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NOT JUST ANYBODY

community-sponsored stories
by Pacifican Jean Bartlett, longtime Bay Area News Group writer
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For decades he navigated the brutal winter waters of a whaler's Arctic life at sea, and then the Master Mariner retired to Pacifica



Captain Christian Pedersen lived a life of a thousand tales. After his death in Pacifica at age 92, June of 1969, a number of Bay Area journalists expressed regret they had not known to interview this quiet elderly gentleman.

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A Norwegian-American seaman, whaling captain and fur trader, Christian Theodore Pedersen was born on December 23, 1876, in Sandefjord, Norway, to Christoffer and Marie Pedersen. When he was 17, he signed on as an ordinary seaman on the bark-rigged steam whaler, the Fearless. Captained by James McKenna, the ship was purchased at Sandefjord where her Norwegian crew was hired to deliver her to her new San Francisco owners at Point Barrow, Alaska. Christian's jobs included: climbing the rigging to loose, furl and reef the sails; attending to lookout duty at the masthead where he scanned the waters for sea ice or whale spouts; scrubbing decks; and tarring rigging (the ship's stationary ropes and wires) with thick pine tar to protect the rigging from the freezing Arctic weather.

←The Captain and his wife May aboard an Arctic vessel, the year they married, 1920.

Once the Fearless arrived in Alaska, Captain McKenna sent some of his Norwegian crewmen back to Norway. Christian had hoped to be included among them. Many years later he recalled how homesick he felt as a young lad back then. But Christian and a number of others were commanded to stay on board and subsequently, the crew and their captain steamed to Herschel Island, off the north coast of Yukon, Canada, in pursuit of Arctic bowhead whales and to winter in the ice. Christian learned English during this time which earned him a quick promotion to storekeeper. According to his U.S. Naturalization paperwork, in 1894 he established U.S. residency with the intention of becoming a U.S. citizen (he was naturalized in 1901). As to the ship and crew's one year wintering at Herschel Island, that turned into an unexpected delay of four winters. In September of 1897, the Fearless left for San Francisco.

Ice and grueling cold weather forced the ship and her crew to winter 35 miles east of Point Barrow. They finally arrived in San Francisco in November of 1898. During the winter months the crew rested, the Fearless was resupplied and repairs were made. In the spring, Captain McKenna and his crew left for

Baillie Island in Canada's Northwest Territories. This time, along with his duties as storekeeper, Christian additionally served as boatsteerer/harpooner. An extraordinarily high-risk job, the boatsteerer was required to pull the forward oar of a whaleboat, make a first strike into a whale, and then try for a second strike immediately. It required a great deal of strength, skill and grit. It was additionally another promotion for Christian. He was now a petty officer.

In 1901, Christian was promoted to Fourth Mate of the Fearless, but because weather and age had taken its toll on the Fearless, the whaling season was spent in the Aleutian Islands on repairs rather than whaling. The ship was sold.

Christian met his wife Mouza Dyakanoff in the West Aleutians and they married in 1901. They had two children, Alexandra and Theodore. Christian was widowed in 1906 and with no one to care for his two small children while he was at sea, he placed his children in a Methodist orphanage and boarding school in Unalaska, a city in the Aleutian Islands. Later his son would accompany him on whaling ships during Theodore's summer breaks from school.

By 1905, Christian – who had sailed as Second Mate with Captain McKenna on the Arctic fur hunting schooner Olga in 1902 – was now a First Mate. However, by this point in time he had grown weary of working for Captain McKenna and he went to work as a storekeeper on Samalga Island for Samuel Applegate, a trader, explorer and a U.S. Weather Bureau weather observer. As the storekeeper, Christian ran the trading post, managed pelts, did accounting, maintained supplies and loaded and unloaded cargo and mail and goods for trade from incoming ships. He would also spend a winter working as a watchman in Dutch Harbor, Unalaska.

