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The San Francisco Waterfront: A Morality Play Moves On

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THE SAN FRANCISCO WATERFRONT

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A Morality Play Moves On

The Good Old Days

"And so for years we've had a saying for all this, too. 'Face me or face the ladder'."

The longshoreman who said this was always called "Brother Jess" by the rest of us San Francisco longshoremen. Jess was just past sixty and less than two years from retirement when he died of asbestosis in 1978. I went to his funeral as a friend. I also went to represent his union, Local 10 of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union. One man I went with had known Jess for years. He told his widow, two sons, and three daughters what we were all feeling. "I'm sorry. We'll miss him, too. He was always one fine brother," As we left the funeral home, I overheard another longshoreman. "Imagine earnin' that for your tombstone....'One Fine Brother'."

I'd like to tell you something more about Brother Jess because his epitaph was more than fitting. He should be somehow known and remembered. But because he was a kind of model for us all, to speak of him is to also speak in some measure of the life and times of every "man along the shore" in San Francisco. That, too, I've long since come to feel and understand, is a slice of life worth looking at.

* * *

I remember Jess back to 1964 or '65, a year or so after I began longshoring. The gang I worked in as a holdman got dispatched to a five day job aboard the CHINA BEAR. Jess caught the job out of our hiring hall. He was, as we say, a "plug" winch driver. That's what he was when he left us, too.

When working conventional vessels like the CHINA BEAR, you handle a wide variety of cargo. There's always a lot of "general freight" -- all sorts of differing sized crates and boxes of varying weights. Boxed and crated shipments of such variously sized and weighted items as machines and machine parts, furniture, glassware, dishes and ceramics, clothing, sports and hardware items are routinely encountered. Large and quite variously packaged shipments of food -- from 25 pound boxes of Norwegian sardines to 100 pound cartons of frozen New Zealand meat and 750 pound barrels of Greek olives -- are equally common. So, too, are shipments of beer, wines, and liquors, cheeses, teas, coconut and tapioca, tropical fruits, cookies, candy, and tinned desserts. Still larger shipments of many different canned goods are virtually inevitable. A host of industrial and chemical products -- like ignots of aluminum, tin plate, bar steel, pipe and rails, coiled steel, nails, and barrels of pesticides -- are absolutely standard. So, again, are many different types of sacked or bagged commodities -- flour, beans, rice, barley, coffee, nutmeg, pepper, and all sorts of nuts and dried fruit. Baled goods are also very common -- cotton, jute, rubber, rags, gunnies, pulp, and paper. Deck loads of lumber, logs and pilings, farm machinery and construction

equipment, and all sorts of commercial vehicles are almost invariably worked as well.

To move such cargoes to and from shipside, a variety of lift-trucks, tractors, pallet boards, scows, carts, and wagons has long been employed. An even wider variety of nets, slings, bridles, and hooks has also been forever used to hoist the cargo to and from the ship. So, too, are various types of machines, dollies, and hand-trucks, skids, ramps, rollers, tackle, and hand tools finally used to move the cargo between its place of shipboard stow and the area where it can be hoisted or landed by the winch driver.

The diversity of operational circumstances which we for these reasons encounter is again compounded by a wide variety in the shipboard hoisting gear, its capacity, location, and general state of repair. Operational circumstances are very greatly affected, too, by the configuration of the vessel, but this is increasingly so as our work descends from its weatherdeck (its topmost cargo deck) to its shelter deck and then its lower 'tween and finally to its lower hold and "deep tanks". In a loading operation, our sequencing and stowage of cargoes will also be determined by the cargoes to be loaded and discharged at the vessel's subsequent ports-of-call.

Among other things, this variety in circumstance means you'll learn about your winch drivers real quick when working the hold of something like the CHINA BEAR. And because of this, it didn't take very long for even a novice like me to see that Jess was a cracker-jack longshoreman and first rate winchie. It was a good five days. And he had a whole lot to do with that being so.

It's also because of this that I remember Jess on a lot of other jobs, too. But I especially remember when he caught us over in Oakland or up in Richmond discharging what we call "long steel". Now, steel's no picnic, no matter what, but forty to sixty foot I-beams are always a nightmare -- an exceptionally dangerous and fatiguing nightmare -- so on those jobs I was really glad to have him on the winch handles. But whatever the cargo, it was a pleasure to work beneath his gear. He could thread a needle with the cargo hook or the sling-load of cargo suspended from it. He knew what was safe and proper longshoring and would quietly insist upon it when anyone sought to have things otherwise. He was always, as we say, "Johnny-on-the-spot," but never did what winch drivers sometimes try to do and holdmen must resist. He never had to be told "to just lay off trying to run things from them handles way up there." He was there to work with you and help you out. And in that department, like a lot of others, Jess was really good. I guess you could say he was a real fine teacher and always very patient. Maybe even patient to a fault sometimes.

