

THE ACCOUNT OF PAUL WALTHER

## A SEAGOING COWBOY

It was an Iowa fall day in 1945 when a news article in the Nashua Reporter caught my eye. A local auctioneer had contracted with the UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) to buy bred dairy heifers to be sent to WWII, war-torn Greece. He noted that tenders or caretakers were needed to go with the cattle on their sea journey.

At that time I was an adventurous, Nashua High School Junior student wanting further information. He suggested that I contact the Brethren Service Committee in MD. So I sent them a letter. They replied with a detailed questionnaire asking about my experiences with dairy cattle; Am I an experienced milker? Have I attended the birth of calves? Etc. I carefully filled out the questionnaire and returned it, not considering the ramifications of a positive response.

There was no immediate response. However, in January 1946, a letter was received asking if I were still interested. I checked the box indicating that I was. Suddenly in mid April, with six weeks of High School remaining, a telegram arrived; "REPORT TO THE LIBERTY SHIP, S.S. CHARLES W. WOOSTER, HOUSTEN, TEXAS." Panic time!

This naive teen-age farm boy had not actually discussed this adventure with his parents. Could or would they approve? What about High School? What would the superintendent say? Would he

approve? My parents suggested that we discuss this with him. Did I hear them correctly?

So off we went to discuss this adventure with the High School superintendent. Fortunately, I was near the top of my class academically and so was normally exempted from the final exams. I could hardly believe it when the superintendent casually said, "Yes with an opportunity like that, Paul, you might learn as much on this trip than if you stayed in school. Take your school books with you, study well, and take the final exams when you return." The next day my folks put me on a train for Houston, TX.

To this day, as a father of four boys, I would have difficulty sending them off on a trip like this at the age I was at that time.

Arriving in Houston, I discovered that because I was under age, I couldn't work on a ship without written parental permission. After receiving a desperate telephone call, my folks went to their lawyer to get a notarized copy of consent. Hens forth I became a legitimate member of the U.S. Merchant Mariners, with an ID issued by the Coast Guard.

Our ship was loaded with sulfur fertilizer, cotton and 125 wild bronco mares, all bred to donkeys, all now pregnant with mule colts. There were no dairy cows in sight. We were bound for Piraeus, Greece. The date was April 21, 1946.

My fellow cowboys were Mennonite farm boys from Kansas and Iowa. They were waiting to be discharged from their duties as military conscient objectors. They previously were working on building dams or working in hospitals, etc. I do not recall how many

of us cowboys were there. There were probably a dozen or so. The veterinarian and I were the only ones who were not COs.

The horses were placed in closed stalls, two to a stall, in cargo holds of the ship. Each stall had two steel buckets, one for water and one for oats. During the entire voyage, some of the horses did not discover the oats.

In the center of the hold there was a pile of baled prairie hay for the horses. The hay would be tossed into the front of the stall, the horses would eat what they could and then work the remains to the back where it would mix with the manure. We would gather the manure by banging a shovel on the back of the stall and the horses would kick the manure out of the stall. It would be gathered up into garbage cans which would be hoisted up about 20 feet onto the deck and dumped overboard.

The wild mares did not ever become accustomed to us handlers during the trip. They were always ready to kick, bite or rear when disturbed. We lost 4 mares but four mule colts were born on the trip.

The first sight of land was Gibraltar on one side and Algiers on the other side. After several days we arrived at the port of Patras on the western side of Greece. This was not to be our final destination. We stopped to unload the bales of cotton and sulfur fertilizer.

All went well and we were set to sale at six o'clock in the morning. Because the ship's crew had celebrated so vigorously the night before, departure was delayed until nine a.m. There being no tug-

boat anywhere, the ship had to navigate this activity alone. The ship had to back slowly from the dock and move forward out between two piers. The misty-minded engine workers were able to shift into slow and reverse. But when the order came down "full speed ahead", they were able to shift gears to full speed but failed to shift to ahead. The ship was suddenly backing full speed up onto a very stationary water breaker. The huge drive shaft and propeller (screw) were bent onto the side of the ship. This surely was the end of our voyage.

With huge ropes and use of the multiple deck cargo winches of the ship, we were pulled back to the pier that we had recently left. It was obvious that the horses had to be unloaded.

No previous plans were ready to receive these horses. A simple rope corral was constructed on shore. The horses would be unloaded one by one over the side in a crate with a trap door at each end. The plan was to guide the horses, one by one, into an open crate. A stall with two horses would be opened at a time. One horse would be maneuvered into the open crate. Seeing an opening the horse would enter the crate, the front door would slam shut followed by the rear door. The ship's cargo crane would deposit the horse into the corral.

However, the Greek stevedores, having great skills for handling cargo unlike wild horses, would yell and bang to try to direct a horse into a crate. Of course this would excite a horse to the point that it would practically climb the walls. The situation soon demonstrated that the exercise was dangerous to both men and horses. Ben Bushong, our leader, with sign language was able to put

the cowboys in charge. We devised a funnel to direct the horses into the crates. Slow and easy was the rule. Everything slowed down and the task was calmly accomplished. With the stevedores out of the way, one by one the horses were corralled.

