

II. THE SETH PARKER AT SEA

THE ATLANTIC COAST

On Sunday and Monday, December 3 and 4, 1933, thousands of people converged in Portland to step aboard the *Seth Parker* and see it for themselves. During the four or so months that the ship would be in American waters it would stop at 15 places, and visitors were always invited aboard. You could get a free ticket from Frigidaire dealers, who were happy to welcome you into their stores. More than 36,000 tickets were distributed for the Portland departure alone.

The *Seth Parker* was scheduled to depart on Tuesday, December 5. The day before, Phillips Lord went to Augusta, the state capital, to invite the 180 members of the state legislature to attend the event by way of a special train chartered for the occasion. On Tuesday, Lord hosted them, along with Governor Louis J. Brann and other guests, aboard ship, and at an old-fashioned baked bean and brown bread dinner



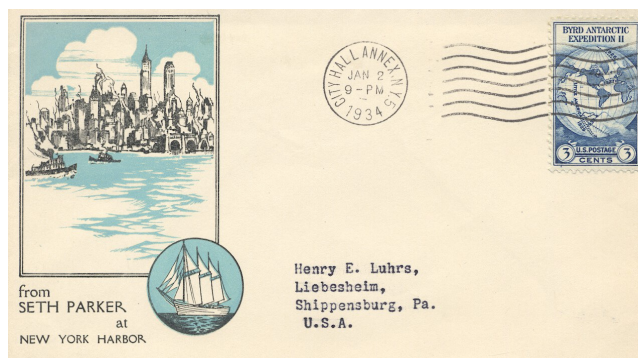
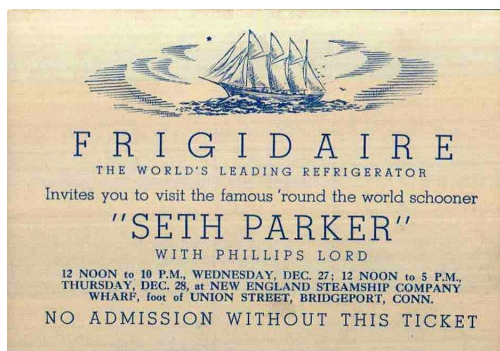
The *Seth Parker* at an unknown location.

set up at Portland's State Pier Building by Burnham & Morrill, a well-known Maine cannery ("[I]f B & M Baked Beans ain't a meal for a king, I don't know what be"—*Seth Parker* in a B & M ad¹⁶). The governor and other notables spoke, a military band played, and the Bowdoin College Glee Club sang. The weighing of anchor, scheduled for 11 p.m., was to be a well-lighted affair, with floodlighting supplied by a Portland fireboat, and the anti-aircraft lights of Battery I of the 240th Coast Artillery directed across the harbor. However, a storm delayed departure. Phil and his wife returned to Portland's Falmouth Hotel, where they were staying, eventually returning to the *Seth Parker*, for which Lord had arranged a tow into the channel outside the harbor. It appears that they finally got underway early on Thursday, December 7.¹⁷

No less celebratory was the *Seth Parker's* arrival in Boston late the same day. It was around 9:00 a.m. the following morning (Friday) that she made the two-mile run up the main channel, surrounded by tugs and with all sails set. Many craft sounded their whistles, and the *Seth Parker* responded with three siren blasts as she made her way to "T" wharf, at the foot of State Street. There was a water salute from three fireboats. Present were city officials, members of the press, and Frigidaire's general manager. Phil Lord, having been appointed a lieutenant senior grade in the U.S. Naval Reserve prior to the trip, appeared on deck in uniform. He and some of his entourage then headed to the Hotel Statler, which served as headquarters during the visit.

SETTING SAIL ON THE SETH PARKER WORLD CRUISE

Festivities in Boston included a reception and luncheon at the Copley Plaza Hotel, where Lord was given a key to the city by Mayor James Michael Curley. More than 200 were in attendance at the event, which was broadcast over WEEI. Lord was also the guest of honor at a Rotary Club luncheon at the Statler, where he spoke and led the attendees in some old fashioned hymn singing; and he visited the offices of Frigidaire's general manager in Boston, where he received a specially-inscribed gold badge from the city's fire commissioner.



Thousands visited the *Seth Parker* during the three days it was open to the public. (A *Boston Globe* editorial oversight put Sunday's attendance at both 10,000 and 20,000 in the same article.) Extra police, plus a contingent of 40 Sea Scouts—two of whom would join the crew upon the ship's departure from the city—helped with the crowd, and many had to be turned away. "When the crowd waiting at the wharf in the cold air for their chance to visit the schooner became restless, Capt. Lord came to the gangplank and led the people in singing the hymns and songs he has helped make popular on his radio program."¹⁸ At night, the ship was illuminated by floodlights.¹⁹

It appears that the *Seth Parker* was in Providence on Tuesday, December 19, when Lord presented his regular Tuesday night broadcast. By Thursday he was headed for the Connecticut coast, where he and another ship almost collided in a gale.²⁰ He arrived in Bridgeport (see above left) soon thereafter.



Courtesy of the Boston Public Library, Leslie Jones Collection

New York City was the *Seth Parker's* locus for New Year's Eve, the ship having arrived there on Friday, December 29, berthing at Pier 1, The Battery. Among its visitors were a dozen old captains, resident of Sailors' Snug Harbour, a home for retired seamen. Reported one news story, "The old skippers gave Lord a cargo of good advice, and a bundle of tales about lost islands, sunken treasures and mysterious waters that the broadcaster hopes to investigate before he points the 'Seth Parker' homeward again."²¹

By mid-January 1934, Lord was in Philadelphia, where some important radio-related events occurred. During the week of January 15 the ship's shortwave transmitter was installed by Radiomarine Corp. of America, an RCA subdivision, at the RCA works in Camden, New Jersey, on the opposite shore of the Delaware River from Philadelphia. This was the unit the *Seth Parker* would use to shortwave the weekly "Cruise" program, produced on board, to RCA's Radio Central on Long Island. The antenna had been installed while the ship was in New York harbor earlier in the month. NBC engineer Carey P. Sweeney joined the cruise to handle radio issues. Sweeney was from Texas, and had worked in the development labs of General Electric, RCA Communications and Bell Telephone before joining NBC.