But there was something else about him, too . . .

It maybe took a little longer to see and understand this, but Brother Jess took a wondrous pride in his work. His ability and readiness to help move the cargo -- in what he'd grinningly call "a respectable, union-minded manner" -- was absolutely central to the intense, pervasive, yet quiet self-esteem he so obviously enjoyed. However, his on-going contribution to the work being done was also

a concrete expression of his sense of union and community with us, his fellow workers. For these reasons, men of my generation in the union could presently see his work for what it was -- a cornerstone to his marvelously well-rounded sense of personhood and brotherhood and the waterfront reputation he had long since fashioned for himself. In the language of our domain and turf, Jess was "good people and good to be around". And you only had to work with him to find that out.

What Jess reflected in his work and hence his character was the fundamental axiom of the waterfront he's known since 1944. The imperative of contributing to the work as best you can is rooted in the nature of the technology just described. To work conventional cargoes with conventional shipboard and longshore gear in an efficient, yet safe and sensible manner, requires a number of things. Like any work, it requires a measure of physical strength, dexterity, and stamina. But given this, other things become extremely important. It continually requires the initiative and cooperation of everyone. It frequently calls for an individual, self-directed ingenuity. So, also, a collective innovation. It requires a wide range of skills and experience in every job performed and, of course, an unfailing willingness to bring those inventories into play. If, then, you're anxious to contribute as best you can, you can "face" a man like Jess. You can also begin to fashion your own credentials as "one fine brother". Maybe, like Jess, you'll even become a really good longshoreman, too. However, if you in these ways fail your fellow workers, you can only expect a many-sided social pressure to quit and leave the job. As we

bluntly, if figuratively, say in longshore language, to face and climb the hatch ladder that runs from weatherdeck into the hold.

Given the nature and demands of such work, it follows, too, that each man on the job must be given the opportunity to fully contribute to its performance. Our second axiom has therefore been to listen to one another. Indeed, the patience of a man like Jess is at least partly explained by our need to really hear each other out. As it happens, the egalitarianism of the community thus fashioned -- and the consequent tempering of our individual pride and self-esteem -- has for many years been underwritten by another of our sayings. "When it comes to longshorin', you can always learn and you can always learn from any man."

It was, then, like Brother Jess once said. "In other words, and this we've known for years and years, you've got to do the right thing. You've got to do the work, help the fellas out, and always be ready to learn. Now, this helps the boss, true enough, but we do it to keep our union and with that we know we'll always do okay." Funny how something that was kind of casual can stick with you, but I remember this real well. It was said over lunch on a summer's day in 1967. The gang was loading hides at Pier 45 aboard the CRYSTAL MARU and Jess had caught the job. We'd been talking, as we most always do at lunch, about our work and union. Having put it as well as anyone could, he could also conclude with an elegant simplicity and poignancy. "And so for years and years we've had a saying for all this, too. 'Face me or face the ladder'."

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The sense of personhood and brotherhood that men like Jess enjoyed by reason of their work was also accompanied by an engaging aura of personal autonomy. That circumstance was rooted in the options they had with respect to the time and place of their labor and its concrete nature. The basic option was that of working either from our hiring hall or as a gang member. It was exercised within the framework of some fifteen different job categories, each with a seniority requirement. With the passage of thirty calendar days, this range of options might also be exercised again.

When working from the hall, you "plugged in" for a rotational and therefore equalized dispatch in one particular category. However, on a daily basis you could usually make a selection from many different kinds of work. As a rule, you could also choose your work from a wide range of piers, ships, and cargoes. Frequently, you could choose a starting time of 9 a.m., rather than 8. Sometimes you could even affect your quitting time by choosing what you knew would be a "short" or "long" day's work.

Gang men didn't have these options. They almost always did the work they had joined their gang to perform, like that of a (low seniority) holdman or a (high seniority) lift driver. A gang's rotational dispatch to a particular pier and ship was also determined by the union personnel of the hiring hall. However, since that dispatch was made by phone and well in advance of each job's start, gang mem-

bers could plan their days off. They could also drive directly from home to the job and thereby avoid the time and expense of going to the hall. Gang life was popular, too, because working each job with the same core of men usually made things somewhat safer and easier.

