

Following the coast

Sweet memories on salty seas

By Willem Moojen

July 2021

Some memories of my travels aboard ships my father sailed on. The glory years of the Dutch small merchant ships (coasters). Beautiful trips from port to port in many countries.

I still write daily about the Dutch maritime world for newspapers and maritime magazines. Especially about the history of the Dutch Merchant Navy. My thoughts often wander to the voyages, mostly during school vacations, but also outside them, which I spent on ships on which my father sailed as first mate. I cherish these memories carefully. Born as the eldest of twins, a quarter of an hour earlier than my sister, on February 25 1948 in Haarlem, a beautiful old town not far from Amsterdam. My father was at sea, so the upbringing of two small children fell entirely on my mother's shoulders. My father was born in 1920 as the son of a pub owner in IJmuiden and went to sea at an early age, just 15 years old. Life in this fishing port on the west coast of Holland was rough with sailors from far and wide seeking entertainment in the numerous bars. His first ship was a steam trawler and then an old pilot boat and the sea tug Amsterdam (1938) of Bureau Wijsmuller (famous salvage company). After that he signed on with the Holland Steamship Company (HSM) and sailed to numerous ports along the African west coast. With the same company he sailed a lot to the UK, Faroe Islands and Reykjavik. Many ships followed as did many countries and ports. Between 1958-1960 he stayed in the Caribbean and sailed between South America, the many islands and North America. Then again on coasters.

Too late for school

At a very young age, just one and a half years old, I went on a coastal voyage to Denmark. Of course I don't remember anything about that. Many trips would follow in the spring, summer or autumn school vacations. It regularly happened that I returned to school too late and sometimes much too late. That was still possible in the mid-fifties. Sometimes I sailed alone with my mother but also often with my twin sister. When exactly we would go depended on where the ship was. We didn't have a telephone at home then. The ship's agent would send a telegram to tell us when and in which harbour the ship was expected to arrive. Of course, this could not be too far from where we lived, such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam or Antwerp. For my mother, a young woman, it was then a matter of quickly gathering clothes and a few necessary other things. And then, with two young children and luggage, to find the ship in a harbor by train, bus and sometimes cab. If the ship lay on the buoys, my father and a sailor had to use a rope ladder to get us on deck. If my sister went along alone, I had to stay with an aunt, which I hated as a mother's child, because they could stay away for a long time. On board we slept in my father's bunk when he was on watch or on the couch in the cabin. Also sometimes in the second mate's cabin or in the hospital. The cabin was not large, but comfortable for that time with a large berth with curtains in front and large drawers underneath. A small desk with chair, book rack, a closet, a leather couch and a sink with hot and cold water. In the corridor was a shower/toilet.

Following the coast

Life on board a coaster was always hectic and with little crew it was all hands on deck. When entering a port it was all about opening the hatches, often with presennings (tarpaulin) and hatch battening, mooring, hanging or operating the derricks and shifting the ship to another quay and checking the cargo (tally work). The cargo consisted mostly of coal, wood, grain, general cargo, pitch, scrap metal, Chinaclay and anything else that was offered. On departure, closing the holds and making the ship ready for sea. Filling the stores with provisions and beverages, stocking up on cigarettes and soft drinks (bonded stores) as well as fuel and water. Everyone had their own task, the deckhand, engine room and cook. When everything was settled, it was time to leave and the pilot came on board. Then you heard Lekko (let go) and it was fore and aft and the ropes were cast off. On to the next port. The routine on board is often standard on most ships, with watchkeeping, steering, maintenance such as biking and painting in good weather and numerous other chores. When calling at a new port, everything starts all over again. It was the time when the crew could still go ashore after work to relax, of course the pub was a pleasant pastime but fortunately also sightseeing. Now, due to the strict rules in ports, a sailor doesn't get off the ship anymore. The romance of sailing is therefore unfortunately largely gone.

Grey Little Devils

The 'Grey Little Devils', as the English called the Dutch coasters, could be found in ports all over the world. Sometimes two or three were moored together in an English harbour. When the weather was nice, sailing was great and I could spend hours in a corner of the wheelhouse enjoying the sea, waves, wind and ships passing by in the distance and with some luck dolphins appearing in front of the bow. In bad weather such a small ship could go wild and besides occasional seasickness frightening moments were no exception where everything loose in the cabin went to pieces. Especially when it happened that a cargo shifted or washed off the deck. I experienced this several times. Years later, on October 20 1986, on my way back from Harwich to Rotterdam on the ferry St. Nicholas (1982), I ended up in a hurricane in the North Sea. For 14 hours the ship was lying head down in heavy seas because docking was impossible in Hook of Holland. Most passengers were seasick and very frightened as the ship swayed enormously to 40 degrees and plunged deep into the waves.

