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# A Yankee Trader in Yap: Crayton Philo Holcomb

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In May 1867 Crayton Philo Holcomb, A middle-aged whaling captain with many a sea voyage behind him, took leave of his relatives in Granby, Connecticut, for the last time to follow his star. 'There is a fortune or utter disappointment ahead and I do not often give up before I make a trial', he wrote to his mother in words that have a familiar ring.<sup>(1)</sup> Holcomb was on the verge of making an overland journey across the continent that would eventually bring him to far more remote frontiers than post-bellum California. At the time he had no way of knowing just how elusive the 'fortune' would prove to be, nor could he anticipate the major role he would play in the commercial development of Yap, an island in the Western Carolines on which no permanent trading station had yet been established.

Born on 24 January 1830, Holcomb appears to have begun his vagabond existence at the age of seven when he first went away to live. It was not long before young Crayton's eyes were set seaward, like those of many another New England youth of the day. At the age Of 20 he left the family farm to sign on a whaler, the *Braganza*, which sailed from New Bedford on to September 1850 for a two-year cruise in the Pacific.<sup>(2)</sup> Holcomb must have found the sea more to his liking than the pastures of Connecticut, for within six months of the *Braganza's* return in 1854 he shipped aboard another whaler, *Chandler Price*, as first mate, later becoming master of the vessel upon the death of Captain Curn. His first voyage aboard the *Chandler Price* (1854-57) was followed by another (1857-62) during which he retained command of the ship.<sup>(3)</sup>

He must have put to sea again almost immediately after the completion of his second voyage on the *Chandler Price*, for in 1864 we find him writing to his family from aboard an unnamed whaler at port in Honolulu of the hard luck that seems to have dogged him for the rest of his life. He complains in his letter that his ship had been rammed by another vessel and dismasted, and while it was undergoing repairs at the dock it was set afire by 'a nigger one of the damd contrabands from Washington'. As if this were not enough, the ship dragged anchor a few days later in a storm and smashed into a wharf, causing still further damage.<sup>(4)</sup> His bad luck may have persuaded Holcomb to turn from whaling to another occupation-for this is what he did shortly afterward-but it never tempted him in the slightest to give up his wandering ways in exchange for a placid life in Connecticut. He remained at home no more than two years before setting out again, this time for California. A seasoned traveler by then, Holcomb confessed to his family that 'for me to live in Granby is out of the question . . . not that I have not seen many happy days there, but there is nothing I can do to make myself contented'.

Although shortly after his arrival Holcomb declared his intention to make California his home, his letters soon betray the same old restlessness; a year later, in 1870, he pronounced the times dull and the streets of San Francisco 'crowded with idle men and women'.<sup>(5)</sup> After two short voyages to Alaska as master of the schooner *Page*, Holcomb bought his own vessel (never named in his letters) and sailed to Tahiti on his first trading voyage into the Pacific. His visit there seems to have made a lasting impression on him, for the idyllic vision of 'orange groves and a life of pleasant indolence' becomes a common refrain in his correspondence after that event. Granby, on the other hand, and all that it represented to him-harsh winters, uneventful rural existence, and family squabbles-held less appeal than ever despite frequent promises that he would return home for a visit once he had made a comfortable profit for himself in his business ventures. Soon Holcomb was writing of how weary he was 'drifting around the world like a waif upon the water without any settled plans' and telling of his desire to settle on some island of the Pacific and sun himself 'beneath the green groves of fruit and flowers that grow there'.<sup>(6)</sup> Nevertheless, not one month after his return from Tahiti Holcomb had sold his vessel and taken a berth aboard the schooner *Sarah*, bound for Japan and China.

In Anril 1873 Holcomb left San Francisco again this time for good as captain and part-