

“Pitcairn: Survival by Ship”

A talk given by Herbert Ford, Director, Pitcairn Islands Study Center,
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This brief study of Pitcairn’s maritime history presupposes that the ships that called at Pitcairn Island were instruments of its survival, were, perhaps, even a major factor in the island’s survival over the years. My study of this survival factor runs right from the time of the first recorded ship sighting on the island in May of 1795, until the cargo-container ship Palessa’s call, arriving from Peru on December 22 of 2010.

But in reality, even before 1795 there was at least one ship that had contributed to Pitcairn’s survival: she was HMAV Bounty, and when she was stripped of whatever goodies she had on board and they were brought ashore in the ending days of 1789, those items and implements and seeds and what-have-you all certainly contributed substantially to the early years’ survival of our favorite island.

Some will think my hypothesis has too much assumption in it, and that may be, but I believe a careful look at the more than 3,500 ships that called at Pitcairn during the period of this study will prove I’m “spot on” as some here in the audience today would say. This is true because the study reveals that multiplied hundreds of ships among the thousands that called brought food, medicines, physicians, nurses, teachers, preachers; materials of all kinds, helpful governmental leaders, a stray cow here, a horse there, and, yes, too, uncounted numbers of ravenous, big Polynesian rats. And it was not just the ships that brought help to the island, but also many vessels that helped by taking hundreds of Pitcairners away from the island; Pitcairners who were ill - often dangerously ill - or others, folk who had great need to get away to the outside world because of other pressing problems.

The ships themselves were never the survival agents, of course; we don’t think of a ship that of itself can be of help like we humans might give succor, but some of the many calling ships at Pitcairn seemed to come powerfully close to using their own muscles of iron and rope and steel to help.

Take the ungainly-looking supply tender Southern Salvor. She did what no other vessel had or yet has done in proportion for Pitcairn. On April 21, 2005, that ship – guided by its captain to be sure - allowed itself to be maneuvered in so dangerously close to the massive rocks surrounding The Landing at Bounty Bay hard under Ship’s Landing Point. There she began the super-dangerous off-loading of the heaviest construction equipment ever landed from a ship onto the Rock of the West in a feat seems almost human to some. As a result of that action a heavy rock crusher, and an equally heavy cement-mixer vehicle were successfully landed by the combined skills of the Salvor’s crew, and the bravery and superb seamanship of the Pitcairn men who manned a cobbled-together barge they had skillfully constructed to ferry the equipment the short distance from the Salvor to The Landing.

The result of that all but impossible survival accomplishment was the taming of the vexing ordeal of travel up and down the too often terribly dusty or dangerously muddy, steep dirt road from The Landing, up the Hill of Difficulty to The Edge and on into the village of Adamstown. After making use of the equipment brought by Salvor to lay down an all-weather concrete topping on the road, no longer did the Pitcairners have to endure the choking clouds of dust of summer, or the sea of slithering, red mud in the winter. The Southern Salvor was truly an agent of salvation for Pitcairn Island.

So, yes, the ships calling at Pitcairn can sometimes be thought of themselves as the survival agents of our favorite island. A long line of ships of the Royal Navy in the 19th century belong in the survival-by-ship category. Among them would be her majesty's ships Portland, Hycainth, Constance, Virago, Spy, Calypso and others, most of them ordered be ships of mercy to the Pitcairn people by the good-hearted Admiral de Horsey, commander of the British Pacific Station. And also in that category would be, among yet others, the numerous motor ships of the Blue Star Line – the New Zealand Star, the Albion Star, Auckland Star, Napier Star and lots of others. Pitcairners rejoiced when one of the "Star" ships appeared off Ship's Landing Point, for they knew that every Blue Star ship carried a surgeon on board, and that the ships' medicine cache was always full of life-saving medicines. The Star ships undoubtedly saved a number of Pitcairner lives, in addition to dropping lots of coin, dunnage timber, and other goodies on the island, some of it in exchange for Pitcairner-made crafts, and island produce.

