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E. W. BURNHAM OF SOUTH WINDSOR HAS HAD AN EXCITING CAREER

82 Years Old Today, He Recalls Incidents of the Rover.

HONG KONG GUARD IN THE FIFTIES.

Experiences Harpooning Whales and in the Civil War.

(Special to The Courant.)
South Windsor, April 27.

A man who has had a most interesting career is Erastus W. Burnham, who tomorrow celebrates his 82nd birthday anniversary. Mr. Burnham was born in this town April 28, 1834, within a mile from where he now lives, across from "The Maples," owned by J. E. Lathrop of Ellington street. He now lives with his sons on Depot street where he has been successfully engaged in the tobacco business.

At the age of 14 with a companion and a few dollars he decided to see the world. There was rivalry at that time between the railroad and the steamboat companies, the trip from Hartford to New York being made by boat for 25 cents. After seeing the "Big Town" Mr. Burnham was glad to return home where he remained until he was 17.

At 17 he was accompanied by his father to New London where he shipped on the whaleboat Hannibal, which sailed around the Cape of Good Hope to Australia, at the time gold was discovered in Tasmania. The crew were anxious to stop at Tasmania, but the captain fearing desertion by the larger part of his crew cruised to New Zealand and among the lesser Pacific Islands.

Harpooning Whales.

Mr. Burnham recalls a struggle with a whale off New Zealand on Christmas Day, 1851. The whale of monstrous size had been harpooned and towed for miles in a vain effort to tire it, but finally broke away after a hard struggle. Mr. Burnham was stroke oar on the second mate's crew which took seventeen whales on that trip, the largest of which was taken on September 26, when coming through the Bering Straits. Two hundred and twenty-five barrels of oil were taken from this particular whale. Mr. Burnham says that the three crews had the closest rivalry while pursuing a whale, and each one of the crew which won got an extra griddle cake next morning.

On the return from the Arctic the Hannibal put into Hong Kong where Mr. Burnham and a companion fled to the island of Macca until the ship left port as they would have been compelled to finish the voyage. This was at the time that Commodore Perry opened the ports of Japan.

On Hong Kong Police Force.

Alone and in a strange land the two Americans finally got on the Hong Kong police force which at that time was mostly made up of Americans, Englishmen and Irishmen, with Chinese ministers as interpreters. The night squad all carried carbine guns. Mr. Burnham tells of the Chinese custom of arresting the party that makes the complaint as well as the accused person and says that it was the custom of the husky officers when they encountered natives who resisted arrest, to tie the whole bunch together by their "pig-tails" and march them into their squad house. Chinese pirates were much in evidence at this time and the depredations made by them along the coast were becoming unbearable. On one occasion Mr. Burnham was detailed with a squad of fellow officers to seize a pirate vessel then in port. The officers all floated out in different directions in sampans and completely surrounded the vessel capturing the crew of twenty-seven pirates, all of whom were beheaded.

Guarding New Orleans.

July 1, 1853, Mr. Burnham resigned from the Hong Kong police force and on the 4th shipped on the Challenge, bound with a cargo of tea and silk for New York. The ship sailed from Wampoto on the 12th and after passing through the China Sea, sprung a leak off the island of St. Helena. The ship was in such a bad condition that it was necessary to put into the Azores Islands, where the crew was discharged and later Mr. Burnham shipped on a barge for New Bedford, where he ended his seafaring career.

Following his return to the United States he went to Holyoke, where he worked in a paper mill from which the Hartford Courant Company bought its paper. Mr. Burnham has been a "Courant" reader for many years and each morning devotes two hours to the reading of this paper. When war broke out in 1861, Mr. Burnham answered the call of the President for volunteers by enlisting on December 28 of that year in the Twelfth Connecticut under Colonel H. C. Deming, who, under General B. F. Butler, worked in conjunction with Commodores Porter and Farragut in the siege of New Orleans. Mr. Burnham says that when the port was opened and General Butler marched his men through the streets torrents of abuse were poured on the Union soldiers, but General Butler exercised such a strict discipline that the men would not retaliate to abusive language from women and children under any circumstances.

January 5, 1864, he re-enlisted under Colonel Abbott of the Connecticut Heavy Artillery, later a brigadier general. May 16, they left Fort Durlin for Petersburg, where for eight months they were under constant fire. During his second enlistment Mr. Burnham was a gunner and had several narrow escapes from death. In one instance Mr. Burnham had changed places with a gunner when scarcely ten seconds later two men were killed on the spot he had just left. He has among his collections at the present time a bullet which went through his blankets and the leg of his trousers, just grazing his leg, and at the battle of the Crater he was shot in the shoulder. At the close of the war his regiment was one of those kept in the South for the summer. He was mustered out September 5, 1865.



Erastus W. Burnham.

Within the past two years Mr. Burnham has revisited the scenes of battle near Petersburg, where his son, F. A. Burnham, owns a 400-acre plantation on which are the breastworks which were familiar to the father fifty years ago in the great struggle. Going over the fields brought back many recollections of the days he spent in that vicinity in war time. He is hoping to make another visit to the plantation the coming summer.

He is still very active and is a man of a very sunny disposition who always has a good word for his friends and neighbors and the respect and good will of all his acquaintances.

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