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Who were the Seagoing Cowboys?

Jackie Turnquist

Every once in a while, you hear a story which makes you begin to realize that “everyone has a story” – and also that there are so many untold stories out there. Here is one such tale.

Robert (Bob) S. Brown, Sr., mostly from Carlisle, but lately of Sharon Springs, shared this story with me, first over the phone, and then via a homemade DVD he and his wife created. It is the story of how young men volunteered to help struggling countries after World War II.

After the war, many countries in Europe, Africa and Asia were struggling to survive the ravages of the war. With much of their infrastructure demolished, their population decimated, and their countryside ravaged, the citizens of these countries were struggling to survive. Different programs and organizations were formed to help these countries rebuild.

Very shortly after graduating from high school in 1946, Bob Brown attending a meeting where the Brethren Service Committee, in association with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Association (UNRRA), were looking for men to assist in providing relief to these countries.

Specifically, the mission was to restock the livestock. The herds of Europe, Africa and Asia had suffered greatly, and the plan was to ship cattle, horses, sheep, pigs, mules, chickens, etc. to individual countries via Victory Ships (cargo ships built during WWII to replace those sunk by German submarines). During the voyage, the animals would need to be tended to by people with appropriate experience.

Bob signed up, and on December 7, 1946, flew from Albany to Washington, DC, then traveled on to Newport News, VA, arriving at 6:30 am on Sunday, December 8. He presented himself to the Merchant Marines in Norfolk on Monday morning, and got his ID card. Enlisting as “cattlemen”, the boys quickly became known as Cowboys...and since they were working on the seas, they became known as “Seagoing Cowboys”. Bob was assigned to the SS Pierre Victory, and reported to Pier X for a physical and tetanus shot on Tuesday, and on Wednesday, December 11, he signed the ship’s articles and boarded, along with 776 mules and 33 other cowboys, destined for Salonica, Greece.

The mules were housed in cattle stalls located on the second tier of the ship. Below that the hay and grain was stored, and on the fourth tier was kept the water. The cowboys’ duties were to feed and water the mules. On Sundays, the cowboys would attend church service on the fantail (rear) of the ship, if the weather cooperated.

Bob kept a journal of his voyage, along with pictures, in a memory box. His journal details each day: on December 14 they passed through the Gulf Stream; on the 12th and 13th, two mules died (6 died in total by the end of the trip); first land was sighted (Portugal) on the 18th; they passed the Rock of Gibraltar late at night on the 19th. On December 21 the ship's horn blasted, warning another ship that it was coming too close. Bob has a picture of that other ship.

Once they started heading north through the Aegean Sea, they had to be cautious as there were many mines, and only a narrow shipping lane had been cleared. They anchored at 3:00 am on December 24 in Salonica Bay-the first ship to enter the heavily mined bay at night. Two other Victory ships were already anchored. In the harbor was a sunken ship still there from the war.

The Greeks unloaded the mules, and the Cowboys were given passes to leave the ship. Over the next several days, the Cowboys toured the city, encountering a great deal of destruction: the railway yard, a church (restoration was starting), and the Arch of Galerius (built around 300 AD) were a few of the places battered during the war.

Interestingly, Bob's sister, Grace Barber, visited Greece in 1963, and brought back a postcard of the church (fully restored) as well as the arch. The citizens of Salonica had access to a limited bus and trolley system, but many either walked or used a donkey and cart to move themselves or their belongings around.

On December 28, the SS Pierre Victory was untied from the pier, and the ship waited in the harbor. Just after they finished dinner, a stowaway was found. The man was handcuffed and put in a room – many of the Cowboys gave him things such as a coat and cigarettes. The ship started on its journey home. Near Athens, the stowaway was brought ashore.

The trip home was often very rough, and the ship bobbed about more due to its lighter load, so there were a lot of queasy stomachs. The Cowboys used their time to clean stalls and the ship. On New Year's Eve, Bob watched some of the men play poker, and some drank the "stuff" they had purchased in Greece...Bob had a Coca Cola.

January 11 saw them 140 miles from New York City, and the seas were calmer. They anchored in New York harbor on January 12. They had breakfast and were free to go ashore (without their luggage). Bob and some of the other men saw a show and got some food, including a milkshake. Bob called his Aunt Hazel to make arrangements to get back to Carlisle before catching a boat taxi back to the ship for the final night.

They packed and were checked by Customs Officers on January 13. By 5:15pm, Bob was at Grand Central Station to meet his aunt.

The Cowboys were paid \$100 for their trip and received a Thank You note from the Brethren:

The Brethren Service Committee desires to express a word of appreciation to you for your assistance and cooperation in the Livestock project and trust that you may have received some new experiences and satisfaction while giving of your time and effort, thus being able to share with others the spirit of Brethren Service...

Of the people on the ship, 34 were members of the "Cowboy" crew. In charge of the Cowboys were a veterinarian from Kansas, a foreman from Virginia, a foreman from Connecticut and a supervisor from Indiana. There was also the ship's crew and the captain (John E. Munroe). Interestingly, the captain's wife also made

the journey. She signed on as a librarian, and was paid one cent per month. Captains were allowed to bring their wives on one trip per year.

The Cowboys on the SS Pierre Victory came from across North America: Canada, South Dakota, Louisiana, Connecticut, Indiana, Virginia, Ohio, New York, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Illinois, Tennessee, Kansas, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Maine.

The program to bring livestock to the countries in Europe, Africa and China continued for 3 years, and over 7,000 men signed up to be Cowboys. Some made the trip several times. Over 4,000 cows alone were brought to Europe. A descendent of this program is still in place today; it is called Heifer International.

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