



Two Years Before the Mast

Richard Henry Dana, Jr. (1815 - 1882)

Read by:	Multiple readers	Format:	MP3 CD in DVD case
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Afflicted with poor vision following a bout with the measles, Harvard undergraduate Richard Henry Dana left school in 1834 to ship out as a common sailor aboard the brig *Pilgrim* for a two-year voyage around Cape Horn to California. He kept a diary during the voyage and upon his return wrote the classic *Two Years Before the Mast*, which was published in 1840 and quickly became a best seller. The term “before the mast” refers to the quarters of common sailors, located in the front of the ship. His initial motive in writing the memoir was to expose the poor treatment of common sailors at sea. The ship was bound with U.S. goods to trade with the missions and ports for cow hides in California, a Mexican colony. The book recounts stays

along the coast from San Diego, San Juan Capistrano, Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, Monterey and San Francisco, the heavy work involved in transporting the hides, and the ways of the Native Americans and Mexican Californios. Dana learns Spanish and becomes interpreter for the ship. The book is famous for his account of the mid-winter return voyage around Cape Horn that took weeks as they battled storms, wind, cold and icebergs, cited by Herman Melville as the best description ever written of the perils of Cape Horn. The book was made into a popular film starring Alan Ladd in 1946.

Richard Henry Dana, Jr. (August 1, 1815 – January 6, 1882) was a Massachusetts lawyer and politician best known for his classic memoir *Two Years Before the Mast*. He was born in Cambridge into a prominent Brahmin family; his father was the noted poet and critic Richard Henry Dana, Sr. He attended a private school run by Ralph Waldo Emerson before entering Harvard. He left school in 1834 to sail to California, returning in 1836, whereupon he entered Harvard Law School and wrote his classic memoir, which was published in 1840. That same year he entered the bar and published *The Seaman’s Friend*, which became a standard reference on the rights and responsibilities of sailors. He went on to defend many sailors and became an ardent abolitionist, helping found the Free-Soil Party. He was appointed a United States District Attorney for Massachusetts by President Lincoln during the Civil War. His arguments before the Supreme Court enhanced an already brilliant legal reputation. He later resigned over differences with President Johnson over Reconstruction and the punishment of Confederates. His positions favoring Afro American voting rights, education, and ownership of property and firearms were opposed by most in his class but were later embraced by President Garfield. The city and landmark Dana Point on the Pacific coast between San Diego and Los Angeles are named after him.