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Matthew Turner: To Look Back, Distracting From the Now

On the salty bayshore docks of Sausalito, just north of the mighty Golden Gate, amidst the modern sleek steel motor boats bobbing in the water, a tall sailing vessel stands erect, towering above the rest. As its mast calmly sways in the breeze, the sound of bustling sailors and sea captains reaches your ears, mining supplies being loaded and unloaded by the minute. The final preparations being completed, the ship departs the parallel fleet at the dock and departs on its multi-week journey across the blue. As the boat chases the sun to the west, the words “Matthew Turner” can be seen lining the stern in large lettering.

Such a scene is highly reminiscent of the ports of San Francisco during the Gold Rush, a time long ago, lost to only old pictures and memoirs. Here in 2019, technology has advanced our civilization to be able to run motor boats capable of carrying an astounding amount of materials overseas. So why is it that in Sausalito, just north of San Francisco, a small crew of volunteer workers from the non-profit organization Call of the Sea have dedicated their time to constructing a life-size replica of a late 19th century sailboat? This ship, the *Matthew Turner*, is a project that reminds the world of the importance of preserving history. Like a fictional tale, our history is comprised of different eras, each one leading to the next – and, like that story, one cannot truly appreciate the world we live in today without knowing everything that led up to it.

The *Matthew Turner* and the nearby San Francisco Maritime Museum both teach important histories of our world that would not be taught in-depth otherwise. These sites are dedicated to promoting the importance of history in our world, and it is just as important to continue to preserve these as it is to teach history in high schools around the country.

One may scoff at the ostensible significance of a museum, as art may appear to be an unnecessary luxury of our society. While it may be true that it does not affect our daily lives directly, museums provide a special window into our history that many other media cannot. Joan Wages, president and CEO of the National Women's Museum, states that upon entering Susan B. Anthony's home, "I began to see her as the living, breathing woman she had been, rather than just the heroine I had read about... it is said that museums bring history to life and that's certainly been my experience." Like some people may prefer to see a story told through a television series rather than reading it in a fictional novel, or others prefer to look at photographs rather than reading about historical locations, many people find it easier to connect with our history through physical replicas and museums than through reading about our past. The Matthew Turner ship is a replica, which serves the same purpose as a museum, but with a greater emphasis on the realism and authenticity of the time period, as well as appealing to one's physical senses rather than educating them through words and pictures. When one steps aboard the Matthew Turner, they will be able to feel as if they are truly on an 19th to 20th century sailing ship, reliving history. They will be able to experience something no museum would ever be able to replicate.

Just across the Bay in Richmond, the famous Kaiser Shipyards remain as a historical monument commemorating the shipbuilding in the Bay Area that aided the US successes in

World War II. Located here is the SS Red Oak Victory, a US military ship from 1944, which was salvaged from scrappage by the Richmond Museum Association in the 1990s. Volunteers constantly work away to preserve the ship, keeping it in its truest form and upholding this history of such an important vessel from a past generation. “Your generation and other generations can see what this ship did for World War II and everything,” argues Red Oak Victory volunteer Gary Piva. “Without these ships and everything, we couldn’t have won the war.” He dedicates a large portion of his time to working on the ship and restoring it to its former glory, alongside other deckhands who share his hobby. The ship is open for touring and hosts events every so often in order to allow those interested the opportunity to learn more about the ships and shipyards used in the middle of the twentieth century, most of which served the US military in World War I “It’s part of the history,” continues Piva. “It’s part of the United States history, and the ‘Greatest Generation’ that won the war.”

Back in Sausalito, *Matthew Turner* project director Alan Olson believes that the ship will help future generations feel attached to the history of where they live. “The Bay is a very important part of where we live,” he states, looking out at the water from the deck of the vessel. He believes that sailing is a unique experience that few people get to experience, and is one that he feels is necessary to understanding the true importance of our maritime history, especially here in the San Francisco Bay Area. “Most young people have never had a chance to go out on it. They don’t have a connection to it... without any connection, they won’t have the same kind of hard feeling towards it or care for it that they need in the future to take care of their world” (Olson).

The idea for the project has floated around Olson's head since the 1980s. "We tried, we weren't able to raise the money [or] bring a community together strong enough to be able to have the resources to do it," he laments, now successfully years into the project. The project was abandoned for a few decades until Olson returned in 2001, and over time has gained a group of volunteer workers who are passionate and have formed a tight-knit group. One of these workers, Brian Swing, recalls discovering the project a few years back by complete accident. "There's this giant tent with all kinds of sawing and noise going on in the background," he reminisces, "and I walked in and said, oh, this is pretty amazing- here's a big ship they're building" (Swing). Swing's previous occupations had involved carpentry and woodworking, which had given him skills he was able to utilize in constructing the *Turner*; however, despite being trained, he found there to be some new challenges he hadn't expected. "If you think about, you know, furniture, a lot of it has straight lines and square angles, but everything on the ship is curved," Swing explains. "Even if it looks like a straight line, it really has a curve to it of some type. And so machining the lumber to fit these curves was a pretty intriguing operation." Throughout the process, both Olson and Swing have found themselves in a community in which everyone feels satisfied and enjoys their time. As Olson says, "We really all get along very well. We work together. We work as a team with a lot of camaraderie. We have a lot of fun at it. We laugh a lot. And everybody just is really happy to be here."

Despite their noble cause and efforts, Swing and Olson have encountered few snags along the way. Swing remembers a lot of stress during construction of the vessel: "There would be a lot of yelling and screaming and directions flying in all directions," he recalls. Olson, on the other hand, from the perspective of project director, explains having to deal with "different competing

ideas or competing egos” throughout the experience. Overall, though, he feels that the community works well as a whole.

With the entirety of the hull constructed, the Matthew Turner’s future is looking extremely bright. Aside from some riggings and sails, all that’s left to do is some interior decoration, and soon the Turner will be ready to set sail. It is scheduled to do some programs down in Mexico to teach students about sailing history, and should be ready to hit the sea within the next few years. “You think of people that go sailing, well, you know, maybe that's rich guys to go out and raise their sailing boats and that's not open to the rest of the world,” says Brian Swing. “But here's a way of getting young students, some of them I think are in third or fourth or fifth grade, to get an opportunity to really understand what sailing is about and what oceanography is about” (Swing).

With so much hard work and dedication poured into it, one might again ask why people would bother to work so hard on this project. But preserving history as a whole is one of our most important jobs as members of society, and these dedicated volunteers are a prime example of how underappreciated such work can be in this world. They pour countless hours into making sure a replica of an old sailing boat will be able to teach the history of San Francisco maritime to students, educating them about the former glory that once was these vessels, and their significance upon our current society.

So as you stand there on that dock, watching these trading ships pull mining materials in and out of the bustling port, just stop to think about the importance of preserving such a memory. As the ships fade away into the past, being replaced with flashy and smooth vessels of the present, the modern docks that meet your eyes will still have a single ancient link to that fallen

history in place, serving as a constant reminder of what once was. And that link's name is Matthew Turner.

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