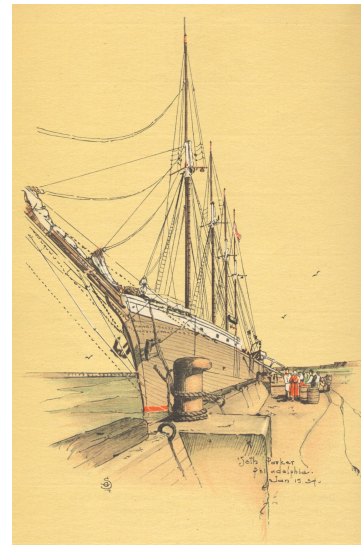


# SETTING SAIL ON THE SETH PARKER WORLD CRUISE

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## I. THE MAN AND THE IDEA

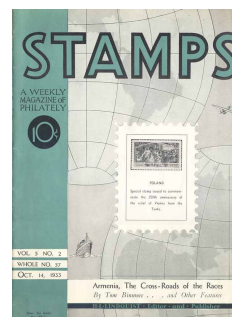
### INTRODUCTION

He was only 31, so it wasn't a mid-life crisis that led radio personality Phillips H. Lord to announce in 1933 that he would make a "round the world" cruise aboard a schooner he would name *Seth Parker*, after the radio character he had created and played. Nor was it a mid-career crisis—he had been on the air for only four years. From 85 years on, it looks like what Lord often referred to as a boyhood dream— "I'll buy me a sailing ship and hunt pirates and cannibals. . . . I'll sail to far places and look for sunken treasure. I'll fish for deep sea creatures . . ."—did include at least some measure of restive longing for adventure, but was mainly the result of three more prosaic factors—personal financial success, a tireless sense of self-promotion, and the availability of a well-heeled sponsor. Together they produced an event that was followed closely by Lord's countless fans, and that—withstanding its unhappy ending with an S.O.S. and a tow to port—contributed to Lord's continued success in the entertainment industry long after he returned home. At the beginning of the trip he said it was going to cost him half a million dollars and maybe his life,<sup>2</sup> and he was close to being right on both counts.

The Seth Parker story is of interest to DXers because the trip included a series of radio broadcasts that were transmitted live from the schooner by shortwave, for rebroadcast over the NBC radio network. The network broadcast band stations were how most people listened in. But if you had a shortwave receiver and knew where to look, you could hear the shortwave signal direct. And it would be a great catch.

The story of the *Seth Parker* has been told many times, most often in the fan magazines of the day. In the shortwave press, Don Jensen called it "[Seth Parker's' Crazy Radio Cruise](#)" when he wrote about it in the February 1988 issue of *Popular Communications*. Adrian Peterson told "The Story of the Good Ship Seth Parker" in *Wavescan*, [No. N51](#) (February 14, 2010), with brief follow-ups in [No. N52](#) (Part 2) (February 21, 2010) and [No. N219](#) (May 5, 2013). Online, John Woram's website, [Chronology of the Seth Parker Voyage](#) [Internet Archive], is an indispensable reference. Although not oriented toward the broadcasting side of things, it reflects extensive research and offers many interesting clicks. (The Woram website is HQ for all things Galápagos, not just the *Seth Parker* story. Go to the [homepage](#) and have a look around.)

Among the memorabilia of the trip that still surface occasionally are the special postal covers that were issued in connection with it. Lord's collaborator in the philately effort was *Stamps* magazine. *Stamps* had begun publishing only in 1932, so it is no surprise that it would seize the chance to cover the trip and gain some publicity. My thanks to the [American Philatelic Society Research Library](#), Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, and the [Spellman Museum of Stamps and Postal History](#), Weston, Massachusetts, for providing invaluable access to the early editions of *Stamps*.

