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Lloyd Swayne

SWAYNE & HOYT, INC. AND THE INTERCOASTAL TRADE

An Interview Conducted by
Miriam Feingold Stein
in 1975

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LLOYD SWAYNE: SWAYNE & HOYT, INC. AND THE INTERCOASTAL TRADE

[Date of Interview: April 7, 1975]

Origins of the Company and Building the Fleet

Feingold: Can you tell me how Swayne & Hoyt, Inc. got started?

Swayne: The company was formed by my father, Robert H. Swayne, and John G. Hoyt, I think about 1890. It was primarily an agency company at that time. They acted as agents for a number of foreign ships that came to San Francisco. They didn't own any vessels until maybe around 1900 when they acquired a steam schooner called the S.S. Krueger, I think it was.

Then about 1904 they arranged to have a steel steam schooner built in Toledo named the Redondo. Perhaps you are aware that in those days it was customary for people to form, you might say, companies on shares rather than selling stock. In other words, somebody'd take a thirty-second, and another person a sixty-fourth, and so on. By accumulating them all together, they'd get the total. A good many of the people taking shares were, of course, people like ship chandlers and people who provided various services that, of course, expected to get the exclusive use of sales of their product to the boat after it was built.

In the case of the Redondo, it was built by the Craig Shipbuilding Company in Toledo, [Ohio]. It was just small enough to be able to get through the locks that existed at that time around Niagara; in other words, I think just a little under two hundred feet. It went out the St. Lawrence down to New York and down around South America through the Strait of Magellan and finally up here, all of which took quite a while in the doing. Incidentally, my brother, Warren Swayne, made the trip on her.

Feingold: What sort of freight did it carry?

Swayne: I've forgotten now. Of course, I wasn't around at the time; it was really before my time. But they got some kind of a cargo out of New York, I think. Of course, it wouldn't carry very much to speak of anyhow; it was a very small ship. It was built primarily for the lumber business, which, of course, was mostly carried on deck rather than in the hold, so that it didn't have very much cargo capacity without the lumber on deck. But as far as I remember those two ships were the ones that they had at that time.

Also, they had a small steam schooner named the Albion River, which was lost, and then the Pomo that made a weekly run from San Francisco to Albion River in Mendocino County, where there was a sawmill. It would carry what supplies they needed up, and then bring lumber down. Of course, in those days there were no roads to speak of; the only way to get from one place to another was by water. So that ran on a number of years until I think the Pomo was lost coming down the coast in a big storm on New Year's Day, 1913. These two carried a few passengers.

In the meantime, they had also purchased a steam schooner named Yellowstone and arranged to build a small steam schooner called the Casco right after the fire. It also was lost somewhere along about 1909 by running aground on the coast down below San Francisco. The Yellowstone was sold about 1920. So that's about the status of where they started and as far as they got up until the time--about 1915--at which time I became interested in the company.

In 1915 with the opening of the Panama Canal and the San Francisco World's Fair, the International Mercantile Marine sent out two passenger ships, the Finland and Kroonland, for which they acted as agents. These ships operated until the canal was closed by a slide in 1916.

Of course, by that time, the First [World] War was on. Oh yes, and in the meantime, of course, (I'm getting ahead of myself) in the meantime, Mr. Craig, who had built the Redondo at Toledo, was forced to come to California on account of his health, and he established a shipyard down at Long Beach. Of course, he wanted business for the yard, and I suppose the first person he talked to was my father on account of having built the ship for him back in Toledo.

They arranged to promote several ships. These were all steel ships and the Redondo, of course, was steel. At that time, they were, I guess, about the only steel steam schooners operating, because everything else was wooden at that time.

Feingold: Then this was very innovative.

Swayne: Yes, quite innovative, I would say. Anyhow, about 1908 Craig came out, and I think about 1911 he got his yard established and he was starting to build a ship for us called the Navajo. The Navajo, then, was built by a company--the Western Steam Navigation Company--which, as far as I know, was one of the first corporations established to build steam schooners.

Before it was built the Hammond Lumber Company needed a vessel, and they acquired this boat that was being built for us. Then we again built another vessel which became the Navajo.