Soon we crated the last mare and lifted her over the side into the corral. The crate was opened, the mare leaped out, burst through the crowded corral and over the flimsy fence, followed by the entire herd. What a sight, more than one hundred wild animals racing down the street, over the hill, followed by a group of men on foot, shouting loudly.

It occurred to me that very few Greek farmers ever had experienced working with wild horses. Because this was an unexpected dispersal of the horses, they also didn't have the proper corrals or equipment to work with them. Were any of the horses ever caught or tamed? We probably will never know.

Soon we were hustled into the back of a 4X4 truck to go east over the mountains, past the historical town of Corinth, across the Corinthian Canal and through Piraeus, the port of Athens. We traveled about twenty miles north of Athens to a little town by the Greek name of Amarousia where we were housed at a small hotel. I remember that the food was good, but with a surplus of olive oil. We were to stay there at least a week till we could find a ship to take us back to the U.S.A.

My first thought was WOW! Now I can visit the world famous site of Athens. A Kansas CO and I plotted out our route. A ten cent bus ride would take us to Athens within a half an hour. "Let's go." We visited the Acropolis, and to where St. Paul found a monument

to an unknown god and other sites. All museums were still closed because of the war. We had some food and went back to where we got off the bus. To our dismay, the incoming buses always went to the bus barn and the outgoing busses left from another place.

While standing on the corner trying to decide what to do now, we were approached by a man who didn't speak English. Fortunately he was once a prisoner-of-war by the occupying German Army and could speak some halting German. Also, my companion could speak a little German. Then with a smattering of German that I recalled from my childhood, we struck up a conversation.

We described our dilemma the best we could. First we needed to find the out-going bus station. This was easy but the second was more difficult. We could not decipher the name of the town to where we going. It was Greek to us! He told us that there will be two busses that will have stops about a half hour from here. Take one bus but if you don't arrive at the right destination, turn back and then take the second bus. He wrote down the names of the busses in Greek to help us. We made it back on our first try. Lucky us.

After about a week at the hotel, we were told that an American cargo ship was to leave for the U.S. and we could go on it. We went aboard and scrubbed and disinfected our quarters. We also sprayed for bedbugs. Just as we finished, we were told by an American Embassy person that the ship didn't have the enough life jackets for all of us. We were driven back to our hotel.

Another week passed and it was announced that an empty American Fruit Company Liberty ship was going back to the U.S. and we

could gain passage. The word, empty, meant that the ship was more affected by high seas. Some times as the ship rolled forward the propeller would come out of the water. I think that everyone on the ship got seasick. Otherwise we had a good 19-day trip back to Norfolk, VA, U.S.A. I was kept busy studying my school books.

We arrived to Norfolk on a Sunday morning. I had a fistful of Travel Checks and only a pocket of small change. There was a problem of cashing Traveler Checks on Sunday. I was told that the bus depot might do the job, and there I bought a ticket to Iowa. Within the hour I returned to depot and cashed the ticket, receiving some real money.

I wrote a letter to my folks telling them that I was on my way home. Then I proceeded to hitch hike the thousand plus miles home. The travel was unusually fast till I reached Cedar Rapids, Iowa. There I boarded the "Toonervill Trolley" heading to Waterloo, Iowa. I believe this antique, narrow rail trolley was on one of its last trips. I tried to sleep but it was so rough a ride that sleeping was out of the question. From Waterloo I again hitch hiked to within a mile from Home.

The whole adventure was a trip of a lifetime. For the first time I got a glimpse of the horrors and devastation of war. My only regret was that I didn't have a camera to record the events on the way.

Paul Walther

12/2015

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Early January, 2016, we found among my mother's collection of papers, some of the notes I had prepared of talks about my journey. One card stated that we had 335 horses on board. Today I can't believe that the figure to be accurate. The small corral could never contain 335 horses. Also the 4X4 truck that took us from Patras to north of Athens could not have been large enough to haul more than the dozen seagoing cowboys.

Now after 68 years, I recently became aware of-

- That there is a website "seagoing cowboys"
- That someone is collecting stories and information about the seagoing cowboys.
- That Heifer Project was a major part of the enterprise.

The Greek seagoing cowboy adventure started my lifetime of agricultural and humanitarian work in the U.S. and 8 other countries. This includes-

- The Selma, Alabama march, 1964
- A Columbia, South America accompany project, accompanying religious and social worker's lives were threatened by paramilitary groups, 2009
- The New Orleans hurricane disaster assistance, 2005
- Nine years in the Philippines as a rice production specialist and as an agricultural missionary with the United Church of Christ. I helped distributed Heifer Project livestock such as cattle, goats, rabbits and ducks.