

# The Enterprise

Falmouth, Massachusetts

Friday, May 29, 2009

## 'Zeb, Schooner Life'

By MARILYN J. ROWLAND

"Zeb—Schooner Life," Gordon Massingham's documentary about the life of famed Martha's Vineyard sea captain Zebulon Northrup Tilton, will have its Cape Cod premiere on Monday, June 1, at 7 PM at the Cape Cinema, 820 Route 6A, in Dennis. Tickets are \$10 and will be sold at the door.

Mr. Massingham will be present for a Q&A following the screening.

The film, which debuted last summer on the Vineyard as a benefit for the historical society, is based on the 1972 book, "Zeb, Celebrated Schooner Captain of Martha's Vineyard," by Martha's Vineyard resident Polly Burroughs. It integrates Captain Tilton's story with information on Wampanoag lore, the whaling industry, schooner design and construction, Zeb's schooner, the Alice S. Wentworth, local maritime lore, and the extended Tilton family, known, in part, for their love of singing. Historic footage and photographs of Tilton, the Wentworth, and local maritime settings provide the focus for this wide-ranging look at Captain Tilton and a nearly forgotten way of life.

Captain Tilton was born in 1855 and he died in 1932 at the age of 87. He began his life as a sailor when he was 15, becoming such a skilled navigator that it was said he could make it to Chicago "on a heavy dew." He was a humble and homely coasting schooner captain, delivering bricks, lumber, cobblestones, and paving oil up and down the coast of New England, using his sailing skills to reduce transport time and to survive brutal storms at sea. Hardworking, popular with the ladies, and a charismatic storyteller, he became a national celebrity, the subject of hundreds of newspaper articles and many radio interviews.

Zeb was a true local folk hero, tall, about 6'4", with large hands and enormous strength, and stories of his legendary feats abound.



The schooner Alice S. Wentworth at Brant Point.

He not only navigated his schooner, but he hauled cargo, loading and unloading at every port. His work ethic was legendary.

But he also enjoyed a good time, and would throw parties on the Wentworth when he came into port and work was done. It was said he had a woman in every port, but he was a family man,

who said he never smoked, drank, or played around.

Married three times, he had 10 children with his second wife, seven of whom survived infancy. After his third marriage, at the age of 72, Zeb and Grace took off on a honeymoon trip aboard the Alice S. Wentworth to New Bedford to pick up coal for Nantucket.



Zeb Tilton at the wheel of the Alice S. Wentworth.

The Alice S. Wentworth is as much the star of "Zeb—Schooner Life" as Zeb is. Known as "a handy little vessel, the schooner was well-designed and good looking, and with Zeb at the wheel, it was known and respected far and wide. It hauled bricks to Martha's Vineyard for the old high school (now elementary school) and brought cobblestones for Nantucket's streets. The subject of numerous photographs, paintings, carvings, and weather vanes, the schooner lives on in the hearts of local sailing buffs.

As the movie points out, schooners are alive and well today, taking on load after load of tourists these days instead of cobblestones.

"Zeb—Schooner Life" is sure to appeal to anyone with an appreciation of New England maritime history and the colorful characters that shaped the economy and culture of the region.

Director Massingham, of Detrick Lawrence Productions of Edgartown, is one of those people with a love of maritime history. He has been making films for 31 years. With a master's degree in creative writing, he has taught writing and English literature, and his first job was as a newspaper reporter for the Cape Cod Times.

It was in graduate school, when

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he was required to take outside courses, that he discovered film, and he said he "immediately got hooked," spending a few years "trying this and that."

In 1977, with a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, he produced a film, "Massachusetts Story" about possible impacts of drilling for oil in George's Bank. (The title was based on "Louisiana Story," a 1948 documentary by Robert J. Flaherty about the impacts of the oil industry in Louisiana.)

He then went on to work as a producer at Channel 5 in Boston, after which he started his own company and began to produce films for firefighters about hazardous materials. He has since produced more than 150 emergency response training films of all kind for Emergency Film Group, part of Detrick Lawrence. It has been a very rewarding career for him, and one which has earned him numerous awards.

He considers firefighters and EMTs the "salt of the earth," people who value helping others above all.

The idea for "Zeb—Schooner Life," came from Ms. Burroughs, a prolific writer of regional top-

ics and children's books, who was looking for a director to make a movie of her book on Captain Tilton. She had seen Mr. Massingham's earlier film, "Gloucester's Adventure," about the rise and fall of that city's fishing industry and the schooner, *Adventure*, when it was broadcast on WGBH television, but did not realize that the director was a Martha's Vineyard neighbor of hers until a mutual friend pointed out that fact.

A fan of schooners himself, Mr. Massingham was receptive to her request. He said he had been looking to create a film that showed off the character of Martha's Vineyard, "something that tourists could take home with them," and "Zeb—Schooner Life" fit the bill.

It took about a year to make the film. The biggest challenge was in gathering historic footage and photographs for the documentary, and getting permission from proper sources to include the footage, Mr. Massingham said. Some scenes were recreated for the film, but most are authentic footage and provide vivid images of an important chapter of Cape and Islands history.

For more information, visit [www.zebtilton.com](http://www.zebtilton.com).