

The Age, November 7, 1992

Salute to memory of fever ship by John Lahey

Victorians are more and more acknowledging the sea, rather than the bush, as the prime factor to be honoured about their ancestors' early settlement. Tomorrow there will be yet another commemoration ceremony. This one, at Point Nepean National Park, is different, because it concerns the worst fever ship ever to reach Melbourne.

It took 90 days for the clipper Ticonderoga, carrying mainly highland Scots, to reach Port Phillip Bay from Liverpool on 5 November 1852. This was a long time when you compare it with the 68 days taken the same year by the clipper Marco Polo, the glamorpuss (sic) of immigrant ships.

At that state, the news of Victoria's extraordinary gold discoveries had just reached Europe (May 1852), and almost any ship that could float, including former convict ships, was snatched into service to transport thousands of people.

We can imagine how disease could spread. Significantly, the Ticonderoga, only three years old, had a double deck. The bottom deck had trouble with the effluent of the top one.

Near the end of her voyage, the Ticonderoga stood outside Port Phillip Heads flying the yellow flag of fever. A passing ship alerted the port authorities, who went out to meet her. They were almost overpowered by the stench of rotten food and sick passengers on board. The sight was appalling. The ship was filthy, and most of the victims were prostrate. Out of 814 passengers, 90 had died.

Another 80 died after the Ticonderoga had been taken inside the Heads and anchored off Portsea, a site that the authorities chose over the quarantine station at Point Ormond. Descendants of the survivors will gather near the Portsea anchorage tomorrow for the first time in 140 years.

The sick from the Ticonderoga were transferred to a quarantine ship off Sorrento, and the dead were buried in the sand. On board had been 199 children under seven. The tragedy went further because many survivors were now widows, widowers or orphans in a strange land.

Of the two doctors on board, the senior one died. The junior was James William Henry Veitch, who must have worked miracles. Dr Veitch had a good reason to survive. He had his eye on a passenger, Anne Morrison, whom he wooed and subsequently married at St Peter's, Eastern Hill. Their great-great grandson is the "Fast Forward" comedian Michael Veitch.