In 1908, the mariner became captain of the Arctic schooner, the Challenge, and from then on, he captained American vessels out of Alaska and San Francisco. In 1912, Captain Pedersen commanded the Elvira, an auxiliary gasoline-powered wooden trading and whaling schooner.

He married for a second time in 1906 or 1907. Her name was Sofia Reinken and she was a native Alaskan and a widow. Their three children were: Lydia, Walter and Hazel. Lydia was born in Unalaska, Walter was born in San Francisco, and Hazel was born in Unalaska. Tragically, Sofia died in childbirth following Hazel's birth in 1916. All five of Christian's children with his first two wives—four living at the time of his death—were named in his obituary: Alexandra, who predeceased her father, was born in 1902; Theodore was born in 1905; Lydia was born in 1907; Walter was born in 1914; and Hazel was born in 1916. While the Captain continued his work in the Arctic, his three children with Sofia grew up in the same boarding school/Methodist orphanage in Unalaska as his first two children. His sons Theodore "Ted" and Walter would become well known in Alaska.

In 1913, the Captain worked briefly for the Canadian-born Arctic explorer and ethnologist Vilhjalmur Stefansson. Stefansson had purchased the whaling steamer Karluk as a flagship for the Canadian Arctic Expedition. The two men had met in 1906 over their respective adventures in the Arctic, and Christian was asked by Stefansson to command the steam brigantine Karluk, an estimated four-year project. Captain Pedersen sailed the Karluk from San Francisco to Victoria, British Columbia. However, not long into the job, Christian disagreed with the ethnologist's strategy on where to locate the Karluk if she could not reach the intended destination due to winter ice. And so before the Karluk was fully ready for her greater expedition, Christian resigned as master of the ship. He then returned to San Francisco.

That same year, Captain Pedersen returned as commander to the schooner Elvira where he continued whaling and trading in the Arctic until the Elvira ran aground in a large piece of ice. The story that follows is from the C. T. Pedersen papers in the collection of Sven Johansson, Victoria, BC.

"Captain William (Billy) Mogg, who had lost the schooner Bonanza on the shoal 15 miles east of Herschel Island a few years before, was mate with Captain Louis Lane in the gas schooner Polar Bear. Mogg visited Pedersen and told him that it would be safe to winter where he was then tied up. Pedersen disagreed. 'I told him that I would not give ten cents for the Elvira in the first gale that would come along. The Polar Bear was stuck close to us. I started the crew hauling flour etc. the seven miles to the beach, while I walked up to the Belvedere and arranged with Captain Cottle to keep my crew for the winter. We kept hauling supplies to the beach for several days, but I had given instructions in the first place for the crew to have their belongings packed, ready to abandon ship when I would say so. It looked bad when I got up one morning, and I could see the snow blowing off the top of the mountains, so I gave orders to abandon ship after breakfast. The northeast blizzard hit us when we were halfway to the Belvedere, 13 miles to the east of us. I knew that she had a lifeline from ship to shore, so I felt safe as long as we kept going on the young ice. When we hit this line we headed offshore, and soon we could hear the wind howling in the ship's rigging, but did not see her hull until we were about 30–40 feet from her.'"

The following morning Captain Pedersen climbed into the crow's nest of the Belvedere. He could see that the Polar Bear had used her power to break through the ice and had landed safely inshore. There was no sign of the Elvira. She had lost what stability she had and capsized. The Elvira had been carrying a great many furs, which were all insured and all lost. But as the captain was able to prove the furs were on the Elvira when she sank, he was paid in full. Captain Pedersen and Olaf Swenson, a part owner of the Belvedere, traveled by foot and dogsled approximately 400 miles overland to Fairbanks and then caught a ship to San Francisco. As to the Belvedere, she remained trapped in the Arctic pack ice off Icy Reef in the Beaufort Sea during the winter of 1913-1914. As agreed, her crew built shelters on her deck and remained with her until she became free the following summer. She was in good repair and remained in active service for another five years.

