

SEAGOING COWBOY

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1. Learning of the Program

In the spring of 1946 I was serving in Civilian Public Service Unit #91, an institution called Mansfield State Training School at Mansfield Depot, Connecticut. Although it was called a "school," only perhaps a third of the patients attended school; the rest were cared for as severely retarded persons. I came there in May of 1943.

I don't know specifically how I learned of the seagoing cowboy program, except that I'm sure that the word spread. I applied for it and was assigned to what they called Detached Service; that is, I was still technically in CPS but was temporarily "loaned" to the Coast Guard for the specific purpose of serving as a seagoing cowboy.

2. Reaching the Place of Departure

I was ordered to report to Newport News, Virginia, by one of the last days of March, 1946. Before that I went home by train from Mansfield. My home was in Lebanon, Pennsylvania. The next day my wife and I met another couple, Ellis and Thelma Wilson, at Baltimore. Ellis was going on the same ship as I was.

We took an overnight passenger boat from Baltimore to Newport News, a very uncomfortable trip. We spent the morning with our wives looking over the F J Luckenbach, our ship. Then in the afternoon our wives returned to Baltimore, this time by bus, I think, where one of the women had left her car. Ellis and I met the others in our group and immediately lived on board ship. After a day or two, while the animals were loaded and final preparations made, we took sail on one of the last days of March.

3. The Ship

The F J Luckenbach was a cargo ship that had been used during the war for transporting materials. To convert it for use as a cattle ship, stalls had been built on its three levels. We were carrying horses, not cattle ---612 of them. I was assigned to a section on the second level, and my duties were relatively few and simple --- bedding down the horses with straw, feeding the horses food at the one end and cleaning out manure at the other end. Feeding twice a day; cleaning out once a day.

Our supervisor, a middle-aged Brethren farmer from the mid-West named Rohrer, begged the captain to store up the manure to unload at Poland, which would be valuable to the soil-poor Polish farmers for fertilizer, but the captain would hear none of it. We washed it overboard daily with a fire hose at his orders.

Aside from Mr. Rohrer, our volunteer supervisor, we also had a youngish veterinarian to care for the horses as needed. Horses fared worse on the sea than cows did, and we lost eight or ten of them. Except for the supervisor and veterinarian, all the others of the cowboy group, possibly 18 or 20, were CPS men.

At first we had bunks below in the rear of the ship, but the stern rose and fell so violently that we found some hammocks mid-ship. Those served much better. We did not have quarters, like the crew, so we kept the few belongings we had in our bags in a convenient corner.

I think I was sea-sick all the way across, but not what we usually think of as sea-sickness. There was very little, if any, vomiting, but my general wellbeing felt "sick and woozy." Energy seemed lacking. Working with the horses, cleaning out manure, kept me most of the time in an atmosphere of humidity and odor. Then, too, the ship was in a constant swaying motion. The horses were lined up in their stalls cross-ship, so that as soon as the ship was out of the harbor, the horses began bracing themselves, first with their back legs, then with their front legs, back and forth, and like a child on a swing this movement kept the ship swaying side to side, even in calm weather, all the way across the Atlantic for twelve days!

We had our job with the horses and the crew had their job with the ship, so our paths didn't cross very much nor did we have much in common. Our cook, a large colored man, was friendly and we kidded around with him quite a bit.

I don't recall any storms, but there was some heavy weather coming back. I think we followed the Gulf Stream going across, and that was relatively smooth.

Speaking of the relative steadiness of the ship: The weight of six hundred horses was well over a hundred tons, so that made the ship ride helpfully low in the water. On the return, though, we stopped at Copenhagen to take on ballast (sand, I think) so as to keep it from riding high in the water. Without the horses, too, on the return trip we didn't have the endless side-to-side roll previously mentioned.

4. Our Destination

After about eleven days we reached the eastern side of the Atlantic south of England and proceeded northward through the English Channel. While in the Channel, we got our first reminder that the war wasn't long over. Someone called our attention to a mine --- a metal sphere about five feet in diameter--- floating wide of the ship about two hundred yards. There was no particular alarm on the ship, so I assume this was not an unexpected occurrence. We sailed on by and left it behind. I don't know what happened to it, but I assume there was a constant patrol for such objects, and it was probably shot and exploded by a British coast patrol.