As for working days or on the nightside, that was left to each man, too. Each man also had the daily option of not working at all. Indeed, you only had to work one day out of thirty to keep your place in the workforce. At the same time, you could "replace" yourself during or after the workshift of any job when you felt so inclined. Finally, a leave of absence could invariably be secured and renewed, as could working privileges in every other West Coast port.

The opportunity to in these ways structure one's working life and income and hence one's personal and family life underwrote the autonomy just mentioned. It also produced an absolutely universal sentiment -- "It's the freedom I really like. It's the freedom we've got to do what we want." However, this freedom, like maybe any other, posed a dilemma, too -- "Man, we've even got the freedom to layback completely. I mean we're free to really screw our business up! And if and when we do, well, then we can pack our grip and hit the road for another port and what we think will be another chance. Now, that's a burden! It really is! And its also been the downfall of many a man."

As this perhaps suggests, we have even been known to "invoke" a kind of tongue-in-cheek humor while wrestling with our burden and dilemma. Like I remember discussing this whole thing with a real good

friend I worked with back in the 1960s. Well, we both had to laugh when he finally summed it up for himself towards the end of the shift. "You know, this is like a moment of truth for me. And its downright shameful, too. I mean I'm really in favor of socialism and have been for years. But after bouncin' around the system we've got, I know I wouldn't fit in no more." He paused to shift his weight on a three-high stack of coffee bags. "I mean socialism is serious business and calls for discipline. So, truth to tell, I'd be a disaster after this." He shifted his weight again. "I don't know. Maybe I should see this as our 'Third World'. Maybe that would help. Fact is, I think it will, but Lord know I need some help 'cause the system we've got has damn-near ruined me."

Well, I guess we laughed -- as we did again just recently -- because he had a darn good point. But since it's pretty hard to know what's true or maybe not so true when we speak of these things, the obvious should perhaps be noted. The need to make a living was always there and mostly always pressing. And because of that we only occasionally lived with a modest -- and, to my mind, healthy and forgiveable -- abandon. Indeed, and because there were also great fluctuations in the amount of available work, we again had a saying -- "You'd better take it when it's there." On the other hand, since everyone shared this dilemma and somehow lived the burden of our options for himself, there was also a ready understanding of the more common, if not quite innocent, frailties of men. Hence, too, a pervasive inclination towards humor and forgiveness. In a word, the de-

mands of our work and union were destined for many years to be placed in an exceptionally attractive relief by men like Jess . . . a relief provided by a lively, abiding, and hardwon sense of humanity.

* * *

When I first went longshoring there were a great many men like Jess in Local 10 and a great number of ships like the CHINA BEAR and CRYSTAL MARU. Those circumstances, the options just mentioned, and the benefits of a militant and democratic union would be reason enough to like a job. But there were other reasons, too.

The warehouse district which then lay adjacent the waterfront of San Francisco was a richly colorful and exceptionally vibrant commercial area and neighborhood. There were umpteen cafes and bars on the pierheads and in the first few blocks towards "uptown". And beaucoup stores with "SALVAGE", "ARMY - NAVY SURPLUS", "CLOTHING FOR THE WORKING MAN", and specialty items for seamen, fishermen, and longshoremen. Store-front churches, "missions", and reading rooms, especially for seamen "on the beach," were scattered about. There were pawn shops, gun shops, and bait shops; hotels, each with a weathered posting of their daily, weekly, and monthly rates; boarding houses, rooming houses, and flophouses. "REC AND LOCKER ROOMS" dotted the area. There were movie houses, maybe not first run, but they only cost half a buck and never closed. Liquor stores and corner groceries, newsstands and book stalls, smoke shops and pool halls abounded. The aroma of roasting coffee was always there, as was the pungency of

spices from every exotic corner of the earth. You could always find a card game, dice game, or bookie. You could even pitch pennies. You could always find a pal or two you had worked a ship with just a few days before. You could always find a new political tract or leaflet and someone ready to discuss it. You could always find a place to drop a crab pot or wet a line -- or a place to simply watch the passing parade and the waters of the Bay in solitude.

A little bit up from "the front" was the city's Produce Market. It began to stir at 2 a.m. as workers arrived to open up. Trucks appeared. Their parking and running lights added pinpricks of eerie, lonely, mist-bound color as we headed back to the ships and docks after a 1 a.m., mid-shift supper in Chinatown.

