

Sunken Ships, Ghosts and Rescues

Man Overboard?

This next story was told by eighty-six-year-old Captain Robert Priefer, the last captain of the passenger steamship *Milwaukee Clipper*. Captain Priefer's father was the supplier of the provisions for the ship. He was the man who would go to the slaughterhouse on Fond du Lac Avenue and 27th Street in Milwaukee and select the very best cuts for prime rib, which was a specialty served on the *Clipper*. The prime rib was unsurpassed by any prime rib served in the city. It was not surprising to find out that when asked, Captain Priefer said that his favorite food on the *Clipper* was the prime rib.

He must have eaten a lot of it, because he started working for the *Clipper's* steward department in 1941 when he was just seventeen. He washed dishes and served food and eventually moved into the deck department. To become captain, as he put it, he came up the "hawse pipe," meaning that he climbed up the ship's rank without attending a traditional maritime academy. "The owners of the ship, Max and Mark McKee, never cut any corners," says Priefer. "They served great food, breakfast, lunch and dinner."

Captain Priefer was captain of the *Milwaukee Clipper* between 1958 and 1970. During that time, he met a number of famous people who rode on the *Clipper*, some of them entertainers who actually performed on board. He met Roy Rogers, the wrestler Gorgeous George and Liberace ("before Liberace was Liberace"). However, one of the most famous acts on the ship was actually performed by a third mate named Ken Phillips.

It was 4:30 a.m., Priefer recalled. Someone saw "someone" go overboard, so as the captain, he ordered the boat to go around and discovered that it was not a person who jumped, but Mark McKee's dog, Raleigh McKee, a six-month-old boxer pup who got bored in the confines of the baggage room and jumped through an open porthole into the water. He swam "back home" for about forty-five minutes while the ship swung around 180 degrees for a pass at the pup, according to Bruce McCrea, a reporter for the *Muskegon Chronicle*.

They lowered Ken into a lifeboat to retrieve the dog, but the lifeboat rode too high in the water for even a large dog to climb in. Ken jumped into the icy water, and the pooped puppy climbed up his back into the lifeboat. "The third mate almost drowned because that damn dog decided to go for a swim," says Priefer.

When the ship docked, the captain informed the owner of what had happened since Mr. McKee wanted to know why they were late. With the dog returned safely home, McKee sent over a box of cigars to the third mate to thank him for the rescue. Unfortunately, the mate didn't smoke cigars! Perhaps he would have appreciated a side of prime rib instead.