

Sea Breezes

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This Month

MAGNETIC MINE!

□ END OF AN ERA □



Wives, mothers, nurses, navigators – these are some of the skills attributed to the

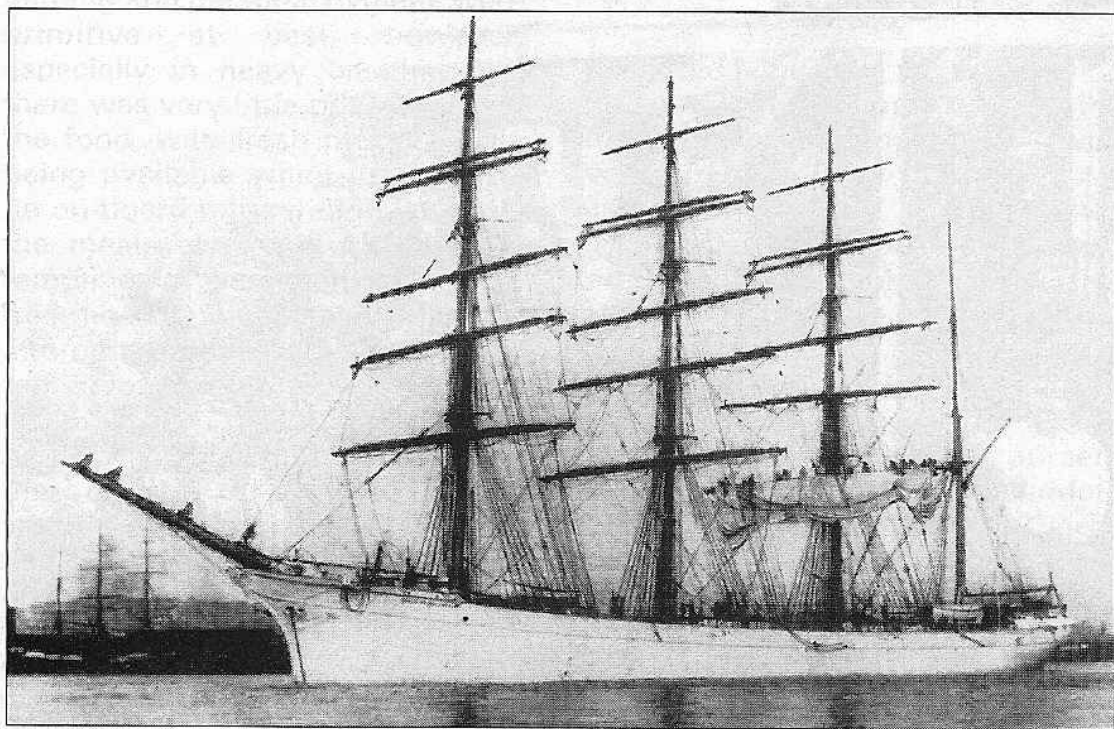
The Two-Year Getaway Cruise

By Bill Cockburn (Canada)

WHY on earth would two refined women, one of them no longer young, sign on for two years as crew members on an ocean-going windjammer? Why would they subject themselves to many months of discomfort and privation, with the added possibility of being exposed to real physical danger? That is a question I have often asked myself, ever since I learned that my own grandmother and one of my aunts did just that at the turn of the century.

Of course, there is more to the story than that, as indeed you might expect. It came about as

follows. My grandfather, Capt William Fordyce from Lerwick in Shetland, was master of a four-masted barque, the **Falls of Halladale**, engaged in hauling general cargo between European ports and the Americas, Australia and New Zealand. In those days this was strenuous work – uncomfortable, tedious and frequently very hazardous. Weather was probably the most important factor to be reckoned with. For example, on one previous voyage from England to San Francisco, this same ship tried for three weeks to round the notorious Cape Horn, losing a large number of sails and



The "Falls of Halladale" at anchor in San Francisco harbour. The photograph was probably taken during the "getaway cruise". The crew can be seen handling the mainsail.

part of the mainmast in the process, before being forced to turn tail, recross the South Atlantic and complete the run via the gentler Cape of Good Hope and the Pacific Ocean. By the time the ship tied up in California, this one voyage had lasted almost eight months! It was commonplace for seamen to suffer severe injuries, even death, from accidents such as falling from the rigging, being washed overboard or smashed against deck gear by enormous waves which could sweep over the entire length of the vessel. Proper treatment of injuries and illness normally had to wait until the ship reached the next port. No ship's doctor here!