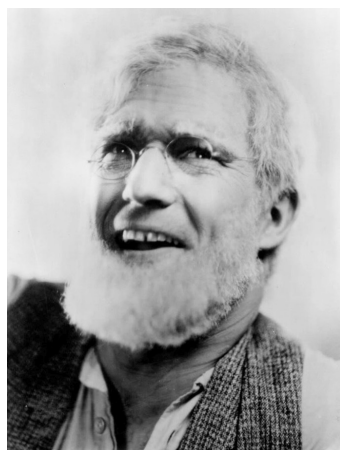


Thanks as well to the American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, home to the [Phillips H. Lord papers](#), for providing a copy of the log of the *Seth Parker*, which covers the month of May 1934 and the period from September 1934 to the end of the trip in February 1935. The log is a diary of 49 closely-typed pages, prepared by Lord himself while aboard ship. It contains much information beyond just progress and weather, including events at sea and on land and, most importantly, Lord's thoughts on many aspects of the trip. It provides perspective on the journey, and on Lord, not found elsewhere. Accompanying the log is a seven-page report from Lord to the governor of American Samoa on the events that brought the *Seth Parker's* journey to an end.

These and other sources have been a big help in telling the *Seth Parker* story again, hopefully with some new information and some new texture that will contribute to a fuller understanding of this interesting event.

An editorial note: Much of the coverage of Lord and the *Seth Parker* at the time of the events, even the negative coverage (which Lord would experience for the first time), was in fan magazines. The *Stamps* articles could be fawning, especially when the *Seth Parker's* first officer, and Lord's longtime friend, John O. Ives, was the author. The cruise was a big enough story to receive newspaper coverage, and even some of that smacked of press release journalism. The point is that many of the public accounts of Phil Lord's doings during the days of the *Seth Parker* must be approached with at least a little bit of skepticism. Your author has tried to keep that in mind.

## PHILLIPS LORD AND SETH PARKER



The origins of Phillips Lord and his character, Seth Parker, have been often repeated. Lord was born in 1902 in Vermont, but he lived most of his life in Meriden, Connecticut, where his father was pastor of the First Congregational Church. He had deep family roots in Maine, and he was particularly influenced by his grandfather, Hosea Phillips, who lived in Ellsworth. After attending prep school (Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts), he graduated from Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. He became the principal of the Plainville, Connecticut high school where his childhood sweetheart, later his wife, Sophia A. Mecorney, taught English. In 1927 he moved to New York to seek a future in entertainment, and to make ends

meet he worked various day jobs—for a candy company, a legal publishing house, a magazine—always actively promoting himself in whatever he was doing. He was creative, and he wrote many stories, but no one was interested in them.

As Jim Harmon, author of *The Great Radio Heroes*, put it, “[t]he chief attribute of young Lord’s personality was self-confidence. . . . He considered himself an immediate master of anything into which he entered. His relentless drive could take him places that turned away other brains and talents. [He was h]andsome, well groomed, with dark hair and piercing eyes, [and] a gleaming, dimpled smile . . . .<sup>3</sup> He was also capable of hyping a story to the max. A news account published shortly after the *Seth Parker*’s departure from Maine was headlined, “Seth Parker’ Admits Voyage Is for Buried Gem Treasure.” “Where is the \$4,000,000 buried treasure,” asked the writer. “He won’t tell. He insists he knows. He gives the hint it’s somewhere in Indo-China. But the maps are a deep secret.”<sup>4</sup>

In the common telling of the Phillips Lord story, one day early in 1929, while visiting a friend in Hartford, Connecticut, Lord was listening to the radio and happened upon a drama depicting life in a small New England town. He was annoyed by what he perceived to be an erroneous depiction of the subject, about which he considered himself an authority. He complained to the station, and, in an early demonstration of the qualities for which he would become known, took them up on their challenge to produce something better. Thus was born the “Old-Fashioned Singing School,” which Lord produced with a group of friends for about ten weeks. Other stations became interested, and Lord syndicated the scripts so the stations could produce the program on their own. NBC expressed interest in the program, whereupon it was refashioned into “Sundays at Seth Parker’s” and presented on the NBC Red Network on Sunday nights at 10:45-11:15 p.m. eastern time. In its original network incarnation it aired from March 1929 to December 1933.

