

Offbeat Oregon: Letter from afar gave young traveler’s family a view to a shanghaiing

By Finn J.D. John
for *The Sentinel*

Sometime around 1885 or 1886, a hand-some-but-diffi-dent-looking young man named Carroll Beebe got on a westbound train in southern Minnesota, on his way to new adventures in the young frontier state of Oregon. But the adventure he would find in the Beaver State wasn't even close to what he had in mind as he stepped aboard that train.

Carroll Beebe's story is unusual because of its very usualness. Stories like it were so common in the 1880s that newspapers didn't usually pick them up, and the people living them didn't usually bother to write them down — if they could write; Carroll's is almost by definition the story of a poor boy, and in the 1880s poor folks were often illiterate. Moreover, there was a strong bias among the new state's boosters and business interests against publishing stories like this, because it's really not the kind of story that encourages people to come to Oregon.

The only reason we know Carroll's story is through his family back home in Minnesota, courtesy of the dean of living Portland waterfront historians, Barney Blalock, who shares the family's story in his book, *The Oregon Shanghaiers* (History Press, 2014). Carroll was the oldest son of Vernon and Sarah Beebe; but he and the other kids were orphaned when

he was 11, and they grew up with aunts and other relatives. There must not have been much for him in the way of opportunities in Minnesota; or maybe he simply had an itchy foot. In any case, having heard and read about the great opportunities in the young state of Oregon, he determined to go there.

And so, off he went. The Northern Pacific Railroad brought Carroll through the Rocky Mountains and along the Columbia River to Portland. Upon arrival there, Carroll found himself at large in a wild and rough-sawn frontier city, with many options before him. He could travel south along the Willamette and find work in one of the bucolic agricultural towns there; he could go north to Puget Sound, up in the Washington Territory; he could sign onto a logging crew and plunge into the woods. Or, of course, he could stay right there. Good hard workers were always in demand in frontier Portland, although it could be a dangerous place, particularly along the North End waterfront.

But instead of doing any of these things, Carroll, for some unknown reason, decided to journey to the only town on the West Coast more dangerous for greenhorns than the one he was in: Astoria.

For months his family back home heard nothing from their wandering scion. Then, in the summer of 1887, a letter arrived addressed to Carroll's cousin Vernon Gilmore, sent from a faraway foreign port (probably Santa Fe, Venezuela).

“Dear Sir,” it read, “I sit to inform you that your cousin, Carrel Beby, was drowned off Cape Horn, from the American barque *Xenia*, of Boston ... Your cousin fell from the fore topgallant yard on the morning of Feb. 12, he being sent up by the second mate to loosen the sail. He missed his hold, fell overboard, and was drowned.”

The letter was from a sailor or named Donald McGregor, young Carroll Beebe's best (and, most likely, only) friend aboard the *Xenia*. It goes on to give a few clues as to what happened to young Carroll in Astoria to result in this abrupt change of vocation. It apparently started when he checked into the wrong boardinghouse.

“Your cousin was put aboard under false pretenses, by Mrs. Grant, who keeps a sailor's boardinghouse in Astoria,” the letter continues. “She asked him if he would go aboard and answer to another man's name. She said she would send the other man aboard that night when he came down from Portland in the steam boat but she never sent him.”

What appears to have happened here is, upon arrival in Astoria, Carroll Beebe checked into a boardinghouse run by a matronly woman named Bridget Grant — a onetime auburn-haired

beauty still striking and charismatic in her mid-50s. A widow who kept her boardinghouse with the help of her grown sons, she certainly looked the part of a standard-issue boardinghouse landlady. But, of course, her boardinghouse marketed itself particularly to sailors.

Now, in the 1800s, as you may know, sailors' boardinghouses were different from regular boardinghouses. An ordinary boardinghouse was like a long-term no-frills bed-and-breakfast and charged weekly or monthly rates. A sailor's boardinghouse, on the other hand, let people stay “on credit.” This means one paid nothing for room and board, but a tab was carefully kept and when the day came when a ship captain needed a man or two, the guest was presented with a choice: Pay up or discharge the debt by shipping out.

