

Memories . . .

To Travel by Ship

a 1953 Saga

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There has never been devised a more pleasant or comfortable means of travel than by ship. I am sure those who have suffered from seasickness, cruel heavy seas, and beastly overcrowding would dispute this, my opening argument. The following is a true story transcribed from my notes written on location. I have made a few insignificant additions and conversational reconstructions.

On Tuesday, May 26, 1953 I booked passage to Europe on the S.S United States through Mr. Hal M. Hall the president of “Tennessee Valley Travel Agency” in Chattanooga, for about \$180.00. I was booked for berth No. 1, D-22 for a \$30.00 deposit that I made to hold the available space.



Friday, September 4, 1953

It was on September 4, 1953 that I exited a taxi cab at the head of pier 86 on North River at West 42nd Street, paid my 80 cents fare, walked to the telephone at 7 am on the shore end of the pier. I placed a long-distance call to my young wife, Audrey, who was attending her sister’s wedding in South Dakota. Without a twinge of conscience I dialed the number with the assistance of an operator working those early hours for the telephone company. No one seemed to object to a call at such an early hour of the morning.

The dock was a long wooden jetty that ran down into the river and along the side of the S.S United States. I was one of the first to board by way of a wooden gangplank with handrails. I was escorted aboard and to a table of officers who checked all my papers to be sure everything was in order. Then I immediately began to explore the surroundings.

There were 2000 passengers and 1000 crew on board for this eastbound crossing. When built in 1952, the ship was partly financed by the Federal Government to be used as a troopship in case of another war. It could be converted over in 24 hours to hold 15,000

soldiers. I was taken to the D-deck and shown my room. There were a hundred ways to get lost returning alone to topside. The ship was almost 1000 feet long and it seemed of equal depth. There was no elevator into the depths where I was housed. It was incumbent on us to climb eight flights of steps to reach the topmost part of the ship. I was traveling Tourist Class and was on the lowest passenger deck in the ship. It was just under the water line. There were no portholes, and the room had two upper bunks and two lower. Four strangers bunked together. I was assigned a lower berth and an old German gentleman, Karl Erlanger, from Darmstadt had the upper berth above me. In deference to his age and due to my total ignorance, I suggested that we trade places. Another of our companions was a retiree from the Buick Motor Company in Michigan, Dick Ware, and lastly a young businessman from Stateside who seldom had anything to say, and whose name I did not catch, though I am sure one had been wasted on him. I do not trust or like silent people. I believe that they have something dark and mysterious to hide from the world about them.

I had gotten on board more than four hours before sailing time, so I had lots of leisure to look over the visitors who had come aboard, passengers, and the various decks and general layout of the vessel. As I wandered among the throngs of people all of a sudden, I spied the most unlikely passenger of all. It was a certain acquaintance of mine, Amos Elmendorf and his 12 year old son. Amos and I had been schoolmates in the distant past. He was a tall lean man with sparse, thinning hair. He was clad in a worn dress suit that hung loosely about his frame. I was not anxious to become engaged in conversation with those two and sought out a hiding place. All that immediately presented itself was a low hanging drape and I ducked in behind it. As luck often has it the pair stopped just before the curtain where I was secreted. Amos was instructing the young offspring about the vagaries of the vessel. He continued by saying, "When your grandmother came to the Americas she got off the boat at Ellis Island. It was on the 4th of July. After receiving her medical report and other things they put the weary travelers through, they were transferred to the mainline. Just as Mom exited out onto the street with her two worn suitcases, a 4th of July celebration band came down the way. She sat down on the curb and cried, saying that nowhere but in America would they go to all of that fuss just for her." He paused while junior assimilated the depth of meaning that had been laid out before him. Then catching the lad by the hand they pressed their way toward the gangplank and landed with the other sightseers who had come aboard and were now being shown off the ship before sailing.