Towards 3 a.m. seamen who had closed the bars on lower Market Street or lower Mission, up in North Beach, or in that remnant of the Barbary Coast, the International Settlement, started to drift good-naturedly through the muffled streets to presently board their dimly lit and gently surging vessels. We were always full of advice for seamen headed for town. That's just being friendly. But, if, like many of us, you've sailed, you know it's really appreciated, too. So when we spotted a small knot of seamen headed back to the front, we'd also hail them to ask about their night on the town. "Hey, mate! Good time?" "Ja! Ja! Gooood time! Gooood town!"

About 4:30 ILWU warehousemen began to drift into the cafes near their hiring hall on the lower end of Commercial Street. It opened at 5. It had some real find wall paintings of men and women working.

Children, too. Dispatching began an hour later. You need an early start for a job in South City or some such place.

Fishermen berthed at the Wharf, at Mission Rock, or in China Basin were by that time well outside the gate. They pulled away from cafes that opened at 3 a.m. to serve them breakfast and steaming coffee. They'd be back with their catch by mid-afternoon, so we'd watch them depart or return when working Pier 45 (which today is hardly used), Pier 50, or the now abandoned banana dock in China Basin. We always enjoyed those scenes.

We'd begin to drift into the bustling, already crowded waterfront cafes around 7 a.m. As was true at break time, lunch, and supper, we broke bread with teamsters, warehousemen, sailors with shoreside duty, ship chandlers and repairmen, tugboat workers, bargemen, railroaders, ship clerks and scalers, and longshore walking bosses. You'd always see someone you hadn't seen for awhile and do some catching up. On a sunny day or pleasant evening, we'd finish up with coffee while sitting outside watching the Bay. When it was cold and rainy, there was the compensation of an especially contagious verve and heartiness. Maybe a shot or two of brandy, too.

The hiring hall and offices of Local 10 were moved from Pier 18 beneath the Bay Bridge to their present site on Fisherman's Wharf in 1959. As compared to its former, run-of-the-mill and over-crowded digs, the local now had two really spacious buildings of unique design. Its new home, together with a fair-sized parking lot, was set on a full city block. It would later be further distinguished by an ex-

traordinary Benny Bufano statue -- a serene St. Francis. Given the Pier 18 situation, this new complex could be advertised as "a monument to the city's labor movement." However, its elected, rank-and-file board of trustees rebelled when asked about wearing tuxedos at the opening ceremony.

When it opened and for some years thereafter, our new home was ringed by a neighborhood of fishermen and fishing families. As is the fashion, you could say their lives were really centered. They had their boats, their slips, and homes. They had their cats, dogs, and parrots. They had the Bay and what lies beyond and hence they had their livelihood. They even had an annual blessing of their boats that somehow seemed to work. There were shops with bait, tackle and marine supplies, repair facilities and dry docks. There were processing plants for fish and other seafoods. There were dockside cafes for a very early breakfast and a beer in the late afternoon. There were even restaurants where neighbors met in the evening to eat, sing, dance, and hoist a couple. It really was, as the signs still say, "a fisherman's wharf." And because we respected and enjoyed their community, we were always made welcome by our neighbors.

It was within such highly textured settings, then, that the relationships we had by reason of our work and union were rounded out and deepened. Indeed, a true community -- spawned by work, strengthened by unionism, rooted in a turf, and enriched by a spontaneous and diverse social contact -- was thereby fashioned and very much enjoyed by those of every calling on the city's waterfront.

Modern Times

During the past twenty years, several new technologies have been introduced into the transport industry. The key component in the most widely known and utilized of those technologies is the container. A container is a rigidly framed, reusable "box" into which a wide variety of cargoes can be (as we say) "stuffed," secured against shifting, sealed, and then transported by rail, truck, plane, or ship. Maritime containers are about eight feet by eight feet in width and height. They run from twenty to forty feet in length and accommodate up to twenty-five tons of cargo.

As the use of containers spread in the longshore industry of San Francisco Bay, the social and economic dislocations were increasingly severe and encompassing, both for us and others. Thus, to begin with, when they first began to appear in some number (around 1961), there were about 4,800 longshoremen working over 7.5 million hours a year in the ports of the Bay and Northern California (Stockton, Sacramento, and Eureka). At the present time, this area has about 2,300 men working just over 2.5 million hours annually. Meanwhile, the cargoes handled by these ports also rose from just under 10 million tons a year to just over 20 million.

For us in Local 10, work fell from over 7 million hours annually to just over 2 million as conventional operations became less common in the Bay Area. Our numbers were adjusted accordingly -- by normal

attrition and by our gaining an earlier retirement age. We went from about 4,200 in 1961 to our present 1850. Our options and hence our autonomy and sense of freedom were also increasingly and finally very sharply curtailed in favor of a substantial pay guarantee plan. As these things occurred, Bay Area tonnage rose, too -- from about 7.5 million tons a year to well over 15 million.

