

# Cape Cod Times

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## A legend sails on Vineyard folk hero gets film treatment

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Schooner sailor Zebulon Northrop Tilton (1866-1952) is a Martha's Vineyard folk hero, a notorious, cross-eyed ladies' man of incredible strength and charisma.

They say that whenever Tilton became impatient to sail, he would

throw his dory overboard, attach his schooner to the little rowboat and row the big ship, fully loaded with cargo, out of the harbor himself, instead of waiting to be towed.

Another story runs that he once helped three Coast Guardsmen struggling with an anchor by asking them

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Zeb Tilton aboard the Alice S. Wentworth.

## Zeb: Film recalls Vineyard character

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to step aside and hoisting the weight all by himself. Yet another says he defeated the entire Harvard boxing team. He even has a general store named after him in New Hampshire.

Now a film has been made about him. "Zeb - Schooner Life" will be shown Monday at Capé Cinema in Dennis.

The film is modeled on the book "Zeb: Celebrated Schooner Captain of Martha's Vineyard," by Polly Burroughs. Burroughs, who has written a great number of books about the Cape and Islands, said she knew to focus her next book on Tilton when a friend told her he was "the most unforgettable character that ever lived on Martha's Vineyard."

Indeed, the film's director, Gordon Massingham, said he found in his interviews that the folklore of Zeb Tilton had survived through the generations. Though he expected only older residents of Martha's Vineyard to remember the sailor, he was surprised to discover that much of the younger population knew the legend well.

Zeb lived in Chilmark and transported lumber, oysters,

**According to local tales, Zeb and the schooner he captained, the Alice S. Wentworth, could sail to Chicago on a "heavy dew."**

ice and coal throughout New England in the early 1900s - while competing against gas- and oil-driven cargo ships. The schooner he famously captained, though not his first ship, was the Alice S. Wentworth. According to local tales, the two could sail to Chicago on a "heavy dew."

Emergency Film Group, the Edgartown-based film company that produced "Zeb - Schooner Life," started as a documentary company, but now primarily makes training videos for emergency-response agencies. Nonetheless, Massingham, who owns the company with his family, said all of his videos generally have some history to them.

"I was a history major, so I've always had that interest," said Massingham. "To make a film entirely about history, well, that's a very nice thing to do."

Burroughs said that, after she wrote it, her readers

insisted that her book should be made into a documentary, and, after much prodding, she approached Emergency Film Group to help place her words on the big screen.

"We were looking for a local

subject," said Massingham. "(Burroughs) just happened to show up. It happened at the right time."

Massingham said the film's first release on Martha's Vineyard was a great success - the premiere alone, a benefit for the Martha's Vineyard Historical Society, sold all 220 seats at \$50 a ticket. The director said he was surprised to see a long line of people waiting outside the door, hoping to get in despite the full house.