Then, in addition to that, about 1912 Craig built the vessel called the Camino, which was hardly classed as a steam schooner because it was a double-deck vessel and primarily a cargo carrier rather than lumber. But it did carry a lot of lumber. These two ships were used coastwise between San Francisco and Portland.

Then that was followed by another one called the Alvarado and another called the Paraiso coming along maybe a year or so apart.

In 1913 or early '14, I guess it was, Mr. Craig sold his yard to a company that wanted to build submarines. He got out of the business and they took over and started building submarines. Then, about the time we got in the First [World] War, early in 1917, he decided to build another yard on some property that he owned adjacent to the first one, and he started the construction of two small vessels called the Eldorado and Silverado. Well, when the war came they were taken over by the government, who took over all new construction at that time, so that we didn't get them. He also arranged to build one further vessel of the same type called the Wallingford.

In the meantime, the company that took over his first yard apparently went bust, couldn't pay him the money that he had coming to him. So he took the first yard back again under the name of the Long Beach Shipbuilding Company. They built a number of vessels for the Shipping Board.

Of course, in the meantime, no private operator could have any ships built. But we still had the Alvarado, the Camino and Navajo having been sold, I guess, after making a trip to Europe for the Belgium relief operation. At that time, due to the war, of course, freight rates were sky-high, particularly foreign. So we arranged for the Alvarado to make a trip to South America or two and also two trips to the Orient. Also, at the same time, we chartered a vessel called the Yucatan and sent her to the Orient for two trips. So that kind of brings you up to about 1920, I guess.

Swayne: In the meantime, I'd gone down to Craig to be their engineer on this new construction that they had, so I was away for about three years while I was doing that, and came back into the business again in 1920, '21.

Then, we had the Alvarado, which was still making foreign trips and at one time--about that time--had gone around through the canal to Cuba, I guess it was, with cargo. In order to get cargo back, we had to start at New Orleans and load cargo back from there, which was the start of what we call the Gulf Pacific Line.

Feingold: Why did you have a need to form a separate company? Why did you have the Gulf Pacific Line?

Swayne: It was really a trade name and it was the operating name for Swayne & Hoyt at the time. Then afterwards, in order to get some more capital, which we did, we incorporated the Gulf Pacific Line in order to bring in other stockholders.

Also about this time, Swayne & Hoyt became operators for the Shipping Board. We were the ones that started a service between the Pacific coast and the east coast of South America, which was called the Pacific Argentine Brazil Line. But it was Shipping Board ships, and we were only the operators of them.

Feingold: Had you sought that out with the federal government? How did you get that contract?

Swayne: We suggested the service because there hadn't been any such service and we thought there was a need for it. So they said okay, we'll agree with you. They provided the ships and we did the operation. That went on until about 1928 when the ships were sold, the line was sold. We bid on it, but we didn't get them. McCormack Steamship Company got the line. At the same time we were Shipping Board operators to Australia-New Zealand and the Orient.

Anyhow, getting back to the Gulf Pacific Line, we had purchased back the Eldorado from the Shipping Board and also we were able to get one or two charters to come westbound, and then we as agents loaded them eastbound for other people. In about '22, we were able to buy two small vessels from the old Pacific Mail Company. They were both called "Points"; I can't remember now which points they were. But anyhow, that was the start of the point-naming operation.* Finally we got two more of those to make a total of four.

*At the company's zenith, most of its ships bore the names of geographic points, e.g., Point Ancha, Point Lobos, Point Judith, etc. (Ed. note.)

Swayne: Meantime, the Alvarado and Eldorado were sold. Then following that we got vessels that were a little larger. The Shipping Board had built a number of 5000-ton vessels. (By the way, these original Points were about 3500 ton dead weight.) So the Shipping Board had these larger vessels--5500 tons--and we eventually acquired about seven of those over a period of years. Finally, we embarked on the still larger ones--7500 ton dead weight vessels--of which we finally owned thirteen.

They were all sold. As the Second World War came into view, we thought it was a good time to liquidate, having seen what happened in the First World War and so forth, which we did. That was the end of the Gulf Pacific Line and Swayne & Hoyt.