* * *

The new technology has also subjected our dwindling community to something of a diaspora. We have increasingly seen each other less frequently because the land requirements of that technology dictated a de-centralization of the industry to land-fill sites throughout the Bay Area. At the same time, the immense and widely scattered facilities which accommodate it are not surrounded by the kind of vestful and varied neighborhoods we so long enjoyed. Indeed, unless you pack something from home or buy from a vending machine or coffee truck, a drive "into town" is necessary at lunch or supper time.

Within the framework of this technological sprawl, pier after pier on the old Embarcadero was abandoned. It followed, perhaps as night the day, that successive portions of our world were thereafter buried beneath concrete and glass, steel and potted redwoods, three-piece business suits and a studied informality of very high fashion. As our turf was being demolished in favor of fancy restaurants, bars, boutiques, and hotels, our community was virtually consumed in a swirling vortex of financial and commercial swingers. The paintings of the

warehousemen could not be saved. They disappeared beneath the rubble of the lived-in museum that housed them. Indeed, the entire lower end of Commercial Street lies buried beneath the imposing majesty of the Embarcadero Center. The produce market with its restlessly dynamic setting also fell to that majesty, to the regal, if placid splendor of the Hyatt Regency, and to the high-rise, high-cost apartments and townhouses of the Golden Gateway. As this occurred, North Beach was progressively inundated, too, by neon and gawking tourists, the boisterous juvenility of conventioners, and a silicon-based, pink plastic sexuality.

Our neighborhood has fared no better. It has simply been plowed under by the commercialization of everything in sight. Take the Eagle Cafe just down from our place. For years we went there for an early breakfast. Lunch, too, when we worked a nearby pier. Well, the Eagle's still there, but now it's perched atop the Pier 39 development -- that startling embodiment of the knack some people have for living off a fabrication of things they've torn apart. To make the picture complete, the Wax Museum down on the wharf should really offer a likeness of two or three longshoremen.

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Having thus been stripped of our daily, matter-of-course opportunity to kick around together, we've also been dispersed and isolated by the new technology in other ways. For example, a conventional vessel is to this day routinely worked by up 150 longshoremen, but less than

30 of us work the largest container ships in the world, the SL-7's of Sealand. As compared to a conventional operation, we're also much further distanced from one another. Indeed, most of the work associated with a modern operation is performed by individuals who can only communicate by radio from the cab of their machines. As a workforce, then, we've been increasingly "atomized" by a division of labor that requires no on-going communication and cooperation among us. It's even hard to know who's on the job with you.

The tasks of modern longshoring are also utterly routine as compared to those of conventional longshoring. Since the integration of these tasks is affected in a highly routine manner, too, the overall, on-going operational circumstance is likewise virtually unchanging. The container, or what we call the sling-load, is always the same. Its movement to or from the vessel is always the same. So, also, its hoist and shipboard handling. It follows, too, of course, that the need for initiative, ingenuity, and innovation is all but eliminated. Indeed, our labor, having thus been radically "de-skilled", is simply thereafter sequenced into a veritable sea of containers -- and increasingly so by a computer printout.

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The personal and social loss in all of this, at least for us -- and, I guess, for a lot of other workers, too -- has been painfully high. Our everyday working and trade union relations can no longer be spontaneously rounded out and broadened, deepened and enlivened

in an encompassing social setting. The machine and its productivity has thinned our ranks, while reducing our options, autonomy, and freedom. It has also denied us the measured self-esteem we earned by taking pride in our work and being helpful to our fellow workers in interesting, challenging, and ever-changing circumstances. In a word, our loss is great because so little of our work can still contribute to the production of men like Brother Jess. Our loss is also fundamental. It is fundamental because the new technology, by eliminating the responsibility of facing such men and the opportunity of becoming really acquainted with them, has severely diminished our capacity to fashion and maintain our own humanity.

Given the cynicism so current among us as a nation and a people, one might hesitate to use the word, but under the conditions won by the ILWU over many years of struggle, conventional longshoring is to this day a moral experience. It might even be said, again with some hesitation, that such employment has continually renewed our humanity and sense of fraternity -- and hence our union and community -- by a fashioning of character. For this reason, it is hard to overstate how profoundly we've been influenced by our work, estate, and heritage. It follows, too, however, that our on-going effort to cope with a uniquely rapid and engulfing technological change will continue to be very importantly informed and strengthened by our remembrance of men and things now past or passing.