At other times it was the cargoes the calling ships carried that meant survival to Pitcairn. A prime example would be the appearance off the island of Admiral Richard E. Byrd's U.S.S. Northstar on December 13, 1939. The Pitcairners were not actually starving when Admiral Byrd called, but, according to him, they were "badly in need of certain food and medical supplies. "The necessary medical and dental attention was given by the medical officers of the Antarctic Service on the ship," Byrd reported. Assistance was also given in overhauling the island's radio receiver and in repairing a disabled generator. And when the Northstar departed Pitcairn, she had on board Arthur Christian, a one-time Chief Magistrate of the island, who was suffering serious eye trouble, and whose wife had died of an unknown disease of the stomach just four days before the Northstar had arrived.

And at yet at other times it was the people in the ships who were the survival heroes of Pitcairn Island.

One of those heroes who came time after time to the island in his ships was a man who did so much for Pitcairn that fellow captains of the shipping company he sailed for began calling him "Pitcairn" – "Pitcairn Jones" they began calling him, decidedly a term of respect. And no wonder, for Captain Arthur C. Jones, who became the commodore of the Shaw Savill & Albion line before his retirement, called at Pitcairn more than 100 times, his first call coming 'way back on May 5, 1919, as a young apprentice in Ellerman and Bucknell's steel screw steamer Katuna. Commodore Jones last Pitcairn call came in 1964; that last call was his 53rd at Pitcairn as commander of several of Shaw Savill &

Albion's vessels, most notably the line's two passenger cargo-liners named Corinthic One and Two. That last call of Jones' was a truly memorable one, for before it happened the Pitcairners had secretly contacted Shaw Savill's Lord Sanderson and gotten him to order Arthur Jones to go ashore, for never before the captain actually been on the island – he was too concerned with the safety of his ships due to the steady drift of currents from west to east just off Pitcairn, and so he had consistently refused to leave the bridge while his ships lay to off the island.

“This was a great thrill, being my 53rd visit to Pitcairn in the Corinthic,” Captain Jones wrote. “The islanders often invited me ashore, but as we never anchored and merely drifted close inshore, I could not leave the vessel. I told them (the Pitcairners) my Chief Officer might leave and maroon me there! At Pitcairn we normally lay with the stern of the ship toward the land, in order to simplify the maneuver if we were drifting shoreward – I'd give her a kick in the pants if needed (by quickly ordering the engine room for power to move the vessel away from the shore),” Jones wrote. “The ladders which I ordered hung over the ship's side were always placed on the prearranged lee side to make it easier for the Pitcairn people to board the ship (the lee side being away from the winds, the winds being broken by the entire windward side of the ship). Normally very little maneuvering was required after the ship was in position.”

So how did Arthur Jones help Pitcairn survive?. Here's part of the answer from the Fiji Times newspaper in 1952, on the occasion of Captain Jones' first call at Pitcairn as commander of the brand new Corinthic II: “Captain A. Jones, a master mariner of 32 years' sailing experience between Britain and New Zealand, is teaching Pitcairn Islanders how to stop their island from disappearing into the sea by erosion. Cause of the erosion was the number of half-wild goats which roam the island, eating the lush vegetation. Captain Jones voluntarily undertook the task of teaching the islanders how to prevent their island disappearing under foot about five years ago. He took a small shipment of young trees to the island. This shipment was successfully planted by the islanders and on each trip from New Zealand since then he has taken more – mostly Norfolk Pines, but also several other kinds, and, recently, Wattle tree seedlings. ‘Trees grow three times as fast on Pitcairn as they do in New Zealand,’ Jones commented. Protective fences were erected around each tree to prevent the goats from eating them, and children on the island were each given a tree to look after.”

So Captain “Pitcairn” Jones turned Pitcairn from a barren-looking, erosion-ridden, unsightly place to one that today offers lush greenness over most of its surface..

Jones also gave the Pitcairners often repeated help by winching the Pitcairn longboats up onto the Corinthic's decks and housing their crews as the ship made its way to Henderson Island, there to drop off the boats and the islanders so they could harvest Miro wood logs for the making of their island crafts. And always, Jones would lay to nearby until he could see that the Pitcairners had successfully jumped the tricky reef at Henderson and gotten inside where they had clear water to make their way to shore. That simple act of standing by to lend assistance should there be an accident on the reef,

regardless of the dent it put in the schedule of his large passenger ship, says as much as anything about the quality of Jones' humanitarian concern for the Pitcairn people

In addition, this master mariner took aboard his ships, on rare but singularly helpful occasion, desperately ill Pitcairners who needed emergency medical treatment in New Zealand or Panama hospitals.

