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Shanghai

Lead: During the nineteenth century, if a ship captain found himself short of sailors, he might have to make up his crew by shanghaiing.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: One of the important irritants that led to the War of 1812 between Britain and the United States was impressment. A British Captain, short of sailors, would stop an American merchant ship, sometimes at gunpoint, land a party of toughs and drag off a few unwilling Yankee sailors

to fill up his own crew. Despite the part this practice played in bringing on the war, at the time of the peace negotiations, very little was said about it. Britain, an island nation, had to maintain a superior Navy. Long tradition and ancient laws permitted the Royal Navy to force sailors into service by any means possible. After the war, impressment faded as an issue, but the practice continued, by mid-century acquiring a more colorful name, shanghai.

Soon after the discovery of gold in California in 1849 the harbor of San Francisco began to look like an artificial forest. The masts of hundreds of sailing ships crowded the waterfront. Many of them could not

sail because their crews had deserted and were up in the hills in search of a fortune, but the lure of gold was not the only reason. Life on a sailing ship in that era was no picnic. It was hard work, in miserable conditions, for very little pay, and often captains had to fill out their crews by using the services of a crimp. Typically, a crimp owned a boarding house on the waterfront of a port such as New York or San Francisco, and there prospective sailors stayed waiting for a job. A captain would send word that he needed crewmen, pay the boarding house charges plus a fee for the crimp's services and in turn, the crimp would send over the men. Up to that point, it was all very legitimate, but sometimes the crimp came up short

and could have to engage in creative recruitment. A bump on the head, knockout drops in the beer, a body quietly slipped through a trap door into a waiting boat and soon the unsuspecting seaman, or Midwest farmer, or gullible tourist would disappear only to find themselves in the crew of a slow boat to China, hence the name, Shanghaiing.

Crimps would pay the police and local officials to look the other way, but eventually, in the early 1900s, seaman's unions secured the passage of laws making the practice illegal but the real end to shanghaiing came with the steamship. Crimps could supply bodies, but not those highly trained

**sailors required in the age of
technology.**

**At the University of Richmond, this
is Dan Roberts.**

Resources

**Keller, David Neal. “Shanghaied!” *American Heritage* 46
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