We proceeded from the English Channel eastward into the North Sea to northern Germany, passed through the Kiel Canal into the Baltic Sea, and proceeded to a cove-shaped part of northern Poland to Nowyport, a port town near Gdynia. There, after tying up and getting the horses ready for unloading, we went ashore and felt ground on our feet for the first time in almost two weeks. My memory is hazy on the loading and unloading of the horses. I remember that at Newport News they were loaded in stall-size boxes by crane, but I think at Nowyport they were herded single file down a ramp.

What did we find at our destination? Well, we found a small port town of obviously old and dilapidated houses that had mostly escaped destruction from the war. Since we arrived in the early afternoon, groups of us strolled into town. There were few people on the streets; there were occasional Soviet soldiers, a second reminder that the war was not long past.

To our surprise we found at the door of one of the houses a middle-aged man who spoke to us in English and invited us into his house. It developed that he had grown up in the U S --- in the mid-West, I think --- and had somehow come to live in Poland as a young man. He had a Polish wife and two or three children. They were obviously incredibly poor and rather reluctantly admitted that they'd be glad for anything we didn't

need that we could give them. The man had a rather dejected manner and spoke freely but not joyfully.

Late in the afternoon of either the first or second day of our stay in Nowyport, we decided to take some of our cast-off clothing to the family we had met. We were leisurely strolling with the clothing in our arms when we were suddenly accosted by three Soviet soldiers (armed, of course). We couldn't understand each other but it became apparent that we were to follow them.

They took us a short distance to an old wooden barn, completely empty except upstairs --- I'd call it the hayloft --- where there was a desk and several chairs and an unshaded light bulb suspended over the desk. At the desk sat another soldier who was obviously in command. There were also several other soldiers standing or sitting there.

The officer spoke toward us in Russian. We said we're Americans. We couldn't understand each other, except he probably understood "American."

For a minute or two there was an awkward stalemate. Then it occurred to me to ask whether anyone speaks German. One soldier said he did a little. Well, "a little" was the same for me.

So there began a cumbersome conversation. "Where were we going and why?" "To visit the family we had met and give them our cast-off clothes." "This is not permissible for you to sell anything to anyone here." "Oh, no, these are not for sale. *Sie sint geschenke fur unserer Freunde*. These are gifts for our friends." "No, that's not permitted. *Nehmen sie zurick und gieben sie zum Rote Kreuz*. Take them back and give them to the Red Cross." That turned out to be the gist of our limited conversation, but we went around several times, I insisting that they are gifts and the officer insisting that we can't do that and we should take them back home to the Red Cross. Eventually the same soldiers who had brought us there took us back to the ship. They may have given someone at the ship instructions to supervise their crew; I don't know.

Thinking of it afterwards I realized when we were first accosted it was dusk, and by the time we were taken back to the ship it was dark, so we probably were taking a greater risk than it seemed to me. Surely the area was under martial law and a curfew must have been in effect. Years afterward, one of the fellows in our group insisted that "you saved our lives." I don't think it would have come to that, but I'm content to let him think so!!

(As a postscript I must add that the morning after we had been taken to the barn and questioned, we donned the extra clothing, several layers of it, strolled down to the home of the impoverished family, disrobed everything surplus, and left it there!)

The ship stayed in dock for two days and two nights, and I remember getting around the neighborhood quite a bit. Several of us went by bus to Gdynia. The "bus," as was to be expected, was a dilapidated survivor of many years. I suppose it had seats, but I remember only being packed tightly with the occupants (standing, of course). Our fares were collected by an early-middle-aged woman who amazingly scrambled between, under, and over the passengers. I don't recall how we got some Polish money, but I remember the money unit was the zloty. That's one Polish word I learned; the other was something that sounded like *brosha*, and it could be used for either "please" or "thank you," much like the German *bitte*.