That's the theory, anyway. In practice, “pay up” often wasn't an option even if the guest had the resources to do it. Ship captains paid handsomely for sailors — reimbursing the room-and-board fees plus a generous service fee that was popularly called “blood money,” and which ranged from \$30 or so up to over \$100 depending on market conditions. And these, of course, are 1880s dollars, each worth about \$28.50 in modern money. So, a boardinghouse operator had a powerful incentive to avoid having guests be on a cash basis.

We don't know if young Carroll was staying at Bridget's place “on credit” or if he was paying weekly or monthly for room and board. It seems likely, given the nature of young footloose men, that he was on credit — but the fact that Bridget resorted to a rather dirty trick to get him to ship out suggests that perhaps he was not.

What she did was essentially to ask him, as a favor, to muster aboard the barque *Xenia* as a crew member to hold the place of a sailor she was bringing in from Portland. The sailor wasn't going to make it in time, she told him, and if he wasn't there for roll call, she would lose the \$60 fee (worth roughly \$1,700 in 2019 dollars) she was due for her services. Would he take his place at roll call, just long enough for her sailor to arrive?

Sure, he would. “I been going to sea for a number of years, I told your cousin what sort of woman Mrs. Grant was,” Donald McGregor wrote, in his letter. “He had been what us sailors call ‘shanghied’ by her ... The captain refused to let him go ashore, saying he had paid Mrs. Grant \$60 for him, and that he would have to make the best of it.”

There must have been some concern about potential liability, though, because immediately after the drowning the captain of the *Xenia* confiscated Carroll's sea chest and all his belongings, then took the rather eyebrow-raising

step of confiscating a packet of papers that Carroll had entrusted to Donald McGregor. Donald suspected that the captain was keen to hush the whole thing up and wanted no word to get back to the young sailor's family; and he turned out to be absolutely right. Luckily, a card with cousin Vernon Gilmore's address on it had fallen out of the packet before the captain robbed Donald of it, and he was able to use the address on it to get word out.

The captain was probably lucky. Had Carroll's parents been yet alive, there likely would have been some trouble over this. But part of the reason Bridget Grant was so successful for so long as a boardinghouse operator in both Portland and Astoria was her personal touch. It is extremely unlikely that she would have shanghai'd Carroll without first making sure there was no one in the world who cared enough about him to make trouble from four states away.

(Sources: *The Oregon Shanghaiers: Columbia River Crimping from Astoria to Portland*, a book by Barney Blalock, published in 2014 by The History Press.)

Finn J.D. John teaches at Oregon State University and writes about odd tidbits of Oregon history. For details, see www.finnjohn.com. To contact him or suggest a topic: finn2@offbeatoregon.com or 541-357-2222.

Opening!

Friday, March 29th

That's Right THIS FRIDAY!

We are still digging ourselves out from the storm. But, we are anxious to start another season and can't wait to see you all.

You'll find what you need to get your garden going.

Berries

Fruit Trees

Seeds

Shrubs

Roses

Veggies

Full Line of Produce

Perennials

Annuals

Rhodies

Try our new! Lemon Zucchini Bread & Banana Zucchini Bread

Come enjoy some coffee, ice cream, or a freshly baked pie in our EXPANDED indoor seating area.

Check out our freshly baked goods

Friday Farm Family Fun Day

Umpqua Ice Cream only \$1.50

Tuesdays: Senior Day! Welcome all Seniors 10% off Plants & \$1.50 ice cream

Fresh Baked FRIDAYS Pies, Brownies, Apple/Zuc Bread & More!

Shady Oaks

Plants & Produce

It's the Place to Be!!!

Open 10-5:30 Monday-Saturday 11-5:30 Sunday

77380 Hwy 99 So, CG • 541-942-5004



ALLIGATOR AUCTION

SATURDAY - March 30th

11AM-4PM

Aprovecho/Stove Tech Stove,

Ashley rocker/recliners, dog food,

Hunting rifle/knife, Shilo Inn,

Gift Certificates for Food,

Restaurants and Books.

Many items in KNND's front window.

To get a bidder number call KNND

between 2-5pm at 541-942-2468.

KNND Alligator Radio trade auction

is Saturday March 17th

from 11am until 4pm.



The Alligator Auction promises

fun and great deals for

businesses and listeners

A percent of the proceeds to benefit South Lane Dental Clinic