Feingold: So they both went down at the same time, so to speak.

Swayne: Yes. In the meantime, of course, we had the idea of getting a mail contract, which we were able to do. We had to recondition two of the boats to make them faster. They had to do thirteen knots instead of ten. Craig did the reconditioning of those. We also were required to build a new vessel of the same tonnage. I'd designed the vessel and wrote the specifications for plans and all. We put them out for bids. And just at that time, Mr. Black decided there shouldn't be any more mail contracts and so the whole thing went by the board.*

Feingold: After all that hard work!

Swayne: That seems to be about the story.

The Point Ships

Feingold: Let me ask you a bit about the Point ships. How many were there all together?

Swayne: There were four 3500s, there were seven of the 5500s and thirteen of the 7500s.

*This refers to the Senate hearings on the U.S. Merchant Marine in 1933, chaired by Senator Hugo L. Black. (Ed. note.)

Feingold: So that's twenty-four.

Swayne: That's over a period of years. Of course, when we got bigger ones we discarded the smaller ones, and that went on till we just had the thirteen 7500s left.

Feingold: Were they primarily outfitted to carry lumber or to carry other kinds of cargo as well?

Swayne: No, they were general cargo ships. The whole Gulf Pacific Line was general cargo. Of course, it did carry some lumber, but mainly it was general cargo. Of course, some lumber was carried east, but not west. West, we loaded at New Orleans, Mobile, Houston, and Tampa, and carried general cargo from those main gulf ports.

Feingold: And this might have been cargo that had been floated down the Mississippi.

Swayne: Yes. In addition to local cargo, we had joint rates with the barge line and also with the Illinois Central Railroad. So we drew on all that area up as far as Chicago--even, I guess, as far as Minneapolis. At one time, the barge line ran up that far.

Feingold: And then they all came through the canal and out to the west coast?

Swayne: Yes.

Feingold: So that was pretty much intercoastal trade.

Swayne: Yes. It was entirely that. The Gulf Pacific Line and the Gulf Pacific Mail was entirely intercoastal.

Feingold: About what horsepower were these ships, do you remember?

Swayne: Going back how far?

Feingold: Let's just start with the latest.

Swayne: With the Point ships?

Feingold: The Point ships.

Swayne: I think the first four were probably about fifteen hundred horsepower. The seven 5500s, they had fifteen hundred horsepower turbines in them. The others were reciprocating engines. They were about twenty-five hundred.

Feingold: I think it was the Point Lobos and the Point Ancha that were two of the mail carriers. Is that correct?

Swayne: Yes. They were the two we had to recondition to have a higher speed.

Feingold: I see. And so they had reciprocating engines in them, did they?

Swayne: Yes. And then we added what was called an exhaust turbine in order to increase the power to get more speed. In other words, the reciprocating engine exhausted into the turbine, which in turn exhausted into a condenser. By doing that, you could get a higher vacuum, and the higher vacuum paid off in the turbine where it didn't in the reciprocating engine.

Feingold: I see. Was that a fairly advanced notion for the time?

Swayne: It was an idea that originated in Germany, I think, and became--well, not very common, but a number of installations were made after the First [World] War. So we just went along with the idea that to get increased power, that was the way to do it.

Feingold: Did any of the ships carry passengers?

Swayne: The Gulf Pacific Mail Line ships--the two, the Lobos and Ancha--were fitted to carry eight passengers.

Feingold: So that wasn't a major part of their trade.

Swayne: And of course, the little Pomo going to Albion, that carried passengers. And the Camino was fitted for quite a few. The Navajo and Camino were used primarily as cargo run between San Francisco and Portland, and they did carry some passengers.

Feingold: My notes say that the Point Lobos was not quite four hundred feet long; is that accurate?

Swayne: Yes, that's about right. I think they were about 375 feet, those 7500 tonners.

Feingold: And they had a crew of about thirty or thirty-five men?

Swayne: Yes, about thirty.

Feingold: I remember when I first saw the list of Point ships, I was very interested in how they got their names.

