



The MV Sloterdijk, a passenger freighter in 1959.



Above: Barbara L. Benson looks through the Captain's binoculars westward to America.



Left: Barbara L. Benson in 1959 on her first trip to America. She would later move here permanently.

A Passage to America

BARBARA L. BENSON REMINISCES ABOUT HER FIRST VOYAGE TO AMERICA

ON NOVEMBER 23, 1959, the MV Sloterdijk, a passenger freighter of the Holland America Line, sailed from the docks at Antwerp in Belgium headed for New York. It was the last crossing that the smaller vessels made before winter storms made the Atlantic too dangerous for them. I was one of the 12 passengers booked in the comfortable on deck cabins. Traveling with the mother of a friend who was already living in New York, we were the only Europeans among Americans who had been on cost-conscious tours of the continent. It was my first voyage to America.

There were no frills—just books, some movies, good conversation, and good food. The service was impeccable. There was little protocol, and the passengers enjoyed frequent visits to the Bridge, chatting with the captain and his officers. That was, until we were about three days out. Passage along the Scheldt and Westerschelde channels, out to the North Sea, past the Straits of Dover and into the English Channel had been uneventful. But as

we headed out into the Atlantic the skies became grayer and the seas more ominous. We were soon pitching into high waves and the china and chairs were sliding around in the dining saloon. With only cautious forays from our cabins, we survived about 48 hours of these turbulent seas.

Being young, I had little fear and occasionally watched from inside the Bridge as the bow dipped into and rose above the waves. I did have some nausea, and a kind steward brought me soda crackers, assuring me that this was the cure for seasickness—that I should nibble a few of them before getting up in the morning. He was right, and to this day, I often find soda crackers a simple antidote for a queasy stomach.

We thankfully emerged from the rough seas and sailed the calmer waters of the Gulf Stream until we saw landfall, a little south of Newfoundland. We hugged the New England coastline, and out from Nantucket were alerted of our proximity to the sunken wreck of the Italian liner Andrea Doria, which had collided with the Stockholm on

July 25, 1956. On the evening of December 4 we sailed through The Narrows and into New York Harbor. The night before there had been a merry Captains dinner ending in a flourish of Baked Alaska and Champagne.

As we anchored for the night, the lights of Manhattan sparkled up ahead of us. I had never seen anything like it. I was filled with a mixture of excitement and apprehension for my future experiences. On Saturday the 5th of December 1959, in a morning haze, we weighed anchor and sailed up the river to our port in Hoboken, New Jersey. The Statue of Liberty stood steadfastly on her plinth ahead of us. The passenger freighters did not dock at the West Side piers where the great ocean liners arrived with greater ceremony. I had arrived in America not on one of those luxury liners, and not in steerage, as so many millions did, but on a little ship that provided comfortable and safe passage to a new and amazing world. U