

The Wayward Sailor

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The Wayward Sailor

My two uncles, that is my mother's brothers Bob and Albert Orley, knew an easy way to make money.

They would wait outside the Jubilee Tavern in West Silvertown for the patrons to leave the pub and board the twenty-six seat, horse drawn open carriage for their trip to Southend-on-Sea. It was a regular occasion and when the carriage was fully loaded (no pun intended) and ready to move, the well-inebriated occupants would throw money, mostly copper coins, on the pavement for the children. And the two Orley brothers were not slow in coming forward; they often came home with more money in their pockets than their mother Agnes could earn at her cleaning job in a week.

It was 1918, the First World War was over. Their father, William Robert, known as Bob, had been away at sea in the Merchant Navy and had become stranded in New Zealand at the start of the war in 1914. It was no problem to him as his brother Fred had a sheep farm near Napier - an idyllic place to live. In fact Bob wrote to Agnes imploring her to join him. But she was having none of it,

“My place and my family's place is here in Silvertown, England”.

Anyway she was afraid to travel and, moreover, when Bob had left in February 1912 she was one month pregnant and because she wasn't sure at the time she had never told him.

Agnes duly gave birth to a girl (my mother) on 28th October 1912 who was christened Ivy, after no one in particular but just because “Ivy would be someone to cling to”.

Whilst young Bob was collecting his coinage a pal of his came running around the corner,

“Bob! Bob!”, he shouted, “Your Dad's in the Jubilee”

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“No!” said Bob, “He’s in New Zealand”

But without further ado Bob ran around the corner and looked into the Saloon Bar. Sure enough there was his Dad. You could have knocked him down with a feather. He almost choked and when he got his breath back he called out loud, above the noise in the bar,

“Dad!”

Albert was dumb struck and couldn’t speak. People in the bar stopped talking and the boy’s Dad looked round, he seemed different but it was him all right. It wasn’t their father’s intention to go home as he felt he would not be welcomed in view of his long absence, but the boys almost dragged him there, young Bob was in the door first,

“Mum! Mum!” he yelled, “Dad’s home”

Whereupon Agnes fainted while Ivy, who had never seen her father, clung to her mother’s apron and cried with fright. She had



The Jubilee Tavern—picture taken in 1958

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always looked upon Agnes's brother Albert Gee as her father; they all lived two doors away.

So the Wayward Sailor had returned. Because he couldn't get a ship back from New Zealand during the war the authorities considered him as a deserter. This meant a term of a few weeks in prison after which Agnes accepted him back and life started to get back to normal for the family - Bob (12), Albert (11) and Agnes (9) But it took Ivy, aged six, some considerable time to get used to having her real father around. Three years later they had another son, Daniel.

It wasn't long before Bob (my Granddad) was back at sea with the Merchant Navy. I can recall waiting at the Lock Gates with my mother Ivy and brother John to see his ship the S.S. Duqueser entering the King George V Dock prior to World War 2. It was early 1939 and it was his last trip. His ship had been to Germany delivering scrap iron, which no doubt would have been made into bombs and returned to this country during the blitz.

When war was declared against Germany, Bob was considered too old to continue in the Merchant Navy. So he was put on 'Essential Works' in the Rank's Flour Mills. After the War he was back at sea, so to speak - he got a job on the Sun Tugs, on the River Thames. I had the pleasure of sailing with him on the tugs, up and down the river during my school holidays. We visited the Surrey Commercial Docks, the West India and the Royal Victoria Docks to pick up barges laden with all sorts of goods which we transported to other parts of the River. I remember we always stopped at Wapping Dock to visit the local Tavern for liquid refreshments. I always refused the invitation to join them. The Skipper agreed I should stay behind to guard the ship. At the age of thirteen, that made me feel important. Bob eventually worked

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on the Woolwich Ferry and finally he worked as a full time 'Pot Man' in the Ram Tavern. No doubt he was able to relax at spotlessly clean wooden tables scrubbed by his wife Agnes, but unfortunately they were not together for long.

William Robert (Bob) Orley, my Grandfather died in 1946 he was 63 years of age. Ivy had her third son Malcolm the same year, unfortunately he never knew his Granddad.

Bob waited a long time for Agnes, she died in 1971 at the age of 93. No doubt he is stoking the boilers in a heavenly sailing craft in some far-off galaxy where there are no pint pots to collect or tables to scrub.