

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

A Sea Captain's Wife Goes To Sea

by Spencer Grey

During the nineteenth century about 80 percent of men in Chatham were mariners, and many became captains of sea-going ships at an early age, often as masters of ships belonging to the company of Chatham native Alpheus Hardy. Among those captains was Benajah Crowell, who was master of the Wild Rover between 1856 and 1859.

His wife Almira Hardy Crowell and some of their children often sailed with him, and during many of those voyages, Almira kept her own log, including for their voyage on the Wild Rover between Feb. 19, 1858 and Jan. 30, 1859, from Liverpool, England, to Callao, Peru, and back to Boston, with her three-year-old son, Kleber, along.

As often is the case, the weather in the North Atlantic during the winter months was frequently stormy. Almira and Kleber suffered from sea sickness for the first several days at sea, and on March 5 she notes: "Blowing a gale from south west. Carried away main and mizzen top gallant sails. Sea runs high and bury the ship, water washes into the galley and puts the fire out, and made cook cross. Washed cook and Deedong (young French crew member) into the lee scuppers."

But as the Wild Rover sailed south past the Canary Islands, the temperature rose and the days became more pleasant, until on March 26 they crossed the equator and pleasant became hot with frequent squalls bringing heavy rain.

Sea captains' wives often preferred to sail with their husbands not only to keep them company but also because they were relieved of their usual domestic chores, as the crew prepared and served the meals, cleaned their quarters, did the laundry, and on this voyage, frequently watched over and entertained young Kleber, as noted in this entry: A flying fish flew on board. Kleber and I had it fried for breakfast. Dedong made Kleber a sloop. Steward towed it after the ship to please him. We were going fast; took the sloop under water and lost her. He then flew around to the carpenter and all hands to make him one.

On such a long voyage, fresh food always was a welcome alternative to the hard tack and salted beef that was the usual fare. As the ship reached the southern Atlantic, crew members captured or shot fish and birds. Almira tells of a fish that looked like a large gold fish that the mate caught and which they ate fried for dinner. On another occasion the mate caught a porpoise, and they ate the liver for breakfast. The mate apparently enjoyed hunting and fishing, as on another occasion he shot a land pigeon, which they were able to retrieve, and at the same time the captain also shot one but it fell too far from the ship to reach easily. When the dog refused to fetch the bird, the captain offered a dollar to anyone who would go over the side to get it, and Dedong, the French boy, said he would go. They tied a rope to him while he swam to get the bird and then pulled him back on board. That night they had a stew of birds for dinner.

After battling the usual fierce winds and current in the Straits of Magellan for several days, they succeeded in sailing into the Pacific, and had good weather until they arrived at Callao, an island port near Lima, Peru, on May 26, 1858. There they found several Cape Cod ships waiting to load or unload their cargoes, most of them commanded by men they knew, including Captain Winthrop Sears of the Conquest, Captain John Crowell of the Ocean Pearl (both also owned by Alpheus Hardy), Captain Kelley of the Osborne Howes, Captain Gardiner of the John Bryant, and Captain Reynolds of the Georgiana.

For the next several months Almira and Benajah socialized with these friends from home, frequently going to one ship or another, Almira to have tea with the many ladies in port and, with Benajah, dinner with the other husbands and wives. During the day they took excursions to Lima or other nearby sites, such as the one she describes here: June 10: I have been making preparations for a horse ride. I thought I should make a poor rider, but came off best. We went over hills and hillocks, up a steep hill 150 feet. Thought I would fall over the horse's head coming

down. Stopped at a Peruvian native's and had a very pleasant reception. They treated us to meats, bread, wine, ale, and cigars. Felt quite refreshed. Mounted our horses and started off for Callao. Stopped just inside the town; took dinner, came home at dark. Our party consisted of three ladies and 10 men. We rode about 20 Miles. I left Kleber on board the James Brown with Mrs. Crabtree.

On the Fourth of July all of the Americans in the harbor met on board the Star King to celebrate. She reports that they "... had a grand dinner, speeches, toasts, a band for music, dancing and singing, and fired salutes at sunset."

Near the end of their five month stay at Callao, Almira recalls the many pleasant days they spent there. "There were eight ladies that belonged to different ships; we visited each other and were cordially received. We met every Sunday evening on board of some ship that had an instrument for singing."

On Nov. 5, 1868, they left Callao for the voyage home, but with calms alternating with gales, it took them until Dec. 3 to round Cape Horn. They continued to make a very slow passage north, and on Jan. 5, 1859, they still had not reached the equator. Almira's entry for that date reflects the problems arising from the long voyage home, for she relates that Kleber is wearing canvas slippers made by one of the crew because all but one pair of his shoes have worn out, the captain believes they may have to put in for provisions, and the steward reports that they are getting short of tea, to which the captain replies, "...don't let the tea get out unless you want to get out yourself. Give the men coffee, as we have plenty."

On Jan. 30, they finally arrive in Baltimore, where Almira and Kelber board the steamer Joseph Whitney to get to Boston faster, arriving there on Feb. 4 and finally home to Chatham two days later, having been away for 15 months.



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