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Ships, semis, what's the difference?

It's hard not to feel a surge of romance and adventure when the tall ships pull into Green Bay.

I blame books and movies. Everything from "Moby Dick" to "Master and Commander," from "Captain Blood" to "Pirates of the Caribbean," we've got this notion about big sailing vessels.

But when you think about it, they hark back to an era when sailing vessels had all the romance and adventure of a Schneider truck.

Getting junk from there to here so people can buy it. Or from here to there so they can sell it. Stuff they don't need or shouldn't have. It's got all the romance of a porcelain toilet — a necessary part of life, I suppose, but just a method of conveyance at the end of the day.

Don't get me wrong. I've read Melville and Patrick O'Brian, I've seen "Captain Blood" and "Pirates of the Caribbean." Nobody's going to be more excited than I am to see those nine tall ships pull into Green Bay this weekend.

What can be cooler than the Pride of Baltimore II, a reproduction of an actual privateer vessel? Or the Draken Harald Harfagre, a Viking longship? You can't get much closer these days to real pirate ships than those two.

The El Galeon, a reproduction of a 16th century Spanish galleon, is the one I'd most like to sail on. At 170 feet and 496 tons, this movable wooden museum will bring the days of Ponce de Leon right to Green Bay's doorstep.

It's all as adventurous and romantic as can be, yet most of Green Bay's historical experience with tall ships was nothing like that. The ships that pulled into port in Green Bay in the 19th century may have looked like the U.S. Brig Niagara or the S/V Denis Sullivan, which are visiting this weekend, but they functioned more like big

trucks. They hauled stuff.

Stuff like pigeon coops and whiskey.

"We have old records showing all kinds of crazy things that came in by water," said Brown County Port Director Dean Haen, whose office, as the modern keeper of port records, inherited the old handwritten logs of Green Bay's early shipping days.

"Whiskey, pigeon coops, all kinds of strange commodities, that traveled by water because it was the fastest mode of transportation," Haen said. "It took a long time to hike through the woods, and you couldn't carry much."

Sailing vessels would bring it in, up to the old fort and even farther, all the way up river to De Pere, Haen said.

"We sent out a lot of stuff, too," he said. "We were clearing Wisconsin's forests initially and exporting railroad ties for the laying of railroads across the country. We were exporting cedar shake to the big cities, lumber for New York and Chicago."

Back before the railroads came into being, ships were the only way to transport, said Mary Jane Herber, local historian for the Brown County Library.

"That's the way a lot of people got here, too," she said.

Records show 146,260 tons of timber and timber products were shipped from Green Bay in 1877, Herber said. As lumber decreased in importance, Green Bay became the largest shipping port for flour in the Great Lakes, she said.

One big commodity that shipped out of here was barrels.

"We had a huge cooperage firm here that started around 1858," Herber said.

Barrels were a big deal in those days, and not just for the whiskey, according to Herber. All kinds of things were shipped in barrels, everything from flour and pickles to nails.

"We tend to think boxes, but that wasn't the way they did it back then,"

Herber said. "They didn't have forklifts or hand carts — that came later. They used barrels because they were easy to store and they were round, so you could move them."

D.W. Britton was Green Bay's big barrel-making company. Located where Camera Corner is now, Britton's went out of business in the 1920s. A fire there in the early 1890s was the impetus for the birth of Green Bay's first professional fire department, Herber said.

Boiler-powered ships started coming into the area in the last part of the 19th century, but wind-powered ships continued to haul into and out of the area well into the 20th century, though most by that time had alternative power as well, Herber said.

Shipping is still a big deal in Green Bay, but it's changed hugely, Haen said. It's an \$88 million-a-year industry upon which companies like Georgia-Pacific depend for the coal and limestone it needs for papermaking. How's that for romance and adventure?

Two-, three- and even four-mast vessels like the ones you'll be able to see this weekend will likely never be anything more ever again than a moving tourist attraction, but Haen foresees a day when shipping itself regains some or most of its past importance.

"The cost of building roads is incredibly high, and with all the congestion and everything, you'll see a resurgence of water transport," Haen predicted. "We're likely to become more like Europe, where any water that's more than 3 feet deep, they're moving freight on, because there's no more capacity to build roads."

If Haen is right, maybe someday we'll have an annual festival where reproduction semi-trailers are brought into town, so we can ogle them and marvel at how people used to move whiskey and pigeon coops in the early 21st century.

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