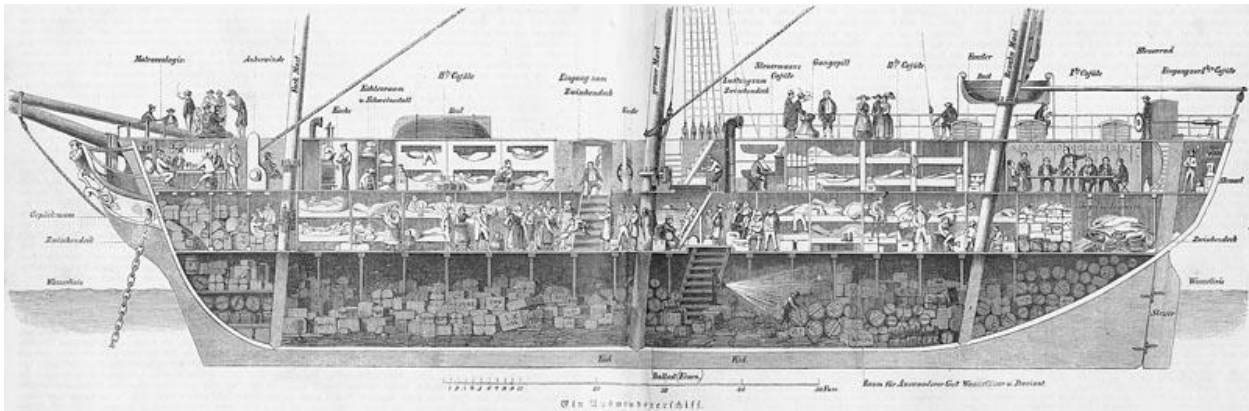


## Life on a Sailing Ship in the Early 1800's



From Die Gartenlaube Leipzig Fruft Neil Courtesy of the Mariners' Museum  
<http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/assets/graphic/full/3008.jpg>

*“The two months journey of Philippine and her companions would surely test any of today’s travelers. We complain about how uncomfortable a one day trip might be by plane, train or bus. (Are we there yet?) They didn’t have any restaurants to stop at for a hot meal of fresh food, little or no privacy. Could the students imagine what it must have been like below the decks of those ships?”*

*Emory Webre, Retired Teacher*

<b>Philippine’s Daily Life on the <i>Rebecca</i></b>	<b>The Old-Type Steerage Experience</b>
<p>“We went down to the wharf, where we were to take a small boat carrying the passengers to the ocean vessel.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Callan, p. 223-224</p> <p>“I meant to tell you about the first night on the vessel. When the time came to retire, I did not know just how to manage in the narrow berths. Of course there was a good deal of laughter among us, but I finally managed with patience and some pain. My berth was the top one. When at last I got into it I found I had very little covering, but I could not get out and down again. When I tried to turn over I bumped first against one thing, then against another. I got settled, but there was no sleep, and there was not room even to raise my head.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Callan, p. 224</p> <p>“For a whole week she tossed in rough weather on the Bay of Biscay, and her passengers experienced the desperate helplessness of seasickness.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Callan, p. 224</p> <p>“Then came the long stretch of unbroken ocean,</p>	<p>The old-type steerage is the one whose horrors have been so often described. It is unfortunately still found in a majority of the vessels bringing immigrants to the United States. It is still the common steerage in which hundreds of thousands of immigrants form their first conceptions of our country and are prepared to receive their first impressions of it. The universal human needs of space, air, food, sleep, and privacy are recognized to the degree now made compulsory by law. Beyond that, the persons carried are looked upon as so much freight, with mere transportation as their only due. The sleeping quarters are large compartments, accommodating as many as 300 or more persons each. For assignment to these, passengers are divided into three classes, namely, women without male escorts, men traveling alone, and families. Each class is housed in a separate compartment and the compartments are often in different parts of the vessel. It is generally possible to shut off all communication between them,</p>

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when there were pleasant days on deck and they could think more coherently, pray more peacefully, listen more attentively to Father Martial's little spiritual talks and to the English lessons they all found so difficult."