I have no mental picture of Gdynia, but I know a couple things we must have done there. For one thing, we visited a store that sold wooden items. I bought, and still have, a wooden plaque with a scene made from pieces of varicolored woods, likely cut by a

jigsaw --- if they had a jigsaw. We also visited a restaurant, but I don't recall what we ate. I do recall, though, that we were offered wine, which we refused, and asked for water, which we didn't get. Maybe it was because I was using struggling German again; or perhaps they never dreamed of using water for drinking!

When I say "restaurant" or "store," they, like the bus, were the most deprived examples of those words. The restaurant, I recall, was a bare room with several tables and chairs. That was all. Another day some Polish officials took us by truck through parts of the city of Danzig. I have a recollection of seeing destroyed army trucks and tanks here and there, but mostly there were block after block of skeletons of bombed-out buildings or piles of rubble that had once been buildings. Nothing in the newspapers back home could have brought to us the realities of war like this visit to Danzig. What must have been the terror in the hearts of the people who once called this home!

5. Return Trip

We left Nowyport the third or fourth morning and almost immediately felt we were on a pleasure cruise! No horses! No work nor work schedule! Time to read or, if the weather was warm enough, to sit on deck and chat.

Instead of aiming for the Kiel Canal, which we had come through on the trip east, we threaded our way to Denmark, where we docked at Copenhagen, its capital. There the ship took on ballast to weigh down the ship for the passage across the Atlantic. We must have arrived on a Saturday, because the next day was Palm Sunday. We left Copenhagen on Monday for home.

My memories of Copenhagen are fairly clear but disconnected. Certainly we felt the shock of moving in less than one day from the war-scarred, bleak Nowyport to the charming, bustling Copenhagen. Soon after we docked, I must have taken a walk by myself and as I passed a unit of an apartment building, I heard through the open window the sound of a Beethoven Sonata. I was impressed by music as a universal language; passing people speaking Danish, which I didn't understand, made me feel quite foreign, but hearing Beethoven's music, which I did understand, made me feel very much at home. The apartment building, by the way, had a cornerstone with a date of something like 1612 or 1620, which equally impressed me with the vast difference in historical time between North America, where 1620 marks the beginning of settlement, to Europe, where 1620 is just yesterday. This impression, by the way, struck me even more powerfully when Elizabeth and I flew to Europe forty years later.

I recall walking around Copenhagen with Ellis Wilson, a friend from my Mansfield Unit who was also on the "cattle" trip. Once we walked by the royal palace and also by the famous Little Mermaid statue in the harbor. Somewhere I must have a snapshot of myself sitting in the Little Mermaid's lap. On Sunday morning Ellis and I attended an imposing church for its Palm Sunday service. I was fascinated by the fact that I didn't understand a thing --- except one: the Lord's Prayer. It was the cadence, not the words, by which I recognized it. Ellis and I also attended a movie, but we left midway through it because we didn't understand any of it. Our leaving seemed to upset an usher; apparently leaving a movie mid-picture was unheard of for the Danes. These uncouth Americans!

Leaving Copenhagen on Monday, we passed through the Kattegat and Skagerrak (which had been only strange-sounding words to me before), veered north of Scotland, and out into the Atlantic. I think we had some rough weather on the return trip, but

mostly the trip was relaxing. We could read or chat below-deck or in relatively warm weather we could sit on deck --- amid-ship, not at the heaving stern! My stomach felt quite normal, what with open air top-deck instead of manure below-deck and relatively little swaying of the boat.

We docked on May 1 (as I recall, at Baltimore this time). While I was abroad, my number had come up for discharge, so I could return to Elizabeth and my family and attempt to resume life (the same and yet not the same) I had known. In addition to a discharge from Selective Service --- signed by Gen. Hershey and a colonel whose name I don't remember --- I also received a document of discharge from the Coast Guard. My rank was listed as "cattleman!" That must be unique. I wonder how many cattlemen are ranked in the Coast Guard today!

This was written in response to a request from an Indiana woman who has had a long interest in the serjeant cowboy project that began at the close of WW II.

So because it was written for her, it presupposes a general knowledge of the proj. on the part of the reader.

Any questions?

Just ask