

37 years of chantey singing



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Hello chantey singers. As I pass the torch to Park Ranger Casey Fenton, I want to reflect on the 37 years I've been at the chantey sings; what they mean to me and perhaps what they might mean to you. I hope these ruminations of my experiences might strike a responsive chord with some of your own experiences.

I came to my first chantey sing on Saturday, November 4, 1989, a date burned into my memory; a night which changed my life. Two friends of mine from the Starry Plough pub Irish music sessions where I played fiddle, Simon Spalding and Beth Clark, called me up one night and asked if I wanted to come to a chantey sing in San Francisco. I'd never been to one, though I liked chanteys, so I was game. When we arrived at Hyde Street Pier and went aboard the Balclutha, there were around 70-80 people singing the chantey "Whiskey Johnny," led by a NPS Ranger with guitar. I had visited Hyde Street Pier in the 60s and once in the 70s during its State Park days, and had visited the Balclutha several times with my parents and sister, beginning around 1958 when she was docked further down the wharf. I did not realize until I saw the ranger that the ships were part of this NPS site, which shows what a large gap in the years since I last visited the ships.

I was immediately struck with what a special event and place this was for group singing. I decided right then and there that I wanted to be involved at the sings. During the break I went to the galley for hot beverages, and was warmly greeted with a smile and a cup of apple cider from Alice Watts (R.I.P.), who was the volunteer responsible for organizing a volunteer galley crew to heat and serve cider, chocolate, tea and coffee. At the end of the sing at midnight, I went up to the ranger, Celeste Bernardo, introduced myself, and told her I wanted to not only come to more sings, but become a ranger at the park. It was an immediate shift in career goal! That's how profound the impact was! Celeste suggested I first volunteer, which I did for two years, 1990-92. It turned out that Celeste was also in the local Irish music scene as a concertina player, and we became fast friends.

For the Summer, 1991, I crewed aboard a replica of the BOUNTY, sailing the East Coast. That experience and coming back to volunteering was a confidence builder, convincing me more than ever that this was the career choice which represented who I am. Celeste began a multi-Saturdays training program for volunteers who wanted to join the newly-formed Living History program, which I joined.

I was hired as a ranger in June, 1992. By that time, Celeste had taken a new position at GGNRA, and Ranger Revell Carr became the chantey sing leader. Revell mentored me in shipboard skills which we used in public demonstrations, as well mentoring me in how chanteys were used in multiple tasks, such as singing them at the capstan, pumps, raising sail, and up aloft. When Revell left for graduate school in 1996, he passed the torch to me for the chantey sings. Most of the sings were held in the hold of the C.A. THAYER, with four per year on average held aboard BALCLUTHA. A great spirit of group singing flourished on either vessel, but the THAYER held a special place in the hearts of attendees for its ambience and as the founding home of the chantey sings. Galley beverages were heated and served onboard either vessel depending on where the sing was held. Eventually all the sings moved to the BALCLUTHA for its accessibility, and as the THAYER went into years of work in dry-dock. When the chantey sing outgrew capacity, it moved to the ferry, where we averaged 150-200 attendees.

Through the 37 years in being at the sings, 30 of them running them, I've seen kids grow into adults, shy people emerge from their shell and begin to lead chanteys, attendees become inspired to begin volunteering and then become hired, such as in my own experience, and a community of sea music enthusiasts flourish and bond with each other. At least one marriage came about as they first met each other at the chantey sing! I've seen more people of color come to the sings in the last 10-12 years or so, more than from when I started. Many people have come and gone, from either moving away, or having the sings at a particular time in their lives, and have seen people attend for at least as many years as I have, and some going back to the chantey sing's beginning. Those who have passed away are remembered.

A special note about Alice Watts. She was recruited as a park volunteer in 1983, encouraged and invited in by ranger Dave Nettell, the sing's founding ranger. In 1986 Alice began the regular monthly hot beverage service aboard ship, recruiting a volunteer galley crew to heat and serve cider, tea, cocoa and coffee. More than the beverage service alone, Alice and crew were a warm and welcoming presence in the galley. Alice also became an instructor in the park's overnight "Age of Sail" immersive youth education program, and later became Mate aboard the park's restored 1891 scow schooner ALMA.

Alice passed away from cancer in February, 2024. She is sorely missed by family, friends, the chantey sings, current and former volunteers and employees, and in the SF Bay sailing community. We honor her memory at the sings, with a special tribute chantey sing every February. Many thanks to

longtime galley crew members Chris Candell and crew, who keeps Alice's tradition of hot beverage service at the museum sings.

What makes the chantey sing go? Although the ranger sets the welcoming tone of inclusiveness in a non-judgmental event where all are encouraged (but not pressured) to sing, here's the bottom line: What makes the sing go is you, the community who brings your enthusiasm, your voices, and your curiosity to know more about where chanteys are placed in your maritime heritage. If you are relatively new to the chantey sings, I hope you enjoy this new voyage of discovery!

What are your experiences of the chantey sings? When did you start attending, what drew you to attend, and what do the chantey sings mean to you?

To Casey, many thanks to you for taking the helm, the latest in a direct line of chantey sing rangers going back to the founding chantey sing ranger Dave Nettell. Your own voyage of discovery about chantey singing is well underway! Wishing you all fair winds and a following sea, and hope to see you at the sings whenever I'm in town.

- Peter