

Only memory remains of Ipswich shipyard

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By Keith Regan

IPSWICH – A wooden pier rots silently in a windswept grassy marsh near Crane Beach, the only sign that more than four decades ago the area bustled with the activity of the William A. Robinson Shipyard. Once one of the busiest smaller yards in New England, the Robinson yard employed 600 people during the early days of World War II. Men and women worked around the clock in a cluster of hastily built workshops, producing submarine chasers, minesweepers, landing barges and other small vessels for the United States Navy.

The shipyard was the first in the country to produce a ship under the First defense Act of 1940. In 1942, the workers at the yard were honored with the “E” award for excellence from the federal government for their contributions to the war effort. The yard closed for good in 1945. According to Anthony Pagano of Melrose, the story of how the William A. Robinson Shipyard came to be actually begins thousands of miles from Ipswich, on an island in the South Pacific.

“It’s quite a story,” said Pagano, who became the unofficial expert on the shipyard after discovering a steamer-trunk full of Robinson’s photographs and newspaper clippings at an estate sale in Melrose. “It’s a story of adventure, a love story, and in the end it’s kind of a sad story.” William A. Robinson, the son of a Midwestern newspaper publisher, was an avid sailor and adventurer. Between 1928 and 1931, he sailed around the world on a 32-foot sailboat, paying his way by selling articles on his travels to magazines and newspapers back in the states. During an extended stay on Tahiti, Robinson met Richard Crane’s only son, Cornelius Crane, who was on an expedition to the South Pacific for the Carnegie Institute.

“Crane found a letter in a mailbox that Robinson had hung up on the island,” Pagano said as he thumbed through one of several photo albums packed with photos Robinson took on his trip. “When Crane finally caught up to him, they hit it right off and that’s how the whole thing began.” Crane invited Robinson to visit his family’s 59-room summer estate in Ipswich after he completed his trip. Following a hero’s homecoming in New York City in November of 1931 after more than three years at sea, he made his way to the Crane estate. At a dance in his honor in the grand ballroom, he met Cornelius’ younger sister, Florence Crane. Two years later, they were married in Chicago.

Florence shocked the high society crowd in the windy city when she climbed aboard Robinson’s 32-foot sailboat, the Svaap, for a honeymoon trip to the Galapagos Islands. The trip was a disaster. Flash floods caused them to shipwreck in the Panamanian jungle and when they finally reached the chain of islands, Robinson’s appendix burst.

“If it weren’t for the connections of the Crane family, he would have died way out there

at sea,” Pagano said. The department of the Navy was alerted. Two seaplanes and a destroyer were dispatched with a team of nurses and surgeons. Robinson was operated on aboard the destroyer Hale hours before his ruptured appendix would have killed him. The couple returned to Ipswich where, as soon as he recovered, Robinson began work on a 70-foot ship on the river behind the Crane estate. He hired master shipbuilders to construct the ship in the style of two centuries earlier, handcrafting every facet of the ship. “That first ship, which he called the Swift, was called the most beautiful ship of its size at the time,” Pagano said. The Swift would later be bought by a Hollywood producer, who used it as a pirate ship in several films. During the next several years, Robinson continued to produce elaborate ships, such as the 51-foot Santa Cruz and the 90-foot Caribee.

As World War II approached, the Cranes wealth and influence helped Robinson secure some of the first shipbuilding contracts issued by the government. The area around the marsh was cleared and small huts were built to house drafting lofts and specialty shops. Pagano said Robinson, a shrewd businessman, was able to raise funds from the state and town governments to finance dredging of the channel that passed near the yard, allowing larger ships bringing supplies to enter the area. Experienced shipbuilders came from Gloucester and Essex. Men and women came from Lawrence and Haverhill, answering newspaper ads for work in one of the three shifts that kept the yard going 24 hours a day. “The sounds of the shipyard could be heard all along the beach,” Pagano said. “You could hear it day and night, the pounding of the steel; the machinery whirring away, the workers yelling to be heard over the noise.” The shipyard built over 200 ships during the war.

When his marriage to Florence began to sour, Robinson was released from his contract with the government to build more so he could return to Tahiti, where he would live until his death in 1988. “It was a bitter divorce,” said Pagano. “Within a few years they had everything bulldozed in back there to erase any trace that he was even there.” The story of Robinson, the Cranes and the shipyard had been one of the area’s best kept secrets – until recently. About four years ago, Pagano came across a trunk filled with Robinson’s personal memories – photos of the shipyard and his trip around the world, a ship’s log from his voyages and other personal information.