

Cape character Tom Dennison Will be missed

Reprinted from the Cape Cod Times
March 12, 1998

Only Bay State man to be convicted of piracy in the 20th century dies at 61.

By DOUG FRASER
STAFF WRITER

ORLEANS — The last pirate died Sunday.

After the tug *The Hammer* went aground in 1965 on the tidal flats between Cooks Brook and Campground Beach in North Eastham, Tommy Dennison went down to do what he did best - salvage the engine and other parts.

When he was arrested, he claimed to be doing work for the tug owner - a man who, it turned out, did not own the tug.

He became the only man in Massachusetts in the 20th century to be convicted of piracy, which still carried a sentence requiring he be hung by the neck on Boston Common.

He ended up being fined a hundred dollars.

"That was far from piracy," said Al Youngren Jr., who fished with Dennison out of New Bedford for many years. "He just stripped a boat that had beached."

But the piracy charge seemed to fit a guy who lived by his own rules. With that piratical beard and handlebar mustache, his self-confidence, and a seaman's gift of



storytelling that could convulse even a staid courtroom, Dennison, 61, was a Cape Cod character.

"He knew everybody, police chiefs, selectmen, senators and judges," said Youngren. "If he was in a restaurant and a senator was in there, he might just go over and say, 'Hey, I know you,' and he could do that because he had the gift of gab."

Everybody has a Tommy story.

Like the time he had an argument with the guy with whom he was building a house. Dennison revved up his pickup truck and knocked the building down.

Or the night he sat in a bar lighting cigars with hundred-dollar bills.

Old friend Warren Quinn recalled riding down the beach in the 1950s in two old cars, with Dennison jumping back and forth between the two, from rumble seat to rumble seat at 60 miles an hour.

"He fell and hit the sand and was out cold," said Quinn, who packed

him into one of the rumble seats, closed it and drove home.

Later that night at the drive-in with his girlfriend, Quinn heard a rustle in the back. Dennison climbed out.

"I'm hungry" he said. Then he walked over to the snack bar, got some food, climbed back into the rumble seat and closed it," said Quinn.

"He had a lot of charisma," said retired Eastham police Lt. Tom Murray. "We used to call him The Pirate. He was very colorful and he knew exactly what was going on, and who was doing what"

Murray said information from Dennison was crucial to several police investigations.

But he was just as often on the wrong side of the law. Dennison was a hard-drinking man who wouldn't shy away from a fight

"If he liked you, and you mentioned you needed an engine for your boat, it'd be there in the morning," said Youngren. "Never mind asking where it came from."

He would sometimes come into a bar and order a round for everybody and leave before paying, saying "When I drink, everybody drinks, and when I pay, everybody pays."

"He told me I couldn't throw him out because the only thing that was keeping him alive was my chowder," recalled John Sully, the owner of the Yardarm in Orleans.

"Even his enemies loved him," said longtime companion Phyllis Weaver. "Tommy was someone you could hate one minute and love the next"