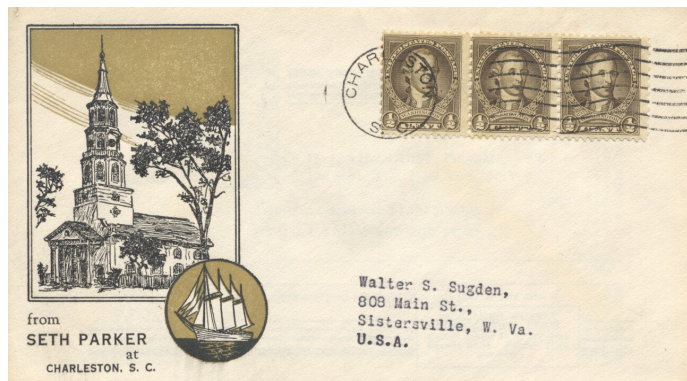
An ad in *Stamps* got it wrong when it announced that the *Seth Parker* would be in Baltimore on January 23 (there was no Baltimore stop). By that date the *Seth Parker* had probably reached Newport News, Virginia, where it remained until February 7, save for a side trip to Washington, D.C. during the period January 28-31. While in Washington, Lord received visitors aboard ship and also made a couple of obligatory department store appearances, as he did as well in Newport News and other stops. More importantly, he met with President Roosevelt on January 30, the President's birthday, and, it being a Tuesday, he sent the weekly "Cruise" broadcast from the nation's capital.



An oft told human-interest story that occurred in Washington is as follows: While in New York, Lord had come across four young men who had, some years before, run away from home to go to sea. Now unemployed and homesick, they welcomed Lord's invitation to come aboard. Upon reaching Washington, Lord wired their parents, advising them to listen to the January 30 program. Each of the men spoke on air. Lord appealed to the business communities in their home states to find them jobs, and then, at his expense, put them on trains for home.²² It was a story made for Seth Parker.

At the end of the Newport News visit, the ship's chief engineer, Frederick C. Smith, was married to his three-year beau, Marian A. Weaver, in a modest on-board ceremony that was broadcast on the regular Tuesday night program. The bride remained on the *Seth Parker* for a time after it left the city.

Following Newport News, the *Seth Parker* headed off for the next three stops on its coastal tour (dates may not be exact): Wilmington, North Carolina (on February 12-16); Charleston, South Carolina (February 17-22); and Savannah, Georgia (February 23-March 1). The final destination was Florida, where Lord et al. stayed first in Jacksonville (March 3-7), then St. Augustine (March 9-16), Palm Beach (March 17-21), and Miami (March 22-April 12). The itinerary at each of these stops was by now fairly standard: shipboard visits by members of the public, speeches to service clubs and chambers of commerce; welcomes by city officials; reading and singing (sometimes in character); interviews with the press, acceptance of awards and citations, greeting fans, etc.

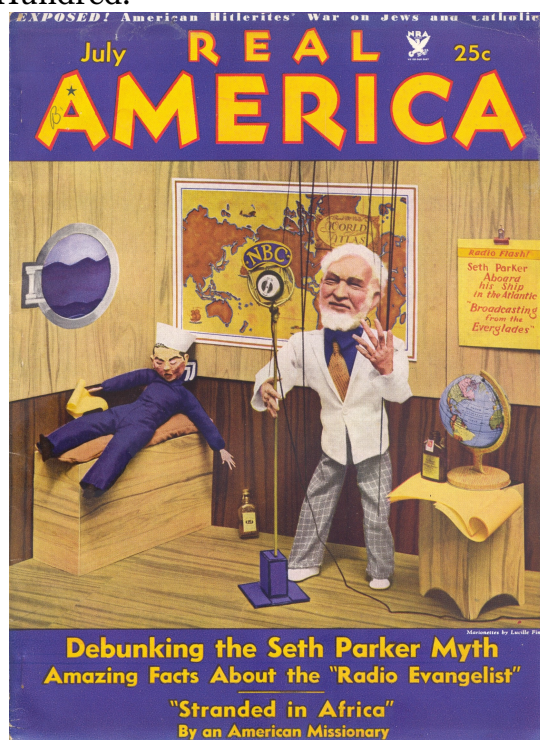


The Charleston broadcast was said to have been made from the dungeon where the legendary Seminole Indian Osceola had been imprisoned, and featured Osceola's grandson, and the grandson of the man who captured Osceola. One of the Miami broadcasts was said to have originated in the Everglades. Reported *Stamps*: "Those who were present at that broadcast, given right in the heart of the Everglades, agree that it was one of the

most impressive sights they have ever witnessed. Even as Phil Lord told over the radio of the sound of the nearby water, the splash of a fish's maneuvers in the water seemed to give sanction to the telling. ¶These [Osceola and the Everglades] are not impossible accomplishments, but they require the brain and energy of a Phillips Lord to see achievement."²³ Miami also included an appearance at the city's Sun-Sea-Air event, and an informal meeting of the city's "Committee of One Hundred."

But there was some criticism of Lord building. The July 1934 issue of *Real America* magazine ("The Outspoken Magazine") summed it up, taking Lord to task on multiple fronts in an article titled "Debunking the Radio Hoax of 'Seth Parker.'" The charge was that in real life, Lord's character and conduct bore no resemblance to "Seth Parker," that he was exploiting the religiosity and sense of propriety of his fans for his own enrichment, and that at any given time, Phil and his shipmates—often with female companions—were far less likely to be engaged in hymn singing than in drinking, frivolity, and other carryings on.