No wonder Jones stands at the head of the list of those who have helped Pitcairn survive. For their part, in typical Pitcairn fashion, the Pitcairners have returned lasting honor to Captain Jones - goodness for goodness - by naming a point of land on their island in his name. "Jones Point," they call it.,

Others who called at the island went ashore to help in emergency situations, or did yeoman service for the Pitcairn people over a period of time. In that regard, one thinks quickly of Dr. "Brick" Southworth who, after earlier having arrived at the island on Captain Irving John's famed schooner Yankee, sometime later voluntarily returned to the island for six months to give needed, in-depth medical help. Southworth's most interesting and helpful experience on the island is told in the privately printed, limited-edition of "A Doctors Letters from Pitcairn, 1937," that you'll find on sale here at the conference. And, too, one could name a number of other physicians who gave truly selfless service to ailing Pitcairners over the years.

And, of course there were others than medics who came on the survival ships: school teacher Hattie Andre's name comes quickly to mind - the little lady after whom Pitcairn's painted "Hattie leaves" are named, whose name just happens to also grace one of our women's residence halls on the campus here at Pacific Union College. Hattie arrived at the island off the Seventh-day Adventist missionary schooner Pitcairn in 1893 in the midst of a typhus epidemic, only to find that her services as a nurse, and a cobbler of coffins in which to bury the dead was needed in far greater measure than for any teaching she might do. There was plenty of room for that after the epidemic had run its course.

And in terms of individual service by those who came by ship and stayed to help, consider the fellow who showed off the island one sunny day in the 1800s in an 18-ton sloop out of Peru, along with a sickly American who called himself "Captain" Noah Bunker. The fellow we're talking about was George Hunn Nobbs, and his contribution to the survival of Pitcairn is inestimable. Teacher, pastor, healer, arbitrator, ambassador, Nobbs was all of that and much more. A promising fellow who had previously done considerable naval service - some of it truly heroic - Nobbs gave up the promise of wealth and possible fame, because he saw a need among the people on that tiny Rock of the West, folk who were all but lost out there in the no-where-ness of the South Pacific Ocean.

How much Nobbs really gave up we'll really never know, but we do know a good bit about the value of his service to the Pitcairn people, and what it cost him - a great cost it was.

With the brigantine Jules Roseville, when it departed from its call at Pitcairn in 1844, Nobbs sent this indication of the poverty his service had reduced him to a fellow clergyman in Valparaiso:

“My stock of clothing which I brought from England (in 1828) is, as you may suppose, very nearly exhausted, and I have no friends there to whom I can with propriety apply for more. Until the last three years it was my custom to wear a black coat on the Sabbath; but since that period I have been obliged to substitute a nankeen jacket of my own making. My only remaining coat, which is quite threadbare, is reserved for marriages and burials, so that it is customary to say when a wedding is going to take place, ‘Teacher, you will have to put on your coat next Sunday,’ which is equivalent to informing me that a couple are to be married.”

George Nobbs became destitute, penniless, without any of the material things of life we often treasure; he was even banished from Pitcairn for a time by the notorious, dictatorial Joshua Hill, only to return to his service for the islanders the very first chance he got: that’s service friends, service that rivals anything done by a Livingstone, or Tom Dooley, or Albert Schweitzer, or any other great humanitarian you can name. And when the Pitcairners all went off to Norfolk Island in 1856, their teacher-turned-pastor George Hunn Nobbs went with them on the Morayshire, after weeping inconsolable at the grave of his beloved son Reuben whose remains had to be left behind on Pitcairn. There in that new island home far, far to the west- northwestward of Pitcairn , Nobbs continued give unstinting service to the Pitcairners until his death in 1884.

And who else might we name among the heroes of Pitcairn service, those who either came on the ships or who guided the ships themselves into helpful service. In this latter category one’s mind skitters back to a round faced, roly-poly-looking fellow in Cristobal of the Panama Canal Zone. Gerald De Leo Bliss, the postmaster at Cristobal, had somehow heard that it was taking a half to a full year or more for mail to reach the Pitcairn people from other parts of the world, and it often took longer than that for mail from Pitcairn to reach the outside world.

