

## Goose Bumps and Shivers Down the Spine

*By Irv Sternberg*

Moments of inspiration don't quite make sense by normal logic, says *New York Times* writer David Brooks. "They feel transcendent, uncontrollable and irresistible. When one is inspired, time disappears or alters its pace. The senses are amplified and there may be goose bumps or shivers down the spine."

Well, that sounds wonderful, certainly an exhilarating experience worth having. I wish I could claim ownership of such an experience. But I think the description is a bit over the top. I prefer to think of inspiration as something that motivates me to do something I otherwise would not do.

As a kid inspired by the good guys in white hats in the assembly-line production of Western films that Hollywood cranked out in the 1930s, I spent hours playing Cowboys and Indians with my friends. As an adult inspired by great novels, I vowed that someday I would write one of my own. Of course I felt a tremendous sense of accomplishment when I finally published my first novel at the age of 66, but I honestly never got goose bumps or felt a shiver down my spine.

Then, sometime in the late 1990s, a friend of mine introduced me to a piece of maritime history featuring a young Boston woman. Her name was Mary Ann Patten, and she was the wife of Captain Joshua Patten, an esteemed young skipper of a sleek clipper ship named *Neptune's Car*. In 1856, while the ship was nearing Cape Horn, Capt. Patten became seriously ill. His 18-year-old wife took command of her stricken husband's ship during the fiercest storm of the century. She quelled a threatened mutiny and brought the ship, crew and cargo safely to port in San Francisco, all while carrying her first child.

Her intrepid spirit, courage and determination inspired me to think about writing a book about her. My research revealed that the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century was a period of glory and excitement for American shipping, a time when the world paid tribute to the beautiful and swift clippers built in the shipyards of Boston, New York and Portsmouth. Dozens of wives sailed with their captain-husbands, many demonstrating uncommon bravery and knowledge of the seas during passages recorded in the logs of these masterful ships. But one woman stood out. Mary Ann Patten was the all-time heroine of the clipper ship era.

So fascinated was I with her story, I set out to educate myself on the fine points of sailing, no small challenge for a landlubber who was once afflicted with sea-sickness aboard a rocking fishing boat still tied to the pier. Eventually, I completed a tale of fiction that was based on Mary Ann's life and adventures aboard a ship I called *Neptune's Chariot*. It received some great reviews and was a finalist in the Colorado Book Awards contest. I don't think I could have written that book without genuine inspiration.

But I'm still waiting to feel those goose bumps and shivers down my spine.