

## Sally Speaks - A History of My Family

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While you know me as Sally Swift – my first name is actually Sarah, and was inherited from my paternal grandmother, Sarah Rotch (pronounced “Roach”). My grandmother, Sarah, grew up in the prosperous whaling town of New Bedford. Her ancestor, Joseph Rotch, was a prosperous ship owner. In 1765, he purchased a large portion of the districts of the town of Dartmouth, which would later become New Bedford. In New Bedford, the name “Rotch” said it all. Joseph Rotch had built the ship “Dartmouth” – now famously known for the Boston Tea Party! Also at the Boston Tea party was a ship named “Beaver,” owned by Joseph Rotch’s son, William. William would not only become the richest man on Nantucket, but also became the most famous member of the family. His vessel, the Bedford, was the first to fly the American flag as he sailed in British waters, after peace was declared, with his brig loaded with whale oil.

My father, Rodman Swift, known all his life as “Tod” was the youngest of three children. He grew up on the New Bedford waterfront. His grandfather, William Cole Nye Swift, was a leading agent of whale ships. William Swift became prominently known in the “live oaking” business – providing southern live oak ship timbers to northern shipbuilders. Frederick Swift, my grandfather, joined William Swift’s business after graduating from Harvard in 1874. At the time of his death in 1915, he had been appointed as a deputy collector for the IRS. As commodore of the New Bedford Yacht Club, he was part of New Bedford’s ruling class.

My father went to Milton Academy and later Harvard College, but it was the seafaring world for which he longed. My father’s boyhood dream had been to make a long voyage with his uncle, Captain Francis Stone, aboard his 2,077 ton ship “Francis.” In 1897, just as it seemed that this dream would be fulfilled, “Francis” burned and was a total loss off the New Jersey shore. When his application for an opening on the U.S. Fish Commission steamer “Fish Hawk” (for which he was encouraged to apply by another seafaring uncle) was turned down, my father entered Harvard’s class of 1903, having made a pact with his family that he would stay and graduate in return for their support of his desire to make a voyage on a “square-rigger” after graduation.

My father graduated from Harvard in the spring of 1904 as a civil engineer with every intention of making this voyage. Agreement or not, his mother tried to dissuade him. The big cargo-carrying square-riggers were great in size and clumsiness, were more vulnerable to being swept out to sea, and as a general rule, the conditions aboard these ships, often with small and poor quality crews, were more difficult and dangerous than those faced by previous generations. No wonder my grandmother was worried sick! To her dismay, my father went to sea without his pajamas! Nonetheless, as a shining example of President Theodore Roosevelt’s advice that a man “does not shrink from

danger, from hardship, or from bitter toil," my father's love of the sea and determination set him on his own seafaring course. His uncle Frank arranged for my father to sail aboard the American four-mastered bark "Astral". The "Astral" was 332 feet long, 45 feet wide, 26 feet deep and had a gross tonnage of 3,206. It was designed to carry 1,500,000 gallons of oil in cases containing 10 gallons each. In October 1904, my father headed off to Japan on the "Astral." The "Astral" arrived in Kobe Japan on March 30th, 1905. On May 13 of that year, the "Astral" sailed back to San Francisco and on July 1, 1905, my father, Rodman Swift, signed off the "Astral" and returned home by train to briefly bask in acclaim before heading back to California. Here, my father was hired as a surveyor at the famous North Star hard rock goldmine in Grass Valley. Arthur DeWint Foote, my maternal grandfather, was the superintendent of North Star Goldmine and Mary Hallock Foote, his wife and my maternal grandmother, ran the family home. My father became smitten by their daughter, Elizabeth. Telephoning the Foote home regularly on Sunday's, my father soon found himself invited to for a meal where he finally won the heart of my mother, Elizabeth "Betty" Foote through much persistence. They were married in June of 1906. Their first child, my only sister Agnes, was born at Grass Valley, California in May 1908.