One drunk was giving the management more than usual trouble getting ashore. He was locking his legs around every chair, table and post that presented itself, and was calling in a high slurred speech, "I want to see the man who drives this boat. He's my brother-in-law!" Roughly handled he was deposited on the shore. By this time I had climbed onto the upper deck and was standing between the two funnels when at 12 noon the steam whistle deafened all other sounds around me. The gangplank was swung up onto the dock and small tug boats were positioning themselves around Leviathan to move it into the river and out to sea. I stood watching for the Statute of Liberty and later discovered that we had already passed it on the other side of the ship about a mile back. I stood looking at it as she became enshrouded in the mist and smog of the city, and finally sank

into the river, and out of sight.

The ship was now turning up its power and a light, cool spray washed back over the decks. I went to the Purser's Office and paid \$2 for a deck chair that was for my use alone during the entire crossing. The chairs are made of red and white plastic woven into bands about 2 inches in width, and about 1/2 inch apart. The deck steward would come around and ask your name, cabin number, and check his list to be sure that you had paid for the privilege of sitting on deck. Later in the afternoon he came back along with a cup of warm broth for the deck passengers.

At 4 pm we were all sent to our staterooms to get ready for lifeboat drill. Behind each cabin door was the location and number of your lifeboat. We put on our life jackets and proceeded to the proper vicinity of our lifeboat. The lifeboat had stamped on its side;

140 persons
1500 Cubic Feet
New York
S.S United States
the lifeboat number

Dinner was served in the glorious dining room on "A" deck. There were eight people at our table. The sea was calm so there were no side rails on the table that kept the dishes from sliding off as in a heavy sea. Lovely menus were furnished and the steward told us if we wanted anything that was not on the menu to just ask for it. I thought I would give that a try, so I asked for 'turkey and dressing'. In due time it came to the table. I have before and since eaten in many restaurants, but have never feasted so well as I did on board this ship. We were all required to wear a dinner jacket to the table to lend an air of respectability to the affair. Breakfast and lunch were less formal occasions.

As I got into my meal I discovered a preacher sitting next to me with his wife on his other side. They had been talking privately to each other so I did not hear the tales that he was telling her, or at least not most of them. At one point he raised his glass in a toast and said, "I give you'ns a salute, as my old aunt says. I'm Rev. Jim Cargoe, and this little beauty to my right is Pearl." Rev. Jim was a short, heavy individual with quick motions, and a ready laugh. He resembled a gnome or leprechaun. I could not help wondering if Snow White and the other six were hiding somewhere around, listening, watching, and smiling contentedly to themselves as he talked. "This old aunt of mine, of whom I spoke, lived in Alpharetta, Georgia all alone with her cat, Jigger." continued Rev. Jim Cargoe. "One day my aunt's widowed friend called and suggested that they go to town and do some shopping. When the other lady arrived it was discovered that as she pulled into the driveway she had run over and killed Jigger. After a sad discussion it was decided that they would put the cat into a paper shopping bag and carry it along on their trip to town. In town they parked the car near a couple of trash receptacles, but as they approached them with the corpse, they saw a policeman watching, so they decided to go inside a restaurant and have a bite of lunch before throwing the cat away. My aunt sat the shopping bag down on the floor beside her, and they ordered lunch. After lunch my aunt

reached for her shopping bag only to discover it had been stolen as they ate. Going through the checkout line, they exited onto the sidewalk only to discover a large woman sprawled out on the cement in a perfect swoon. Near her lay a paper shopping bag with a dead cat half slid out onto the sidewalk. The two ladies looked at the situation and proceeded about their shopping.”

As dusk drew on I went into the theater where an orchestra was playing soft music and enjoyed that for about an hour. Having been up all the preceding night I was growing weary, so leaving the orchestra I made my way down into the bowels of the ship. Along the lower hallway I noticed that all of the doors looked just the same except for the brass room numbers. I paused before room D-22, glanced up and down the hall, turned the knob and entered the room. As I turned the light on I glanced towards the bunks and saw Herr Karl Erlanger sitting on his bed with his head sunk deeply into his hands, his elbows resting on his knees. He did not move at my entry.

I was silent for a few seconds, and then asked, “Are you well, Herr Erlanger?” He looked up and replied, “My body is in fair physical condition, but my emotions are spent.”

I said, “Is there something that you would like to talk about?”

He needed no prodding, but fell right into the middle of his woes.

