Be ye pirate savvy?

By Rebecca Unger

Steve "Shanghai" Brown told tales of savagery, belted out broadside ballads and offered nuggets of historical gold on the classical Age of Piracy during his lunch lecture at the Yucca Valley's Hi-Desert Nature Museum last week.

"The pirates of today, who work the water off of California and Malaysia with assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenade launchers, are true to the history of the brethren of the coast," the Joshua Tree buccaneer averred.

Brown began his pirate saga where it began with many a man: A poor tenant farmer named Billy came to town to sell his turkeys, but was forcibly taken by a "green gang" to serve in His Majesty's Royal Navy.

"Your king needs you," Billy was told by a third lieutenant as he was clubbed by a thougbles servant, only to wake up as a "volunteer" aboard a navy warship.

Brown explained that some famous pirates were actually privates — sailors who were commandeered and funded by their countries, like Sir Francis Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh, who plundered to plump up England's coffers in the 16th century. Another famous opportunist, Jean Lafitte, helped defend New Orleans in the War of 1812 — in exchange for par

done for him and his men.

For our poor fellow, however, aboard a Royal Navy ship, it was one blockade and battle after another, and if the warships ever took a prize, the crews below decks never saw any of it.

Pirate ships frequently had more equitable arrangements for their crews, Brown revealed.

"Pirates often signed articles that included a form of workers' compensation, with things like standard payments for loss of limb. And they divided their loot far more fairly than any privates or navy ships," Brown observed.

After enduring seven filthy, brutal, starving years aboard ship in service to the crown, Billy was dumped at an English port with just the clothes on his back.

Billy's wife and family had been thrown to the mercy of the streets long ago, so with no home and no prospects, he signed on with a mercantile ship.

"If there were living conditions at sea more revolting and dangerous than aboard a Man-o'-War, it was as a merchant ship," Brown intoned ominously.

But even worse were the slave ships, at the time parts of a legitimate enterprise.

"You could smell the slaves miles off, if they were upwind," Brown told his audience with a glare. "Those poor souls were stuffed below decks, shoulder to shoulder, living in their own filth. It was getting hard to tell the good guys from the bad guys."