His mind returning to this problem time and again, Gerald Bliss suddenly thought of a possible solution: scores of ship were calling at Cristobal before transiting through the Panama Canal from the Atlantic into the Pacific Ocean. Bliss decided he would start buttonholing every ship captain he could contact, asking if the captain’s ship was possible going anywhere near Pitcairn Island on its voyage through the Pacific Ocean. If the ship was going fairly close to Pitcairn, wouldn’t the captain agree to divert perhaps only a relatively few miles and drop a packet of mail off for the people there, Bliss asked.

Once he started asking, the good-natured postmaster found that captain after captain agreed to drop off mail at Pitcairn Island, and most of them also agreed to pick up Pitcairn’s outbound mail, and carry it to their next port of call from where it could be sent on its way to its destination. In the face of Gerald Bliss’s relentless questioning, mail to

Pitcairn began to move from its point of origin to the island in a matter of a few weeks rather than months or more.

About the ship Wangaretta, which had brought an especially quick delivery of mail to the island, Mrs. Richard Christian wrote to Postmaster Bliss' wife: "We are getting letters from all over the world in a short time now. I received one from India per the Wangaretta written in August. This is the 6th dispatch of mails we have had forwarded to us by your kind husband ... Never in this island's history have we been so kindly favored by anyone. Indeed we do not feel as isolated as we used to be."

The Pitcairn islanders, always quick to know a good thing when they saw, began asking Postmaster Bliss, and more particularly his outgoing wife, if they wouldn't also act as purchasing agents for the island's needs. As the Blisses quickly agreed to this additional role, clothing, agricultural tools, pieces of furniture and scores of other items began to be brought to Pitcairn by helpful ship captains Postmaster Bliss had contacted.

We're quick to recognize the people whose hearts were moved to help the Pitcairners of course, but it is worth remembering that it was always the ships that brought those people to our attention, or were otherwise the vehicles of that help to the island.

And while the ships that helped Pitcairn survive were not always large, among the smaller ones there were those which likewise "got the job done," as we say. Take the sleek, black-hulled, clipper-brigantine Nautilus of Captain Vincent Micheli, for example. The Nautilus which Micheli sailed out of Chilean waters to do trading throughout Polynesia, moved swiftly from one island to another, buying here to trade there, then racing off to yet another isle where a bargain purchase could be made or where there were people who would buy.

The Pitcairn islanders saw the fast-looking Nautilus come round the island from the northwest to stand off Bounty Bay for trading on a fairly basis in the late 1880's. Often aboard Nautilus along with the good-hearted Captain Micheli was his attractive, 20-something-year-old wife Rita.

A close friendship developed between the Pitcairners and Micheli, in no small part because of the kindly way he treated the islanders, and his practice of letting those who were a bit short of cash buy on credit until their finances improved.

Then in early September of 1887, as they swarmed aboard the Nautilus to trade, the Pitcairners found a concerned Captain Micheli watching over his wife, Rita, now ridden with fever. He couldn't take adequate care of her at sea he told the islanders, and though he hated the thought, he felt it was best that she go ashore for the much better care the Pitcairn women could give her. Heavy of heart, and now alone, Micheli set the black-hull speedster's sails for Rikitea on Mangareva off to the west, hoping that on his return to Pitcairn he'd find his beloved Rita healthy and ready for the busy life that came with being a South Seas trader. But it was not to be: Rita Micheli's health there on Pitcairn

gradually failed, and before long her life slipped away into the endless shadow of death. Today one finds her aging headstone there in the Pitcairn Island Cemetery: “Rita Micheli, Age 23” it reads.

Similar in sadness was the case of Eliza C. Palmer, the wife of Captain George Palmer of the Nantucket whale ship *Mariner* who came whale hunting in the Middle whale fishery Grounds that comprised a large part of the Pacific Ocean off Pitcairn Island in the middle of the 19th Century. Eliza Palmer had been ailing with consumption for some time before her husband realized that she was really seriously ill. Finally, in desperation, he hove the *Mariner* to off Pitcairn, and charged the womenfolk of the island to do the best they could for her. And that they did, but it was not enough. On September 27, 1850 Eliza passed to her rest. “An affectionate mother, wife, daughter, sister,” reads the stone marking her grave which is today well out of sight, right under the Public Hall there on Pitcairn. Captain Bercaw, who is with us here today, was good enough at my request some years ago to have wiggled his way under the public hall to photograph Eliza’s headstone there.

