



Eugene Souder

Coming of

The Mennonite seagoing cowboys

by Peggy Reiff Miller

Take a teenage Mennonite boy after World War II, put him on a cattle boat to Europe or China, stir him up with storms at sea, spice him with adventure and danger, bake him in the smoldering rubble of war, and what do you have? A recipe for the coming of age of a seagoing cowboy.

Many of today's Mennonites in their mid-70s and above are among the ranks of men and boys who delivered livestock to war-torn countries 60 years ago. These men put their faith into action to help bring healing and hope to a world torn apart. In the process, they learned much about themselves and the world in which they lived.

The call for these seagoing cowboys, as they were dubbed, came from the Brethren Service Committee of the Church of the Brethren. In 1943, the BSC birthed the ecumenical Heifer Project (today's Heifer International). The idea of sending cows rather than powdered milk to people devastated by war came to Brethren peace activist Dan West while he was serving alongside Mennonite and Quaker relief workers during the Spanish Civil War in 1938. Inspired by West's idea, Brethren farmers had hieifers ready to send by the time World War II ended in Europe in May, 1945—but they had no ships on which to send them.

Mennonite upbringing: Luke Bomberger cleans a cattle stall on the *S.S. Boulder Victory*, which delivered heifers to China in the spring of 1947.

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age on a cattle boat



Elmer Bowers

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Doing it for service: Cattlemen care for horses en route to Greece on the S.S. *Adrian Victory* in October 1946.

Another agency was formed in 1943 by 44 nations to help war-depleted countries get on their feet again—the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. Unlike the Brethren, UNRRA had vessels available for the 200,000-plus head of livestock and other relief goods they planned to ship—but they had no hustlers to herd their horses, hiefters and mules across the ocean. The problems of both agencies were solved when BSC agreed to provide cattle attendants for UNRRA shipments and UNRRA agreed to provide shipping space for Brethren hiefters.

BSC extended an invitation to the Mennonites and other denominations to join them in this venture. Nearly 1,000 Mennonite men and boys, ages 16 to 60-plus, responded over the two years of the UNRRA shipments that began July 24, 1945. One of the first Mennonites to go was Luke Bomberger of Mount Joy, Pa. (now of Lititz).

"I arrived by train in New Orleans the day the war was over (in Japan)," says Bomberger. There he and three other Mennonites joined the nine-member cattle crew on the S.S. *Charles W. Wooster*, headed for Greece. They left Aug. 15, 1945, with a load of 335 horses. "I was 17 when I left and had registered C.O. [conscientious objector]. I turned 18 on the trip. When my draft board found out from my parents what I was doing, they

said I could keep on doing it for my service." Bomberger made nine trips before UNRRA disbanded in 1947.

BSC sought cowboys of high moral principles who could be good ambassadors for the church. For those who fit the bill, life among the seasoned salty seamen came as quite a shock. "These men could be pretty hard characters," says Bomberger. He credits his Mennonite upbringing for helping him cope in this environment. "My church and family had instilled in me an understanding of proper Christian behavior, which made it easier not to be intimidated."

"The trips were an unbelievable opportunity for a small town boy," Bomberger says. Work on his Aunt Katie's farm and other farms and businesses in his hometown equipped him with the background he needed. The long hours of feeding and watering the livestock and shoveling manure in the stuffy, smelly ships' holds was hard and sometimes dangerous work. "Horses could be mean," he says. A mark on his back from the bite of an excited mare is one of his souvenirs.

Other dangers lurked in the waters. "Off Greece," Bomberger recalls, "we could see mine sweepers blowing up mines in the water ahead of us that we could have hit." On another trip, his ship lunged into a sharp turn. He ran to the rail

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'Couldn't believe what we were seeing': The city of Danzig (now Gdansk), Poland, was obliterated in World War II and was still piled with rubble a year after war's end.



Charles Shenk

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and saw a mine the ship had missed. "It was so close I could have spit on it," he says.