Harmon described Seth Parker, the central character of the program, as “a sort of masculine Ma Perkins with wisdom that sprang from the soil and disdained proper grammar.” There was much kindly chatter, gossip, country philosophizing, good-natured joking and inspirational hymn singing among the bewhiskered, grandfatherly Seth, “Ma Parker” (Seth’s on-air wife), and their circle of friends and relatives with the Pine Tree State accents. The program was a depiction of a slow, rustic, God-fearing life in Jonesport, Maine (there is actually a Jonesport in Maine, see above). A picture on the end papers of the 1932 book, *Seth Parker and His Jonesport Folks—Way Back Home* (next page), together with [this 1929 Seth Parker recording \[at 02:47\]](#), convey the general ambience of the show. Over time, some people forgot about Lord and thought of Seth Parker not as a radio character but as an actual person.





It is hard to overstate “Seth Parker’s” following among the radio-listening public of the early 1930s. Seth was a household name in radio the same way Doris Day would be in music or Luci and Desi on TV. The wholesomeness and gospelizing of the Seth Parker character gave Seth particular appeal in church-going households, which is why Lord’s program was a “sustainer,” one that the network supported itself rather than through commercial sponsors. Lord could easily have found sponsors, but NBC was leery of mixing quasi-religious fare with advertising. Lord was an

independent producer, however, and he knew how to promote. There were Seth Parker clubs everywhere, with churches and other groups presenting Seth Parker hymn sings, and dramas and readings where people played the parts of the Seth Parker characters. There were personal appearances nationwide, and extensive advertising tie-ins—the Seth Parker book, a Seth Parker movie (“Way Back Home”), a Seth Parker scrapbook, a Seth Parker hymnal, Seth Parker sheet music, records, photographs, etc. There was even a Seth Parker chair.

What would be considered a hopelessly hokey show today became a phenomenal hit, and even spun off another program, “The Country Doctor.” It was the Depression, and Phillips Lord was at the top of the charts, and a rich man. He was a promoter, but he was also a talent, and a bona fide success.

#### GEORGETTE AND SETH PARKER

The *Georgette* (the *Seth Parker*’s original name) was built in Portland, Oregon in 1918. She was a four-masted, motorized schooner, 188 feet long, 37.5' beam, 867 tons, with two 175 h.p. diesel engines (necessary, as Lord put it, “in attempting to pass up rivers, ‘miles from seabreezes and deep in tropical jungles’”<sup>5</sup>). She had served as a lumber hauler between New Zealand and San Francisco in the service of her owner, G. W. McNear of San Francisco. In 1920 she was shifted to the Alexandria, Egypt to Seattle run, and then the South Atlantic.

By one account, Lord first saw the ship when it was harbored in Red Hook, Brooklyn, after it had come north from Venezuela in September 1932. It was happenstance that Lord encountered the *Georgette's* captain, Constantine Flink, at the foot of the gangplank of another vessel, the *Black Douglas*, on New York's City Island, where both men were looking over boats (reportedly Lord had been searching for the right vessel for two years). Though sometimes said to be a Dane, Flink was apparently born in Estonia, but lived most of his boyhood in Leningrad. He became a navigator in the Russian navy, and later served as first mate on a Norwegian vessel. He was said to speak seven languages, and he became an American citizen after moving to the United States in 1916. He and Lord traveled to Red Hook, and, it is said, Lord bought the *Georgette*, and its accompanying skiff, a Wheeler Playmate, the next afternoon.

