

The Missing Immigrant Ship

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THIS year we celebrated one hundred years in America. Our Swiss forebears sailed from Antwerp on the American ship *Roger Stewart*, and landed at New York in 1853. They headed straight for Illinois, beat the panic of 1857 by moving on to Iowa, and in 1873 bought cheap railroad land from the Kansas Pacific (now the Union Pacific) and took root in Dickinson county, Kansas. On May 10, 1953, about 350 attended a reunion held in Junction City.¹

Not being a particularly mobile family, many of those who attended the reunion had never seen the ocean—much less a square-rigger. Perhaps that was why they were so anxious to locate a picture of the *Roger Stewart*. Anyhow, they definitely wanted a king-size reminder of that historic crossing—to which they owed so much and about which they knew so little.

It was like looking for that proverbial needle; only this one antedated the Civil War. Neither the Essex Institute nor the Peabody Museum at Salem, Mass., could furnish any clues. A search was made among the records of the former Bureau of Marine Inspection & Navigation, now in the custody of the National Archives. There was no mention of a vessel by the name of *Roger Stewart* being documented, either in New York or Philadelphia, between the years 1852-1854. And the U. S. Immigration Service reported no records for arrivals at New York prior to 1897. All their papers had been destroyed by fire.

The New York "Marine Register" for 1857 did carry this helpful notation: "Roger Stewart—Capt. Scolfield. Class A 1 ½, 1066 tons, draft 20, 2 checks, wood-oak & hackmatack, fastenings iron & copper, built 1852 in Brunswick, metalled Jan. 1856. Owner, the captain, full model." We seemed to be on the right trail as the ship's manifest, on file in the National Archives, listed our *Roger Stewart* at "1066 48/95 tons burthen."

Then in the Library of Congress this little item was discovered, tucked away on the back page of the New York *Daily Times* for

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1. The Junction City *Republic* of May 14, 1953, began its story of the reunion as follows:

"The largest crowd ever to attend the annual Gfeller reunion, assembled in the Junction City Municipal Auditorium Sunday, May 10, when approximately 350 members and friends of the family gathered to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the Gfeller family in the United States.

"Peter Gfeller and his wife, Anna Marie, and their 11 children, ages ranging from 17 years to six months, came to this country on the ship 'Roger Stewart,' landing at the Port of New York on Sunday, May 29, having sailed from Antwerp 38 days before. Peter Gfeller and his wife had come from Switzerland, and first settled in the State of Illinois, just west of Chicago. . . ."

May 30, 1853: "Arrived Sunday, May 27 [May 29?] . . . Ship Roger Stewart (of Brunswick) Skofield, Antwerp, 38 ds., mdse. and 41 passengers to Perkins & Delano."

Brunswick seemed to indicate the state of Maine, rather than Georgia, and the search turned toward the customs house in Portland. Here again the desired records had been destroyed by fire. They had no data on vessels built within that area prior to 1869. But a near-by "marine detective," whose hobby included the examination of old registers compiled by Lloyds of London, established the fact that the Skolfield yard in Brunswick had produced the "*Mayflower*" we were trying to locate. Though this hobbyist also had an album of sailing ship pictures, not one of his 800 captions made any reference to the *Roger Stewart*.

We couldn't understand why the name of our ship failed to appear in the records of the Union navy—along with the *Ino*, *Pampero*, *Morning Light*, *Nightingale*, and all the other vessels that had been rushed into the blockading squadrons, to bottle up the South. That is, until a yellowed clipping from the Brunswick *Telegraph* came to light. It was printed on May 11, 1860. It seems that the *Roger Stewart* had sailed from Mobile, with a load of cotton, bound for Liverpool. All went well until she was a little south of Cape Hatteras. A severe gale was encountered, a leak was discovered and the ship went down, head foremost—never to be recovered.

A final letter of inquiry, this time to the Pejepscot Historical Society at Brunswick, brought a beautifully written letter in longhand from its treasurer, to prove how friendly those Easterners can really be. In part she said:

The old Skolfield shipyard is in North Harpswell, about five miles from here. Nothing is left of it but the old blacksmith shop. Mr. George Skolfield, a great grandson of Master George Skolfield lives on the old farm, across the road from the shipyard. His wife tells me that Master George was the builder of ships and not a sea captain. She said that they had papers telling about the building of the ROGER STEWART and the material that went into the building of it. She said Master George owned $\frac{2}{3}$ of the ship and his son Alfred made early voyages in it as Captain. So he was Captain probably when your ancestors came to this country. *In his home here in town is an oil painting of the ship ROGER STEWART.* Our photographer Mr. Stephen Merrill, in 1949 made a photographic copy of this ship ROGER STEWART, the old shipyard, and of Master George and of Captain Alfred. He says he has the plates and could furnish you with copies 6 x 10 at \$1.00 each.

And that was how we cracked the case of the missing immigrant ship, measuring 180 by 36 by 18, that housed 421 passengers for 38 days, including the family of 13 Gfellers, their two maid servants, and a man—back in 1853.