Seasickness was a malady many cowboys experienced. "Those are the times you wish you'd die, you felt so bad," says Eugene Souder of Grottoes, Va. "And you fed the fish."

The weather often created hazards. Ships ran aground or collided with other ships in dense fogs, got stuck in ice in the severe Baltic winter of 1946-47 and were tossed around like corks on angry seas. "We ran into a storm about the second day out," says Lee Jost of Harrisonburg, Va. "It was so stormy it washed some of the horses off the top deck."

It is a miracle that of the 73 UNRRA cattle ships, which made a total of 360 trips, only one was lost—and that one to a mine in the harbor of Trieste, Italy. The crew was saved, but the cargo was lost.

If the dangers were known ahead of time, it was the invincibility and naiveté of youth and the commitment of older men to the purpose of their trips that led them to sign up for the journeys. For their service they were paid one cent per month by the Merchant Marines to make them legal members of the ship's crew, plus \$150 per trip by UNRRA.

Any unpleasanties of the trips were far outweighed for most cowboys by their shore leave experiences. Don Klippenstein of Goshen, Ind., speaks for many when he says, "The entire episode broadened my view of the world." Touring the Acropolis or walking the roads Paul walked in Greece, standing atop the Great Wall of China or gliding through Venice on a gondola brought history to life.

Many Mennonite cowboys who went to Poland looked up Mennonite churches there. Al Meyer of Goshen vividly recalls being inside a demolished Mennonite church building. "On the wall you could still see a tablet in honor of the brave men who gave their lives for the German Fatherland in the First World War," he says. "It was sort of sym-

bolic to see the wreckage of the Second World War and a bombed-out Mennonite community of which there were no remaining people."

The German-speaking Mennonites had to flee Poland at the end of the war, leaving behind Bibles, hymn books and other books and records in their destroyed churches and homes. Mennonite cowboys took on the mission of retrieving books and documents from the rubble. These items can be found in many of the Mennonite historical collections around the United States.

By far the most indelible impressions made on the cowboys were those left from the aftermath of war, especially for those who went to Poland. "We just couldn't believe what we were seeing," says Charles Shenk of Harrisonburg. "A year after the war, most of the streets (in Gdansk) were still just piles of rubble. We saw almost no young men. It seemed like a generation was gone. You'd see people crawling up out of the rubble. They were living down there. I couldn't imagine what these people had been through."

The cowboys witnessed the extreme poverty created by war. Lee Jost recalls a boy coming onto his ship. "Down in the galley somebody dropped something. This kid got down and ate it off the floor; he was that hungry."

"I remember the immediate reaction of people on the pier when a horse fell," says Ron Graber of Nashville, Ind. "People rushed out from the shadows of the dock and cut it up. That was a lot of meat."

Battlefield scenes sobered the cowboys. "To us young teenagers just off the farm from very sheltered lives, it was quite an eye opener," says Earl Rosenberger of Harrisonburg. "There were skeletons in uniforms still lying around, and war materials and a lot of wreckage and damage." The most sobering experience of all, however, was had by the cowboy crews who toured the Nazi experimental research facility near Gdansk, where they saw vats of human body parts, melted human fat used

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for soap making, and dried human skin used for leather.

“The sights of Gdansk certainly made an impression on a lot of the young cowboys,” says Shenk. “These trips must have contributed to all of us in regard to wanting to be peacemakers. How grateful I am for the invitation to be involved in something that then contributed to our lives like nothing else ever could.”

“A lot of cowboys involved, if you follow their lives,” says Shenk, “have gone into wonderful mission outreach projects.” Gandhi Award winner Robert O. Epp and the late Melvin Gingrich and John Howard Yoder are just a few prominent Mennonites who served as seagoing cowboys. You may find that someone in your congregation did, too. If so, their story will be worth hearing.

Peggy Reiff Miller is a member of the Church of the Brethren living in Milford, Ind. She has been researching the history of the seagoing cowboys for over three years and is working on a historical young adult novel and a nonfiction book on the topic.