

SEA HISTORY ^{\$3.75}

THE ART, LITERATURE, ADVENTURE, LORE & LEARNING OF THE SEA

Zeb—Schooner Life: A documentary film directed by Gordon Massingham (Detrick Lawrence Productions, Edgartown, MA, 2009, 83 minutes, \$24.95 DVD; www.zebtilton.com)

He was born in a time when Confederate raiders were harassing the whaling industry in the Atlantic and when “Tiltons on the Vineyard were thicker than fiddlers in Hell,” according to one person’s recollection. He sailed through six wars: the Spanish American War, World War I, World War II, and his three marriages. He was as homely as any man alive, self-professedly so. And he was as tough as nails, from his skin to his tongue to his driving work ethic. Yet he had no trouble whatsoever finding friends in every port and rose to national fame as one of the last great schooner captains in America. And his name was Zeb.

Documentary director Gordon Massingham knew he had a gem in Zeb Tilton, a Martha’s Vineyard legend. Besides an island full of experts on the man and his life, he also had the scholarly research of Polly Burroughs’s *Zeb: Celebrated Schooner Captain of Martha’s Vineyard* behind him. His job was to bring that story to life for the big screen.

Zeb’s co-star in this production, *Alice S. Wentworth*, the schooner with which he fell in love and shared a significant portion of his life, holds her own in the story. Sadly, they were separated when the Great Depression and Zeb’s failing eyesight came between them, but until that day, Zeb was known to drive her like an America’s Cup yacht, perhaps even faster. His seamanship was so good that when the world came crashing down around him and hundreds of boats and lives were lost to the great New England hurricane of September 1938, he and his schooner came through the storm unscathed.



Zeb’s fame grew as the years passed. He befriended Hollywood actor Jimmy Cagney, or, it could be said, Cagney befriended him. Thomas Hart Benton, one of the fathers of the Regionalist movement, painted his portrait. Even veteran newsman Mike Wallace was caught on camera hailing a passerby and asking the question, “How much do you know about Zeb Tilton?” As the documentary rolls on, local historians, schooner captains and Tilton descendants have words to share. By 1952, Zeb Tilton, Martha’s Vineyard’s “John Henry, Paul Bunyan, and Casanova” all rolled into one, was gone. So, too, were the great sailing schooners and the Martha’s Vineyard he knew and loved. Thanks to this film, he sails into eternity.

JOHN GALLUZZO
Marshfield, Massachusetts