



Tilikum with her war canoe prow before her departure from Oak Bay Vancouver flies Canada's national flag and the provincial flag of British Columbia.

Courtesy Maritime Museum of British Columbia

Around the World in a Dugout Canoe

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Australia was a major destination for the 1901 voyage of Captain John C. Voss.

Voss was a British Columbia mariner who sailed a dugout canoe to London. Inspired by Joshua Slocum he intended to sail around the world – to become rich and famous. His arrival created a flurry of interest in the Australian press, and the already strong yachting community became intrigued by the possibilities of distant voyaging.

Voss was a game changer in the yachting world because he inspired a generation of sailors to challenge their limits and those of their boats in blue water voyages.

Arriving in Sydney out of Fiji, long overdue after a terrific storm, in which his Mate was lost overboard, Voss hoisted his little Canadian flag at half-mast and on 19 November 1901 sailed into the harbour.

He exhibited his boat at Manly, temporarily dry-berthing her. He erected a tent for the long

series of exhibits of the boat in ports of call which were often accompanied by public lectures. This is how he financed the voyage.

Initially publicly shy, Voss had much to learn as a showman. Presenting himself to strangers in large numbers was something with which he was quite unfamiliar. He was fortunate that he had the grace and charm necessary for operating hotels and restaurants on Vancouver Island which experience began to serve him well in a different venue.

At Melbourne Voss had *Tilikum* removed from the sea and moved to an exhibition site. After the exhibition was over she was taken outside the hall and with shear legs and tackle she was lifted up to be placed on the horse drawn wagon. Voss directed the work but used blocks and tackle supplied by the carrier. A heavy strap was placed around the middle of the boat and hooked on to the block. Voss gave orders to heave up and four men got hold of the winch handles and lifted her up until *Tilikum* was high enough to place on the wagon. Then Voss gave the order to stop heaving. Just as two men began to remove the cradle from the ground *Tilikum* dropped with a crash.

Voss was appalled as he surveyed his seriously damaged vessel. Disaster was now staring him in the face as he saw his dreams of future achievement suddenly evaporate. He launched a court case for damages to cover repair, which began a small melodrama played out in the courts and avidly followed in the press. The publicity attracted even more attention to the voyage.

Once Voss had repaired *Tilikum* he received an invitation from a Ballarat man to sail *Tilikum* on Lake Wendouree, a small inland lake 1,400 feet above sea level. Voss put *Tilikum* on a horse drawn wagon and drove to a site near the boat club. His exhibit of *Tilikum* and public talks generated greatly needed income to finance the next leg of the voyage. While there he received a gift of a new suit of sails from some Ballarat yachtsmen. The old suit was tacked up in their boat shed by the members of the Yacht Club to keep as souvenirs. *Tilikum* had the unique distinction of being the very first deep water ship ever to sail on the lake and he set the first of his altitude records for sailing.

Voss spent considerable time cruising Port Philip. He clearly enjoyed the ports and the people there. But he saw that he needed to move on to Adelaide if he was going to reach his destinations in a reasonable time. Afterward Voss took *Tilikum* to Glenelg where they stayed until 8 January 1903. While he was there he was made an Honorary Member of the Holdfast Yacht Club which honoured him at a farewell banquet. This was the beginning of a trend, as from then on many yacht clubs he visited made him an honorary member – which gave him entree to clubs at future ports of call in distant countries.

Voss engaged a new Mate for the voyage to New Zealand, Edward O. Donner, who was more famously known as The Tattooed Man of Australia. Voss particularly enjoyed his company and his story-telling. The Mates never lasted long. The rigors of life in such a small vessel usually motivated them to move on with their lives.

Tilikum's departure again attracted a huge crowd who gave them a rousing send off. They were towed out of the harbour by some small boats in the company of several yachts. After dropping their towline the crew set the sails. They sailed past Cape Willoughby, KI, in company with a barque bound for Hobart, Tasmania.

On 21 January they entered Hobart Harbour where they stayed for three weeks. In Hobart during this visit Voss gave public lectures on the scientific side of boat handling, sailing and explanations of his theories on the use of the sea-anchor. His experiences in entering and leaving Australian ports had been invaluable to Voss. The sea handling qualities of *Tilikum* enabled Voss to take a small yacht to places on the coast that would normally have been considered too dangerous for a small boat

By developing a science-based set of theories about small craft handling and the use of sea anchors, Voss brought a serious focus to yachting. Unusually he also started to lecture on these principles and documented them in a small booklet that he sold at the exhibitions and lectures. While technological advances have rendered his theories outmoded, he was the first to address the skill sets and equipment needed by a yachtsman for deep sea voyaging.

Voss honed his small vessel skills in New Zealand to a high level. Demonstrating his ability to cross dangerous harbour bars and navigate in shallow waters. At sea he learned to safely weather the most violent storms with a patent sea anchor of his own design. He popularised the use of the sea anchor by yachtsmen through his public lectures.

Voss sailed extensively around the New Zealand coast and enjoyed even greater financial success in exhibiting and lecturing on *Tilikum* and her travels. He sailed on through the Torres Strait, across the Indian Ocean to South Africa and on to London. At this point Voss sold *Tilikum* and moved on to other adventures.