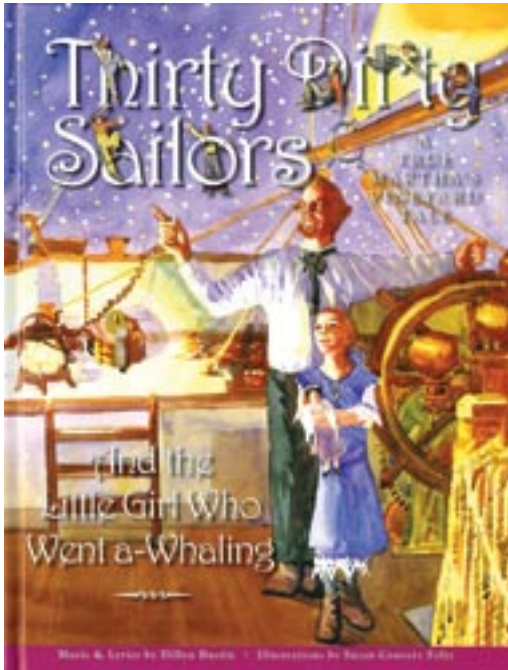


The Martha's Vineyard Times

In Print



A picture-book ditty tells a true Vineyard tale

By CK Wolfson - November 8, 2007

Thirty Dirty Sailors And the Little Girl Who Went a-Whaling. Music and lyrics by Dillon Bustin, Illustrations by Susan Convery Foltz, Vineyard Stories, 2007, includes CD, \$21.95.

Thirty Dirty Sailors is a complicated tale stripped down to bare bones simple. Its text - the lyrics to Dillon Bustin's song by the same name - tells of six-year-old Edgartown native Laura Jernegan's decision to spend three years, from 1868 to 1871, on a whaling ship with her family as it traveled from New Bedford, around Cape Horn to Hawaii.

What the book depicts is how young Laura responds when her father, ship captain Jered Jernegan, suggests the family join him on the whaling expedition. She wonders what she will find to do for a year aboard ship with: "Thirty dirty sailors a-telling me tales, Thirty bloody sailors all a-cuttin' in the whales."

All the rhyming narrative is set before the voyage itself, leaving one to wonder about the details of the voyage, about the sailors' tales, about the adventure itself. But chances are children will remain happily engrossed in the possibilities of how the time aboard ship might be spent: keeping a journal, learning to read, collecting seaweed, meeting children from tropical places. Laura compares those options to the

alternative - remaining in Edgartown where she would "...listen to the teachers in the public school, memorize their rules, on a straight-back stool."

The introduction by Martha's Vineyard Museum Executive Director Matthew Stackpole provides the historical background about the Roman, Captain Jernegan's 125-foot whaling ship, and offers excerpts from young Laura's actual shipboard journal.

Explaining why Vineyard Stories got involved in the project, a departure from their adult offerings, publisher John Walter says, "I think it was the idea of being able to tell Island children a real Island story that shows there's a lot to learn from 100 years ago about what makes this Island extraordinary."

All to the good, but this engaging children's book seduces its audience of two to eight year olds by virtue of its slick design, and Susan Convery Foltz's glossy, historically accurate watercolor illustrations.

Her pictures range from complicated, shipboard scenes, sailors in bunks, masts and rigging, and whaling depicted in great, colorful detail, to her simple, cunning character studies: an expressive Laura standing alone, a thrashing sperm whale, vignettes of Laura engaged in her studies. There is great charm in the figures that ornament the introduction, and whose portraits border the cover page. Done with gesture and modeling, they convey a lot without becoming overworked or fussy. The book, designed in Atlanta, Ga., makes the text part of the graphic element, and in most cases, easy to read and follow.

From song to book

If not for Ms. Foltz's serendipitous intervention, "Thirty Dirty Sailors" might have remained just a charming ditty, part of songwriter Dillon Bustin's 1991 theatrical musical review, "Tidebook: An Island Rhapsody." She was inspired as an audience member when Tidebook was performed at The Whaling Church. Both the Island history and the family particulars of the story captivated her imagination. She grew up on School Street in the former Edgartown home of Captain Jernegan's kin, Nathan Jernegan.

"I'd always wanted to do a children's book," she says in a phone conversation from her home in Lauderdale by the Sea, Fla. An art student at Syracuse University and The School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Ms. Foltz describes doing three versions of the cover before she was satisfied, traveling to Mystic Seaport to take pictures of ships, and sifting through the archives at Martha's Vineyard Museum. (In the draft of one picture she mistakenly painted an electric lamp on a dresser, and had to redo it.) She recruited friends to pose in costume for the story's characters.

Her dedication to the project was bolstered by her own Island history. Ms. Foltz's mother Allison Convery, active in the Martha's Vineyard Historical Society, authored "A Child's Guide to Martha's Vineyard" (now in its sixth printing). Her father, real estate businessman Leo Convery (a collector of scrimshaw and author of "Ships in Bottles") served as president of the Chamber of Commerce. Before marrying and leaving the Island, Ms. Foltz served as president of the Martha's Vineyard Rotary Club, as well as operating an antique store, Summer Old, Summer New, in Vineyard Haven.

The book is completed by the inclusion of a CD sung by a young Hannah Meyers, accompanied on recorder, ukulele, Hawaiian guitar and concertina. Sweet, simple and catchy, one can easily imagine it's the voice of Laura Jernegan, bringing the character to life.

Art show and publication party, Saturday, Nov.10, 3-5 pm, Featherstone Center for the Arts, Barnes Rd., Oak Bluffs. Susan Convery Foltz's illustrations and "Thirty Dirty Sailors" party. Dillon Bustin performs at 4 pm. Book signing, paper-hat making, music and refreshments. Free. 508-693-1850.

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