In the Glorious Days of the Sailing Ship

Yankee Clippers Graceful
Craft of Great Speed

Although there still are a few old square-riggers sailing about the seven seas, whaling up to Europe from Australia in the annual grain race or engaged now and then in the nitrate trade, the glorious days of the sailing ship are definitely over. And what days those were!

The windjammers of today—what are left of them—are but poor imitations of the sleek, speedy craft that eighty years ago, under the force of their bellying sails, drove across the stormy Atlantic, around the treacherous Horn, or to far-off China and back so that New England could have its tea. The few sailing ships that remain today, with their makeshift crew and awkward lines, are to the clipper ships of yester-year as the tortoise is to the hare. The clipper ships (so named from their sharp, overhanging boxes) were in fact so speedy under favorable sailing conditions that they frequently outdistanced the earliest of the steamships.

England as well as America had clipper ships. There was great rivalry between the craft of the two countries. The Britishers built stout, swift vessels to ply the Atlantic and to make the distant voyages between the British Isles and Australia, India, and China. But it took the Yankee shipbuilders of Boston, New York, Baltimore, Salem, New Bedford, and other ports to produce the speediest of craft. Over a number of decades the American shipyards turned out literally hundreds of these ships. The Yankee clipper as a rule was narrower of beam than the British vessel, she frequently carried more sail for her tonnage than the Britisher, and more likely than not was swifter under sail.

Of all the clipper ships built in this country the largest was the Great Republic, which was launched in the Donald McKay shipyards, Boston, on Oct. 4, 1853. This vessel was 335 feet long, had a beam of barely 38 feet, and was rated at 4,200 tons. Although the Great Republic was an extremely fast sloop, she was not so speedy as some of the smaller vessels. The Mary Whidbey, for example, was a fast craft. In 1855 she actually landed passengers in England in less than 12½ days out of Baltimore. The James Baines in 1854 sailed from Boston to Liverpool in 32 days 6 hours. Among the clipper queens of the sea was the Dreadnought, which is said to have sailed from Sandy Hook to Queenstown in 9 days 13 hours. This record, however, is doubted by the best of authorities on the subject of sailing speeds. It would seem from glancing over the records for eastward trans-Atlantic passages that anything under 16 days was amazingly speedy. The westward passage, because of prevailing winds, generally required more time than the eastward.

The Golden West in 1856 arrived at San Francisco just 20 days out from the eastern coast of Japan, having averaged 243 miles a day. The Flying Cloud, another famous clipper, sailed from San Francisco to Honolulu in 8 days 8½ hours. Apparently the fastest passage across the entire Pacific was that of the bark Mermaid, which in 1865 reached San Francisco just 31 days out of Shanghai, China. The Sea Witch sailed from Hongkong, China, to New York in 74 days 14 hours.

The previously mentioned James Baines, a Boston-built ship, in 1855 sailed westward from Liverpool to Melbourne in 63 days. The Lightning the year before had clipped off the distance from Melbourne to Liverpool in exactly the same number of days. Modern sailing craft that engage in the annual grain race from Australia to England (vessels of the type of the ill-fated Hesper Cécile, pictured upon this page) are considered to be making good time if they complete their voyage around the Horn in 100 days.

At right: Reproduction of Frank Vining Smith's famous marine masterpiece, "Grand Old Days of Sail."