

Beyond Hunger: Communities of Change

In 2014, to mark its 70th birthday, Heifer International gathered a group of men known as the seagoing cowboys to honor their contributions and collect their memories for posterity. The narrative below, part of an article in a 2014 edition of World Ark magazine, gives some background and includes the story of one of them, Donald Struchen, as written by historian Peggy Reiff Miller.

At the close of World War II, herds of young men and a few women crossed oceans with shipments of livestock for families whose livelihoods were obliterated during the fighting. We credit those seagoing cowboys with cementing the foundation of Heifer International, which grew into a global nonprofit that's now 70 years strong.

The all-expenses-paid trip overseas came with a number of caveats. The animals had to be fed and their stalls mucked multiple times a day. Seasickness was practically a given on the utilitarian ships that shuttled livestock and other aid to postwar countries. And there was no getting around it, the poignant stench from mounds of manure would be inescapable.

For the young men eager to earn their credentials as seagoing cowboys, there was no waffling. This was a plum chance to do important work and sample a taste of freedom, all while setting out into the wider world for the first time.

Teams of boys as young as 15 caught trains or hitched rides from heartland farming communities to the ocean ports where they would set sail. Those boys are in their 70s, 80s and 90s today, but their stories of adventures on board and ashore are as vibrant as ever.

Nearly 7,000 young men took to the high seas to deliver livestock on Heifer's behalf after World War II. The deliveries came about through a partnership between the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) and the Brethren Service Committee of the Church of the Brethren. Heifer still gives animals to families around the world, although today most of those animals are purchased in the regions where they're given. Alas, the golden era of the seagoing cowboy is past.

(more)



DONALD STRUCHEN: The heartthrob

Was it his devil-may-care account of hitchhiking through New England that summer before being called up for cowboy duties that cast him as the dashing vagabond? Or was it the suspense of his last-minute race to Newport News, Va., to catch his ship bound for Italy? Maybe it was the image of him slumped in the shadows behind an outdoor opera house, exhausted from travel but determined to hear the lyrics of “Carmen” performed al fresco on a summer night.

Regardless, Donald Struchen’s enchanting, sun-dappled tales of his seagoing days brim with an infectious spirit of adventure. His photos from that summer, peopled with pretty girls in polka dot dresses and sunburned young men squinting in the bright sun, add even more glamour.

A retired Methodist minister now living in New York, Struchen shared his story via email:

“It was the summer of 1946 when I was a student at Garrett-Evangelical Seminary in Evanston, Ill. A fellow student and I thought a good way to spend the summer would be to help the farmers in Europe recover from the war by taking them some livestock. Arrangements were made and we were told to report to the Carroll Victory ship in Newport News, Va. We began hitchhiking from Evanston to Virginia only to be told when we arrived the ship was not ready. My friend was interested in a girl who was in Buzzards Bay, Mass., for the summer so we hitchhiked up there. Since we didn’t know how long it would be before sailing, we got dishwashing jobs in a restaurant, but before we could begin work for even one day we received word to report to the ship in three days. So it was back on the highway with thumbs in the air and hope that we could make it over the July Fourth holiday before the ship sailed.

“We did get there and watched them load 900 horses, which were going to Trieste. We were happy about this, for most ships were going to Poland and we thought this would be different. My partner and I were assigned to caring for 50 horses in the front hold in the bow of the ship. We watered and fed them

regularly every day. We kept them standing the whole time. We helped the vet care for them if they needed care. ... The manure piled up higher and higher every day, so the smells were pretty powerful along with the heat down in the hold and the seasickness that hit us as we rolled out into the ocean. I recall lying on a bale of hay and asking myself if I regretted my decision to make this trip. The answer was NO. It was a great adventure and wonderful summer even though I was bitten in the arm by one of the horses.

“It took two weeks to get to Trieste but along the way I had a lot of time to read. I was reading *Ben Hur* about a slave who was rowing on a slave ship. On the day that our ship went through the Straits of Messina I read that Ben Hur was rowing through the Straits of Messina. Talk about coincidence!

“We had three days ashore before we were to head home. One night we found an outdoor opera house, and I recall standing along a wall at the back listening to “Carmen” and fighting sleep, for we were exhausted. I bought a beautiful carved wooden horse about 4x6 inches in size as a remembrance. It still stands on a shelf in my house. We met two young ladies who took us swimming at a nearby lake. Their picture is still in my album. Our three days ashore were soon over and we began the two-week trip back home. Our job the first days was to scrub down the holds and clean the ship so it could reload and continue this wonderful ministry to the people of Europe.

“The other cowboys were an interesting bunch. Several Mennonites, a couple of pre-med students, some pre-ministerial and a handful of pacifists. We had Bible study and deep discussions up on the forward deck. I made a number of friends who I kept contact with for several years. We docked in Baltimore right on schedule, and George and I once again began hitching back to my home in Erie, Pa. I grew a mustache during the summer, which made quite a hit when school started. I think we received a check for our summer work. But no amount of money would be as valuable as this summer adventure was to me. Thank God for those who made this project possible.”