

Seagoing Cowboys:

Delivering animals to post-WW II Europe

by Peggy Reiff Miller

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Luke Bomberger still recalls how his heart raced that night 60 years ago, when his foot slipped off the rain-slicked step of the ship's ladder. He had just made his hourly night-watchman's report to the bridge, and as he shot feet-first towards the chained opening on the side of the *SS Mexican*, he knew that if he slid out into the black Atlantic waters, he wouldn't be missed for another hour.

Luckily, a two-inch strip of metal on the edge of the ship caught his foot and broke his slide, and as he pulled himself up to safety, he was grateful that he'd live to spend another day as a seagoing cowboy.

In the 1940s, Bomberger, of Lititz, Lancaster County, was one of hundreds of men from Pennsylvania who responded to ads seeking cattle attendants who were willing to go to sea. World War II had just ended, and many of the volunteers, enticed by stories they had heard from returning soldiers, had seized this opportunity to see the world while delivering cows to people whose food source had been devastated by the war.

Setting Sail with Cows

The idea to send cows, rather than powdered milk, was conceived by Brethren relief worker Dan West in 1938 (during the Spanish Civil War). The idea was put into action in 1943 by the Brethren Service Committee of the Church of the Brethren. Through the "Heifer Project," farmers throughout the country, including many from Pennsylvania, began raising "heifers for relief." With the cows in place, but no ships to deliver them, the Brethren Service Committee turned to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, an agency formed by 44 nations in 1943 which planned to ship some 200,000 livestock to countries whose herds were decimated by the war.

UNRRA had the ships and money to purchase animals, but it needed workers to herd the heifers, horses and mules across the ocean. In placing ads for wranglers in publications across the country, the Brethren Service Committee sought cattle attendants of high moral principles who, it was hoped, would be ambassadors for the church.

Among the thousands of men answering the call for seagoing cowboys, as they were dubbed, were five students from Elizabethtown College in Lancaster County who set sail from Baltimore on the *SS Virginian* June 26, 1945. Richard Wenger of Lititz was one of them.

"A great deal of preparation was required," he says. "We had to secure a permit from our local draft board to leave the United States, to say nothing of the typhus, typhoid and tetanus toxoid shots we needed."

Bomberger, who was assigned to cattle boat trips by his draft board, went to sea nine times before UNRRA disbanded in 1947. "The trips were an unbelievable opportunity for a small town boy," he says.

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As members of the Merchant Marines, the cattle attendants were paid one cent per month, which made them legal members of the ship's crew. They also received \$150 per voyage from UNRRA. Although the mission of each voyage was similar, every trip was different, depending on the type of ship, the time of year, the weather, the ports of departure and destination, the cargo, and the makeup of the cowboys and the ship's crew.

Often, life among the seasoned salty seamen came as quite a shock to the unworldly cowboys. "These men could be pretty hard characters," Bomberger recalls.

The cowboys also had to endure the hard and sometimes dangerous work of feeding and watering the livestock and shoveling manure in the stuffy, smelly ships' hold. "The horses could be mean," says Bomberger, who carries a mark on his back from the bite of an excited mare as a souvenir from his seagoing cowboy days.

Storms at sea were frightening. Equally frightening were the mines that menaced European waterways after the war. Bomberger recalls one day when the officers on the bridge of the *SS Mount Whitney* took off running. "They always walked," he says, so he knew something was wrong. When the ship lunged into a sharp turn, he ran to the rail and saw a mine in the water. "It was so close I could have spit on it," he says.

Seeing the World

Once the cowboys arrived at foreign ports in Poland, Greece, Italy, France, Belgium and China, these Pennsylvania natives had their eyes opened both to other cultures and to the realities of war. Walt Gingrich of Palmyra, Lebanon County, was part of a special crew of Brethren college and seminary students delivering horses for Czechoslovakia. When his ship docked in Bremen, Germany, Gingrich was shocked to see the destruction of the city.

"They'd show war movies in our high school assemblies about the bombing of Britain and all, Gingrich says. "So you knew there was destruction, but it doesn't register until you are there and see what it actually looks like. We really, *really* blew Germany apart."

The cowboys on his ship had agreed to save fruit, candy and other non-perishables to share with German Christians when they landed. But, once on shore, they found few churches still standing. "If not totally destroyed, they were damaged beyond use," says Gingrich's shipmate Guy Buch, then of Pine Grove, Schuylkill County.

The cowboys succeeded in finding a German pastor, and when they visited his church's nursery school, they shared oranges they had saved with the children. "Many didn't recognize the fruit," Buch says. "Food was very scarce."

Jack Baker of New Enterprise, Bedford County, recalls the desperate hunger of the Polish people he met. "They came on deck, took the buckets the cattle had been drinking out of, and without rinsing them out, milked the cows into them," he says. "Then they drank the milk right out of the bucket."

Al Guyer of Quincy, Franklin County, who was on the same November 1945 trip, says he'll never forget what happened when the crew threw a dead horse overboard. "There were some small boats around our ship," he says. "People on the boats just grabbed hold of that dead horse and drug it in – for the meat."

But to the cowboys who endured long days aboard the ship crossing the ocean, the trips to foreign ports provided many pleasant memories, too.

The *SS Cyrus W. Field* carried a load of heifers and six high school boys from Lititz to Naples in June 1946. Thanks to their adventurous spirits, the boys learned more during their nine days in port than they would have in any history or geography class. After a tour of Pompeii,

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they packed into a Red Cross ambulance and headed for Rome, where they visited the Coliseum, the Roman Forum, the Vatican Museum, St. Peter's Cathedral and Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel before topping off their trip with excursions to the demolished Monte Cassino monastery, the Isle of Capri and its grottoes, and Mt. Vesuvius, still warm from its 1944 eruption.

On the other side of the world, Eugene Souder and three other cowboys took a train ride through China that ended with a trip to the Great Wall. After riding a train 100 miles inland and back, the cowboys decided to stay on the train so they could see the Wall, which was only another 10 miles from their port. When they arrived, they took a rickshaw from the train to the site.

"The Wall was massive," says Souder, "an engineering feat of major proportions."

As evening approached, they knew they better head back to the ship, and that's when they discovered that no train was returning to their port. They decided to walk. "We were told not to walk on the railroad tracks," says Souder, "or you might be mistaken as Communists by the Nationalists guarding the tracks."

They walked in the dark, parallel to the tracks to keep their bearings, through terrain so muddy it almost sucked their shoes off. When they arrived back at the port after curfew, they found another ship in place of theirs. After some tense moments, they were directed to the tug boat *Fu Ping* where they slept for the night. Early the next morning, the tug met their ship and the men climbed on board, ready to head home.

And after months spent away from family and friends, home is where these cowboys gratefully returned— with a great many stories to share.

Transporting cattle overseas to a foreign country may have been difficult and at times dangerous work for young men fresh off the farm or on break from college, but for the hundreds who left their homes in Pennsylvania to become seagoing cowboys, it was an adventure of a lifetime.