- Swayne: Well, as I told you, the four we bought originally were named Points, so we just kept on with the name. Then ones we acquired later, we changed to the Points. It seemed like a good name because there was no other company in the world that I know of that had a name of that kind for their ships.
- Feingold: And you certainly had an unending source of names. [laughter]
- Swayne: We tried to use Spanish names in connection with all of the Points.
- Feingold: For any particular reason?
- Swayne: No, except that we were going to the Caribbean and I guess it just seemed like a good idea. The four original boats, I think, were all Spanish named, and of course most of the names here on the coast are Spanish.
- Feingold: Yes. My recollection was that most of them were named for points right around here.
- Swayne: A good many. Sometimes we have to go far afield to find one.
- Feingold: You mentioned the Black Commission--the Black investigation. I was wondering if you were involved at all in that.
- Swayne: All we were involved in was a notice. We were discontinued on the mail contract. Our mail contract was cancelled.
- Feingold: Why was that?
- Swayne: They cancelled all the mail contracts that time. But as far as I know, there was no investigation of any of our activities. We were just notified that we were finished, period.
- Feingold: I wondered, because I know they investigated the Dollar Line fairly thoroughly and I wondered if they had looked at Swayne & Hoyt.
- Swayne: No, I don't think we ever had anybody come in to see what we were doing, if anything.

Labor Relations

- Feingold: You must have been around in San Francisco during the '34 strike, the general strike. What were your impressions of that?

Swayne: Well, we were right in the middle of it. You mentioned one of the engineers was murdered as a result of the strike. I don't know that it was intentional at the time. But anyhow, he was killed. Of course, that's where Mr. Warren became so prominent that he was elected governor and from governor was appointed the chief justice. He handled the trial of one of the men who was caught as a result of the murder.

Feingold: What were Swayne & Hoyt's relations with labor unions at that point?

Swayne: I don't know just how to give you any information on that. Of course, after the big strike in '34, the National Labor Relations Act was passed, which gave the unions a big play and almost forced everyone to deal with the union. At the same time, it was permissible if the people employed wanted to form their own union, they didn't have to be a member of any other. So, the mates and the engineers on our ships decided they wanted to have their union rather than join the regular one, which they did.

Just before we liquidated we were about to have an election to see whether they still wanted to keep their own union or whether they wanted to have the regular union represent them. But it never came off because the ships were sold.

In the meantime also, I think, most of the men belonged to two unions--their own union and the regular union.

Feingold: Was that so they wouldn't get in trouble?

Swayne: I suppose so; they figured it was good insurance, I guess.

Feingold: They had themselves covered any way they wanted to look at it.

Swayne: But otherwise, we, like every other shipowner, had to deal with the unions--the seamen's union and the stevedores' union and so forth. We were a member of the Waterfront Employers Association and Pacific American Steamship Association. They did all the bargaining, and if there were any difficulties, they had to straighten them out. So we didn't deal directly, I'd say, to any extent with any of the unions.

Feingold: You didn't? So you yourself never had anything to do with the heads of any of those unions?

Swayne: No, I didn't have to do any collective bargaining in person.

Feingold: Were representatives of Swayne & Hoyt on any of the bargaining committees?

Swayne: No, I don't think so; I don't remember any. I might have been on a couple of meetings sometime, I've forgotten, but not to any extent.

Personnel

Feingold: I see. In the course of my research, I've come across a number of names of people who were associated with Swayne & Hoyt, mostly in the Thirties, and I wondered if you remembered any of them. Tirey Ford? [hands Mr. Swayne a list of names]

Swayne: Tirey Ford? He died a few years ago. [Captain W.T. Lion] died. Thomas Sheehan--I don't know; he could still be living. If so, he's representative for the Cal-Mar Line. The other three men [S.F.B. Morse, Sam Taylor, and Henry Gelhaus] are all dead.

Feingold: Can you tell me anything about them? I know that Mr. Ford had been with United Railroads, and according to my notes his name had come up in the big graft scandal in San Francisco.

Swayne: That was the father of this man. This man is younger than I was--about eight or ten years anyhow.

Feingold: And he was your executive vice president, is that correct?

