

Santander Beach

Inspiration from Floripa to Florida

Years ago this press maker shipped a Mariner Halfwood press to a woman on the east coast in the USA. She commented at the time she needed a strong shipping crate because the press would be moving with her to Florianopolis, Brazil. A story began with this.

Santander Beach

On a visit to Spain in 1983, I came to Santander Beach. This was merely a day trip from Castro Urdiales, where we—my family—were staying a few days awaiting the International Art Fair to begin in Bilbao. I could not have known at the time how important this beach would be to me and my story of the Halfwood Press. Now, twenty-eight years later, I am reminded of its significance as I address a greeting card to Eloise Romais.

Eloise is from Brazil, but she lives in Florida today. She wrote to me by email, telling me she and her husband changed their plan, which was to finish their home in Florianopolis—an island-state on the coast of Brazil. They moved from Connecticut to Florida instead. Her father passed away there not long ago; maybe this helped them decide to compromise, and move to Florida instead. Anyway, the popular name for beautiful Florianopolis is Floripa—a little like Florida, don't you think?

This matter of Eloise's new address is speculation on my part. Imagining and speculating on names and events is my vocation. I am an artist—and so, too, is Eloise Romais. I am—or was at the time of my Santander visit—a professor, too. My time to Spain was partly funded by the University of Washington and I was on sabbatical leave, a fact-finding, study-abroad mission that took me around the world.

The art fair at Bilbao excited me because I thought it likely I would find international artists with whom I could discuss my objective, to get me facts about the joining of printmaking with new technologies like video and computer graphics. The stay at Castro Urdiales was short, and the trip to Santander was merely a diversion. It was to be the most decisive event of the whole journey, as you will see.

To finish my story I need to go back to the beginning, for the beginning was not in 1983, but in the 16th Century. In the Basque region (Bilbao today) lived a brilliant ship designer. We call these *marine architects* today. He had a vision of a ship, with innovations in detail that made it a most remarkable craft. He built it for trade with the new world and the ship—a frigate—proved to be fast and also very beautiful.

Her time as a ship-of-trade was cut short when King Phillip II confiscated all seaworthy craft to join the expedition to invade England in 1588. This was to be the historic Spanish Armada, the *Grande y Felicísima Armada*. The Emeraldalda—as this frigate was named, or the *Emerald of the Sea*, was converted to be a tender to the great floating warships in the fleet.

As we know, the armada met with failure, and in the battles the Emeraldalda was badly damaged. The crew managed to reach the northern shore of Spain where they could do nothing more but land the sinking ship, and there she lay on the sands of Santander beach.

That was the sad ending of the Emeraldalda until, two centuries later a young marine architect and his new bride were visiting Santander. Seeing the remains of the Emeraldalda, he was surprised by his wife when she told him the story. She was descended from the family of the original architect of the Emeraldalda. For many generations the old architect's story had survived.

In fact, her dowry included the chest that contained original plans and models more the making of the Emeraldalda. The young architect was thrilled at her disclosure and was filled with enthusiasm; and to build the Emeraldalda anew would be his goal.

At this period in history, the mid-eighteenth century, the ship would sail the Atlantic trade routes to America. At the

same time, however, a bigger plan would be in formation and, again—like the story of the first Emeraldalda—would end in tragedy. Before I explain how, you need to know about a plan that was being laid which would require such a ship as the Emeraldalda.

A Jesuit order, in Spain, was determined to put into effect a plan to launch trade with China—a mission that was believed to be ordained by God. To gain the advantage they marked several European inventions which were certain to attract the Celestials—the Chinese. One invention was printing from etched metal plates, and the presses designed for printing them.

The presses in use at that time, however, were too big, and often were built into the building housing them. Therefore a priest was sent out to find a steel artisan to make a press of smaller design which could be shipped to China. He found his steel wright in Cadiz who was reputed to be more an artist than a foundry man.

The steel wright immediately grasped the concept—having made presses before. To the surprise of the priest, the artisan called upon his neighbor, who was a wood worker who made guitars, mandolins and other musical instruments. The neighbor, too, was much more an artist than woodcrafter. Between the two they built the presses called for—presses of strength and beauty that were made of steel and wood. They called them, *la imprenta de medio madera y medio acero*, half-wood and half-steel, the Halfwood Press.

Finally, many years later, they had finished building a dozen presses, plus one miniature version as a toy model to be used for promotion of the press in demonstrations. In 1753, the Emeraldalda sailed from Cadiz with, among many other things, the cargo presses, heavily coated in grease and oil paper in boxes. A message came to the navigator at their departure. It was from the steel wright. He asked the navigator, when they reached Madeira for provisioning and taking on immigrants to the Americas, to try to locate his two daughters, who had been kidnapped by Algerian pirates. He believed they were on Madeira, working on the sugar plantations.

The ship stopped for supplies at Porto de Funchal in Madeira and, as chance would have it, the sisters, daughters of the steel wright, sought passage to Brazil. One of them, moved by the navigator and priests' reports concerning their father, decided instead to return to Spain. The other, headstrong and independent, wanted to go on.

The ship's crossing was uneventful as these voyages go except that a friendship developed between the navigator and the woman, who, it was found, was also a descendant of the 16th Century ship designer! The presses and their use fascinated her. The navigator used the small model press in his trip since it fit in his cramped cabin. He made tiny maps with it.

They made landfall at Nossa Senhora do Desterro—which is called Florianopolis today nicknamed, *Floripa, Island of Magic*. A dinner was held by the governor to honor the expedition of the Emeraldalda. The navigator invited the woman from Madeira to accompany him. At the dinner, she caught the eye of the governor and, as the time for the Emeraldalda's departure, he made a proposition to her. She could stay at Desterro and she would be given a position in the city.

She stayed—as it was her original plan, anyway—and the design and workings of the press also stayed with her in her memory. The Emeraldalda departed and was never heard from again. Whether the ship and the presses reached China, no one was to know. Until now.

My friend in St. Augustine, Eloise, in Florida, will enjoy this story. She owns a Halfwood Press. I made it for her in 2007, from a design I made up from what the artisans—the steel wright and the guitar-maker, had made. Now I send this story to Eloise Romais, who lives at 1753 Santander Street, Saint Augustine, Florida.