My grandmother, Mary Hallock Foote, illustrated for such famous authors as Rudyard Kipling (master of poetry and prose), Nathaniel Hawthorne (known for "The Scarlet Letter" and "The House of Seven Gables) and Louisa May Allcott (best known for "Little Woman'), just to name a few. She also wrote and illustrated novels which dealt with life in the various mining camps. In 1908, my Grandfather Foote began developing a hydroelectric project in the Sierrra Nevada Yuba River. Although falling electric rates would end the project in 1910, my father spent a year beginning in July 1909 directing a small party in the rugged mountain wilderness building trails and surveying the dam site and the pipeline route.

Being homesick for New England weather and waters, in 1910 my father accepted a position as a superintendent with the Submarine Signal Corporation of Boston. My parents and Agnes moved into a cottage in Hingham, Massachusetts, a town chosen by my father from a nautical chart. Later, my parents would build a house in the same town. Submarine Signal Corporation became a world leader in underwater acoustical technology and by 1925 was manufacturing acoustical sounding devices of revolutionary importance, called "fathometers." During these years, my father spent many days on the water, including time aboard a vessel called the "Rodman Swift, a husky 19 ton, 42 foot motorized vessel owned by the Submarine Signal Company.

I was born on April 20, 1913 and grew up, with my older sister Agnes, around boats and water. My parents had built a new home in Hingham atop an old granite steamboat wharf, aptly called the "Wharf House." Spray, up to eight feet high, would often splash upon the windows. The house contained no rugs, curtains or bright colors. For my father, the Wharf House was perhaps part of a rejection of the life of extravagance in the over-sized houses of his New Bedford boyhood.

My mother, an avid reader and writer, enjoyed small boats, but became seasick in larger craft. She often did not go on our sea trips. My sister Agnes and I, however, were taught well by our father. As we grew older and developed other interests (horseback riding for one!), my father wished for a vessel in which he could sail alone, and the result was "Tyche," a 27 ½ foot schooner which my father helped design. She was my father's pride and joy. My father called her his "ship" and royally treated her as such.

My mother died in 1943. My father's love of the water and sailing continued even after my mother's death. By this time, my father was living on Martha's Vineyard. He continued to spend the vast majority of his time on Martha's Vineyard and built a single-room stone cabin as well as an outstanding outhouse, workshop and woodshed on 40 acres of land in Gayhead. My father lived in this one-room cabin in great simplicity, without electricity or running water, for more than ten years. Unable to sail the "Tyche" for four years because of the war, my father took up gardening and with the thoroughness and energy that had characterized all of his past endeavors, he recorded in numerous notebooks unending facts, including the dates that flowers bloomed and when birds would return.

In 1950, after my father had a heart attack, my sister and I convinced him to move into a new wood cabin outfitted with electricity and running water. His faithful friend, the "Tyche" was moored in Quitsa Pond and my father, known as "Captain Swift," slept many nights aboard his "ship." When his failing health ultimately prevented him from further extended coastal passages, he bought a power cruiser in Florida. He spent winters in Florida and the rest of the year in Martha's Vineyard.

My father died in October of 1959 at the age of 79. He had planned to stipulate in his will that the "Tyche" would be destroyed upon his death, but Agnes and I convinced him that "Tyche" could sail on provided she never left our family. Ultimately, as the aging "Tyche" was fit to sail no more, she was destroyed by my father's friend, in agreement with my father's wishes.

My father set a good example of living life to the full. Whereas his contemporaries from New Bedford's elite generally lived their lives in the comfort of the society to which they had been born, my father never outgrew his beginnings and the passions of a seafaring youngster.

My mother, as an avid reader and writer, also set a good example of making learning a life-long goal. I am thankful to both of my parents for all they instilled in me, and I am grateful that I have been able to use their example to live my life to the full, pursuing my passion of helping humans and horses alike with Centered Riding. Some portions based upon the book "Sea Struck" by W. H. Bunting.