Knowing that her life was ebbing away, Eliza Palmer penned a poem of great beauty that expressed her love for her husband and her un-wavering belief that she would one day be a citizen of the Heavenly home. By dint of what the whalers called “gamming” – passing information from one whaling ship to another, first in the around Pitcairn, and then throughout the Pacific and Atlantic ocean areas it had been heard and had inspired captains and crews in most of the hundreds of ships of the huge American whaling fleet. Ultimately the verses made their way back to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where Eliza’s love and hope in a future afterlife was printed in the widely-read *Whaleman’s Shipping News*, the news letter that tied together the families of the hundreds of whale ships in the American whaling fleet.

Of the slightly more than 3,500 ships we have identified as calling at Pitcairn over the 220-year period of our study – from the arrival of *HMAV Bounty* in 1790, to the Pitcairn call of the cargo/part container ship *Palessa* at in December of 2010 – it might be judged by some that not a large number of those many ships contributed in a truly significant way to Pitcairn’s survival. In reality, though, the number that did “save” Pitcairn – in the sense that lives were saved, or hunger assuaged, or protection given from possible demise – the number is large and significant – the survival factor for the Pitcairn people considerable.

In the number of the ships whose calls were very significant to Pitcairn’s survival, one must surely include many of the ships of the New Zealand Shipping Company, and the Shaw Savill and Albion line. For decades during the first half of the 20th century the cargo-passenger liners of these two companies brought literally tons of supplies to the island, took scores of Pitcairners to hospitals, or were otherwise agents of survival. They had on board their ships thousands of people who were purchasers of Pitcairn crafts and curios, and they hoisted longboats and Pitcairner crews onto their decks in repeated acts that erased the danger of the Pitcairners having to make small boat voyages in open some treacherous seas to Henderson Island to gather Miro wood logs for the creation of

Pitcairn wood crafts. These “survival” vessels would surely include all the Rangi ships of The New Shipping Company: the Rangitane, the Rangitiki, the Rangitata, the Rangitoto, and also the Remuera and the two Ruahines, all of which brought help of many kinds to the island, and at least an appreciable degree of wealth too. And likewise, Shaw Savill & Albion Company’s Ionics, Athenics, Corinthics, Gothics and Tamaroas, along with the Akaroas and Coptics in their hundreds of callings at Pitcairn on both outbound and homebound voyages from New Zealand and Australia and to England deserve major “survival” mention.

And to the names of the ships of these lines we must of course add the names of their Pitcairn-friendly captains: Captain “Pitcairn” Jones, certainly; and J. J. Cameron, A. E. Lettington, George Kinnell, E. H. Hopkins, Bristow Forbes Moffatt, E. A. Holland, and a host of others, seafarers who held it to be an almost sacred calling to make Pitcairn Island a part of every Pacific-crossing voyage they commanded.

Lastly, in this all-to-brief review of the ships and their people who helped sustain our favorite island, let’s remember the people of many ports surely, but especially those in one special place who, through almost all of the era of sailing ships, did perhaps more for Pitcairn than those of any other place. They were the people by the Golden Gate, the good people of San Francisco, right close by us here. They loaded onto scores of ships setting sail southward tons of the stuff of survival for Pitcairn. Some of it, to be sure, was in heartfelt repayment for the courage and open-heartedness of the Pitcairners in caring for ships crews that had come out from San Francisco and had gone shipwrecked on others of the Pitcairns – Oeno and Ducie – and, yes, on Pitcairn itself: the Acadia, the Khandeish, the Cornwallis, the Oregon, and the St. James. But just as much of the stuff of Pitcairn’s survival from San Franciscans was contributed by way of pure, unadulterated altruism. Ship after ship, setting sail from San Francisco for Liverpool or Le Havre, for Falmouth, Queenstown or a score of other European and U.S. East Coast ports in the last half of the 19th century, carried cloth and clothing, agricultural implements, lumber, medicine, food, religion, and what have you to Pitcairn, all courtesy of the generous hearts of the people of the port of San Francisco.

So would Pitcairn Island have survived without this humanitarian outpouring from off the decks of thousands of ships which came to Pitcairn Island? Perhaps your study of the island’s history has already given you a clear-cut answer that the question. Mine certainly has. Many thanks to the ships, ship masters, crews, passengers and good hearted people everywhere – you have been salvation to our favorite island.