“It was the war”, he said with a suddenness that surprised me. “We sowed to the wind and we reaped the whirlwind!” Then after a pause he continued, “My army unit was sent to the Russian front. We made a deep incursion into the heartland of that continent of waste. Then the weather turned against us, and the Cossacks rallied, too. We were now being driven daily to the west, stumbling along with inadequate clothing over frozen ruts and the bodies of our fallen companions. It soon became clear to any man of reason that we were losing this war. My mind went back to the pleasant days when it seemed that the great Wehrmacht was unstoppable. I had departed from my wife asking her to remain there in Darmstadt in our ancestral apartment. My people had lived in that building for some 250 years. I told her that she should be safe there until the war’s end. There was no heavy industry in the town, and I believed that the Allies would not waste their bombs there.

“In time I deserted the army and headed west on my own, dodging Russians and even our own soldiers who would have shot me for leaving my post without permission. I traveled on foot, by rail, and at one point as a stowaway on an aircraft. I ate scraps that were discarded by others who were nearly as hungry as I.

“In due time I reentered Germany and made my way to the southwest by any means that presented itself. It was a different Germany than the one that I had left a few, long months before. The mood was one of loss and discouragement. One day I asked an old gentleman that I met if he knew anything of the fortunes of Darmstadt. He told me that the city was a total waste. ‘The airplanes came in the night. They came almost without warning and the people were caught in their beds with no form of protection.’, he said. ‘The glow of the flames from the great firestorm brightened the horizon for thirty miles away.’ This sad news gave my sick body new strength, and I moved rapidly to reach the

town by the next day.

“On the morrow topping the crest of a hill I could see the sight of Sodom and Gomorrah. Before me was not the lovely city of homes and churches, but a smoldering cinder scaring the earth. I ran forward, climbing and stumbling over the ruins of buildings. Streets were indiscernible, landmarks obscured by the devastation that had overtaken my hometown. Before me I could see a needle standing among the ruin. Yes, it was the tower of Ludwig. It was the only thing still standing. I pressed toward the tower, and found the door open. I went inside and started the clockwise climb up the circular stone stairs, coming out at the top.

“I looked down on more ruin than my eyes had ever seen. Billions of bricks strewn across streets and homes. The three story buildings had collapsed. You could see where the blockbuster bombs had exploded. The walls were still standing, but the roofs had collapsed onto the top floor and broken it down onto the next and so down until it all reached the ground level. As I began to orient myself, I looked for our apartment. It was to my left somewhere under that awful pile of rubble.

“Under there lay the body of my wife, buried away from all care and want.” He returned his head to his hands and just sat there silently as I prepared for bed.

Each berth in the stateroom had a leather looped strap where you could run your arm through to keep from falling out of bed during heavy seas. Being tired and lulled by the gentle roll of the ship I was soon asleep.

Saturday, September 5, 1953



In the middle of the night the ship's clocks were advanced one and a quarter hour for we are traveling east to meet the sun. That time change caused me to miss my breakfast, so after dressing I drew on a jacket and went up to my deck chair on topside. The ocean

was beautiful We were steaming across the very center of a round disc of bluish-green water. Nothing was in sight. Long ropes of seaweed floated in the water, and at one point there were a few boards bunched together as if for their mutual protection against the elements. At nights after that I would lay awake for five or ten minutes wondering if relatives of some of those planks might come through the sidewall and silence me and the ship for good.



When we left New York's harbor the sweltering heat was almost unbearable. As we moved into the open ocean and reached our full velocity, it was much cooler, even to the point of being pleasant. We were in the Gulf Stream not crossing it perpendicularly but on a long diagonal track that we would follow for more than a day. The Stream added another 15 miles per hour to our eastward journey, so as long as it closely resembled our Great Circle track it was to the advantage of the ship to stay within it. Once we left the influence of the Gulf Stream the air temperature dropped about 15 degrees within the space of an hour, and the water took on a deep, dark, blue appearance instead of the bluish-green it had been within the Stream.

Shortly the passengers began to turn up on deck. As luck would have it the Rev. Jim and Ms. Cargoe had two deck chairs just beside mine.

"Good morning, John," he said. "Did you sleep well?"