Swayne: Yes. He had gone to sea before he came in with us. Also, I didn't tell you, on the Pacific Argentine Brazil Line, we at one time operated two combination passenger and cargo ships, the President Hayes and President Harrison. They were bought by Dollar along with five others of the same type to form the first round-the-world service that he put on.

Feingold: I see. So that was the start of all his ships named for presidents.

Swayne: Yes, that's right. The ships, of course, were owned by the Shipping Board and we just operated them. So, when Dollar wanted them they sold them to him.

Feingold: What about Captain Lion? Is he from San Francisco?

Swayne: He is originally from Alameda. He went to sea also, and then became operating manager of--well, port captain would be a more correct name for him.

Feingold: Did all these people stay with the company until it sold out?

Swayne: Yes, they were all still with the company until we liquidated.

Feingold: How about Thomas Sheehan? Was he also from the Bay Area?

Swayne: No, I don't think originally. I don't know just where he came from, as a matter of fact. If I remember rightly, he was captain of the Point Ancha and later he was our manager in Seattle for a number of years, and after we liquidated he kept on with the Cal-Mar Line that we were agents for, the Cal-Mar Line being owned by Bethlehem Steel.

Feingold: So that's what he did after Swayne & Hoyt was liquidated?

Swayne: Yes, he stayed with the Cal-Mar Line, primarily arranging cargos of lumber to go eastbound from the northwest.

Feingold: I didn't find Mr. Gelhaus' first name. Do you happen to have it?

Swayne: Henry F. He was port engineer.

Feingold: What did he do in that capacity?

Swayne: He looked after all the engineering end of the ships, primarily maintenance and also personnel. [Sam] Taylor was the steward's department. [S.F.B.] Morse, Jr. was in the Oakland office for quite some time.

Feingold: What was his function? Just running the office?

Swayne: He was in the office. He was the son of S.F.B. Morse of Del Monte. Mr. Morse, Sr. was brother-in-law of Mr. Ford. So the thing kind of ties in.

Feingold: Yes. He had a real family operation there, a tie-up. So you had offices in both San Francisco and Oakland?

Swayne: Yes: Seattle, Portland, Los Angeles, Chicago, St. Louis, New Orleans, Mobile, New York.

Feingold: Did some of your ships go to the east coast?

Swayne: No, but we had an office there for soliciting cargo, and we were also agents for the Yamashita Line that did go to New York.

Feingold: Was that a Japanese line?

Swayne: Yes.

Feingold: Where was the office in San Francisco? Do you remember?

Swayne: In the Matson Building finally. Originally it was at 430 Sansome Street, and then 230 Front Street, and then finally in the Matson Building.

Feingold: And what about in Oakland--where was the office over here?

Swayne: I think it was down at Howard Terminal; we had an office there.

Feingold: I know in the cast at the Point Lobos when chief engineer Alberts was murdered, the Point Lobos had first come into San Francisco and unloaded there, and then it moved to Encinal Terminal in Alameda.

Swayne: Yes. That's where George Alberts was murdered, at Encinal.

Feingold: Was that a fairly common route for a ship to take?

Swayne: Oh, yes, we moved all around various berths in the Bay, anywhere the shippers wanted their freight.

Feingold: One of the things I've come across in looking into the Alberts murder case was that the Pinkerton Detective Agency was involved somewhat.

Swayne: I don't recall using Pinkerton at any time.

Feingold: Did you use any other detective agency?

Swayne: Not that I remember. We had no reason to, that I can recall.

Feingold: So I guess most of the investigation, then, was done by the Alameda County DA's office.

Swayne: Yes, sure.

Feingold: I've spoken to people in the DA's office who worked on the case and they've told some fascinating stories of how they got the clues that led them to the murderers.

Swayne: Yes. I've forgotten how they ran down who it was. I guess, as a matter of fact, the two men were seen at the time and it was just a matter of tracking them down. One of them got away; they never did get him.

Feingold: That's right. They tell me in the DA's office the FBI still has a warrant out for his arrest. I don't know that anybody would recognize him.

Swayne: Probably died long before now.