In 1914, Captain Pedersen signed on as commander of the Herman—a whaling and trading steam barquentine—and sailed to the Arctic. The Herman was operated out of San Francisco by H. Liebes & Company, one of the largest, high-end women's clothing retailers in the world. In early 1916, the Captain converted the Herman into a three–masted schooner and installed a gas engine. In 1917, he replaced the gas engine with a diesel engine. He captained the Herman through eight voyages to the Arctic for H. Liebes until 1922. He reported that the Herman stuck just once in the ice in all those years.

In 1920, Captain Pedersen met and married May Olive Jordan, a Canadian nurse. She often traveled with him on his trips to the Arctic and cared for his crew and his fur trading clients along these northern voyages. He spoke about May to the "Oakland Tribune."

"She can climb to a crow's nest with the best of them – and does. She was the only woman on board with a crew of 22 men, but she is as good a sailor as anyone, besides being a registered nurse and able to care for any sickness we might have on board. She has travelled with me ever since we were married in 1920, and I feel now that I just couldn't get along without her."

The couple had a son, Charles, who is not mentioned in Christian's obituary. However, he can be found in 1983 delivering a collection of personal papers and records on his father's Arctic voyages and fur trading businesses, to the Archives and Special Collections at the Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage.

In 1923, the Master Mariner left H. Liebes and began his own business, the Northern Whaling and Trading Company. Formed in partnership with New York fur buyer Albert Herskovits, the company focused on fur trading along the Alaskan and western Arctic coasts. As such, Christian captained the M/V Patterson – a 580-ton Arctic trading vessel that was formerly a survey ship of the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey. He additionally started a Canadian branch called the Canalaska Trading Company for those posts beyond the border. Canalaska used two smaller trading schooners and goods were transferred

between ships at Herschel Island. With Canalaska, the Captain set up trading posts all over the Kitikmeot Region of Canada.

In 1936, the Captain sold Canalaska to the Hudson Bay Company and he and May retired from the Arctic life, though he continued to own his fur trade business for a number of years where he and May did mail–order trading.

The couple first retired to Alameda where most of their neighbors were retired U.S. Navy officers and their families. The couple can be found as Alameda residents in the 1940 U.S. Census. Shortly after, Christian and May moved to the unincorporated coastal community of Vallemar, now a neighborhood of the City of Pacifica, and as reported by one of their neighbors in a "Pacifica Tribune" story of 1969, they were a lovely couple, quiet in their elderly years. That same neighbor noted that the Captain had become profoundly deaf.

Several days before the Captain's death in June of 1969, four men escaped from the San Francisco County Jail in San Bruno. Two of them were caught on the night of June 17, a Tuesday, but two remained hidden; though they were spotted at times near Calera Creek before disappearing into the thick foliage. Multiple officers scoured the neighborhood and the school, and all the teachers, students, parents and most of the Vallemar residents were on alert. For three days, the two fugitives evaded capture. The Captain's neighbor warned him to keep his doors bolted, which he did. But in the very early hours of Friday, June 20, the men broke into the Pedersen's home, looking for food and money. Awakened by the noise, the Captain's wife screamed and was knocked unconscious and the Captain received several powerful blows to his head. The Captain died shortly thereafter and the men remained in the house for hours until a neighbor became suspicious when she saw a young man peering from the "Captain's window," and called the police. Not long after, the men were captured. Mrs. Pedersen survived the ordeal but she did not live on her own again.

The community of Pacifica was shocked by the murder and the home invasion, and it was only then that many learned of the Norwegian-American seaman's life among the unpredictable swells, ice and raging winds of a whaler's stretch at sea. The retired sea captain was remembered by his seafaring acquaintances as "one of the canniest old skippers in the Western Arctic."

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By Jean Bartlett (November 22, 2026)

Writer Jean Bartlett was recognized by the Board of Supervisors, County of San Mateo, for "her writing that connects community and preserves local history." She can be contacted through her website, www.bartlettbiographies.com. This story was sponsored by a grant through the Pacifica Historical Society – funded by the Sam Mazza Foundation.