Real America charged that the broadcasts of various events on the trip, including the Everglades broadcast, which included descriptions of jungle scenes, were designed to deceive the



listener into thinking the events were actually taking place, even though they were nothing more than dramatizations, staged on board the ship, with various people, including crew members, playing the parts and using man-made sound effects. (Of course, this was not much different from the basic design of “Sundays at Seth Parker’s.”) The magazine wondered if the Everglades broadcast even came from the Everglades. It also said that Lord had often checked in at hotels along the route, preferring their comforts to life aboard ship.²⁴

But Lord also had his defenders. In August, *Radio Guide* opined that radio’s prime function is entertainment, that Lord’s broadcasts were “good, clean red-blooded shows . . . carried out in great style according to the best traditions of virile fiction,” and that members of the audience were not “witless children,” and knew that the programs weren’t anything but “good staging.” It was all in the interest of lifting listeners “from the humdrum surroundings of their ordinary existence,” and not much different from the composite photographs found in newspapers and the numerous “harmless deceptions” practiced for the sake of good movie drama. As for Lord’s personal peccadilloes, the attacks were unfair, unsportsmanlike, and of no concern to the audience. “Shakespeare was a sheep thief and a poacher, but no one thought of condemning his works for his personal weaknesses.”²⁵ Another magazine’s findings nine months later were also generally supportive of Lord.²⁶ But the rumors may have contributed to the inability to find paying sponsors for the trip other than Frigidaire.

A problem that was probably not fully appreciated at the time was that, aside from the questions of personal conduct, the cruise changed Lord’s relationship with his audience in a fundamental way. A Seth Parker listener in Colorado, writing to her local paper at about the same time as the *Real America* article, put it this way:

This young man [Lord] had won a place in the hearts of his public. Elderly couples who spared some of their meager savings to keep up an old time radio, sat hand in hand on Sunday evenings, listening to the beloved hymns, and they believed in Seth and Mother Parker. They wept with them when they told of the death of the little son; they rejoiced when the outlaw gang rebuilt their barns; they blessed them when they heard of the way they befriended the unwed mother and soothed her soul in death. ¶The “army of the unemployed,” clothed in garments unfit for a church, crowded in restaurants or stood sheepishly on street corners, and listened to the songs their mothers used to sing, and sincerely bowed their heads for “just one moment.” And it helped them keep faith in their God and their country, for, after all, religion and patriotism are strange [sic] related. ¶After he left his little group on the out of the way coast of Maine, and started on his trip around the world, we listened, the first Tuesday evening, to Phil Lord, *no longer Seth Parker* [emphasis added], as he and his crew gave a mediocre entertainment. . . . * * * ¶Another idol has fallen: Seth Parker has gone Broadway.²⁷

THE CARIBBEAN AND BEYOND

As late as Palm Beach, Lord was cagey about his itinerary. “We’re not going to follow a set schedule when we leave American water, but will go where the wind takes us and meet conditions as they arise.”²⁸ True to his word, the first stop, which was supposed to be Trinidad, was scrapped, and the *Seth Parker’s* first landing point was Bimini, an island of the Bahamas 50 miles off Florida. *Stamps* made no mention of it, but months later an article in *Radioland* magazine quoted a Lord aide to the effect that, after taking on supplies there, they had engine problems and drifted, finally reaching the Bahamian island of Inagua, near Haiti, only to encounter difficulties over fees and landing permissions.²⁹

The first broadcast from the *Seth Parker* after leaving American waters was on Sunday, April 22, 1934, seemingly from the Bahamas. Reception at Radio Central was poor, however. Widespread reception of the broadcasts had to await the April 29 program, when the *Seth Parker* was about a week out of Haiti. A recording of that broadcast has survived, and the transcript, which can be found at Appendix A (p. 45), gives a flavor of what it was like.

The ship arrived in Cap-Haitien on May 5, moved on to Port-au-Prince, and stayed in the country until May 26. Lord started keeping a ship’s log when he arrived in Haiti and kept it up during the time he was there. He stopped making entries at the end of the month, and did not resume until September 12, when he was three days beyond Panama.

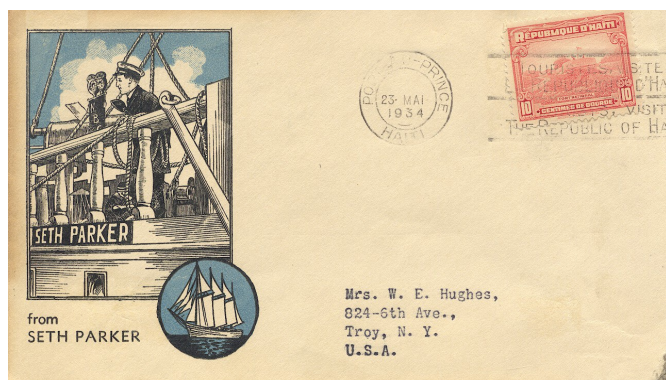
It was not long after departing American waters that the whole endeavor started fraying. A year later, recalling his experiences aboard the ship, M. Eugene Nohl, an MIT undergraduate who had met Phil Lord in Bridgeport and signed on to the ship thereafter (bringing with him a small deep-water diving shell he had invented), said this about the ship’s time in the West Indies.

Those were hectic months—the relentless tropical sun—pure white beaches—deep clear blue waters and skies—rich green tropical foliage—mountains rising out of the seas—the submarine wonders of a coral sea—native dances—harpooning fish at night with a floodlight—the Citadel at Cape Haitien—night wheel watches—strange people and strange worlds. ¶On board, however, there was great dissatisfaction. The broadcasts weren’t going through. We had lost our sponsor. One man after another quit. The engines couldn’t be run. Everything, it seemed, was fizzling out, and then, it was announced we weren’t going on, but were going to head back for the Panama Canal. My brain was on fire with ideas for opportunities elsewhere, and, as there was nothing more for me on the “Seth Parker,” the first of June [1934] found me signed on to the “S.S. Colombia” as a workaway, headed for New York.³⁰

Stamps reported that, while in Haiti, Lord visited the Citadel, went for a horse and buggy ride, saw a “bombosh” (spiritual dance ceremony)—all the stuff of ordinary vacationing³¹—and attended a reception for the President of the Dominican Republic.

The broadcasts may have been the high points of Lord's stay in Haiti. It appears there were a total of four—three on Sundays, one on Tuesday; one in harbor, two outside the harbor (to improve reception at NBC), one at sea.³² When Phil Lord advised Rear Admiral John Halligan of the USS *Saratoga*, then in Port-au-Prince, that the *Seth Parker* was also in the neighborhood, a visit to the American warship ensued, whereupon the May 22 program was rearranged to include music by the U.S. Navy Band, Rear Admiral E. C. Kalbfus and some sailors singing “Sailing Down the Coast of High Barbary” and other songs, and remarks by Haitian President Sténio Vincent.

