

Service, Speed, Style ... and Steerage

BY MIKE FIELD

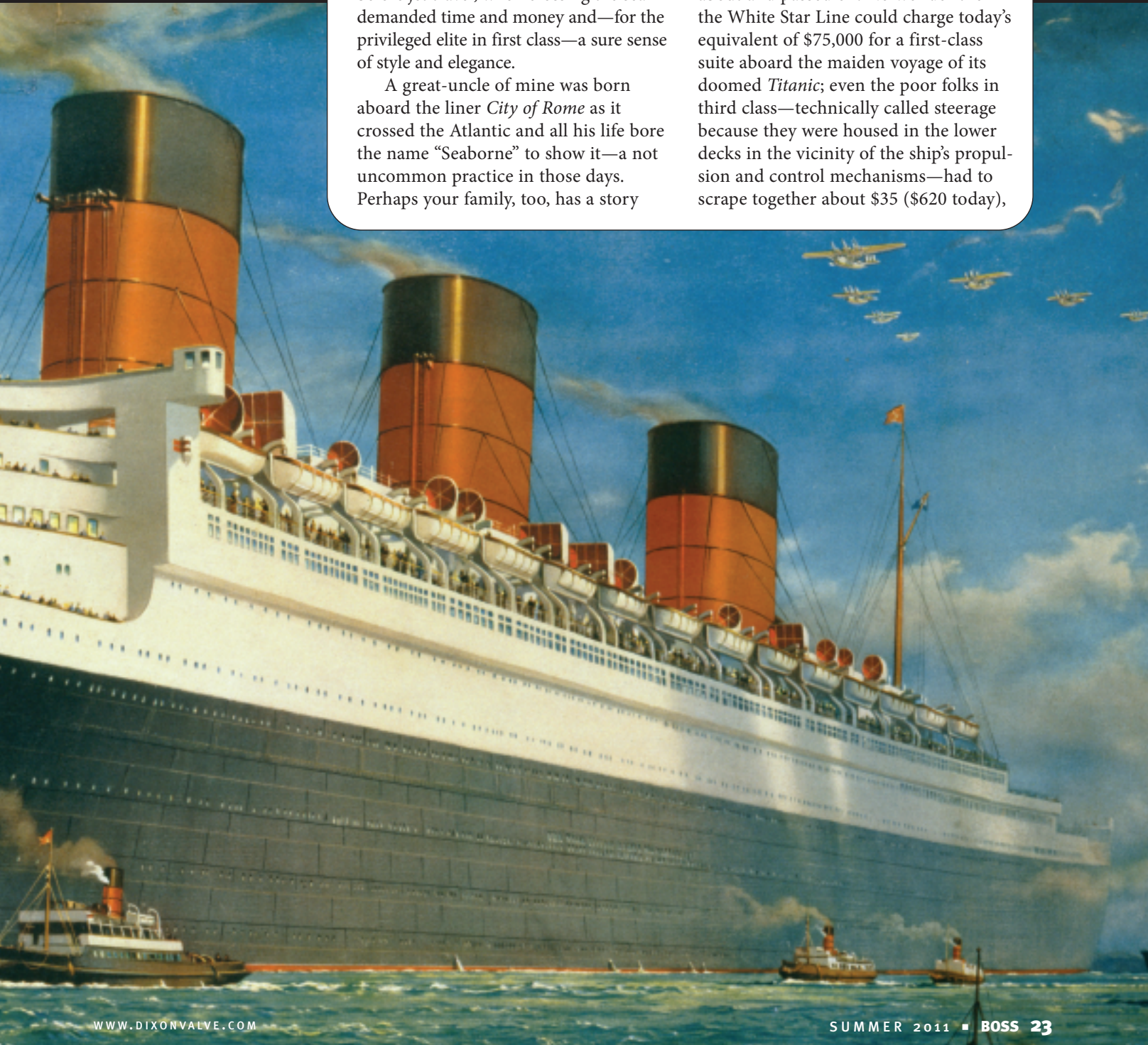
Seventy-five years ago it was transport,
not cruising, that kept the great ships afloat



LISTEN... in the roll and lap of the ocean's waves you can hear the names of that bygone era of the mid-1800s to early 1900s: the *Mauretania* and *Lusitania*, the *Oceanic* and *Europa*, *Queen Mary* and the *Normandie*, the *Olympic* and her ill-fated sister, the *Titanic*. They were among the great ocean liners in the age of steam, before jet travel, when crossing the sea demanded time and money and—for the privileged elite in first class—a sure sense of style and elegance.