The crewmen were usually a rough lot. The hiring records for some of the voyages tell their own story. For example, during the previous one, which sailed from

Britain in 1898, one crewman died of syphilis five months into the passage, seven deserted in San Francisco and no fewer than eight in Tacoma, and had to be replaced. The situation during the next trip – the one where my grandmother and her daughter were on board – was very similar. In addition to the master, seventeen crewmen (including the two women) signed on in Hamburg. Make-up of the working crew changed constantly during the voyage, however. In addition to the frequent desertions, thirty-one in all, many crewmen were legally discharged or signed on in ports visited during the voyage; at least ten different nationalities were involved. One crewman was left in hospital in Melbourne as the result of an injury on board ship, one was left in Rio because of an unspecified illness and one was left at the same



The captain and crew of the "Falls of Halladale". This group photo was taken in San Francisco, most likely on the Getaway Cruise. Some of these crewmen were presumably the ladies' cruise companions for part of the voyage.

port doing thirty days in jail "for threatening the master on board his ship". A master's job was not without risk.

Of course, it was not unknown for the master of a square-rigger sometimes to be accompanied by his wife and even his children on long voyages; however, it was relatively unusual, especially on the Cape Horners. Although a large and sturdy vessel by sailing ship standards, the *Falls of Halladale* was only slightly over 2,000 gross registered tonnage, quite tiny in comparison with today's ocean-going freighters and luxurious cruise ships. As for creature comforts, these were sparse by any standards, especially for the sailors in the fo'c'sle. Of course, the ladies would presumably have been able to use the officers' quarters; the wardroom, with its wood panelling and carpeting, did offer some degree of comfort. Facilities for bathing and personal hygiene were primitive at best, however, especially in heavy weather and there was very little privacy. As for the food, with fresh produce only being available when in port and no on-board refrigeration facilities, the meals can hardly have been tempting for a refined palate. No mid-morning bouillon on deck or afternoon tea and crumpets in the tourist lounge!

Now my grandfather knew better than anyone the hazards and discomforts of a long ocean voyage on board his vessel. So why would he permit his wife and daughter to accompany him on a trip to Australia and New Zealand which was expected to last two years? My grandmother was 58 at the start of the voyage, while my aunt Jeanie was in her twenties, but suffered from asthma, and had



The "purser" in a serious moment. Perhaps she was contemplating the rigours of the planned two-year sea voyage.

been told a long sea voyage would be "good" for her health. Good in moderation, perhaps, but two years? On a 2000-ton, general-cargo sailing ship? Anyhow, the good ladies signed on in Hamburg, though they probably boarded the ship at a port on the south coast of England, such as Falmouth in Cornwall. Presumably to satisfy some regulation, they were listed as purser and assistant purser respectively, at the princely sum of one shilling a month each, just a tenth of what the cabin boy earned! The "third mate" earned the same "salary" but he was actually the owner's nineteen-year-old son, also travelling as an unofficial passenger. It seems unlikely that one of the officers would have given up his cabin to

accommodate the ladies. Even the captain's cabin was small, as can be seen by visitors to the sister ship, the **Falls of Clyde**, which is now on view to tourists in Honolulu Harbour. Since no apprentices are listed for this particular voyage, it is possible the two females were assigned the rather modest apprentices' quarters on the main deck amidships, which normally housed four lads. Whatever the housekeeping arrangements, the ship set sail in June 1900 from Hamburg with a stop at Frederikstad in Norway, before heading for Australia, reaching Melbourne shortly before Christmas.