Budding sailor

Great memories are trips to Dover or Harwich, especially visiting the port during the day and the view of the chalk cliffs. Via the Seine to Rouen is a feast for the eyes with beautiful banks, the landscape and many castles. Life on board had its regularities what I already pointed out. With a cleaning cloth in my back pocket I walked boldly about the ship and helped clean pipes in the engine room and other chores. Later when I was older I helped a lot with painting and sometimes stood at the helm in calm weather. Once I was in the workboat painting the anchor of the Gerry-S with a Portuguese sailor (Augusto). He climbed on the anchor and I stayed in the sloop. This shot loose and immediately drifted into Swansea harbour. With no way could I operate the heavy oars and it took a lot of effort to get me back on board. I also enjoyed cleaning the ship after loading anthracite under the coal pit in Swansea even though it was much too heavy for me. The water hose jumped in all directions. The conviviality on board depended largely on the cook on board. Freshly baked bread and good food. The food was frugal but good and a little extra on holidays. A bad cook was immediately noticeable in the atmosphere on board.

Sweet memories

English and Irish ports have a certain atmosphere, especially in the fifties and sixties when there was a lot of shipping. Harbour cranes, often still steam cranes, which you don't see anywhere, but also the English cars and trucks like Foden. Many harbours were tidal harbours and were situated along a river with a beautiful hilly landscape. Early in the morning you would see droves of workers going to the ports and yards. A time gone forever and after work the pubs were overflowing. Upon entering Southampton, I stood on the bench in my father's cabin watching through the porthole. We sailed past the Queen Elizabeth (1938-Cunard Line) and Empress of Scotland (1930-Canadian Pacific Steamship). With open mouths I beheld the majestic passenger ships, I'll never forget that, that's how big they were. Such a small coaster is totally dwarfed by such mighty ocean giants, it made a deep impression on me. Nice trips were from Viano do Castello in Northwest Portugal to St. Peterport with boardbox for the tomato industry on the island. With an old Bedford bus we made a trip around the island.

Clarecastle

Two trips I would make on the Gerry-S (1952) owned by the Rotterdam Coal Central (RKC) in July and September 1958 from Whitehaven (Cumbria) on the English west coast loaded with coal to Clarecastle not far from Limerick. Much of the annual coal export from Whitehaven went to Ireland, which imported much coal from England. Clarecastle could be reached via the Irish Sea around Northern Ireland or via the south coast of Ireland and Atlantic Ocean to Clare. The approach to the Shannon is beautiful, but for the first few hours of sailing it still seems that you are at sea, so wide is the river. As you get near Limerick, the river is a lot less wide. Then the last part you bend down the River Fergus to the Port of Clare. The closer you get to Clare the narrower the river. In my mind we were sailing right past meadows with grazing cattle. The ship almost touched shore. When we moored, it looked as if the whole population had turned out, so busy was it. The Gerry-S, 1050 tons, was the biggest ship to ever call at Clarecastle. Immediately the loading booms went up and the hatches opened. Men with large shovels filled baskets with coal, which were emptied into ready wooden wagons using the Gerry-S own loading equipment. When these were full, a horse was put in front of them to take the coal to its destination in the village or elsewhere. It was a hustle and bustle, every resident wanted to see this with their own eyes. Children begged for coins and stamps. After work in the evening, young women came scouring the quay for fallen coal to take home quickly, to replenish their supplies. That saved another few pennies in the wallet.* I remember that the houses looked dilapidated and that there was a lot of poverty. Yet everyone was friendly and a few children were allowed on board, where I proudly showed them the ship from wheelhouse to engine room. The atmosphere in Clarecastle and other Irish ports has stayed with me forever and is very different from other ports. In the evening you could hear the people singing and making music. The few cars that drove around seemed to be from the 1920s or 1930s. Ireland has always been close to my heart if only because of the music it produced. The country has produced great names like Them with Van Morrison, Thin Lizzy, Enya, U2, The Chieftains, Rory Gallagher and the Dubliners, among others. I saw Rory in Amsterdam and the Dubliners in my own hometown. As sailing is embedded in my memory so is Clarecastle.

Photo captions:

1 Aboard the Silvaplane (3-1949) in the late summer of 1949.

2 Together with my twin sister Lenie and my father on the bridge wing of Gerry-S in the Gulf of Biscay underway to Viano do Castello in July 1956.

3 At dock with propeller damage in Swansea in July 1956. Next to bosun Jesus and sailor Antonio a glimpse of my sister, mother and myself on the Gerry-S.

4 With Portuguese sailor Augusto painting the anchor of the Gerry-S in Swansea harbour in July 1956 just before I drifted into port with the workboat.

5 With my twin sister Lenie in St Peterport, Guernsey aboard Gerry-S unloading boardbox on August 18, 1956.

6 Mooring of the Gerry-S on July 22, 1958 in Clarecastle. On the left my father Leo Moojen.

7 Though I sit on a horse on the quay of Clarecastle on September 25, 1958.

*** Note: *the gathering of coal that had fallen between the boat and the quayside by young people was known in Clarecastle as 'Pickin the Dock'. Young lads would climb down the iron ladders on the face of the Quay at low tide and gather coal in sacks. They then climbed back up, with the end of the sack tucked under their chins and handed the coal over to a waiting pram. Dangerous work. (E. Shaw)***