

Letters From Afar

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

by spencer grey

In the days when nearly all men in Chatham sailed around the world, often taking their wives with them, letters from exotic places frequently were sent home describing the places they were visiting and what they were doing there. Two of the many letters in the Atwood House Museum archives from opposite sides of the earth provide pictures of these faraway places.

In a letter from Bangkok, Siam, dated Oct. 24, 1858, Captain Simeon N. Taylor tells his wife, Hitty, his impressions of his visit. He begins by saying that they had a pleasant voyage of 118 days from Boston to Bangkok, with fair weather and no gales. As was often the case, he had passengers on board, and he explains that he got along quite well with them, except for one woman he calls “That D____ Mrs. B____, apparently too polite to spell it out, but saying that after a week out of New York, he was so disgusted with her that they did not speak.

In Bangkok his ship is lying alongside “the banke,” about 20 yards from the American consulate. He finds the climate warm but agreeable, but he is lonesome “among these uncivilized people.” As he explains his daily routine, it seems as if they spend most of their time eating. “When we get up in the morning we have a cup of China tea, at 9 o’clock we take breakfast, at 12 noon we have what they call tippen. It is fruit and cakes and wine. At 4 o’clock we have dinner, about 7 we have a cup of tea, at 9 we have a small glass of Sherry Bitters, and after that we go to bed when we choose.”

The houses, he explains, are all built on the river and “a fellow cannot go anywhere unless he swims or goes by boat.” There are eight or 10 missionaries in Bangkok, but Captain Taylor cannot see that they have had any effect on “the heathen by all appearances.” The people all go naked, men, women and children. Their home is anywhere night overtakes them.” Pointing out that they are on opposite sides of the globe, he says, “But I have not seen anything of Samuel Davis’s parsnip coming through yet. I expect it will be some time before it gets down here.” Not surprisingly, the captain says several times that he is lonely and misses them, urging them to send more letters to Bangkok.

Writing from the other side of the world in London in a letter to her sister dated Jan. 26, 1861, Almira Crowell says that she and her husband, Benajah, have just returned from a concert of music by Handel at St. Paul’s Cathedral. While there they saw the Lord Mayor and many English noblemen. The previous week she had climbed the 581 steps to the top of the steeple of the cathedral to the whispering gallery.

Although she appreciates the many sights of London, she explains that the smoke is so thick that it destroys the beauty of everything and usually blocks the sun. Although she has not yet seen the Queen, she expects that she will on the fourth of February when the Queen goes to open Parliament. She has, however, been to the Tower of London to see the royal jewels, including the Queen’s crown and that of the Prince of Wales.

Aware of the tensions between North and South, Almira says that they are worried about conditions in America, and that she hopes there will be no great change before they return, and that no one will “be obliged to resort to arms.”

Apparently they were sailing from South America to England, as she says that the previous day they had crossed the equator, and as the only one who had not crossed it before, she expected that she would have her head shaved as part of the initiation. One of the passengers on the ship was a fur trapper from Louisiana who eventually was going to Australia, where he planned to pitch a tent upon his arrival in Geelong, a few miles from Melbourne, so as to avoid the expense of staying in a boarding house.

Almira and her husband are staying in a boarding house in London, and she has asked the cook to bake beans. Because brown bread is essential to go with beans, she is going to go to the kitchen to show them how to make it. It must be that although she enjoys the sights and activities in London, she wants the baked beans as a tie to home.

While many people in Chatham during the 19th century knew little or nothing about the rest of the world, it is evident from these letters that the Chatham mariners and their wives traveled widely and were therefore familiar with the culture and arts of places throughout the world.

Material from the Chatham Historical Society's Atwood House Museum was used in the preparation of this column.



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