Callan, p. 224

"There was Holy Mass at four or four-thirty in the morning whenever Father Martial was well enough, and Communion for the nuns followed by a long thanksgiving, before the ship's bell sounded for breakfast. Often in the late afternoon the nuns stood together in the bow of the boat, their full skirts rippling out in the breeze, their thin veils waving in the fading twilight. Then the captain called for "the hymn," and the sweet strains of the Ave Maris Stella floated over the waters. As her nuns sang, Mother Duchesne's intent gaze studied the sky, the waters, and the western horizon. The long weeks of the voyage, the stench, the nausea, the still tender memories of separation from loved ones, laughter, news about people and things that were part of her life—all seemed to drop away as she stood there, looking westward toward the sunset and her promised land.

When the evenings lengthened and were fair, they remained on deck "as late as nine o'clock," Father Martial sitting quietly near them as they talked of France and the friends they had left so willingly, yet so reluctantly, or of the events that had broken the monotony of the day: a ship sighted and signaled to—"bound for Granada," they learned through the porte-voix; a porpoise caught—"so big it took several men to haul it in, and when served at table it tasted like beef, but the fat was like pork"; latitude reckonings and islands coming in sight, and "the trail of light behind the vessel when it made good speed." That phosphorescence was a phenomenon they gazed at with astonishment and delight.

While the nuns suffered a good deal from their crowded and stuffy sleeping quarters, they had no complaints to make about the meals served on the *Rebecca*. Mother Duchesne said only that the food was nourishing and abundant, though she found

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though this is not always done.

The berths are in two tiers, with an interval of 2 feet and 6 inches of space above each. They consist of an iron framework containing a mattress, a pillow, or more often a life-preserver as a substitute, and a blanket. The mattress and the pillow, if there is one, are filled with straw or seaweed. On some lines this is renewed every trip. Either colored gingham or coarse white canvas slips cover the mattress and pillow. A piece of iron piping placed at a height where it will separate the mattresses is the "partition" between berths. The blankets differ in weight, size, and material on the different lines. On one line of steamers, where the blanket becomes the property of the passenger on leaving, it is far from adequate in size and weight, even in the summer. Generally the passenger must retire almost fully dressed to keep warm. Through the entire voyage, from seven to seventeen days, the berths receive no attention from the stewards. The berth, 6 feet long and 2 feet wide and with 2 and a half feet of space above it, is all the space to which the steerage passenger can assert a definite right. To this 30 cubic feet of space he must, in a large measure, confine himself. No space is designated for hand baggage. As practically every traveler has some bag or bundle, this must be kept in the berth. It may not even remain on the floor beneath. There are no hooks on which to hang clothing. Everyone, almost, has some better clothes saved for disembarkation, and some wraps for warmth that are not worn all the time, and these must either be hung about the framework of the berth or stuck away somewhere in it. At least two large transportation lines furnish the steerage passengers eating utensils and require each one to retain these throughout the voyage. As no repository for them is provided, a corner of each berth must serve that purpose. Towels and other toilet necessities, which each passenger must furnish for himself, claim more space in the already crowded berths. The floors of these large compartments are generally of wood, but floors consisting of large sheets of iron

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cabbage soup disgusting when she was seasick. Mother Audé, however, praised the menu, remarking that: Dinner was usually an affair of six or seven courses-soup, fresh roasted chicken, ham, vegetables, fish or eggs, dessert, dried fruits, liqueur. At breakfast there was omelet, herring, anchovy, ham, sausage, fruit, tea or café-au-lait three times a week, preserves. Once a week a sheep or a pig was slaughtered, so there was very little dried meat served. Fresh fish was caught frequently, and there was plenty of excellent wine.

The captain [she continues] was very nice to us; but after four passengers left the vessel, he was much nicer. The sailors of the crew were as meek as lambs, working quietly and without any objectionable language. The second-in-command was a very intelligent man, silent and reserved, whom the sailors obeyed without a word of objection to orders. As for the passengers, they were all bound for New Orleans to rejoin their families. They were polite and friendly on the whole. One lady [Sister Lamarre's partner at Pauillac] stayed close to us during the whole voyage.

Callan, p. 225-227

"During the bad weather she turned night into day and day into night....