Haiti was hot, and Lord didn't like it. He preferred being on the open sea and enjoying the company of Rex, the ship's dog. In addition, Lord was getting concerned about funds. As a possible money maker he tried to sell the Haitian government on a promotional film for the country, but he couldn't generate any interest, which was probably just as well because his on-board movie-making personnel were a weak lot. It appears he left them in Haiti.³³



The next stop, Jamaica, was one of the more eventful of the *Seth Parker's* stops. The ship arrived in Kingston on May 29 or 30, 1934, and stayed more than six weeks. The reason: the filming of a Phillips Lord movie, “Obeah” (in another incarnation, “White Sails”). The plot: adventurer (Lord) seeks to rescue American explorer under voodoo spell (“obeah”) of native captors; explorer dies; adventurer escapes to his yacht with explorer's daughter and another girl; they look for sunken treasure; cue romantic triangle. A filming party of 23 professionals arrived in Kingston from New York. An accident resulting in serious burns to two members of the party and three local girls with parts in the film occurred on June 24, and delayed the ship's departure from Jamaican waters until July 19. The film, which did not live up to its billing as an “epic of the sea,” was poorly received, confirming what other radio stars were discovering, namely, that success in transferring stardom from radio to the movies was no sure thing. Two radio broadcasts were made from Jamaica (see p. 32).

Jamaica was also the site of a confrontation between Lord and NBC that was serious enough to warrant dispatch of network vice president John Royal to the island with a mind to end the Lord-NBC relationship. NBC was concerned about the negative publicity over Phil Lord's “unwholesome” conduct during the trip, and the damage it could do to the Seth Parker image, which was central to the success of the Seth Parker radio programs, in which NBC had invested much over the years. More immediately, NBC was uncomfortable with the appearance of Lord's vessel, and certain broadcasting equipment bearing the NBC logo, in the “Obeah” film making, with which NBC was not involved. Compounding concerns included the injuries that had occurred during production of the film, and the boosting of Jamaica rum during one of the Jamaica shortwave broadcasts (it was NBC policy not to promote hard liquor). In the end, a chastised Lord was permitted to continue using NBC's shortwave installation for a weekly 15-minute program, usually on Monday nights, which

NBC carried unsponsored, Frigidaire having dropped out of the picture in March; and radioman Carey Sweeney could remain on board.³⁴

Panama was another long stop. The *Seth Parker* passed through the Canal during the first few days of August, and berthed at Balboa, on the southern coast (near Panama City), where it remained until around September 9. Lord and some of the *Seth Parker* gang had been in the Canal Zone in January 1932, en route to the west coast for some theater engagements. A photo from that trip (below), taken aboard the Dollar liner *President Van Buren*, shows Lord at center, with Raymond Hunter, the hymn-singing “captain” of the Jonesport neighbors on the left, and the *Van Buren*’s real captain, H. S. Bauer, on the right. The trip may have informed Lord’s decision to head toward the Canal and the Pacific rather than sail south.



There was a broadcast from the *Seth Parker* while in Panama, on Thursday, August 30, and another on Monday, September 10, from just beyond Panama. The first is believed to have featured Panamanian music and short addresses by President Harmodio Arias Madrid and American Ambassador Antonio C. Gonzalez. There is little information about Lord’s activities in Panama. The next to the last of the regular series of *Stamps* articles about the cruise appeared on August 25, 1934, about three weeks after the ship’s arrival there, and made no reference to the ship’s Caribbean stops save for a photo of

a Panama cover. That was the last of the *Stamps* articles for five months. (Some of the details in the ship’s log seem to have been the raw material of articles appearing in earlier issues of *Stamps*, and since Lord made no log entries during the Jamaica and Panama visits, there was probably little material for *Stamps* writers to work with during this period.)

From the log, and from a newspaper report,³⁵ it appears that sometime between the latter part of the ship’s stay in Jamaica and its departure from Panama (roughly mid-July to early September), John Ives left the ship for the United States in order to arrange for the release of the “Obeah” film. Ives’ plans to return must have been indefinite, for a later log entry—November 29, by which time the ship was far beyond Panama—indicates that only then did Lord conclude that Ives would not be returning. It was the last reference to Ives. His absence would have a major impact on Lord for the rest of the cruise.

The true test of the planning and execution of the *Seth Parker* voyage was the period between its departure from Panama in September 1934 and the end of the trip in February 1935. The relatively well-organized stops along the east coast and in the Caribbean now gave way to long stretches of open ocean and not much else. Save for landings at a few rocks and small islands, the *Seth Parker*’s first Pacific stop was the Galápagos, which it reached on November 2 after almost two months of ongoing problems.

Even though Flink was at least nominally the *Seth Parker's* “skipper” (Lord often called him that), Lord was the key man aboard, even on matters of seamanship. Although an amateur, he was a good mariner, knowledgeable about the particulars of sailing, and a good navigator—someone who could handle himself respectably on the ocean. But that would not be enough to ensure a successful journey.

One of the most serious problems was the state of the engines. One of the two motors suffered a broken crankshaft early on, rendering it inoperative for the rest of the trip. In a September log entry, Lord observed that, with no engineer aboard, he had become his own engine repairman. This is inconsistent with some other evidence,³⁶ but whatever the exact truth, he was regularly taking the engines apart and putting them back together himself. In addition, the pumps were giving difficulty, no small matter with the ship taking on 20 inches of water a day. As things became worse, Lord gave serious consideration to returning to Panama, but decided to press on and hope for the best.

The sails were the primary means of power for the *Seth Parker*, with the engines reserved for short-term service only. Their unreliability during the many long periods of calm seas meant progress could be exceedingly slow. The ship was awkward and unwieldy, and short on ballast, and it often drifted and lost ground that had already been gained. “We really are in a fairly bad way,” Lord wrote at the end of September. “We have not made any ground in a month.”³⁷ Lord continued to make broadcasts, but they had become a burden, and by October he would have been happy to cancel them, mainly because he had no material. NBC answered his prayers on December 1 when it canceled the “Cruise” series, seemingly because the signal was now too weak in New York and NBC said it could not feed the network from signals received through the RCA facilities in San Francisco. The exact consequences of the cancellation are unclear; it seems it meant only that the *Seth Parker* broadcasts would be on an “as available” basis.

