

# Stories From The Archives — Captain Robert Dollar, Dean of Pacific Shippers

Researched By: Ralph Drew, Belcarra, BC, June 2013.

Source: Associated Press, May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1932.

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**San Rafael, Calif., May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1932** — Captain Robert Dollar, 88-year-old dean of the shipping and lumber industries died in his home here at 8 a.m. (C.S.T.) today after an illness of two weeks.

The 'Grand Old Man of the Pacific' was known to the four corners of the earth by his fleets of merchant ships. He had been in a coma for more than 36 hours. The illness started with a severe cold which deepened into bronchial pneumonia. [His wife] Margaret Dollar was supported at his bedside by three sons: Harold, Stanley and Melville Dollar and their wives and children.

March 20<sup>th</sup> [1932] Captain Dollar celebrated his eighty-eighth birthday and in a statement said the U.S. "was a fine place for those who liked to work." His entire life had been one of activity.

## Born in Scotland

He was born in Falkirk, Scotland, March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1844. He went to work in the shipyards and at the age of 14 with his father and brother went to Quebec, Canada, and obtained work in a [barrel] stave factory at \$6 a month.

When still a young man he ventured into the lumber country and eventually extended his holdings into western Canada, Michigan, California and Washington. Successful in the lumber industry, he turned to trade with the Orient, and later at an age when most men are ready to retire, actively entered the shipping business. It was from these latter activities he won the title "Grand Old Man of the Pacific".

## World Service

At the age of 80 he inaugurated around-the-world service. He personally worked-out the details and then sailed on the first voyage to call on 400 shippers and potential customers around the globe.

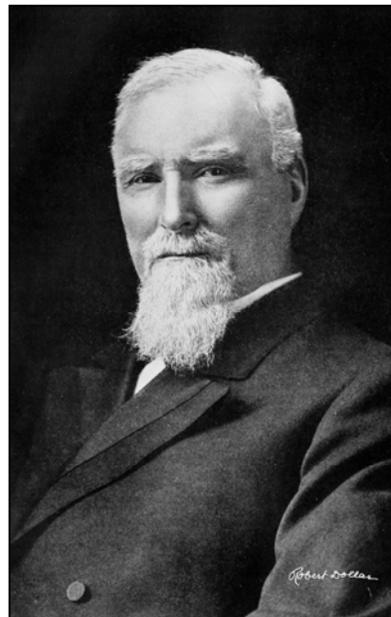
He was president of the Dollar Steamship Company, the Robert Dollar Company, Admiral Oriental Company, Dollar Portland Lumber Company, Canadian Robert Dollar Company, and director of the American International Corporation, Anglo London and Paris Bank, and San Francisco Savings Bank.

## Shipping Career

Captain Robert Dollar began his nautical career when he was six years old by launching a washtub on the Forth and Clyde canal in Scotland. Little did he suspect when he was soundly thrashed by his father for the episode that he was then destined to become one of the largest individual ship owners in the world.

His actual debut in the shipping business did not come until half a century later when Dollar had arrived at an age when many successful men retire from active life, but he gained world-wide recognition and virtual monopoly of the American trade on the Pacific and during the years that rounded-out the span of three score and ten. Before organization of the Dollar Steamship Company, he had conducted highly successful lumber and milling operations in Canada, the United States, and China.

Captain Dollar who became known as the "Grand Old Man of the Pacific" because of his activities in fostering commercial relationships with China and the Far East in general, commented as he saw shipping business grow beyond expectations, that "I often think we are expanding too fast, but the curtailment of it presents quite a problem as the business appears to demand expansion."



**Capt. Robert Dollar, 1917**

## First Ship

Captain Dollar purchased his first ship, 'Newsboy', a small tub of 300 tons, as an adjunct to his lumbering operations in California, and made his first venture in the China trade with the 'Arab' a 6,500-ton steamer, in 1901. By 1921, the Dollar Steamship Company had an imposing fleet of 19, offices in various parts of the world, including Japan, China, the Philippines, Straits Settlements, India, Russia, and Greece.

In addition to controlling coast-wise ocean travel along the Pacific states, his steamships were the only American passenger vessels running to the Orient. He also had an important interest in passenger and freight steamship lines to Alaska.

He received numerous honors, including three decorations by Chinese rulers. He made many charitable bequests and established a chair of Christian sociology at the San Francisco theological seminary. He made his home at San Rafael, near San Francisco, and was assisted by his sons in many interests.

## Little Education

Dollar received a brief but fundamental education in a public school presided over by a crippled school master whose zeal in chastising lazy students led them to thank Providence he had only one arm. Writing his memoirs late in life, Dollar credited his early training in thrift and temperance for his success.

With his father and brothers, Dollar went to Quebec when he was 14 and began to work in a [barrel] stave factory for \$6 a month. He became a chore boy in a lumber "shanty" or camp soon afterward, and in his spare time during the long winter evenings learned to figure and write. The year 1886 found him in charge or a crew of 40 men running logs down the Du Moines River, a tributary of the Ottawa River, his salary being \$26 a month.

In 1874 he married [Margaret Proudfoot] and settled in Bracebridge, Ontario. Two years later he adventured out on the great ice expanses in and around Georgian Bay, near Parry Sound, in order to establish new logging camps, and became lost in a blizzard. He fought for days to get back to civilization.

A search for bigger timber took him to the Marquette region in Michigan. He continued lumbering in the upper Michigan peninsula until he moved to California in 1888, and bought a timber tract in Sonoma County. In 1893 he started a mill and lumber establishment in Mendocino County, and added holdings in Washington and British Columbia.

## Business Grows

During the [first] world war, the captain turned over many of his ships to the Allies under an arrangement which permitted him to take care of his own business. His business continued to grow in the *ante bellum* period and a record of his ship purchases during the years from 1921 to 1926 shows the Dollar fleets had increased two-fold by the addition of 22 vessels.

The Dollar world passenger and freight service was inaugurated in 1924 with seven United States Shipping Board boats. In 1925, he purchased five other large shipping board liners for trans-Pacific trade out of San Francisco. Early in 1926, another fleet of five shipping board boats were taken under the Dollar flag and Captain Dollar owned all of the American passenger boats operating on regular schedules to the Orient.

Working with foreign trade bodies, Captain Dollar opposed congressional legislation which he considered restricted trade by imposing burdens on ship owners. Because of American shipping laws, many of the Dollar shipping vessels were registered in Vancouver, B.C. Captain Dollar travelled extensively and headed a movement among businessmen of the United States to foster foreign commercial relations.

Among his lumbering interests was the settlement of 'Dollarton', Burrard Inlet, six miles from Vancouver, B.C., where he built a model community. [The Canadian Robert Dollar Company purchased 100 acres near Roche Point in North Vancouver in 1917, and built the 'Dollar Mill' at the foot of 'Dollar Road', the first large successful business established in the area which operated until 1942.]



*British Columbia Archives (BCA F-02514)*

**Dollarton mill & docks (Canadian Robert Dollar Company), *circa* 1918**



*Vancouver Public Library (VPL 6522)*

**Dollarton log booms, 1939 — looking south towards Dollarton mill & Roche Point**