A storm at sea is a truly terrifying spectacle. The noise from the breaking waves and roaring wind would drown any thunder or cannonade. It is absolutely deafening, and added to that is the rolling of the vessel itself. The sailors shout to encourage one another in their work; it is a lugubrious sound, but their silence is more dismal and still worse is the sight of the captain pacing the deck in an anxious mood. The ship tossing violently in an angry sea gives the impression of the confusion of the last day. The sky seems to roll up rapidly behind the mountains of water, dragging the stars with it. The sea, nearly black in the storm, constantly gapes wide, disclosing bottomless depths; the waves sweep over the deck as the ship rolls and pitches. Twice the waves have forced open our little portholes and drenched our beds at night. The masts bend, the sails

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were also found. Sweeping is the only form of cleaning done. Sometimes the process is repeated several times a day. This is particularly true when the litter is the leavings of food sold to the passengers by the steward for his own profit. No sick cans are furnished, and not even large receptacles for waste. The vomitings of the seasick are often permitted to remain a long time before being removed. The floors, when iron, are continually damp, and when of wood they reek with foul odor because they are not washed.

The open deck available to the steerage is very limited, and regular separable dining rooms are not included in the construction. The sleeping compartments must therefore be the constant abode of a majority of passengers. During days of continued storm, when the unprotected open deck cannot be used at all, the berths and the passageways between them are the only space where the steerage passenger can pass away the time.

When to this very limited space and much filth and stench is added inadequate means of ventilation, the result is almost unendurable. Its harmful effects on health and morals scarcely need be indicated. Two 12-inch ventilator shafts are required for every 50 persons in every room; but the conditions here are abnormal and these provisions do not suffice. The air was found to be invariably bad, even in the higher enclosed decks where hatchways afford further means of ventilation. In many instances persons, after recovering from seasickness, continue to lie in their berths in a sort of stupor, due to breathing air whose oxygen has been mostly replaced by foul gases. Those passengers who make a practice of staying much on the open deck feel the contrast between the air out of doors and that in the compartments, and consequently find it impossible to remain below long at a time. In two steamers the open deck was always filled long before daylight by those who could no longer endure the foul air between decks.

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are furled or torn; the helm is abandoned in order not to strain the vessel. All this is no laughing matter unless one sees God in the storm.

[B] The odor that pervades the ship is another trial. The foul air, the tar, the pipes, the hold above all cause sickness that is relieved only by going on deck to get fresh air; but this is not always possible in bad weather or in the evening when the men are going to bed, in the morning when they are getting up or in bright sunlight. Some days we have been the only ones, with one other lady, not to sleep on deck. Besides all this, we are condemned to stay in our little holes very late because people are getting dressed in the lounge.

[A] But if I have thought regretfully that some would not overcome their fear, I have realized with even more pain that a great number, above all you, Mother, Mother Bigeu and others, would not be able to survive the stifling atmosphere of the cabins, the hard, narrow berths, the incessant noise, the handling of the ship's rigging, which is often carried out at night. Talking is as loud as in the daytime. Eating and drinking go on in the lounge, where two of us sleep, and the cabin of the other three opens onto this lounge.

Seasickness is a wretched malady. Besides making one feel as if one had had four or five emetics in a row, it affects the head as well as the stomach. One is incapable of anything, even a short consecutive thought; short aspirations can hardly draw any affection from a cold heart. I could say only *Ita Pater*, or "I have left everything for you, O my God." And in this state if one asks for water, it often arrives five or six hours later, the same for tea. When one can take only broth, it is cabbage broth laden with grease and often made with spoiled meat. It is a mistake to think that one must eat during this illness. For several days, I took only one or two cups of broth in twenty-four hours and that while lying down; and afterwards I felt quite well. Eugenie and Marguerite have suffered less; either they are more courageous or in better health. However, for two or three days, we were all in such a state that we could not help one another, and the steward had to render

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Wash rooms and lavatories, separate for men and for women, are required by law, which also states they shall be kept in a clean and serviceable condition throughout the voyage. The indifferent obedience to this provision is responsible for further uncomfortable and unhygienic conditions. The cheapest possible materials and construction of both washbasins and lavatories secure the smallest possible degree of convenience and make the maintenance of cleanliness extremely difficult where it is attempted at all. The number of washbasins is invariably by far too few, and the rooms in which they are placed are so small as to admit only by crowding as many persons as there are basins. The only provision for counteracting all the dirt of this kind of travel is cold salt water, with sometimes a single faucet of warm water to an entire wash room. And in some cases this faucet of warm water is at the same time the only provision for washing dishes. Soap and towels are not furnished. Floors of both wash rooms and water closets are damp and often filthy until the last day of the voyage when they are cleaned in preparation for the inspection at the port of entry. The claim that it is impossible to establish and maintain order in these parts of the immigrant quarters is thus shown to be false.