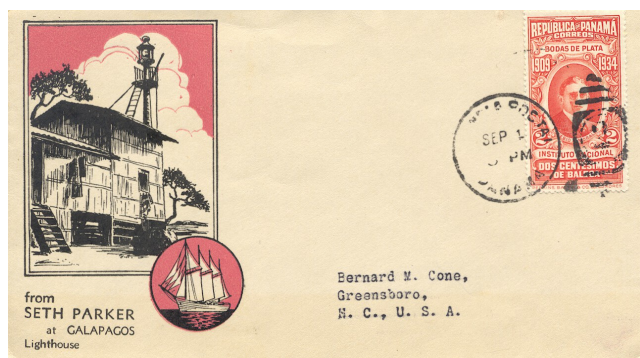
There were other problems as well—bedbugs, cockroaches, and all manner of sores, blisters and low-level illnesses among Lord and the crew. There were times when Lord's hands were so sore he could not use them. One bright spot was the fishing, which was, by any standard, spectacular.

The ship reached the Galápagos on November 2. Just a few days earlier Lord had wondered if he would ever make it. But now, serendipitously, he would enjoy a walk-on in a newsy drama that was playing out internationally.

The story has its roots in 1929 when two free-spirited German nationals from Belgium, Dr. Friedrich Ritter and his patient, Dore Strauch, decided to abandon civilization (and their spouses) in favor of a back-to-nature existence on Floreana (also known as Charles Island), an uninhabited part of the Galápagos. Three years later their story brought a second, like-minded couple, the Wittmers, to Floreana. The island was not big enough for the two couples. Relationships were fraught from the start, and were made worse by the arrival, late in 1932, of the flamboyant and equally free spirited “Baroness” Eloise Wehrborn de Wagner-Bousquet, late of Paris via Vienna (she said), and two male companions, whose announced plan of setting up a hotel on the island to attract the well-healed was incompatible with the lifestyle of its then residents. It all got very complicated, and, whether at her own instigation or not, the baroness became the subject of sensational news

headlines in many papers (“Amazing Tale of How French Baroness Set Up Herself As Ruler of Tiny Island With Iron Hand Methods,” “The Insatiable Baroness Who Created A Private Paradise,” “Mad Empress In the Garden of Eden,” etc.).

In March 1934, the baroness and one of her companions, Robert Philippon, disappeared without a trace. She had said she was going to Tahiti, and her home on Floreana had been left intact, but it was widely believed that the two had been murdered. In the course of events, a male and a female body turned up on the beach of another Galápagos island. At first they were identified as the Wittmers. However, on November 19, 1934, with the *Seth Parker* about a week beyond the Galápagos, Phil Lord was able to dispel that report by noting, in one of his shortwaved broadcasts, that the Wittmers had been his guests aboard the *Seth Parker* at Floreana just a week earlier (actually November 7). The bodies found on the beach had been there much longer. The disappearance of the baroness—who apparently was not a baroness at all—and Philippon was never solved, and the *Seth Parker* sailed on.³⁸



Lord dispatched a *Seth Parker* cover from Port-au-Prince on May 23, and one from Balboa, Canal Zone, on August 3. A cover had been designed for the Galápagos as well (left), but it was actually mailed from Panama, on September 4. Lord may have had advance notice that the mail service on Floreana was little more than a barrel where one deposited mail with the hope that some future traveler would pick it up and send it on its way from a more reliable venue. (The barrel still exists.)

The *Seth Parker* left the Galápagos around November 13, headed for the Marquesas Islands, some 3,500 miles distant. This time it traveled comparatively quickly, reaching Hiva Oa Island in about a month. It remained there for a few days, then pushed on to Tahiti.

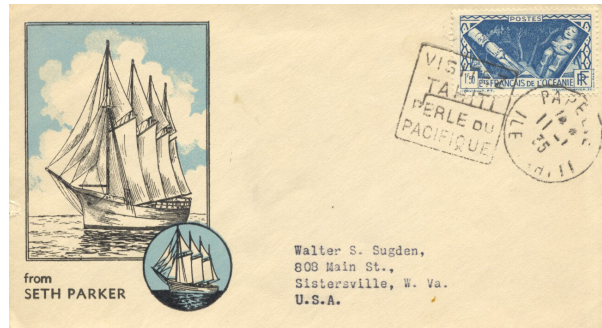
Health issues and mechanical breakdowns persisted after the Galápagos, but Lord’s biggest concern was money. The exact structure of the trip’s funding, and just how the Frigidaire advertising, the weekly programs over NBC (for which they supposedly paid \$15,000 each³⁹), the production of “Obeah,” and the mostly-failed plan to produce short films of various kinds were supposed to translate into disposable funds is unclear. But things were getting desperate. Lord was nearly out of both gas and money. He didn’t have the wherewithal to continue, yet he felt he couldn’t return home without completing the trip. He was writing letters and sending photos to advertisers with products aboard ship without much result, and neither a planned series of *Cosmopolitan* articles nor some Pathé News short subjects ever came to fruition (there was a lawsuit over the latter⁴⁰).

Phil Lord’s other big problem was loneliness. It wasn’t the mind-bending solitude experienced by Admiral Richard E. Byrd during the four and a half months of 1934 that he was alone at an Antarctic forward base (while Lord was in the Caribbean). There were, after

all, 13 other men aboard the *Seth Parker*. But in the ship's log Lord expressed his loneliness often. It was exacerbated as other problems mounted and as progress between ports was sometimes painfully slow. He worried that the trip would take so long that his show business career would be dead by the time he got back. And he missed John Ives, his true "mate." Captain Flink was a hard worker, and he knew how to handle a ship. But his education was limited, and Lord did not regard his judgment or his problem-solving ability highly. Neither he nor the other members of the crew were a good fit for the Andover-Bowdoin graduate, who was now eating all his meals alone.