A great-uncle of mine was born aboard the liner *City of Rome* as it crossed the Atlantic and all his life bore the name "Seaborne" to show it—a not uncommon practice in those days. Perhaps your family, too, has a story

about one of the great ships and someone who made a passage to a new life in one. For many, those stories are not of teacups and caviar, but rather cramped quarters, seasickness and discomfort. Whether above the promenade deck or below it, those voyages were an event to be remembered and talked about and passed on. No wonder then the White Star Line could charge today's equivalent of \$75,000 for a first-class suite aboard the maiden voyage of its doomed *Titanic*; even the poor folks in third class—technically called steerage because they were housed in the lower decks in the vicinity of the ship's propulsion and control mechanisms—had to scrape together about \$35 (\$620 today),





Previous page: Illustration of the *Queen Mary* ocean liner. This page, left to right: The main dining room of the *Titanic*, the largest ship of its day; an advertising poster for the Cunard Star Line, featuring details of the *Queen Mary*'s layout; the *Mauretania* in dry dock in Southampton in 1922; today's massive *Allure of the Seas*, with its 16 decks, and space for 6,300 passengers.



the equivalent of two or more weeks' wages to book passage.

But steerage, in fact, was where the money was.

Although the great ship lines never let on, the one-way steerage class passengers bound for the Americas to fill an unquenchable thirst for abundant cheap labor were the ocean liner's bread-and-butter. Typically the ships carried two or three times the number of third-class passengers as those in first—and often in cramped, austere and uncomfortable conditions. Earlier, in the 19th century, third-class passengers slept packed together in immense dormitories (which is why the steamship *Adriatic* could transport 50 passengers in first class and more than 800 below decks in steerage). But by the second decade of the new century steerage passengers were housed in compact cabins with bunks, cold running water and toilets; daily meals were provided in a common dining area. White Star Line's three great "Olympic-class" sisters—*Olympic*, *Titanic*, *Britannic*—even had a third-class common area with its own piano, though steerage entertainment was left strictly to the passengers' own making.

Yet nearly 100 years later it is the starched white collars, the Worth gowns and air of assured entitlement that came

with first-class passage that still draw our fascinated attention. Here is the last meal the first-class passengers aboard the *Titanic* ate before hearing an evening concert, wandering off to bed and ultimately claiming the majority of the spaces in the lifeboats: oysters and Beluga caviar followed by cream of barley soup; a third course of poached salmon steaks then filet mignon in wine; next sauteed duck breast with figs chased with a lemon sorbet to clear the palate; finally a roast guinea hen with raspberries and a Belgian endive salad to conclude. After the *Titanic*'s great tragedy in 1912, the number of lifeboats, the height of the interior watertight bulkheads and the strength of the ships' hulls all changed. However the elegance, sophistication, fine dining and glamour remained.

Ocean liners, designed to take on the seas in all seasons and all weather, look distinctly different than the floating behemoths that are the modern cruise ship. This year the cruise industry expects to book 16 million passengers worldwide in ships like the \$1.4 billion *Allure of the Seas*, which entered service last December carrying 6,300 passengers on 16 decks with a 1,400-seat theater, ice skating rink and its own Starbucks. The emphasis in these ships is on grand open spaces, exte-

Touching History

Not forgotten, and not entirely gone, the great ocean liners of the past—or parts of them—may still be seen in various forms here and there. Although most great ships typically have a life span of only decades before being overcome by fatigue and newer technology, there are about three dozen classic ocean liners still around today. Some are floating, such as the very early *S.S. Great Britain* (1843), now a maritime heritage site in Bristol, England, or tourist attractions like the *RMS Queen Mary*, famously converted to a hotel and conference center in Long Beach, Calif. One of the greatest of the ocean liners—the *S.S. United States*,