A complete renovation and refitting followed, most of the work being done at Fort Totten Pier in Bayside, Queens. Lord enlisted the aid of many firms, which were happy to have their products associated with the trip. There was E. J. Willis & Co. (galley appliances), Westinghouse and Okonite Co. (electrical), Lenox (dining ware), International Silver (cutlery), Rand McNally (charts and maps), A. G. Spaulding (sporting equipment), Johnson & Johnson (first aid), Winchester, Iver Johnson and others (guns of various kinds, of which Lord was particularly proud). A specially-bound set of the Encyclopedia Britannica was on board, as was movie-making equipment. Phillips Packing Co. of Cambridge, Maryland took advantage of the simultaneity of the *Seth Parker* trip and the Second Byrd Antarctic expedition by supplying both with canned soups and vegetables and later announcing that its products had been successfully tested in temperatures 100 degrees above zero and 72 degrees below.<sup>6</sup>

By one report, \$100,000 worth of supplies and equipment was donated just for the publicity value. Names of donors were mentioned in various *Stamps* articles and elsewhere, and companies advertised the presence of their products aboard ship, e.g. [Walker-Turner](#) drill presses, and [Magnecoil](#) electrically heated (and supposedly therapeutic) garments. The *Seth Parker* was “destined to sail to dozens of far-away countries, to make friends of high officials and simple folk as well. Therefore she [had] to be equipped with the latest and finest products of American industry.” (Lord’s plan to have distinguished visitors autograph a world globe, which would then be loaned to a museum, apparently never came to fruition.) It was still the Depression, and Lord wanted to both evidence the return of American business and show optimism about the days ahead.<sup>7</sup>

In all, the ship would be, as *Stamps* put it, “a floating palace.” Its final value was said to be \$250,000, but its performance at sea would prove sub-par. And while it was reported that several thousand applications for spots in the crew were received, at least at the outset there was to be good representation of Lord’s friends, most of them landlubbers “whose present office work and golf for exercise can hardly be called fit training for a year before the mast.”<sup>8</sup>

The area below decks was described as a long corridor, with nine 10' x 7' single-occupant cabins off one side, and off the other the captain’s quarters, Lord’s 15' x 25' study, and bathrooms, one of which boasted a lavender tub, apparently installed in error. Discovering the mistake too late, Lord said he would use it as a brig.<sup>9</sup>

The sponsor of the trip was Frigidaire, at that time a division of General Motors and a major manufacturer of home appliances. Frigidaire published a 32-page booklet called "[Aboard the Seth Parker](#)," which was available free from Frigidaire dealers. Along with two artist's renderings of the ship, and some sea stories (which also featured in the broadcasts), it contained information about the vessel, including photos and drawings of the master's cabin, the main cabin and broadcasting room, the galley, mess, and a sailor's bunk, together with pictures taken above deck. Though written strictly from a marketing standpoint, it provided an interesting glimpse of what life as a gentleman sailor would supposedly be like. It also took every opportunity to promote Frigidaire products, and describe how the new world of electric air conditioning, food refrigeration and freezing contributed to the voyage (and could do the same in your home).

The ship left its berth in Queens on November 20, 1933 and headed for the cruise departure point—Portland, Maine. Before leaving Fort Totten it was renamed the *Seth Parker*, and its home port registered as New York.

#### THE ROUTE—DREAMS AND REALITY

"We'll be gone somewhere between a year and two years," said Lord to a *New Yorker* interviewer. But for a trip of this magnitude, planning—including something as basic as the selection of a route—seemed remarkably casual.

On July 8, 1933, *Stamps* described the planned route in its first story about the trip. Call this the "eastern route." The *Seth Parker* would take

a trip around the world, heading first direct for the Strait [of Gibraltar], except for a stop-over at mid ocean where [Lord] will test the truth of the stories the seamen used to tell him that there were no fish there. From the Strait he will set out for the Suez Canal, to Ceylon, Siam, and the cannibal isles. Thence he will go to Singapore, Sumatra, the Isle of Bali, the Solomon Islands, the Rennels Islands. Fiji and Samoa come next, and then he will head home through the canal and the Caribbean Sea. An attempt will be made along the route to broadcast by short wave lengths for pick-up in this country. Cairo, Bangkok, and Java have been selected as quite certain for such a broadcast, and he will also probably be heard from Hawaii and Australia.<sup>10</sup>

Later in the month, an ad for the philatelic covers followed the same general route, giving 25 destinations: the Azores, Gibraltar, Tunis, Alexandria, Port Said, Hejaz [Saudi Arabia], Aden, Sokotra, Laccadive, Colombo, Rangoon, Mandalay, Nicobar, Sumatra, Singapore, Borneo, Batavia, Bali, Timor, Panama, the Solomon Islands, the Fiji Islands, Tahiti, Hawaii, and Sabah Island. Fifteen additional stops were to be decided on during the cruise. (See p. 34 for the ad.)<sup>11</sup> Similar ads appeared into September.

