my log entered up while I was asleep. Wonderful things happened like being attacked by pirates, sighting burning ships and things of that sort.

They also gave me to understand that the cause of the Wide Bay Bar being so rough was because it was built of india-rubber to keep out pirates. That's why the ships jumped so when crossing it, but I was only a kid and believed everything.

I always longed to go to sea, my Forefathers all being Kentish Seamen.

My Father died when I was about seven years of age and at about fifteen, I entered the Customs for a time when Thornton was Collector. I only stayed a few months then I joined the "Corinth" and went off in her arriving in London in mid-winter. As the ship was not to my liking I did not wish to be apprenticed and returned to Brisbane for good - as I thought.

I joined the Customs again for about a year and a half but missed the ships. The old call came again and I shipped as O.S. on the "Gauntlett". She was a good little barque but the less said about her the better. Certainly there was plenty to eat but the bread was full of worms and all the lamp oil was upset in bad weather so we had to make slush lamps. This made the forecandle very smoky making it difficult to breathe. This forecandle was condemned later on in London and the crews quarters made in a deck house.

Being a returned Emigrant ship lice abounded even in the lags at the running gear forward so we had to dump most of our bedding and clothes before reaching London. In fact, with rats, lice and other life it was not a very happy voyage. I had a month of scurvy when we got past Cape Horn.

Arrived in London. After I spent my money staying at the Sailors Home Captain Almond, who had left the sea, apprenticed me to Mr. T.B. Walker who had a fair sized fleet trading to Australia and Tasmania.

I was apprenticed to the "Lanoma" a new ship and as I already had sea experience was cock of the walk and only had one fight to keep my place.

Three happy years were spent in this ship trading between London and Launceston Tasmania. Of course we worked like horses and lived like them - working out our own cargo and loading wool, tin and wattle bark. Loading wool was a great thing as we worked stripped to our waist screwing the bales with the old fashioned screws. At intervals we clubbed together and sent ashore for a basket of "The Oak" (Tasmanian Beer) . It came through our skins so quickly it did not have time to go to our heads.

On my third visit to Launceston our Captain Barwood left the sea and Captain Whittingham took his place. Three of my fellow apprentices, not liking the change, cleared out.

This document is Copyright © and is not to be modified in any way or reproduced or republished without the express written permission of Ross Black. Anyone wishing to contact Mr Black should visit www.gayundah.vze.com and email the webmaster, who may be able to assist.

On arrival in London my time was up but owing to the time lost on the "Corinth" I could not show four years sea service so had to put in another voyage as Quartermaster.

I then joined the "Parramatta" a frigate built ship and a home to all. I enjoyed the ship and the voyage. Three of us took two hours at the wheel and four off, and never had to call out for assistance from below. The best time I ever had. We carried three Officers a Boatswain his two mates and a big crew and a *full* passenger list of about one hundred.

In London I schooled at Jollys in Commercial Road and easily passed for Second Mate and Seamanship. It was no trouble as T.B. Walker's "Boys" had a name for efficiency. We did all the usual training sending up yards, bending sails and that sort of thing. While in London apprentices were not kept on board. Riggers were employed to do all the maintenance.

Passing for Second Mate was one thing, getting a ship was another. For a month I wandered about the Docks. The first question usually asked when applying for a position was, "Have you been Second Mate before?"

At last I boarded the "Ramsey". [It was] Captain Catey who took me on and [he] told me the reason later. When he was Mate on the "Royal Dane" he overstayed his leave and wanted to join his ship anchored in the bay. He got a passage down with my father who was then Captain of the "Queensland". He put him in his cabin and when the Clerk demanded his ticket my father took the Clerk by the collar and passed him gently out of his cabin.

I had a nine month trip in the "Ramsey" to Brisbane and back, after being away from Brisbane for five years.