Ives did not disappear completely, but stayed on in an on-shore administrative capacity. An article about the trip under his name appeared in the January 1935 issue of *Radio Guide*, and letters sent to the families of crew members after the trip ended came from Ives. For years after the cruise he remained closely connected with Phillips Lord's affairs.

After the Marquesas came Tahiti. The ship arrived there around December 22, 1934. In Tahiti Lord encountered some welcome creature comforts—electricity, a movie house, churches, stores. He made some friends, and even tried to swap his ship for something faster and more agile, but there were no takers. He even thought about suggesting that NBC remove the transmitter to make it easier to buy a different boat. There had been some talk about going home from Tahiti and canceling the rest of the trip. Flink for one appeared to have had enough. But on January 13, 1935, with all hands on board, the ship pressed on to Bora Bora, about 160 miles to the northwest. (A cover, above, was sent from Tahiti bearing postmark of January 11, 1935.) It turned out that the ship could not land at Bora Bora, so it headed for the next planned stop, which was American Samoa.



When in his January 1935 *Radio Guide* article John Ives identified some of the *Seth Parker's* close calls at sea, he described narrow escapes in storms in Long Island Sound and off Cape Hatteras. There had been some close calls after Panama as well, but by that time Ives was back on land. No one could know that far worse awaited the *Seth Parker* just weeks ahead.

THE STORM

It began on Thursday, February 7, 1935, when the ship ran into bad weather some 300 miles northwest of Tahiti. By midnight the sea was heavy, the winds were gale force, and the *Seth Parker* was rolling badly. By daylight Friday some of the rigging required repair, and the crosstrees had broken off due to dry rot. The ship was still rolling heavily, and the pumps were being called on continuously and required constant attention. And a patch made to the hull in Tahiti had torn loose.

That night Lord radioed multiple messages—not S.O.S. calls as such, but alerts that he was having trouble and requesting information on what ships were in the vicinity. He managed to contact the Royal Australian Navy cruiser HMAS *Australia*, which was then 300 miles away, en route to Fiji. It would have to change course by only 20 miles to reach them; the captain said he would reroute at full speed.

On Saturday, February 9, at about 3:00 a.m. the storm broke, and while Lord so advised the *Australia*, the cruiser continued toward the *Seth Parker*. By the time the two ships rendezvoused, the *Seth Parker* felt it was out of danger. The *Australia* stood by for a while and then resumed its regular course.

The weather deteriorated again that night, and by midnight it was getting rapidly worse. By daybreak on Sunday, February 10, the seas were huge, winds were blowing furiously, some of the rigging had gone slack, there were feet of water in the engine room, and the pumps were giving problems. The ship was essentially helpless. That night the *Seth Parker* sent an S.O.S.: “*Seth Parker* in distress and requests assistance. Rigging gone and leaking badly.” Shortly before sending the S.O.S., Lord radioed the *Australia* direct. “Feel humiliated to come to you after subsiding seas, but wind now gale force. Rigging already going. Trying to refrain from sending distress signals, but fear only a matter of hours. . . . If we lose contact it is sign we have gone over.”⁴¹

The weather broke a bit around 2 a.m. on Monday, February 11, and continued to improve slowly. When the *Australia* arrived for the second time it proceeded to take nine men off the ship. Remaining onboard were Lord, Flink, Carey Sweeney and two crewmen.

The rescue was dramatic. Heavy seas made it impossible for the *Australia* to pull alongside, and lowering a cutter was likewise difficult. A line was eventually set between the *Seth Parker* and the cutter, with the cutter’s officer shouting instructions through a megaphone. Two of the crew chose to forego the line, diving overboard and swimming the distance. The operation took 45 minutes.

Lord had radioed Samoa for help, and the *Australia* stayed on scene until a naval tug, the USS *Ontario*, arrived from American Samoa, some 800 miles to the west. (There was some concern that the *Ontario*, which did not have a radio compass, might not be able to find them.)

Towing began on Saturday, February 16, and on Thursday the *Seth Parker* arrived in the harbor at Pago Pago and tied up to a buoy. The weather had been good for the whole trip. The ship was sad to behold, “[w]ith bedraggled sailing gear flapping and her pumps working continuously. . . . All of her masts were still standing, but one or two spars had been torn away, her jib sail was ripped to ribbons and minor pieces of rigging were torn loose”⁴² For philatelists there was a small



positive: subscribers to the cover series received a Samoa cover from Pago Pago, posted on April 19, 1935, which was after Lord had left the island.

It is unclear exactly how much of this excitement made it out over shortwave, but some did. There was a Seth Parker broadcast on the first day, Thursday, February 7, at 5:15 p.m. in the Pacific, and another on Saturday night, February 9. The *March Globe Circler*, bulletin of the International DXers Alliance, carried a report of KNRA (the *Seth Parker's* call letters) at 0015-0045 EST Sunday morning (Saturday evening in the Pacific), describing it as “Phillips Lord’s dramatic broadcast from deck of the ill-fated ‘Seth Parker.’” It appears that it was in this transmission, which would have been after the *Australia's* first visit, that Lord concluded the broadcast with, “Let me repeat for the families listening [presumably those of the crew] that we are not in danger.” A report from Australia published in the April *Globe Circler* described an otherwise unspecified *Seth Parker* broadcast on 12345 kHz. as “one of the most thrilling broadcasts yet.” There may have been a broadcast on Tuesday, February 12, as well.⁴³

In addition to its complement of 710 officers and crew, the *Australia* had a special passenger on board: Prince Henry, the Duke of Gloucester, third son of King George V. When the ship was near the *Seth Parker* he spent much of the time on the bridge, watching the events. As a result of the *Australia's* double rerouting to assist the *Seth Parker*, the Duke’s stay in Panama, where he was headed, was reduced from two days to a few hours, and his visit to Bermuda was canceled.

Lord was still saying that he did not plan to return to the United States until he had circumnavigated the globe,⁴⁴ but by mid-March the story was that he still wanted to make the journey at some point. Right then he was headed for Hawaii on the luxury liner *SS Mariposa* with the intention of selling the *Seth Parker*.