Starting in January 1934, *Stamps* still carried ads for cacheted covers from “40 interesting ports,” but with no specific destinations listed, because the route had changed. This was first noted in an interview of Lord that appeared in *The New Yorker* article, in October 1933.

He [Lord] told me [interviewer] the route he will take. From Jonesport, Maine (*mise en scène* of the Seth Parker sketches), slowly down the coast to Charleston. Then Havana, then across the Caribbean to the Central American coast. Down the main to the mouth of the Amazon, with a voyage up the forbidding stream and perhaps a visit to Theodore Roosevelt’s River of Doubt [in central Brazil]. Then the big cities, Rio and Buenos Aires, and afterwards the course will be toward Cape Horn and Tierra del Fuego.

We won’t round the Cape,” he said. “Not because of the weather—we’ll get it just as bad off the tip of Africa—but because we don’t want to go that way. We’ll cross the South Atlantic to the African coast, Cape Town and Madagascar, and then strike for India—Mandalay and certainly the Lost City of Indo-China. We’ll go to Singapore, and then to Bali. Borneo and Java and then the South Sea Islands. Tahiti and the Cannibal Islands, Frigate Rock and the Marquesas.” \* \* \* After Callao [Peru], if he goes there, he will touch Mazatlán, San Diego, San Pedro, and San Francisco, then head through the Panama Canal for home.<sup>12</sup>

This was a major change of plans. Instead of heading east to Europe, through the Suez Canal, to Asia, the Pacific and home, the route would now be down to Central and South America, across the South Atlantic, up the east coast of Africa, across South and Southeast Asia and the Pacific, to Peru, then up the Mexican and California coast, back to the Panama Canal, and home. Call this the “southern” route.

In December 1933, *Stamps* announced the changes this way:

Instead of sailing to the Island of Ceylon by way of Gibraltar and the Suez canal, Phil thought that a more picturesque and adventuresome trip could be made by sailing to Buenos Aires, Argentina, across to Capetown, South Africa, and up the east coast of Africa to Ceylon. The revised course will enable the little group of adventurers to investigate the myriad wonders of the Amazon, if they like, and will enable them to become

acquainted with far more picturesque natives and animals of Madagascar and the Tanganyika Territory.<sup>13</sup>



Just how seriously Lord and company approached the planning of the route is hard to say. Were these just teasers for the press and the public, and the whole trip just a giant publicity stunt?

As it turned out, the route that was actually taken was completely different from either the eastern route or the southern route. The *Seth Parker* began its journey on December 7, 1933, departing from Portland, Maine. (The prediction that it would leave from Jonesport proved wrong.) For the next three months the ship proceeded down the east coast, making many stops. December saw it in Boston,<sup>14</sup> Providence, and Bridgeport, Connecticut, arriving in New York (photo at left) on December 29. It was there for about two weeks, then departed for Philadelphia; Newport News, Virginia; Wilmington, North Carolina; Charleston, South Carolina;

and Savannah, Georgia. For around six weeks, starting in early March and lasting until around April 12, it visited four cities in Florida.

After Florida, the *Seth Parker* in fact took a western route. It headed for Bimini in the Bahamas, then on to Cap-Haitien and Port-au-Prince, Haiti, staying in that country—which would reach the end of a U.S. occupation in August—for about three weeks, then departing for Kingston, Jamaica, where it was in port from May 30 to July 19. The next stop was the Panama Canal Zone, where Lord and company encamped for a long time—from arrival July 27 until around September 9. Then it was on to the Galápagos, where the ship sojourned for the first two weeks in November, followed by a brief stop in the Marquesas, and on to Tahiti for a three week stay, from the end of December to mid-January.