Feingold: I interviewed Captain Peter Odeen, who was the captain of the Point Lobos. Did you ever know him?

Swayne: Oh, yes, of course. I knew all the captains, naturally. I had to. Is he still living?

Feingold: He was about two or three years ago. I think he was about ninety years old when I interviewed him. He told me all about his adventures on the seas. He had originally come from Norway and had been all over the world before he settled down on the west coast, sailing as captain. I was particularly interested in the years that he was with the Point Lobos, and he told me that story of the time that the ship was beached near the Golden Gate Bridge.

Swayne: Of course, a good many of them started as a mate of one kind or another, and then as we expanded they became captains. I don't know if we ever hardly went outside our personnel that we had, to find another captain for one of the boats.

Feingold: Are there any other captains that particularly stand out in your memory?

Swayne: You mean the names of any of them?

Feingold: Yes.

Swayne: The one outstanding [one] that was with us and became the first one in the Dollar business was Captain Karl A. Ahlin. He had quite a career. He came originally from Sweden in about 1890, I think, and at one time ran a little gasoline-powered boat from San Francisco up to Bolinas to bring down produce. I can't remember just when he came with the company. I think it was probably about 1906, right after the fire when we were building the steamer, Casco, and she was being outfitted at the United Engineering Works in Alameda. I used to go down frequently to see what was going on.

I'm quite sure that was when he started with the company. Then he became progressively captain of the various boats as they were built, including the Camino. He went to Europe on her as captain, in the Belgium relief work. Then, after the war, he became captain of one of the two passenger boats, the President Hayes. Then, when they were sold, he stayed with the ship and went with Dollar. He became captain of the President Coolidge until about the war. He retired just about the time of the war.

Personal Background

Feingold: Yes. Let me just get a little bit of background on you so that we can get you into the story here. Where were you born, and when?

Swayne: I was born in Alameda in 1893. Lived there; with the exception of when we went to Long Beach during the war, we lived in Alameda until 1954. Then we came over to an apartment in Oakland, and finally here.

Feingold: And did you go to school in Alameda?

Swayne: Yes. I went to grammar school. I went to Belmont School for my high school days and Stanford for my college.

Feingold: What did you major in at Stanford?

Swayne: In mechanical engineering.

Feingold: So you knew even then that you wanted to go into the shipping business?

Swayne: Oh, yes. I was trying to prepare myself for it.

Feingold: During your school days, had you spent any time working on the ship?

Swayne: I never went to sea as a seaman or anything, but of course I made many trips on various boats.

Feingold: Or did you work in the office during vacation?

Swayne: Yes, I worked in the office during summers part of the time. In the meantime, my brother was also interested in the lumber business up above Oroville. I used to go their summers at times, to keep out of trouble.

Feingold: [laughter] And put some pennies in your pocket, I guess.

Swayne: Well, in those days you were paid two bits an hour. And you worked ten hours, so you made two and a half a day. Quite a change to now.

Feingold: Yes. That was in the lumber business?

Swayne: It was generally non-skilled labor, which was two bits an hour. I think that's what I got in the office as well.

Feingold: When did you graduate from Stanford?

Swayne: Nineteen-fifteen. It will be sixty years ago in another month or so.

Feingold: And then right after graduation, you went into the shipping business?

Swayne: The shipping business.

Feingold: In what capacity? What was your job?

Swayne: Just doing anything I was told to do.

Feingold: When did you actually take over, or rise out of that position?

Swayne: It was after I came back from Craig in the Twenties. My father turned it over to me then, and I became the president of it. And Ford later joined; I guess three or four years later he joined.

Feingold: Then, what did you do after Swayne & Hoyt and Gulf Pacific were liquidated?

Swayne: Well, I bought into a trucking business, which was a big mistake, and I kept that until 1960. Finally got rid of it.

Feingold: Was that a local trucking business?

Swayne: Yes, and between here and Los Angeles.

Feingold: So did you retire in 1960?

Swayne: Yes. I haven't done anything since then.

Feingold: Well, I would like to thank you for a very informative and helpful interview. It will be a valuable addition to our waterfront history project.

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