

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

A Sailor's Journal

by spencer grey

When Benajah Crowell was captain of the bark Kleber, his wife Almira was making the voyage with him. During that long trip she gave birth to a son, and in accordance with the custom of the time, he was named Marshall Kleber Crowell. Kleber spent his youth sailing on long voyages with his parents, learning the ways of a mariner at an early age.

Not surprisingly Kleber followed the sea most of his life and in later years wrote a memoir in which he tells of many of his voyages. He began his life as a mariner when his father, Captain Benajah, said to him one day, "...no work and all play makes Jack a dull boy, so I had better look for a ship." He gave him a letter to Alpheus Hardy, many of whose ships he had commanded.

Along with his sea chest, Kleber also took his kit – consisting of a tin plate, a spoon, a knife, and a fork, which was necessary on shipboard as the crew were not provided with eating utensils – and left Chatham on Jake Smith's stage coach for the sevenmile trip to Harwich, where he boarded "the steam cars for Boston."

His first ship was a new bark of 900 tons named Mable that was bound for Gibraltar and Spain where it would take on a load of fresh fruit. The crew consisted of 20 able bodied seamen and 10 ordinary seamen, of whom Kleber was the youngest. On the second day out from Boston, as they were passing by Chatham, Kleber leaned on the rail and stared at the town while dreaming about home, where his mother probably was making some of her molasses cookies, and thought that he would like to be able to get to that strip of sand that seemed so near. He was roused out of his day dream by a clout of the end of a rope administered by the mate, who ordered him to get back to work.

The voyage was to Malaga on the southern coast of Spain, where they took on a load of figs and oranges before heading back to Boston. Of the food on board the ship, Kleber says that "we got no lamb chops or fried eggs but good salt junk and cracker hash, soft bread once a week and no cream in your coffee and plenty of work." On the return trip they encountered some storms that created very rough weather, causing the ship to take on water. As they neared Boston with sails blown away, the crew had to pump endlessly, and as they pumped they sang a sea chanty: *Pump her dry until she sucks.*

Leave her, boys, leave her.

The girls are waiting on the bluff.

Leave her, boys, leave her.

As Kleber explains, in those days sailors could not pull on ropes or do any kind of work without singing chanties. With the voyage over, Kleber says that he got himself "a new set of sails" and headed for Chatham, where he "kicked around the sand pile for a while, and Capt. Ben commenced to get me work."

But apparently working in Chatham did not agree with him, so "forgetting my solemn promise never to go to sea again," he headed back to Boston to ship out on the barkentine Kite that was bound for Jamaica, where they

loaded sugar. In those days, as he points out, the crew had to work in the hold. When it came time to quit, “you felt like looking for the soft side of a board—no feather bed around that wagon.”

After serving as second mate on a square-rigger for a lengthy voyage, he decided to spend the winter of 1873 in Chatham, as he believed that with the money he had saved and that which he could make at odd jobs on shore he could afford a rest. By spring time, however, “. . . my bank account commenced to get at ebb tide, and spring coming on the farm, Capt. Ben [began] making his plans for farm work, I thought to myself it’s no place for you.”

In April 1874 he shipped on a steamship, which he stayed on for about a year, at which point his father told him that if he was to be a real sailor, he had to take a voyage around Cape Horn. As Kleber explains, “. . . on Cape Cod them days about every one of the males went to sea and most of them thought if you did not make a voyage around Cape Corn or the Cape of Good Hope, you were no seaman.” To be properly prepared for the long voyage, he had to have a wooden sea chest, both for holding his gear and for providing him with a seat in the forecabin, as “there were no Morris Chairs there.” Having gone on many very long voyages with her husband, his mother knew his needs and provided him with homemade clothes for the different climates from hot ones near the equator to cold ones around Cape Horn.

Well prepared for his lengthy voyage he “. . . left town happy as a girl with her first hobble skirt,” and traveled on Sim Nickerson’s stage coach to Yarmouth where he boarded the train to Boston, where he joined the crew of the Charles W. Cochrane, a full-rigged clipper ship, manned by four officers, 35 able bodied seamen, three ordinary seamen, a steward, and a cook.

As the crew manned the capstan to hoist the anchor, they sang a chanty: *Goodbye my love, goodbye The ship is read the wind is fair Goodbye my love, goodbye.*

When they cleared Boston Harbor Light, they set the sails and mustered aft, where watches were set and the rules of the ship read to them, iron clad rules that they abided by throughout the long voyage. While sailing around the Horn, they encountered gale winds and blowing snow so that it took 30 days to get around the shoals and reefs that peppered their course. It was Christmas Day when they cleared the Horn, so instead of the usual “salt junk,” they were treated to roast pig.

After 254 days they reached San Francisco and passed under the Golden Gate Bridge to the harbor. From there they sailed to Yokohama, then to Manila in the Philippines, back to San Francisco, then to New Zealand for coal, then to the south sea islands, from there to Liverpool, then to Cape Town, back to Oakland, and finally to Boston. Throughout this long voyage around the globe, he crossed the equator five times, rounded Cape Horn three times, and the Cape of Good Hope once.

Now able to pass as an experienced sailor, he returned home to Chatham, where Captain Ben, not being one to allow any idleness, immediately put him to work on the farm.



NEED STORAGE?

- STATE-OF-THE-ART Security
- Brand New • Ultra Clean

rates starting at **\$99** a month

CUSTOM SELF STORAGE
104 Falmouth Road Mashpee, Cape Cod MA
www.customcarstorage.com • 508-539-9700