The planned eastern and southern itineraries, plus an approximation of the western route, are illustrated graphically on the [Woram](#) website. Click on the “World Map” link about half way down the page (near the left-hand margin), then click on the “?” at the top of the map. This will bring up a legend for the several routes. The green dots represent, in general, the eastern route, the yellow dots the southern route, the red dots the western route. Click the “+” off the American east coast for a more detailed map of the *Seth Parker*’s actual east coast route (save for the inclusion of Jonesport and the exclusion of Palm Beach on the map). Click on the red dots to see various clippings, postal covers and other



interesting items. As explained below, the cruise came to an abrupt end in February of 1935, a little over 14 months from its start.

The last broadcast of “Sundays at Seth Parker’s” was on December 3, 1933. The following Tuesday, December 5, the day the *Seth Parker* was scheduled to leave Portland (it was slightly delayed), saw the start of a new NBC series, “The Cruise of the Seth Parker,” wherein Lord et al. would chronicle the events of the voyage. The program was broadcast for 30 minutes, 10:00-10:30 p.m. eastern time, every Tuesday.

About the planning of the ship’s route, John Ives mused as follows:

Perhaps we shall visit various of the South Sea Islands. Perhaps at New Guinea the Australian government will permit some of us to go into the interior for a visit to the new tribes just discovered by airplane. We hope, too, to photograph some of the Komodo dragon lizards in the environment which has let them survive countless centuries in their prehistoric form. We shall stop at Singapore, Rangoon perhaps, Ceylon, Zanzibar, Madagascar—we hardly know for sure. They are all on our proposed route, but if something new intrigues us a thousand miles off, that’s where we’ll go.<sup>15</sup>

Only Phillips Lord and NBC could know if it was all hyperbole, wishful thinking, or an entertainment-industry con, or some of each.



ENDNOTES

*Some of the resources named in these notes  
are available on line. See the Bibliography for links.*

1. "Seth Realizes His Ambition," *The Pittsburgh Press*, November 12, 1933, p. 31.
2. Morris Markey, "A Reporter at Large—Sentimental Journey," *The New Yorker*, October 14, 1933, pgs. 52, 55.
3. Jim Harmon, *The Great Radio Heroes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), p. 43.
4. "Seth Parker' Admits Voyage Is for Buried Gem Treasure," *Courier-Post* [Camden, New Jersey], January 16, 1934, p. 16.
5. "Queens Boys With Seth Parker On 18-Month Exploration Trip," *Times Union* [Brooklyn, New York], November 21, 1933, p. 6.
6. "Unusual Test for Phillips Products," *The Tampa Times*, December 21, 1934, p. 17.
7. "Seth Parker Arranges A Few More Details," *Stamps*, August 12, 1933, p. 246.
8. *Ibid.*
9. John O. Ives, "Seth Parker Furnishes the Georgette," *Stamps*, August 26, 1933, p. 318.
10. C. N. Downs, "Seth Parker Sets Sail—The Realization of a Boyhood Dream," *Stamps*, July 8, 1933, pgs. 53, 54.
11. "Set Sail With Seth Parker" [advertisement], *Stamps*, July 22, 1933, p. 143.
12. Markey, *supra* note 2 at p. 55.
13. John O. Ives, "The 'Seth Parker' Gets Under Way," *Stamps*, December 16, 1933, p. 407.
14. As late as December 7, when the ship reached Boston, the *Boston Globe* was still reporting the southern route as Lord's planned itinerary. "Seth Parker on Way Here," *The Boston Globe*, December 7, 1933, p. 24.
15. John Ives, "The Cruise of the Seth Parker," *Radio Guide*, Week Ending January 19, 1935, pgs. 5, 29.