

**The De Boom Marsily Story**  
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**First Draft, ca 1985**

The story of the De Boom – Marsily family in San Francisco deserves an explanatory introduction. These two families represented the merchant and shipping class from Belgium and England.

The Marsilys operated a shipping line in the UK-Continent area and owned some properties in London in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, according to Emma's memory, and apparently very profitably. Although based in Antwerp their relations with cousin's and relatives in London were close and Caroline Regina, my maternal grandmother, with her brothers was educated in the British Victoria fashion for ladies. Prior to the Franco-Prussian war the children were removed to London in accordance with an old family practice. Before the Battle of Waterloo in 1814, not far from Antwerp, Caroline's grandfather moved his children onto one of his vessels and sailed up the Scheldt until the fighting ended.

I recall in 1914 during the initial invasion of the Belgium littoral<sup>1</sup> on Von Schlieffen's planned attempt to sweep to Paris, Bonnemaman – as my grandmother was known to us – was almost daily in a state of intense fury as the German's advanced into Belgium, together with the reports of brutalizing atrocities. "Les salle Boches" she would exclaim, stamping her feet, "Il faut que on eloigner les femmes et les filles!"<sup>2</sup> Advancing armies were known for devastation and rape.

The De Boom family followed European expansiveness tradition in the classical textbook fashion for merchants and bankers. The role model, at an astronomically higher scale of many orders of magnitude, were the sons and brothers of the original Rothschild in Frankfurt who spread to Vienna, Paris, London, and [are] still important in the latter two cities. The De Booms, according to Emma, had family members or partners in South America, South Africa, and Eastern Canada.

In the TV series on Charles Darwin in HMS Beagle which takes place in the early 1840's, the essential reason for the voyage was to obtain valuable hydrographic data for HM Charts and Surveys in the London Admiralty. These original data were highly classified in order to retain for the British the greater advantage to their trading ships of avoiding sailing in uncharted waters. Information of this kind is difficult to provide firm security, and soon thereafter Dutch, French, Belgian and even a few Spanish vessels entered the trade around the Horn to the West Coast of South America. In the HMS Beagle film, Darwin is shown in Valparaiso mingling with Cambridge classmates and others who comprised an elite society that enjoyed a level of sophistication equal to that in Europe.

A natural round trip trade developed. The incoming traders brought tools, equipment, household effects, clothing and all the riches of Europe to Chile. They returned loaded with an equally valuable cargo – fertilizer in sacks of guano for the nitrogen-poor agriculture in Northern Europe.

At this point enters Cornelius de Boom. It is not known how many voyages he must have made in the late 1840's in this trade to Lima, Valparaiso and other West Coast ports. In 1848, however, occurred the California Gold Rush and its rapid spread of information around the world as, coincidentally, Cornelius de Boom's vessel arrived in Valparaiso<sup>3</sup>.

Thoughts of discharging cargo were abandoned and sail was set for San Francisco. Undoubtedly to help pay for the voyage, Chilean laborers and other eager passengers were signed on. Some of these must have formed the infamous Chilean bandits who terrorized the settlement in its first growing years, a never-mentioned blot on the de Boom family story.

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<sup>1</sup> Littoral - along the shore or coast.

<sup>2</sup> "Filthy Germans. They must remove the women and girl children (to a safe place)."

<sup>3</sup> It is my estimate that this ETA was during the month of October 1848.

The voyage to California was apparently uneventful. No record or memory exists to describe ports visited for replenishment of victuals and water. We can assume that there was great pressure and tension to go hell for leather for an early ETA. Coming up the West Coast in winter weather through the trade winds below and above the equator, the horse latitudes and the equatorial calm, off an uncharted and lee coast, was not at all unusual in those days. It is my estimate (based on recorded later passages from NY to SF in 180 days) that the voyage took a minimum of 45 to 60 days.

The first recorded date of Cornelius de Boom's arrival is February 18, 1849 and is attested on a large certificate of his induction as a life member of the Society of California Pioneers. This certificate was prepared January 12, 1888, obviously at the instigation of Romain Camille de Boom, and for many years graced the front window of the De Boom Paint Co. on Fremont Street in San Francisco, and later in Emma's home.<sup>4</sup>

We can infer that, upon arriving in the Bay, Cornelius ship probably lost most of his crew to the goldfields and brought his cargo ashore to sell to the townspeople. The ship may have joined the hundred or more vessels which lay at anchor, many of which never again put to sea.

The city was housed largely in tents until lumber was brought in for housing and shops. All of these were highly flammable and the city suffered five major fires in the period 1850-1852. Cornelius' brother, Romain, came to assist in the new operation but was lost to exhaustion and pneumonia in 1852 in an attempt to save the stock<sup>5</sup>. The city was harassed by a lawless group of Chileans. Everyone carried handguns for personal protection, as this tradition was carried over into even my generation. My father disposed of his revolver in 1918, according to my aunt Mimi.

On 1 November 1848, a partnership was arranged called De Boom, Vigneau, Grisar & Co. for joint business activities in Valparaiso and San Francisco. On August 1, 1850, the firm sent out a notice that, owing to ill health, Cornelius De Boom was resigning and being replaced by another De Boom from Antwerp. A copy of the 1850 agreement is in the memorabilia provided by my mother Emma.<sup>6</sup> It does not mention [an] Antwerp [office] but this location must certainly have been included as the basic supply point for shipping from Europe. A number of black-bordered notices of family deaths, broadcasted to all members in the 1860-1890, period indicate that about this time a marriage between the two families was arranged. Some of the relations acquired include....

A paragraph in a book<sup>7</sup> in the memorabilia published in 1870 entitled "....." lists the inport-export houses on California Street and can be interpreted as occupying land where the Robert Dollar building was erected in 1910. A letter in French (not yet translated) dated ..... lists some of the commodities required from Antwerp by the San Francisco branch to be carried on the next voyage of the Princess Charlotte, evidently one of the partnership's vessels. The list shows wine, coal...There is no record of exports. However...

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<sup>4</sup> Currently (2006) this certificate is in the possession of Ronald Witzel, Novato, CA.

<sup>5</sup> According to notes handwritten in 1892 by Emma's father (Romain Camille De Boom), Cornelius' full name was Jean Corneille De Boom. His brother, Romain De Boom, "died a single man in San Francisco 1857..."

<sup>6</sup> Currently (2012) in possession of Society of California Pioneers.

<sup>7</sup> Whereabouts of this book unknown.