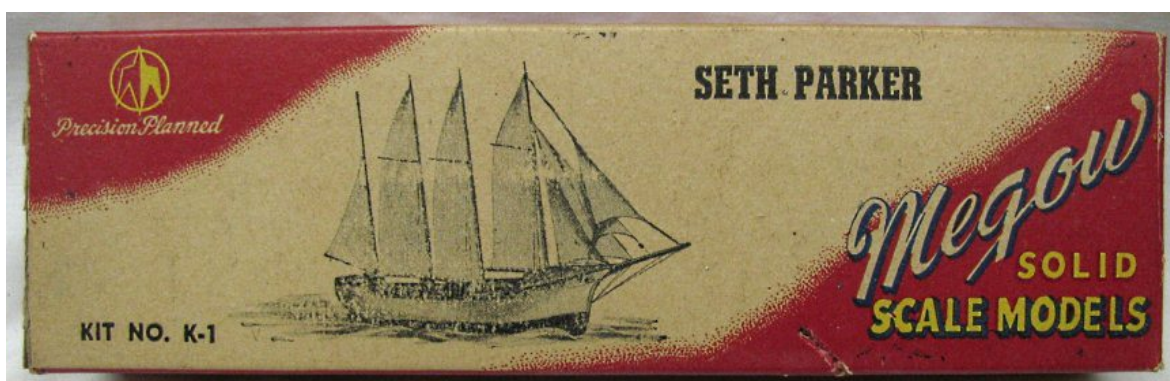
When it was all over there were some suggestions that Lord had overreacted, that the *Seth Parker* had never truly been in danger, and that the S.O.S. was a hoax. But the captain of the *Australia* gave Lord a clean bill of health, and neither the Australian nor the British governments pursued the matter (the ship was on exchange with the U.K. at the time).⁴⁵ In a report in *The Argus*, an Australian newspaper cited on the [Woram](#) website, a detailed report on the *Australia's* second visit contained no negative implications, and praised the *Australia* for its actions in the circumstances.⁴⁶ *Stamps*—ever a Phil Lord booster—got into the act by suggesting that the allegations were mostly the doings of the press (these were the days of the press-radio wars). “The newspapers, in the reporting of this incident, displayed the usual perversity which they reserve for radio personalities. Radio artists have been responsible for taking millions of dollars in advertising from the publishing field into radio. It is a pill which the press prefers to roll bitterly around its tongue rather than swallow. All reactionaries are not in politics; the newspaper and magazine publishers would do well to acknowledge the changing times with the same grace which they recommend to the ‘rugged individualists’ of a day that is dead.”⁴⁷

Two conclusions about the *Seth Parker's* voyage are inescapable. First, by any standard, the planning for the cruise was seriously deficient. The overall condition and performance of the ship, at least when it reached the Pacific, was so wanting as to call into question the basic credibility of the whole project. The ship was not the right design for this

kind of trip, it had structural problems, and its motors were inadequate. *Real America* said they were second hand, and were failing as early as Virginia, and attributed to Captain Flink the observation that the ship was past its prime and that a better one could have been had for \$5,000.⁴⁸ Whether these issues were hidden, or overlooked, or ignored during the cruise's heady promotional days when the *Seth Parker* was proceeding through the relatively predictable waters off the east coast and everyone was enthusiastic about Phillips Lord at last achieving his boyhood dream, we don't know. Other issues seem likewise to have gotten inadequate attention, in particular the financing of the project. Perhaps Lord was too starry-eyed, and Frigidaire and NBC too deferential, to judge the situation objectively. In any event, it was clear as early as the Canal that the *Seth Parker* was unlikely to ever make it "around the world."

Second, even had the storms and related events of February 7-11 not occurred, the *Seth Parker* and its crew could not have lasted much longer. By then the ship was leaking; one engine was running poorly and the other not at all; and the sails and rigging were damaged. Captain Flink had gall stones, one man had a dislocated arm, another was believed to have appendicitis, and there were other illnesses all around. Lord thought that by the time they'd get to Samoa they'd be a hospital ship.⁴⁹ The storm that brought the *Australia* to the rescue, and the *Seth Parker* world cruise to an end, probably saved Lord and crew from an even worse fate. It also provided a convenient and defensible end to the story—man against nature, nature won.

Cynics would say it had all been done for publicity, and there was plenty of that. But eventually the trip became hard work, coupled with ever-increasing personal, professional and financial risks, and isolation—and few meaningful accomplishments. Boyhood dreams of exploration, adventure and discovery were still possible in those days, and may well have been what was beating in Phil Lord's heart after all—more than personal fame, or hymn singing with the Jonesport neighbors. His mistake was in underestimating what it would take to make those dreams come true.



ENDNOTES

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

16. "B&M Brick-oven Baked Beans" [advertisement], *The Boston Globe*, December 12, 1933 [Main ed.], p. 10.
17. "Phillips Lord Host to Maine Officials," *The Boston Globe*, December 5, 1933, p. 15; "'Seth Parker' on His Way," *The Berkshire Eagle* [Pittsfield, Massachusetts], December 5, 1933 [Main ed.], p. 16; "Schr Seth Parker Held at Portland by Storm," *The Boston Globe*, December 7, 1933, p. 19.
18. "Seth Parker on Way Here," *The Boston Globe*, December 7, 1933, p. 24; "Seth Parker Here on World Cruise," *The Boston Globe*, December 8, 1933 [Main ed.], p. 8; "Schooner Seth Parker Welcomed to Boston," *The Boston Globe*, December 8, 1933, p. 13; "Phillips Lord, Famed Radio Character, to be Welcomed by Mayor Today," *The Boston Globe*, December 9, 1933, p. 18; "Nearly 10,000 Sunday Visitors See Seth Parker at T Wharf," *The Boston Globe*, December 11, 1933, p. 15; "Gold Fire Badge Given Seth Parker," *The Boston Globe*, December 13, 1933, p. 2; "Two Sea Scouts on Seth Parker Cruise," *The Boston Globe*, December 16, 1933, p. 3.
19. John O. Ives, "Seth Parker Invites You Aboard," *Stamps*, January 6, 1934, p. 31.
20. "Seth Parker on Air Again," *Asheville Citizen Times* [North Carolina], December 19, 1933, p. 14; "Seth Parker en Route to Providence Today," *Newport Mercury* [Rhode Island], December 22, 1933, p. 8.
21. "Old Salts Spin Sea Yarns as Seth Parker Sails Away," *The Daily Gleaner* [Kingston, Jamaica], January 29, 1934, p. 26.
22. Ogden Mayer, "On the Schooner 'Seth Parker,'" *Radio Stars*, May 1934, p. 16; "Seth Parker Aids Four Return Home," *Evening Star* [Washington, D.C.], January 31, 1934, p. 36.
23. "Trailing Along With Seth Parker," *Stamps*, August 25, 1934, pgs. 259-260.
24. William Stanley Hamilton, "Debunking the Radio Hoax of 'Seth Parker,'" *Real America*, July 1934, p. 8. Some of the stories would be echoed later in Gene Easton, "The Seth Parker Disaster," *Radioland*, November 1934, p. 12.
25. "Who Was Fooled?" *Radio Guide*, Week Ending August 18, 1934, p. 2.
26. John Skinner, "The Inside Story of Seth Parker's Shipwreck," *Radio Stars*, May 1935, p. 28.
27. "The Way of All Flesh" [letter from reader], *Fort Collins Express-Courier* [Colorado], June 1, 1934, p. 6.

