

# Living

# Be ye pirate Savvy?

By Rebecca Unger  
Hi-Desert Star

**S**teve "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 Somalia 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 turnips, but was forcibly taken by a "press 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 thuggish seaman, only to wake up as a "volunteer" aboard a navy warship.

Brown explained that some famous pirates were actually privateers — sailors who were sanctioned 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-

dons for him and his men.

For our poor Billy, 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 privateers 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 merchant ship.

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

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

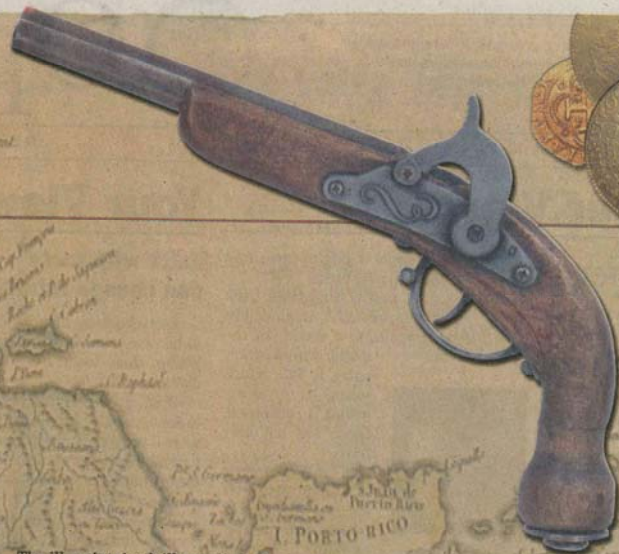
"You could smell the slavers miles off, if they were upwind," Brown told his audience with a glare. "Those poor souls were stuffed below decks, shoulder to shoulder, lying in their own filth. It was getting hard to tell the good guys from the bad guys."



Shanghai Brown

**Mary Read**, left, the daughter of an English sailor and his widow, was raised as a boy by her mother in the late 1600s. She served as a soldier in Britain and Holland, briefly marrying a fellow soldier and keeping an inn with him. After his death, she went to sea and turned pirate, plundering ships with "Calico Jack" Rackham and Anne Bonny.

**Black Caesar**, right, was an African pirate celebrated for his strength and intelligence. In the early 18th century, he joined Blackbeard and was lieutenant on the Queen Anne's Revenge.



The ill-maintained, ill-supplied, ill-crewed merchant vessels often just vanished in the open seas. However, many, like Billy's, were boarded by pirates.

Depending on the mood of the pirates, the merchant ship might do a little trading with them.

"A lot of pirates had a fascination with the finer things in life. They would loot the garments and accessories of ladies and gentlemen and use them in their own costuming," Brown said as he adjusted a ruffle.

However, the captain and crew were most likely to be tortured for sport and the looted ship set on fire and set drifting.

This time, Billy volunteered willingly, joining the pirate crew. He made a small fortune which he blew over a long weekend in Port Royal, and eventually died at the hands of natives near Porto Bello when the ship was driven ashore in a mangrove swamp during a storm.

"A typical happy ending," Brown noted in a tidy summation. "But daily life at the time for the common person was not happy on land, either."

The wealth of background that Brown brought to his lecture derives from his degree in history.

"One of my

specialties in college was colonial, Latin American and Caribbean history," Brown said. "I found it fascinating because of the mixing of so many cultures, political forces and economic forces. It was a great experiment."

Two first-hand accounts of piracy he recommends were bestsellers during the 1600s through the 1800s. These were "The Buccaneers of America," by Alexandre Esquemeling and "A General History of The Pyrates," written under a pseudonym by Daniel Defoe.

Esquemeling wrote of the legendary pirate stronghold of Tortuga and a man who has come to epitomize the age, Captain Henry Morgan.

Defoe's hero was Edward Teach, the other exemplar of pirate life, commonly known as Blackbeard.

"They were usually far more complex and interesting, though in a repugnant manner, than their movie star counterparts," observed Brown. "It wasn't very glam-

orous, but there were all sorts of people in the Caribbean doing mischief and having a grand adventure."

And did Brown want to be a pirate when he was a little kid? "Of course!" he exclaimed. "Doesn't everybody?"

## Famous pirates