Regular dining rooms are not a part of the old type of steerage. Such tables and seats as the law says shall be provided for the use of passengers at regular meals are never sufficient to seat all the passengers, and no effort to do this is made by systematic repeated sittings. In some instances the tables are mere shelves along the wall of a sleeping compartment. Sometimes plain boards set on wooden trestles and rough wooden benches set in the passageways of sleeping compartments are considered a compliance with the law. Again, when a compartment is only partly full, the unoccupied space is called a dining room and is used by all the passengers in common, regardless of what sex uses the rest of the compartment as sleeping quarters. When traffic is so light that some compartment is

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us humiliating services. Either he or the captain's servant came and opened our curtains to give us tea or broth.

As for Father M[artial], we did not see him at all; he was very unwell also. [C] For a fortnight he suffered severe digestive trouble. I cured him by means of Glauber salts. During our sickness, the ship rolled terribly; one fell at every step. Either the captain or another had to give us his arm to go to the latrine, and they waited for us at the door. If one used a glass, the rolling ship whisked it from one's hand spilling the contents on the ground or over us, and one risked breaking the precious utensil...

We were wearing only our winter habits in the tropics because we could not unpack our luggage, which was in the hold. For all voyages, we must remember that when leaving even in December, they may need their summer habits."

Letter 92 Philippine to Mother Barat

**The End**

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entirely unused, its berths are removed and stacked in one end and replaced by rough tables and benches. This is the most ample provision of dining accommodations ever made in the old type steerage, and occurs only when the space is not needed for other more profitable use.

There are two systems of serving the food. In one instance the passengers, each carrying the crude eating utensils given him to use throughout the journey, pass in single file before the three or four stewards who are serving and each receives his rations. Then he finds a place wherever he can to eat them, and later washes his dishes and finds a hiding place for them where they may be safe until the next meal. Naturally there is a rush to secure a place in line and afterwards a scramble for the single warm-water faucet, which has to serve the needs of hundreds. Between the two, tables and seats are forgotten or they are deliberately deserted for the fresh air of the open deck.

### **The Old-Type Steerage Experience Continued:**

Under the new system of serving, women and children are given the preference at such tables as there are, the most essential eating utensils are placed by the stewards and then washed by them. When the bell announces a meal, the stewards form in a line extending to the galley and large tin pans, each containing the food for one table, are passed along until every table is supplied. This constitutes the table service. The men passengers are even less favored. They are divided into groups of six. Each group receives two large tin pans and tin plates, cups, and cutlery enough for the six; also one ticket for the group. Each man takes his turn in going with the ticket and the two large pans for the food for the group, and in washing and caring for the dishes afterwards. They eat where they can, most frequently on the open deck. Stormy weather leaves no choice but the sleeping compartment.

The food may be generally described as fair in quality and sufficient in quantity, and yet it is neither; fairly good materials are usually spoiled by being wretchedly prepared. Bread, potatoes, and meat, when not old leavings from the first and second galleys, form a fair substantial diet. Coffee is invariably bad and tea doesn't count as food with most immigrants. Vegetables, fruits, and pickles form an insignificant part of the diet and are generally of a very inferior quality. The preparation, the manner of serving the food, and disregard of the proportions of the several food elements required by the human body make the food unsatisfying, and therefore insufficient. This defect and the monotony are relieved by purchases at the canteen by those whose capital will permit. Milk is supplied for small children.

Considering this old-type steerage as a whole, it is a congestion so intense, so injurious to health and

morals that there is nothing on land to equal it. That people live in it only temporarily is no justification of its existence. The experience of a single crossing is enough to change bad standards of living to worse. It is abundant opportunity to weaken the body and emplant there germs of disease to develop later. It is more than a physical and moral test; it is a strain. And surely it is not the introduction to American institutions that will tend to make them respected.

The common plea that better accommodations can not be maintained because they would be beyond the appreciation of the emigrant and because they would leave too small a margin of profit carry no weight in view of the fact that the desired kind of steerage, already exists on some of the lines and is not conducted as either a philanthropy or a charity

Callan, Louise. Philippine Duchesne: Frontier Missionary of the Sacred Heart.  
Maryland:Newman, 1957. Print.

The Steerage Experience

<http://freepages.family.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~gregkrenzlok/The%20Steerage%20Experience.html>