

Sea Shanties

Grade Level: 5-12

Subject Areas: Language Arts and Music

Duration: 50 minutes or less

Setting: Classroom

Skills: Interpreting information

Vocabulary: see list

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- define sailing terms used on schooner; and,
- learn a traditional sea shantey.

Material

“Me for the Inland Lakes” CD by Tom and Chris Kastle. [Contact Tom and Chris Kastle, P.O. Box 56474, Chicago, IL 60656, Website: www.schoonerman.com/sextant.htm email: kastle@enteract.com]

Background

During the Schoolship Program some of you may be lucky enough to be on board when maritime musicians, Tom and Chris Kastle are here. One of the sea shanties that they sing is the *Trip of the Bigler*. Included here is that shantey along with activities and some history about sea shanties (they were also sung on Great Lakes schooners).

This maritime history information is taken from a maritime history unit: *The Age of Schooner, Life Along the Manitou Passage* that the Inland Seas Education Association is developing in cooperation with the Leelanau Historical Museum and Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. This unit complements the ISEA maritime history website.

Sailors found that singing songs to fit the rhythm of their task helped them to work more easily together. In these songs, called shanties, a soloist (shanteyman) sang the verse and the crew joined in on a chorus, repeated after each verse. A shanteyman was chosen for his nimble wit and ability to make up or ad lib verses for the situation at hand as well as for a good voice. Most shanties had many verses to narrate special events or life at sea.

They had their own colorful vocabularies that were a blend of nautical terms and places they had been (or wish they had been). Sometimes they are hard to understand—they often used words not in use today, such as “Hilo” for Hawaii or “Barbaree” for the Barbary Coast of North Africa. Their rhythms were those of shipboard tasks: long, slow, and even for hauling lines, or quicker and more energetic for walking the capstan around. Familiar folk tunes adapted to nautical life and traditional old ballads were often sung at leisure or ashore.

Great Lakes sailors knew many of the old sea shanties, but also developed songs of their own which named Great Lakes ports, wrecks, reefs, storms, and lighthouses. As on the ocean, occasionally a crew member might have a concertina, pipe, or whistle aboard to play along.

Today, we know these shanties because of the work of folklorists and musicologists who have searched for them in museum archives and private documents, or recorded elderly seaman singing them and sharing their memories. They are being sung on shipboard programs sailing the Lakes today.

The Activity

Work in groups of two, each group takes one passage of *The Trip of the Bigler* and explains to the rest of the group what is happening.

Chart Work

After listening to the song and reading the words: use the Great Lakes Chart #14500 to retrace the passage of the *Bigler* through the Great Lakes. Identify and mark each place name noted in the song: Milwaukee,..

The Trip of the *Bigler*

Please listen to the CD: "Me for the Inland Lakes" by Tom and Chris Kastle. One of the songs is of the schooner the *Bigler*. Note the special vocabulary used to describe sailing and parts of the boat, defined words and phrases are underlined.

Come all me boys and listen and a song I'll sing to you
It's all about the *Bigler* and of her jolly crew
In Milwaukee last October, I chanced to get a sight
On the schooner called the *Bigler* belonging to Detroit.

It was on a Sunday morning about the hour of ten
The *Robert Emmett* towed us out into Lake Michigan
We set sail where she left us in the middle of the fleet
And the wind being from the south'rd, oh, we had to give her sheet.

But the wind chopped 'round the sou-souwest and blew both fresh and strong
And gently through Lake Michigan the *Bigler* she rolled on
And far beyond her foaming bow the flashing waves did fling
With every inch of canvas set her courses wing to wing.

But the wind it came ahead before we reached the Manitous
Three dollars and a half a day just suited the *Bigler's* crew
From there unto the Beavers we steered her full and by
And we kept her to the wind, me boys, as close as she would lie

CHORUS: And its watch her, catch her, jump up in her juber ju
 Give her sheet and let her slide, the boys'll push her through
 You ought to seen us howlin' as the winds were blowing free
 On our passage down to Buffalo from Milwaukee

We made Skillagalee and Wobble Shanks, the entrance to the Straits
We might have passed the fleet had they hove to and wait
But we drove 'em all before us, the prettiest you ever saw
Clear out into Lake Huron through the Straits of Mackinac.

Well, the *Sweepstakes* she took eight in tow and all of us fore and aft
She towed us down through Lake St. Clair and set us on the flats
We parted the *Hunter's* towline in trying to give relief
But stem and stern went the *Bigler* into the boat they call the *Maple Leaf*.

Well, the *Sweepstakes* she towed us outside the river light
Lake Erie for to roam and the blustering winds to fight
And the wind being from the south'rd, oh, we paddled our own canoe,
With our nose pointed for the dummy she's hell-bent for Buffalo.
And now we're safely landed in Buffalo Creek at last,
And under the Rigg's elevator the *Bigler's* she's made fast
And in some lager beer saloon we'll let the bottle pass
For we're all jolly shipmates and we'll take a social glass.

We soon received our stamps from our skipper Call McKee
And with our bags we went ashore but not to go on a spree.
To Abe and Mike's we started where we arrived in quiet repose,
And the boys fixed up with a splendid suit of clothes.

And now by song is ended and I hope that I've pleased you.
Let's drink unto the *Bigler* her officers and crew,
And may she sail next fall in command of Call McKee
Between the ports of Buffalo and Milwaukee.

CHORUS And its watch her, catch her, jump up in her juber ju
Give her sheet and let her slide, the boys'll push her through
You ought to seen us howlin' as the winds were blowing free
On our passage down to Buffalo from Milwaukee

Vocabulary

Bore away: to “fall off” or away from the wind so that the wind is off the beam of the boat more rather than off the bow.

Dummy: refers to a buoy (navigation marker).

Fore and aft: a line of boats towed fore and aft would be in a line, one behind the other; fore refers to the forward part of a vessel (near the bow) and aft refers to the rear of the vessel (near the stern).

Give her sheet: the sheet is a line that controls the position of the sail. To give sheet means to let the sail out to catch the most wind.

Her course is wing and wing: the mainsail out to one side and the foresail sheeted out on the opposite side. Can only be done in a following wind off the stern—a wind coming directly from behind.

Hove to: to position the bow of the ship into the wind in a way that the ship makes little or no headway.

Howlin': the boat was sailing fast

Make fast: to secure lines to a dock or to a belaying pin.

Nose: bow of the boat

Repose: rest

South'ard: meaning southward or from the south

Sou-souwest: meaning the wind was from the south-southwest

Stem and stern: stem is the main rib of a wooden vessel and stern is the rear of the vessel. Refers to the entire boat running into the other boat.

Starboard tack: sailing with the wind off the starboard or right side of the vessel when you are facing towards the bow.

Wind was fair: good wind for sailing, usually aft of the beam.