I was flattered that he was so quick to remember my name from just one chance meeting. "Yes, thank you. In fact I slept so well I missed breakfast."



“You should make better use of your vacation than to spend it in bed, alone,” he answered. His wife gave him a disparaging glance as the inference of the ‘alone’ sank in, and I made no response. Preachers are enamored by the sound of their voice, and believe that everything they have to say comes of Devine inspiration. I have seen programs where there would be two or more preachers together. One would call for an offering, another would have a prayer, and one the sermon. Each would turn his duty into a sermon so that he could have his say, and fair share of time. Few of them have ever done a day of useful work, but if surveyed would sound as if they had done years of yeoman service at hard labor.

He continued, “I remember my cousin Bob Vital. It was back in the early 1950s that Bob took Dorothy his wife of the day, and the multitude of their children, and went west to California on vacation. He had only two weeks away from work, and so carved out the west as a butcher sections off a side of beef. So much had he planned, that in order to stay on the itinerary schedule they had to travel 700 miles a day. Long drives where really the joy of his life, and this little excursion was tailor made for him. As the times began to shorten, and they nosed the car to the east, he continued this unrelenting schedule. Driving up to the rim of the Grand Canyon, he jumped from the car, with movie camera in hand, and began a long slow sweep of the panorama before him with an 8mm camera. In the background he could hear the car doors opening, and turning he saw the children spilling out onto the tarmac. In a voice of command he called out, “You children get back into the car. You can see this when we get home!” Rev. Jim settled back in his chair and gave such a raucous laugh that it startled those relaxing on that side of the deck. Closing his eyes against the brightness of the northern sun he mumbled, “You better stay on a schedule, too!”.

The S.S. United States set the world’s passenger ship speed record for the north Atlantic crossing. We were traveling about 40 miles per hour. (In later years it was stated that the ship had traveled faster than 50 miles per hour during one stretch, and could travel 10,000 miles without refueling or taking on supplies.) A healthy breeze was blowing along the deck, so I drew my blanket about me, closed my eyes and went to sleep. This was sheer luxury. I was experiencing a little of what the privileged few knew every day of their lives.

All at once the ship blew a long, loud blast from its whistle, enough to raise the dead. It certainly got my attention. I smoothed my hair back down and asked what the disturbance was all about. I was told that each day at noon the ship salutes the sun with its whistle. Looking about me I saw that we were still in the center of that blue disc of water. Looking aft I could see the azure blue of the ship’s wake, where air was being whipped into the water, stretching back to the horizon.

Our noon position for Saturday, September 5, was:

Latitude: 41° 12’

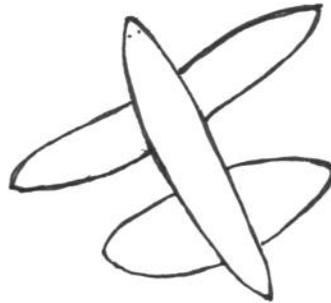
Longitude: 59° 41’

Distance from New York: 653 nautical miles

Distance from La Harve: 2538 nautical miles

Steaming time: 20 hours and 46 minutes (since we are sailing east toward the sun our day is only 22 hours and 45 minutes long)

The whistle was like a call to lunch, and by about 12:45 I had eaten and walked up along the side of the vessel to the bow. I ate in the first of two meals sections. The forward deck was small and not very popular as a tourist's perch. The floor of the deck had lots of marine tools and equipment there that showed it to be a place of utility rather than one of pleasure. The sharp angle of the bow plowed its way through the sea, throwing tons of displaced water to either side. A rainbow moved back and forth in the surge and wane of the spray between me and the sun. Now and again a sudden gush of spray would rise up and shower me with sea water. Schools of frightened flying fish went into the air on a trajectory perpendicular to the direction of the ship's travel. They would glide for a hundred or so feet before being caught by the face of a wave rising up in front of them, or until their momentum ceased to defy the pull of gravity. The small 8 to 10 inch fish looked like a flying cigar with two pairs of long wings along its side. Is it a bird gone to sea or a fish who has never found its way to solid ground? Joshua Slocum in his nineteenth century solo circumnavigation of the earth found these small fish on deck of the 'Spray' most every morning.



