

She captures ship that shanghai-ed granddad

By Gary Charles

WHILE PAINTING in her waterfront studio gallery, H. R. H. Butler's thoughts often turn to the sea as a source of inspiration and tranquility.

Her watercolors are painted directly from the world she sees out the window. Her style captures the very essence of the scene in a rather mystical manner. Paintings, like handwriting, can be attributed to the artist who did the piece. An artist's experiences and learning about a subject influence the treatment of it.

"Learning is so important to the artist. There's always something new to experience. I find that I often spend as much time researching as I do painting," Butler says.

This is particularly true of a painting she did recently for her son. It's a rendition of the windjammer *The County of Caithness*, once a familiar sight in these waters. Butler wanted this painting to be as accurate as possible, because it depicted the ship on which her grandfather was shanghai-ed.

It's a remarkable story, partly pieced together from conversations between the painter and her grandfather and family, partly through research at the Victoria library.

Butler's grandfather, John West, came to the West Coast of Canada at the turn of the century to take part in the Klondike gold rush. Like many men of his time the chance at wealth and fortune was an irresistible lure. Although he never realized his dream of finding gold, he did embark on an adventure that would be the envy of many today.

While waiting for a ship to take him to Alaska and the goldfields, he stopped in at a waterfront tavern for a schooner of beer.

His next recollection was waking up on the deck of *The County of Caithness*, and being told by the mate to "shake a leg and have a go at the upper T'gans!" West had been shanghai-ed aboard one of the last of the great windjammers and ordered to climb to the upper top gallant sail.

The ship was light-handed due to desertions for the goldfields. As a result, Capt. Buchanan used every means at hand to round up a crew. West, to his surprise and misfortune, had just discovered he was one of the crew.

To "shanghai" (forcibly abduct) a man was a notorious practice in West Coast ports in the 19th century. "Blood money" (probably \$30 - \$50) was paid to the inn or boarding house owner, called



Butler with *The County of Caithness*. Inspired by remarkable story.

a "crimp." Although a law was passed in 1895 that required crewmen to be signed on with a government agent present, the practice only ended in reality when no beautiful windjammers were left.

West decided he'd do the work to the best of his ability. Although he was completely green when taken aboard, he soon learned to climb the rigging and make sail as it was required. He never understood how anyone could yearn for a life on the "ocean wave." He said, "With the roll of the ship, the end of the yard arm would be in the water at one minute and way up in the air the next."

The *County of Caithness* was one of a series of tall ships owned by the Craig Lines of Scotland. She was built of iron for the grain trade which didn't necessarily depend on quick delivery, although the 'County' ships often enjoyed record passages.

She was a ship of 1,646 tons with a length of 266 feet and a breadth of just over 38 feet.

"He told of fishing for sharks for fresh meat and of losing a man overboard one night while rounding the Horn."

These early iron and steel vessels were built using the same methods employed for wooden ships. Unlike

wooden ships, however, there were no planks to work loose with age. Consequently these were dry ships and didn't need to be pumped frequently like their wooden counterparts. Because of the sheer mass of metal used, they were virtually indestructible. The *County of Caithness*, for instance, was sold to the Norwegians in 1903, had her rigging changed and renamed *Sofie*. She was still in common use when the First World War broke out.

She was a four-masted barque, which made her relatively easy to handle by a small crew, thus being very economical vessels.

Her three main masts were usually the same height with a smaller mizzen, unlike the three-master with a tall mainmast and shorter fore and mizzen masts. Her spars were short when compared to three-masted ships of the same length.

master handled "almost like a yacht" when compared to the three-master.

These ships were not nearly as tall or graceful looking as the three-masted ships. Yet they were still very beautiful sights to see when under full sail.

Butler's grandfather told her of many adventures on his 156-day trip to Dublin, Ireland, where he was eventually paid off. He told of storms and hardships, of food that was barely fit to eat. "Salt junk and hardback, and the occasional tot of rum after the all too frequent stiff blows," he said.

He told of the men in the mess who would tap the ships bread on the table to drive all the weevils out. He told of fishing for sharks for fresh meat and of losing a man overboard one night while rounding the Horn.

After his forced return to Dublin and then home to England, West once again set out for Canada, this time with a wife, to settle in Saskatchewan. Soon, however, he moved to the coast where he remained for the rest of his life.

His stories conveyed to Butler a set of feelings and mood that she would remember for years. When she finally decided to paint *The County of Caithness*, she tried to see it through his eyes and faithfully portray the ship in the way he felt about her. Watercolors provided the perfect medium for that portrayal.

"When I read the book, *The Last of the Windjammers* by Lubbock, I was thrilled to see the architect's drawings of her," Butler says. "My family are an etching of her that my grandfather bought when he was in China. I wanted to paint it for my son, to preserve the memory of another generation."

Butler is a consistent prizewinner at art shows. She painted *The Captain's Gig* from the *Rainbow* which was sculpted after the war. It was a first-prize winner at the Saanich Fair. Another first-prize winner hangs in the French Embassy on the Island of Malta.

Butler likes to experiment with different subjects as well. She enjoys travelling, and as a result she has seen a wealth of ideas unfolding before her. She successfully paints such diverse subjects as flowers, wildlife and familiar and not-quite-so familiar scenes. Throughout, she maintains the style that has gained her some recognition.

Galleries in Victoria, Sidney, Cheamainus and Ottawa sell her work. She paints in studio on Fifth Street at Mermaid Canal or Roberts Bay, Sidney, where the *County of Caithness* is on display.