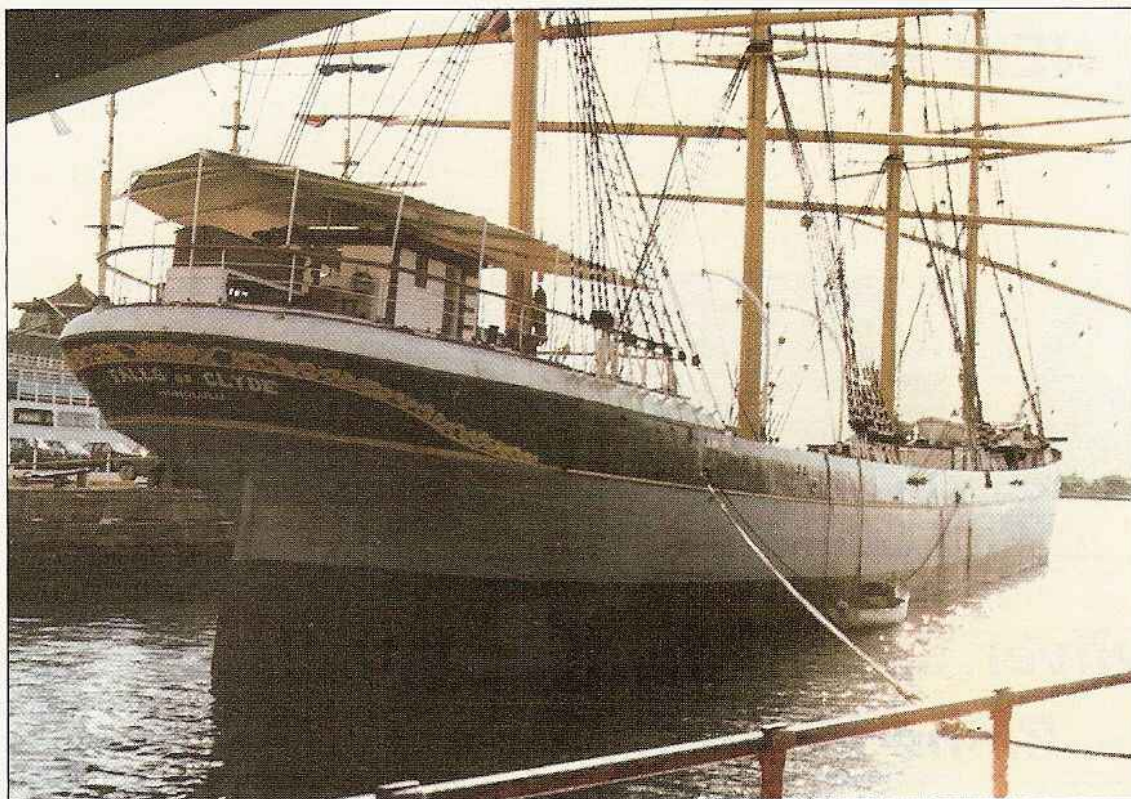
So, since their official duties can hardly have been very demanding, how did the two ladies occupy themselves for all those months at sea? According to my mother's



This photo of Capt William Fordyce was taken in Newcastle, NSW, during the voyage described in the article.

account of the voyage, they accomplished vast amounts of sewing and embroidery, particularly "drawn threadwork" on white sheets, tablecloths, suppercloths, etc, and crocheted endless lace borders. On fine days, they could presumably sit outside, but there was little free deck space available to them, particularly since the crew would continually be altering the sail settings and performing other nautical tasks. What the ladies did in foul weather can only be imagined. Presumably they were able to go ashore when the ship was docked at the various ports of call, but commercial wharfs are normally in a pretty rough part of town, certainly not the place for an evening stroll by a pair of well-bred ladies. Were there times when they had second thoughts? On the second half of the two-year voyage, they did indeed "round the Horn", but only from west to east, after calling at Valparaiso and Portland, Oregon, before heading across the South Atlantic for Britain. I wonder how they fared in the dreaded "Roaring Forties"?

It appears that not all their time was spent on needlework, however; it also appears the beneficial effects of the sea air helped more than my aunt's asthma! Again according to my mother's version of events, my aunt became enamoured of the mate and, at some point in the voyage, became engaged to him, much to her fond parents' disapproval. The courtship could hardly have escaped their notice, given the lack of privacy on board ship, but the mate apparently neglected to ask the captain's permission before proposing to his daughter – rather a tactless omission, given the circumstances.



The "Falls of Clyde", sister ship to the "Falls of Halladale", in Honolulu Harbour. The meagre extent of the "promenade deck" left very little room for recreation.

The mate gave his betrothed an opal ring, probably in Australia; however, for reasons best known to himself, he jumped ship at Valparaiso, leaving his disconsolate fiancée to return home to Scotland alone. Whether the captain was instrumental in his sudden departure can only be surmised. My aunt never married and died of peritonitis on the day I was to have been christened in 1923. Her elder sister gave the opal ring to my own sister for her twenty-first birthday; unfortunately, it was stolen in a burglary some twenty-four years later.

The voyage ended at Grimsby on April 9, 1902. I have sometimes wondered how my grandparents' home in Glasgow fared during this two-year absence. My great-grandmother, then in her eighties,

was left with the primary responsibility for supervising the younger members of the family, including my mother, during this time. However, there were adult siblings living fairly close by and it can be assumed domestic help was also available. I nevertheless question how many of today's senior citizens would be willing to take on a two-year house-sitting assignment!

This was, in fact, my grandfather's last voyage as captain. The owners apparently decided that, though then sixty-five, he should give up his stately "four-poster" and retrain to become a steamship captain. This surprising decision was a great disappointment and a psychological blow from which he never recovered. He never went to sea again. □