

GRACE LINE "SANTAS"

by
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A highlight of a vacation trip to Barquito was visiting one of the Grace Line "Santa" ships on a day that it called to unload passengers and cargo and load copper. On that day of arrival we would gaze at the horizon in anticipation of spotting the "spec" in the distance and anxiously watched as the ship made its way toward the harbor, eventually turning slowly as it dropped anchor. Soon afterward, we headed to the pier for a ride out to the ship on one of the launches; *Andes* or *Potrerrillos* (actually a mini-tug). Once alongside we would climb up the gangway and make our way onto to the ship where one of the first activities was a visit to the barber shop. There we would buy American candy -- a rare treat in Chile--often walking away with boxes of Baby Ruth, Milky Way and other goodies. The day would be spent pretending we were passengers and often having lunch or dinner aboard.

But the real enjoyment of these "Santa" ships was a trip to the United States. We would arrive in Barquito on one of the track cars, board the ship and sail up the West Coast of South America to such ports as Antofagasta, Callao, Puna, Buenaventura, through the Panama Canal and on to New York. This was an adventurous voyage for us kids. At sea we would swim in the pool, play deck games and eat snacks in the Verandah. A good vantage point on the flying bridge of the ship allowed us to view all the activities on the bridge as the ship entered a port and also provided a good view of the cargo operations. This was all before and after tours of the cities and towns the ship visited. After Panama the ship was at sea for five days and often "cabin fever" set in. Passengers were anxious to see a sight of land. The final excitement was entering New York harbor and glimpsing the first view of the Empire State Building and other skyscrapers.

The ships we traveled on in the late 1940s to the 1960s were combination passenger cargo liners or combos. They were called combos because they carried more than the 12 passengers (that freighters often carried) but were not considered passenger ships since freight was their major business. They carried up to 52 passengers and were often referred to as the "52s". Their history dates to the end of World War II when the US Navy halted the building of C-2 category supply ships. They convinced Grace Line to take over the construction despite the company's reluctance. Grace Line felt that the South American trade would demand larger ships, but the price for the uncompleted ships (the hulls had been constructed) was too good to refuse. The nine ships were designed by Gibbs and Cox naval architects who later designed the ocean liner *United States* and had designed the Grace Line passenger ships *Santa Rosa* and *Santa Paula*. The interiors of the "52s" were designed by Dorothy Marckwald and had a "club like art deco" style.

Six of the nine vessels were constructed in Wilmington, North Carolina and were used for the West Coast of South America trade. They were the *Santa Barbara*, *Santa Maria*, *Santa Isabel*, *Santa Margarita*, *Santa Cecilia*, and *Santa Luisa*. The other three virtually identical sisters (*Santas Monica*, *Clara* and *Sofia*) were build by the Federal yards in New Jersey and operated only in the Caribbean. These combo liners entered service in 1946 and 1947. The ships were attractively designed with all first class outside cabins--all with windows not portholes--a lounge, bar, veranda cafe, outdoor swimming pool, outdoor movies and were air conditioned (except for the crews quarters).

In the late 1960s some of the Santas were sold to companies who used them to transport military cargo to Vietnam, sailing from San Francisco. By 1971 all nine of combo ships had met their fate at the breakers. Grace Line build replacement passenger combo vessels in 1963/64, but they never sailed south of Peru while operated by Grace. These were the *Santas Maria, Magdalena, Mercedes* and *Mariana* and were referred to as the "M" ships. Grace sold their maritime operations to a Greek firm in 1969 who named their shipping company Prudential Grace. The "M" ships were transferred to San Francisco and operated on an around South America service through the Panama Canal, to ports on the East Coast of South America, through the Strait of Magellan and up the West Coast to Los Angeles, San Francisco and Vancouver. The company was sold to the American Delta Line in the late 1970s and the ship's stack colors were returned to the green, white and black of the Grace Line. The "M" ships became popular and had full passenger and cargo loads. The end came in 1984 when the ships were laid up and then broken up in 1987. The only survivor was the *Santa Mercedes*, which sails today as the training ship *Patriot State* operated by the Massachusetts Maritime Academy. It is the only former Grace Line combo ship left. So ended the history of these fine "Santa" ships, which we fondly remember.

I would appreciate any pictures of the "Santa" ships, particularly interior views and also any 8mm or 16mm movies. I will be pleased to pay for copying and mailing.