

“The *Darra* Outrage”

“IT SMACKS OF PIRACY” headlined the *San Diego Union* on Sunday morning, November 28, 1887. The night before three sailors had been forcibly taken from the British bark *Darra* as it lay anchored in the harbor. The incident soon known as “The *Darra* Outrage” would stir up the local water front community and threaten relations with British merchants and sea captains.

The *Darra* was a speedy clipper ship--130 feet long and 33 feet in the beam. Built in Aberdeen, Scotland in 1865 for the tea trade with India, the ship had more lately carried immigrants from England to Australia. A recent run from London to Adelaide had been made in seventy days—a record time.

Now in the fall of 1887, the ship was en route from Newcastle, Australia, when it stopped in boomtown San Diego with a cargo of coal.

In San Diego, the ship’s usual good fortune seemed to falter. The *Darra*’s cook, a Chinese seaman named Ah Ying, jumped ship and headed for the backcountry. Since U.S. law severely restricted Chinese entry, the desertion made the *Darra*’s master liable for a huge fine. The fugitive cook was soon caught and arrested, but bigger trouble was on the horizon for Captain Robert Storey.

He anchored his ship near the port’s entrance and began preparing to return to sea, destined for Port Townsend, Washington. Deciding he was short-handed, Captain Storey hired three British sailors to help trim ballast and perform other odd jobs aboard ship. It was good employment for seamen—the union scale was \$45 a month.

At about 10:00 p.m. on Saturday night, November 27--the eve of the *Darra*’s scheduled departure from San Diego—the first mate spotted men in several small boats rowing quickly toward the ship. As the boats pulled alongside, the mate ordered the strangers to keep off. “A volley of oaths was the answer, as something like twenty men swarmed up the ship’s side and jumped upon deck.”

The invading sailors were all members of the local Coast Seamen’s Union. Someone had alerted the union to the fact that the three late additions to Storey’s crew were non-union. The boarding party was determined to remove the offending seamen from the ship.

Hearing the commotion, Captain Storey emerged from his cabin, carrying a revolver. “I ordered the men from the main deck, and presented a pistol,” he recounted the next day. “They hurriedly retreated, but a crowd behind forced them back, and others getting behind, I was powerless to act.”

The boarders--now numbering about seventy--disarmed Captain Storey and began searching the ship. They found the three men they wanted in the forecabin. The luckless sailors were grabbed and hustled over the side of the ship into a boat. Once on shore they were released and warned never to return to the *Darra*.

The next day, a livid Captain Storey reported the incident to the British Vice-Consul Joseph Winchester. The two men hurriedly hunted down city marshal Joe Coyne, who agreed to provide two police officers to guard the ship.

The affair had “insulted the British flag,” Consul Winchester thundered to the press, hinting also that a British man-of-war might be necessary in the future to protect British shipping from similar acts of piracy. The consul suggested that “marine police” be detailed in the harbor and warned that unless authorities controlled the Coast Seamen’s Union, foreign vessels would soon boycott the port of San Diego.

The San Diego Board of Trustees took up “the Darra Outrage” in a hastily called meeting on Monday. More than twenty sea captains attended the special session. Captain Storey was asked if he could identify any of the men who had boarded his ship. When he said he had no means of identifying the invaders, an American captain suggested “it would have been a good idea to have shot some of them. Identification would then have been easy.”

Marshal Coyne seconded the suggestion and recommended that ship captains should always arm themselves to protect their property. Noting Captain Storey’s choice of weapon, Coyne said he did not believe in revolvers: “shotguns were more effective.” The captain replied that “it made a great deal of difference whether the shooter wore a star or not.”

The trustees decided to empower Marshal Coyne to hire four harbor police “in case of emergency” and a resolution was passed instructing Coyne to collect evidence, find the names of the *Darra* boarders, and arrest them. A fifty dollar reward was posted but the anonymous boarders were never caught.

On Tuesday, as the *Darra* again prepared to sail, the three abducted, non-union sailors were quietly escorted back to the ship by city police officers. But the Seamen’s Union was watching when another non-union seaman headed for the ship in a rowboat. The “spotters” intercepted the sailor, beat him, and threw his bundle of clothes into the bay. The man was then allowed to board the ship.

With the *Darra*’s compliment finally complete, Captain Storey put out to sea, vowing as he left port to repel all future boarders “with cold lead.”



The bark "Darra" unloading timber at Newcastle, Australia, February 1897. *Norm Barney Photographic Collection, Cultural Collections at the University of Newcastle, NSW, Australia*

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