The Flying Fish

A newspaper was printed daily aboard the ship, and being a printer, I went to the Steward's Office and told him that I would like to see the printshop. The Assistant Steward personally escorted me to the lair of the printer. It was wonderful to walk into their area and smell the aroma of a printing establishment. I remember on a thousand occasions a customer in our shop would ask, "What is that terrible smell in here?" If he was a good customer and one that I liked, I would say, "I'm not sure what you are referring to, but every night when I close up and go outside, I notice an odd smell in the air out there." If I didn't like the man, or the disparaging way he phrased his question, I would say, "You know I didn't smell that until you came in!" I seldom saw that customer again!

Their machines consisted of an 8 X 10 Chandler and Price open platen letterpress, and a 12 X 18 C&P press, a saw, a Linotype, and a stone. I wondered how they controlled the Linotype and presses during heavy seas to keep them from doing a waltz about the shop, maybe even coming through the side of the vessel. Here were people that I could talk with. People who understood the true meaning of life. Just as we entered, the pressmen walked over to a porthole and threw a one pound can of printing ink overboard into the

sea. I thought this might be a ritual of the sea, or a special ingredient in the diet of some deep sea fish, and asked about it. "Oh! That." he said, "Management bought this certain brand of printing ink and I don't like that kind, so I throw a can overboard occasionally to decrease the inventory." We have used the sea for centuries as a burying ground. All that stuff may come up some day to haunt us.



In the late afternoon we saw a ship pass us westbound, and at rather close range. It was a black ship with an orange bottom down by the waterline. It carried no flag.

Our ship rode the waves well. When the waves were tall it did pitch up and down which made walking around more difficult. If you tried to walk up steps as the ship was rising up on the wave you seemed to weigh a ton. When the ship was falling into the next trough you could trip up the stairs as lightly as a shadow. The rising and falling of the vessel was occurring about every six seconds.

The winds and waves continued to rise all during the night. I went to bed about midnight with high seas rolling against us. I was told by one of the crew that the seas were 30 to 35 feet high. In bed I ran my arm through the leather strap so I would not be thrown onto the floor, or against a chest. When the ship fell into a trough I seemed to be floating in my bed, and could run my free arm all the way under my body without resistance. It was only a matter of minutes before I was sleeping like a baby all through the night.

Sunday, September 6, 1953

During the early morning hours we ran through fields of fog and the deep bass voice of the fog horn at regular intervals shuttered the entire vessel. The winds had died down some, but the swells were still tossing and pitching about so that walking was difficult and dangerous. After breakfast I drew on a warm sweater, an overcoat, and went onto the deck. There were only a few hardy souls out there, and even dressed as warmly as I was it was not enough, so I returned to the warmth of the ship.

Our noon location:

Latitude: 44° 03'
Longitude: 44° 32'
Distance traveled during last day: 708 nautical miles
Distance from New York: 1361 nautical miles
Distance from La Harve: 1830 nautical miles
Steaming time: 22 hours and 45 minutes
Average speed: 31.12 knots

On the main deck there was a large map showing our path from the American Continent to Europe. Each day at noon a small model ship was moved across the map to indicate our current position.

Lunch was not well attended because of the rough seas. I had started to the dining room and in passing a certain cabin saw the door was open and several men were standing around a lady's berth. Just as I passed by the open door her stomach expelled its holdings upward. She was lying on her back and the occurrence looked like a miniature Old Faithful Geyser. Her stomach's contents reached a height of 8 to 12 inches and then fell back over her face, hair, and bed. I thought, "Well, I know one who will not be coming down to eat today."

The tables had side rails all around and the vases of flowers had been removed. The waiter suggested that we eat lightly and not to drink anything. This was in the days before seasick pills were popular, and the wisdom of the day was to keep the stomach's content dry so it would not slosh around inside. The dining room was not well populated, about half of the passengers were absent. The temperature within the ship was lower because it was thought that the coolness would give the passengers a better chance to stay well.