The "Ramsey" was a comfortable ship but a strange one - drawing thirteen feet forward and nineteen feet aft. She only sailed well in smooth water. The head yards had to be kept three feet off the backstays as she was narrow forward. We lived well in the cabin. What stores the Owners did not put aboard the Captain provided - quite different to my next ship the "Gauntlet".

Sailed on the "Gauntlet" to Brisbane and back and then to Brisbane again. The food was not over generous - one bottle of pickles on the table a week. The Captain said, "I don't eat pickles". The First Mate said the same. The Second Mate said nothing - I was the Second Mate. I ate the pickles and anything else I could for I was generally hungry.

We lay about for five months moored to a buoy in the Brisbane River. During this time we had a ships gig race for prize money. Nearly turned over during a thunderstorm but won the race. The next night the Apprentices cleared out. I found my share of the prize money on my desk. The others had theirs and I never saw them again. The Captain would never have allowed us to race for prize money so just as well things went as they did.

On my return to London I left the "Gauntlet" and returned to Jollys and passed as First Mate. As I found I could get my time in for the next examination without troubling about signing on as First Mate I shipped in the "Parramatta" as Second Mate. I had two happy voyages in her - give me big ships every time!

I then passed for Master and felt I owned the world when I got my Masters ticket. After one voyage as Second Mate on the "Parramatta" I was appointed First Mate on the "Simla". A ship of four masts, all square rigged and over two thousand tons, she was a converted P & O steamer with flush decks. She carried four Mates.

I had a look at her and met the Master but did not take to him. I made the excuse that I had not been on a four master before. Said he "I have never been on one either so we both have to learn". Thought I - It's different between a Master and a Mate learning so jibbed and went back to my old love the "Parramatta".

After passing as Master I had friends who offered to get me in the P & O Company. Due to shortness of money I kept clear.

Then I was offered a billet in the British India Company running between India and the Persian Gulf. My school mates advised me not to accept and besides I wanted to return to Brisbane.

At last I was appointed to the "Roma" as Fourth Officer but by that time I was away down channel, First Mate on the "John Rennie" bound for Adelaide. She was one of Davies and Muses ships.

I only signed for the voyage and wished to leave if the Second Mate passed for Mate and then he [could] take my place. I had rather a hard time in port looking after the ship with no Second Mate and no Boatswain. The Second Mate passed his examination so I was free to go and left Adelaide in the S.S. "Birksgate" for Sydney and thence to Brisbane in the Australian Steam Navigation Company ship "Katoomba".

In Brisbane I was advised to join the new Company, The Queensland Steam Shipping Company. After three months I joined the "Warrego" as Third Mate at the time when the late B.M. Macdonald was Purser. After three months as Third Mate I was appointed Second Mate. I was Second Mate for two years then appointed First Mate.

I left the "Warrego" and joined the "Glenworth". She was a happy little ship. From the "Glenworth" I was appointed to the "Eurimbla".

I then had the opportunity to join the Queensland Navy and decided to accept.

For three years I was the Navigating Officer and only Lieutenant of the "Gayundah" until she was laid up and the 'White Ensign hauled down.

After three months I was appointed a Government Agent in the Labour Trade and remained in that service for about ten years. Not a very happy time with several shipwrecks, being amongst natives, being shot at and other little troubles. If asked to describe the manners and customs of the natives I would answer like Marriett – Manners they have none and their customs are beastly.

The labour trade being terminated I rejoined the A.U.S.N. Company but forward promotion slow on account of my loss of seniority - Second Mate one day and Master the next on account of my exemption certificate.

I applied and joined the Pilot Service in Brisbane. My boys being small at the time were overjoyed. Father was going to be a "Pirate". I was in the service for twenty years.

At the beginning of the Great War I volunteered for naval duty but was kept in Moreton Bay. Two of my sons were with me the eldest Harry the first to join the Army. The other two, Sydney and Victor joined a year later. Harry was severely wounded at Gallipoli and died in a Military Hospital on Malta.

I received the General Service Medal and promoted to Commander when the War was over.

Later I had to retire from the Pilot Service on account of age.