

HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF OLD YARMOUTH

THE LIFE AND TIMES
OF BARNEY GOULD—PART 2



BY
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(This is the second of a two-part essay on one of Cape Cod's great characters.)

Barney achieved a modest level of success as a speaker and lecturer. In a newspaper article he was said to have delivered a speech in Osterville covering his travels, womens' rights, religion, and politics, which he concluded by "tripping the light fantastic!" It was also noted that although there were a number of young people in the audience, not one Justice of the Peace was needed to keep order.

Barney burned the candle at both ends when it came to trains. On one hand he considered them to be slow and unreliable; other accounts portray him as being friendly with the railroad crews who often gave him free rides in exchange for a story or a lively jig. Free rides were given to people of importance, as well as railroad employees and their families. These free riders were known as "Dead Heads." This label was not derogatory; it meant they did not have to pay a fare. I believe Barney was clever enough to alter his opinion to his advantage. He once bragged to a certain engineer that he could beat his train to Boston. Sure enough, when the train stopped at the station Barney walked up to the locomotive and greeted the engineer. He never did say how he was able to hold on to the cow-catcher all the way to Boston.

Trains weren't the only conveyance he challenged. At the pier in Provincetown he encountered Captain Joel Nickerson, who was preparing to sail to New Orleans. The captain goaded Barney by asking him if he would be at the pier to catch his lines when the ship arrived. Folklore has it that Barney was indeed standing at the pier when Captain Nickerson docked. It's possible Barney accomplished this by hitching rides on the very railroad trains that he often referred to as slow and unreliable.

Another anecdote tells of how he once made a bet with Captain Bunker, Master of the vessel Orion, which was about to carry prospectors to California during the gold rush. Barney bet the captain that he could beat him to San Francisco, the wager being, “my best shirt laid agi’n your’n.” The story goes that Barney was waiting at the dock when the Orion arrived, and thereafter Barney proudly showed off his new shirt. This is somewhat believable as the Orion had to sail around The Horn, while Barney had many opportunities to join the numerous wagons and railroad trains heading for the gold fields.

There was a time when walking contests were popular in America, and Barney entered and won almost all. His wife Annie often entered with him, they must have made quite a sight competing, he being small and slight of build, her being big and strapping. An 1875 newspaper article contained the following: “We remember when there was but one Mr. and Mrs. Barney Gould, and when these primitive characters created not a little merriment as they pedestrianated along our Cape roads or entered the great and glorious city of oil; but now Mr. and Mrs. Barney Goulds are blooming out in every direction. The country is getting full of them, and walking matches are as fashionable as will be the new spring bonnets.” Could it be that the contradictions in his history can be attributed to the fact that more than one Mr. and Mrs. Gould, real or not, existed?

Mark Twain was not the only person whose death had been wrongly or humorously reported while still alive. In 1875 the following “obituary” about Barney appeared in the local newspaper:

“He has folded his tent like the Arabs, and has silently stolen away. We refer to our late distinguished townsman, the renowned lecturer, etc, Barney Gould Esq. With his departure has gone much of the sunshine from our lives, which have so oft been cheered by his presence. We look in vain for the jovial, familiar face, and listen with beating hearts for the cheerful voice, the accents of which are still lingering on our memories. Life has become monotonous, and the future looms before us like a funeral pall, for he has gone from our midst, he has gone ‘where the woodbine twineth,’ he has-moved to Mashpee!”

Obviously written with tongue-in-cheek and predating his death, it conveyed the popular sentiment toward Barney at that time.

As Barney grew older he did most of his work in the villages of Hyannis, Centerville, and Osterville, but still managed occasional trips to Boston and other communities in the area. There are differing accounts of how it was that Gould's Express ceased operation, and the lack of income caused the Goulds to be moved to the Chatham Almshouse. When Barney's legs could no longer carry him on his routes, he bought a wagon and a horse named Shanks so that he could continue his livelihood. When his failed health deteriorated to the point where he was unable to continue his business, and with no other means of support, the decision reached by the officials of Barnstable and Chatham was that the Goulds would fare better in the Chatham poor house. It is said that when the Justices showed up to take them to their new home the couple took to the woods and gave them a good fight. After finally relenting, Barney turned to the Constables and told them, "It would be better for you if we didn't meet on a dark night!" A newspaper account establishes the date of their move as January 1894.

Barney died in the Chatham Almshouse at the age of seventy-six on January 21st, 1895, and was buried in the Methodist Burial Ground, now know as The Seaside Cemetery, in Chatham. I found the Gould family plot, but there was no headstone for Barney. This was common for people considered to be paupers, and Barney had taken the pauper's oath. Part of his obituary read, "Barney is well-know in the principal cities all along the coast, particularly among the seafaring people and he will be missed full as much as some more valuable men." His wife Annie felt confined in the almshouse and was known to sneak off to Happy Hollow to breathe again the free air of her old community. I could find no record of her death.

Happy Hollow and its cast of characters are long gone, victims of the influx of summer cottages and the many changes that occurred at the turn of the century. In 1909 the Zion Union Church was built on the corner of North Street to serve a

growing Cape Verdean Community. Electricity was introduced to the area in 1913. Happy Hollow sounded its last hurrah during the prohibition era, with several raids resulting in numerous arrests and the confiscation of large amounts of bootleg liquor. Thomas Green, a WWI veteran, was the last known inhabitant of Happy Hollow.

Barney's amazing exploits are painted with a pallet of rich colors and bold brush strokes, the pigments of facts and fiction blending together to create the portrait of Barney Gould. Some say the squeak of cart wheels and the toot of an old tin horn can be heard late at night on the Old Kings Highway as Gould's Express heads to Boston with important packages that must be delivered on time.

I keep two Indian head pennies in my pocket in the event I encounter Barney on a foggy evening somewhere on one of his roads...RIP Mr. Gould.