Along in the late afternoon an eastbound freighter was passed on the distant horizon. We were traveling about four times as fast as the lumbering old merchantman was going, and it was soon just a curl of smoke rising from somewhere below the horizon behind us. During the night we passed the S.S. America also eastbound. It left New York a day before us and was passed about half way across. So fast was the S.S. United States.

After dinner I went into the lounge where the passengers were playing Bingo. I saw Rev. and Ms. Jim Cargoe at one of the tables, and they motioned for me to come and sit with them. I did not partake in the game because there was too much brain power against me, and if it was just a game of chance I was never so lucky. I sat through several hands of Bingo and at last remarked to my friends that I would now turn in and perhaps tomorrow I would feel better. Rev. Jim said there was a doctor aboard, but I was suffering more from the absence of sleep than from some textbook illness. I needed rest. Rev. Jim always had a 'true' story to tell. He said, "You make me think of one of my relatives who lived in California. He was a plumber. One night he grew very ill in the middle of the night, and called a Medical Doctor who was a friend, and fellow church member of his. The Doctor told him to 'take two aspirins and come by my office in the morning.'

By morning he was much better, as most night illnesses are, and did not need the Doctor. Well, as circumstances often happen, one night some time latter the Doctor called my relative, the plumber, and said, 'My toilet is running over and I can't make it stop.' My relative's mind flashed back to his experience with the Doctor a few weeks before, and he told his friend to drop a couple aspirins into the toilet and call his office the next morning. He then returned to bed feeling very smug."

Monday, September 7, 1953

Today the weather was much warmer getting up to about 58 degrees Fahrenheit and the seas were calmed down. The dinning facilities were full again of hungry passengers. Gone were the table's side rails and vases of pretty flowers were again on all of the tables.

I have failed to mention a young man about my age who was also at my table during the trip. His name was Tommy Trainer. We spent much of the days together exploring the ship and talking over the past and our anticipated futures.

Our position at noon.

Latitude: 48° 11'
Longitude: 28° 59'
Distance traveled during last day: 691 nautical miles
Distance from New York: 2052 nautical miles
Distance from La Harve: 1139 nautical miles
Steaming time: 22 hours and 45 minutes
Average speed: 30.37 knots

Tuesday, September 8, 1953

Latitude: 49° 47'
Longitude: 11° 05'
Distance traveled during last day: 710 nautical miles
Distance from New York: 2762 nautical miles
Distance from La Harve: 429 nautical miles
Steaming time: 22 hours and 45 minutes
Average speed: 31.21 knots

In the evening I went to the theater and saw a movie. The films that were shown on shipboard were new releases, some of them would make film history in the future. I do not remember what was showing that night. I went to bed earlier than usual for we were docking during the night at La Harve.

Wednesday, September 9, 1953

At 2:30 am there was a great stir through the vessel.. I arose to see the cause of the

disturbance. We were approaching La Harve. I guess everyone was excited that we were making land rather than being sunk to the bottom of the sea during our crossing. I dressed and went up on deck with a flood of other passengers. Standing there in the darkness I began to see a glow of light on the horizon before us. It gradually grew until we could begin to make out objects on shore. About an hour and a fourth later the ship was resting alongside the dock. La Harve's port had been greatly damaged during the war, but it had been rebuilt and was now more modern than the one we had just left in New York.

We could not immediately leave the ship. We had to be processed through all of the things that were required of foreign passengers back then before going ashore. When we were finally released I felt like a fish thrown out on the bank. No ceaseless moving of the deck beneath me, just firm ground on another continent. The S.S. United States later continued from La Harve to South Hampton, England the terminus for their 31st crossing. At the foot of the gangplank stood the Rev. Cargoe and his wife. "Well, John we are here at last," he said. "Be careful not to let them pawn some antique off on you that's not real. I remember my uncle learned a lesson about that. He stopped at a barber shop up in Illinois to get a hair cut. As he sat waiting he saw an axe mounted on the wall of the shop with a plaque beneath it. He went over to see how the placard read. It stated, 'This is ABE LINCOLN'S axe. It has had three new handles and one new head.'

"How often what we see about us in life is only a shadow of the real thing."

Being ashore I walked a short distance and boarded the ship train for Paris. Home was a long way away.