28. “Seth Parker Arrives in Palm Beach Port,” *The Palm Beach Post*, March 17, 1934, p. 12.
29. Easton, *supra* note 24.
30. “Is Adventure a Thing of the Past? . . . ,” *The Rattle of Theta Chi*, June 1935, p. 3.
31. C. N. Downs, “Seth Parker—Adventuring in the Caribbean,” *Stamps*, July 28, 1934, p. 125.
32. “Trailing Along With Seth Parker,” *Stamps*, August 11, 1934, p. 210.
33. *Seth Parker Log*, pgs. 10, 13, 14.
34. “Royal in a Rush to Get Phillips Lord’s Contract Release from NBC,” *Variety*, July 17, 1934, p. 35; “NBC Sinks Seth Parker,” *The Pittsburgh Press*, July 22, 1934, p. 25; “Seth Parker Back on Job,” *The Pittsburgh Press*, August 19, 1934, p. 26.
35. “White Sails’ Will Soon Be Released,” *The Daily Gleaner* [Kingston, Jamaica], October 8, 1934, p. 3.
36. In January 1935, Lord mentions that there was a “so-called” engineer on board but that he had little faith in him. (*Seth Parker Log*, p. 47.) It was an “engineer” who was married aboard ship in Newport News. And among the crew members who would be removed from the *Seth Parker* in February 1935 following the storm that ended the voyage, one was listed as First Engineer and another as Second Engineer in a Melbourne, Australia newspaper. (Woram website, Table Notes, No. 5.) No doubt the staffing of the crew changed in various ways during the cruise, and “engineer” is a term susceptible of more than one meaning, so the exact roles of crew members at any given time cannot be pinned down. What is clear is that the ability to address engine problems was limited.
37. *Seth Parker Log*, p. 24.
38. The Floreana story, with all its mystery and convolutions, is chronicled in many places, including a 2013 motion picture, “The Galápagos Affair: Satan Came to Eden” (Netflix DVD), which contains much original footage of the dramatis personae (though not Phillips Lord), together with commentary by descendants and others.
39. Hamilton, *supra* note 24 at p. 11.
40. *Lord v. Pathe News*, U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, 97 F.2d 508 (2d Cir., 1938).
41. “Radio Vessel, ‘Leaking Badly,’ Sends SOS; Warship That Found Her Fit Returns to Aid,” *The New York Times*, February 11, 1935, p. 1.
42. “‘Seth Parker’ Sorry Sight At Anchor,” *Hartford Courant*, February 22, 1935, p. 8.

43. "Report on Seth Parker Distress Call Requested by Governor [Otto] Dowling [of American Samoa]," undated, accompanying *Seth Parker Log*, 1934; "Seth Parker Quits," *Broadcasting*, April 1, 1935, p. 50; *The Globe Circler*, International DXers Alliance, March 1935, p. 10; April 1935, p. 12; Fred Smith, "SOS," *Rockefeller Center Weekly*, February 21, 1935, p. 10; C. N. Downs, "Tahiti, Paradise of the Pacific," *Stamps*, March 2, 1935, p. 298; "The Dramatic End of the Seth Parker World Cruise," *Stamps*, September 21, 1935, p. 405; "The Seth Parker—H.M.A.S. Australia Takes Off Some of Crew," *The Evening Star* [Dunedin, New Zealand], February 13, 1935, p. 6; "Seth Parker—Australia Standing By—Sea Moderating," *The Sydney Morning Herald* [Australia], February 14, 1935, p. 11.

"Lord's Ship Is in Peril Off Tahiti," *Hartford Courant*, February 9, 1935, p. 1; "Lord's Ship Rides Out Sea Storm," *Hartford Courant*, February 10, 1935, p. 1; "Seth Parker' Sends SOS Call For Aid," *Hartford Courant*, February 11, 1935, p. 1; "Seth Parker' Sorry Sight At Anchor," *Hartford Courant*, February 22, 1935, p. 8.

"Seth Parker Ship In Peril," *The New York Times*, February 9, 1935, p. 3; "Radio Ship Beats South Sea Storm," *The New York Times*, February 10, 1935, p. 3; "Radio Vessel, 'Leaking Badly,' Sends SOS; Warship That Found Her Fit Returns to Aid," *The New York Times*, February 11, 1935, p. 1; "Radio Ship's Crew Saved By Cruiser," *The New York Times*, February 12, 1935, p. 23.

44. "Sorry Sight," *supra* note 42.

45. "Seth Parker's Calls by Radio Explained," *The New York Times*, March 13, 1935, p. 39; "Phillips Lord is Cleared of Charge of SOS Hoax," *The New York Times*, May 5, 1935, p. 2.

46. "Australia to Rescue—Fine Work in High Sea," *Argus*, February 14, 1935, p. 9.

47. C. N. Downs, "Seth Parker in Distress," *Stamps*, February 23, 1935, p. 280.

48. Hamilton, *supra* note 24 at p. 11.

49. *Seth Parker Log*, p. 46.