last holder of the Blue Riband award—is tied up in Philadelphia while volunteers attempt to raise millions to refurbish her. Some are laid up and out of service and threatened with likely deconstruction for scrap. About a dozen from the 1950s and '60s are still actively sailing as cruise ships in smaller markets focusing on a more intimate passenger experience. Although all of the great coal-burning four-funnel liners have been sunk or scrapped, you still can visit the beautifully hand-carved, oak-paneled dining room from the *Olympic* at the White Swan Hotel in Alnwick, England. —MIKE FIELD



rior cabins with windows and, increasingly, their own balconies, and a

plethora of shops, theaters, pools, restaurants and other amenities. When asked by *The New York Times* recently what cruise passengers desire most, Royal Caribbean President and Chief Executive Officer Adam Goldstein answered simply: “Options, options, variety, variety.” To accommodate their customers’ near-constant need for distraction, modern cruise ships locate almost all their common areas and most of their cabins in the unconstrained space above decks, giving them the peculiar appearance of floating condominiums stacked into the sky.

The classic ocean liner, by contrast, features a distinct hull, typically painted black and high in freeboard, which is the distance from the waterline to deck level. Many of the cabins and public spaces are thus contained within the hull itself, making them smaller, with lower ceilings, and giving them small stout portholes rather than large flimsy windows, which would easily wash out and flood a ship in rough weather. Here again, form follows function, and what

most differentiates life aboard the great classic liners from the cruise ships of today was the relative lack of diversion provided to the passengers.

Ocean liners were big ships going somewhere at great speeds with purpose. By today’s standards, the entertainment options offered by the ship’s management were scarce, and for the most part, passengers were expected to amuse themselves. This they typically did by writing letters or keeping journals; reading in the ship’s well-stocked lending library; smoking, playing cards and gambling in the men’s lounge; listening to the ship’s orchestra (usually consisting of a piano and small string section); and dining, drinking and dancing at elaborate formal evening soirees. There may have been a small indoor pool, more suitable for plunging than lap swimming, and a gymnasium with the latest in modern exercise equipment. There was shuffleboard and deck quoits, which is a British-invented game in which rope rings are tossed at a stationary peg. In fair weather there was shooting practice at clay targets off the ship’s stern. And for many passengers the highlight of a crossing was simply strolling the promenade deck, or occupying a well-placed deck chair to

watch the ocean roll endlessly by.

Every trip aboard an ocean liner was made to feel like a unique and special occasion. Yet beneath it all lay a kind of steady routine. In her 24-year career, the *Olympic*—when not called into wartime service as a troop transport ship—plied the Atlantic transit on a four-week cycle. It started with a seven-day voyage from Southampton to New York, followed by 3 ½ days to restock and board new passengers, then a longer return trip with additional stops at Plymouth and Cherbourg before reaching Southampton. Again a 3 ½-day turnaround was required before beginning the next voyage. Marvels of industrial age technology, with miles of cabling, pipes, and wiring of incredible complexity, the real miracle for these grand ships is that for so many journeys, life on board was quiet and uneventful.

It was almost enough to make one forget the great risk that any sea voyage entails. “When anyone asks me how I can best describe my experience in nearly 40 years at sea, I merely say, uneventful,” remarked the man who first commanded the *Olympic*. A year later, E.J. Smith would sail out of Southampton, and into the pages of history ... as captain of the *Titanic*. ■

Crossing or Cruising?

What is important to recognize is that the great vessels of that bygone era were ocean liners, not cruise ships. They were traveling to a destination with purpose, often carrying valuable cargo in addition to their passengers. British liners contracted with His Majesty’s government to carry the mail could use the prefix RMS or Royal Mail Ship—both the *Lusitania* and the *Titanic* used the RMS prefix and went down with mail aboard.

Speed, then, became an important component of a ship’s reputation. For more than 100 years, starting in 1838, an unofficial

accolade known as the Blue Riband was awarded to the passenger liner crossing the Atlantic Ocean in regular service with the record highest speed. First to claim the title was the paddle wheel steamship *Sirius*, which traveled from New Jersey to Ireland in 18 days at an average speed of 8 knots. By 1952, the last winner—the *S.S. United States*—was making the trip in three days, 12 hours, 12 minutes, at nearly 35 knots (about 40 mph). In the ’teens and 1920s most of the great ocean liners plying the Atlantic were making the passage in about five days’ time.

—MIKE FIELD