

Vineyard movie has Nantucket ties



Courtesy of Gordon Massingham

Nantucketer Charlie Sayle Sr., left, with Vineyard schooner Capt. Zebulon Northrup Tilton, the subject of "Zeb-Schooner Life."

Profile of schooner Capt. Zeb Tilton features islander Charlie Sayle Sr.

By Joshua Balling
I&M Assistant Editor

It was said that the coastal schooner *Alice S. Wentworth*, with Martha's Vineyard Capt. Zebulon Northrup Tilton at the wheel, could outsail the America's Cup yachts of her day in the early part of the 20th century.

The man Tilton often chose as his most trusted mate was not a fellow islander, however. At least not an islander from Martha's Vineyard. He was Nantucketer Charlie Sayle Sr., a knowledgeable and talented captain in his own right, who went to sea at 14 on a fishing schooner out of Gloucester and eventually settled on Nantucket, where his family runs a fish market to this day. Sayle also kept an extensive photographic record of Tilton's voyages, the grainy black and white images harkening back to a near-forgotten time when sailing ships ruled the seas and the

pace of life was much slower.

Sayle's son Charlie Jr. knows only what he's read and heard of his late father's time with Tilton, a charismatic and charming man who became a darling of the burgeoning mass media of the day, thanks to his sailing exploits. But Sayle can recall stories of the *Wentworth* putting in at Nantucket and the inevitable parties that followed once the cargo of bricks, paving stones or cordwood was unloaded.

During the Great Depression, the *Alice Wentworth* also took passengers on excursions from the dock on Nantucket. The price? \$2 for a five-hour sail.

"There was always a party," Sayle said. "Big parties."

Tilton, Sayle Sr. and the *Alice Wentworth* are profiled in the documentary film "Zeb-Schooner Life," which uses their story as a lens through which to view the

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Schooner: Vineyard documentary features islander Charlie Sayle Sr.

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coastal schooner era of the mid-1800s to early 1900s, when the small but fast and sturdy ships carried the bulk of the cargo between East Coast ports. The hour-plus film, written and directed by Gordon Massingham of Martha's Vineyard and based on Polly Burroughs' biography of Tilton, will be shown Wednesday night at the Coffin School on Winter Street.

Zeb Tilton was born in 1866, just after the Civil War and during the decline of whaling. At 15, he shipped out on the coastal schooner *Eliza Jane*, and eventually became her captain. At 33, he bought the *Wilfred J. Fuller*, and quickly became known for his navigational skills.

The *Alice S. Wentworth* was rebuilt from the hull up from an earlier schooner that ran aground, as many such vessels were in her day, and around 1906, Tilton saw her, and fell in love. He sold the *Fuller*, signed on to be captain and carried loads of coal, ice and potatoes up and down the New England coast. In 1921, at age 55, he owned her.

The *Wentworth* was an incredibly fast vessel with clean lines, and under Tilton's command set numerous records for passages. She was also a workhorse, carrying cordwood, coal, bricks, lumber, barrels of tar, and even automobiles when the



The Martha's Vineyard coastal schooner *Alice S. Wentworth*, subject of the documentary film "Zeb-Schooner Life," which will screen at the Coffin School Wednesday, rounding Brant Point.

steamboat was on strike.

She survived numerous storms at sea, and even the deadly hurricane of 1938.

Tilton himself was a charismatic man, known for his wit and strength. He was particularly popular on Nantucket.

"After the cargo was unloaded, he'd cook up some rolls, or gingerbread, the concertina would come out, and the party would begin," narrates Whit Griswold in the film. Like his entire family, he loved to sing, and he would take parties out on the schooner, and tell stories for hours.

At the wheel, Tilton would accept any challenge, and there

was "not a man on the Vineyard who would work any harder."

Actor James Cagney sailed with him while hiding on the Vineyard from overzealous studio executives, and Tilton took him to Nantucket on a cargo trip.

Tilton gained near-celebrity status for his exploits. He appeared on Burgess Meredith's radio program "We the People," announcing his upcoming third wedding. When asked about his desire to remarry so late in life, he replied, "Many a good tune has been played on an old fiddle."

He went on the radio again after the wedding and his honeymoon: a coal-hauling trip to Nantucket.

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— Gordon Massingham
Writer/Director

"Zeb's story is really about the characteristics of the region. It's really a much better approach to talk about that than just a travelogue, or to do a film about lighthouses, or whatever," said Massingham, whose primary business is the production of emergency-response training films. "If you were to read Polly's book, it gets into a lot about island history when Zeb was maturing, and beginning his career. What we did was get into the history and development of the schooner. It's a story worth telling, from a somewhat different approach.

"I'm a sailor, and I was a history major in college, so that probably played into it," Massingham continued. "There is a market for this kind of film, which I would describe as largely about maritime history, and Zeb is a great character to hang it on. It also doesn't hurt that there are about a million Tiltons."

In the late 1930s, the *Alice*

Wentworth was attached by creditors, but a group of investors was formed, including Charlie Sayle, and they raised eight times the money necessary to pay off the debt. The *Alice Wentworth* was restored, and Tilton went back to sea. But in 1942, he came ashore when his eyesight failed, and the boat was sold. His eyesight eventually improved, and he tried to return to the water, but in 1952, Tilton died at his daughter's home.

The *Alice S. Wentworth* ended up in Gloucester, then plied the charter trade in the Gulf of Maine, and in 1965, was put up for auction. She was sold for \$13,000 and docked outside Anthony's Pier 4 restaurant on the Boston waterfront after being filled with Styrofoam blocks to stay afloat.

She eventually sank, and carried to the bottom with her the last vestiges of the working coastal schooner, although the tradition is carried on today in the schooner yachts and windjammers that frequent the Gulf of Maine and other East Coast ports. On the Vineyard, her memory stays alive in the form of the schooner *Sbenandoah*, owned by Bob Douglas of Black Dog restaurant fame, which makes frequent visits to Nantucket.

"Zeb-Schooner Life," 7 p.m. Wednesday at the Coffin School, 4 Winter St. Sponsored by the Egan Maritime Institute.