

A Tale of Two Ships

Researched by Trail End State Historic Site Superintendent Cynde Georgen

On October 26, 1919, twenty-two year old Rosa-Maye Kendrick posed for the cameras on the busy docks of Philadelphia's Hog Island Shipyard. Wearing a stylishly wide hat and holding a massive bouquet of red roses, she stood next to a net-encased champagne bottle. A few minutes later, she picked up the bottle and smashed it against the side of Hull No. 1500, a ship henceforth to be known as the SS *Sundance*.



Rosa-Maye Kendrick at Hog Island, 1919 (Hoff Collection, TESHS)

Hull No. 1500 was originally supposed to be named the SS *Cockspur*, but the name was changed to *Sundance* while she was being built, in honor of Wyoming's work in the World War One Liberty Loan drives. Rosa-Maye was chosen to christen the ship because she was the daughter of a Senator from Wyoming.

Rosa-Maye received her official invitation to act as sponsor for the *Sundance* on October 13, 1919. The christening was supposed to have taken place just nine days late – on October 22 – but owing to the fact that Rosa-Maye and her party hadn't yet reached Philadelphia from Wyoming, the ship had to stay on the way for three extra days.

Because of the delay, Senator Kendrick was unable to attend the launch due to his required presence in the halls of Congress. Instead, Rosa-Maye was joined by her mother, Eula Wulfjen Kendrick, her cousin Eula Williams and friend Winifred Stevens (both of Sheridan), Grace Arnold of Birney, Montana, and a variety of political acquaintances and dignitaries from Wyoming, Ohio and Pennsylvania. On November 3, 1919, *The Sheridan Enterprise* reported on the grand event:

The christening party assembled at Philadelphia and proceeded in automobiles to the Hog Island yards where they were greeted by Vice-President Wood of the ship

corporation and Mr. Frederick Morris of Cody, Wyoming, authorized agent of the shipping board. After a brief visit at what is known as the exposition room where numerous interesting features of the wonderful achievements of Hog Island are set forth graphically, the party proceeded to the huge way, upon which the Sundance was awaiting its christening. The platform surrounding the bow of the vessel was decorated with bunting and American flags and just before the word for the launching was given, Miss Kendrick was presented with a beautiful bouquet of American Beauty roses.

Although the heavy freighter slipped off the way into the water in approximately sixty-two seconds, Miss Kendrick delivered a vigorous blow with the christening bottle just after it began to move and before it got out of reach.

Following the christening, the party was taken on a tour of the yards, seeing them first from the land side and later from the water side in a shipping board yacht. Then a duplicate of the Sundance, the Chickasaw, which had made its trial trip only the day before, was visited.

THE SS SUNDANCE

The *Sundance* was a cargo steamer, part of the backbone of the U.S. Merchant Marine fleet prior to World War Two. These sturdy cargo boats were known as Hog Island Class A ships, and 110 of them were built between 1918 and 1920. All were built by the American International Shipbuilding Company at Hog Island, Pennsylvania (now part of the Philadelphia Airport, located along the Delaware River).



SS *Sundance* leaving the way, Hog Island, 1919 (Hoff Collection, TESHHS)

The *Sundance* was the sixty-second vessel of this type built at Hog Island. The yard was just a little over a year old when Rosa-Maye was there, the first ship having been launched there in August 1918 by Mrs. Woodrow Wilson.

At the time, Hog Island was the world's largest shipyard, with fifty "ways" - the timbered structures upon which ships are built. The ships from Hog Island were built for the United States Shipping Board (USSB) Emergency Fleet Corporation. After construction, these vessels were placed under control of the USSB.

At the time of the christening, the *Sundance* was one hundred percent complete as far as hull construction went; her machinery installation and outfitting was in excess of eighty percent finished. Less than two months later, she was completely finished. The SS *Sundance* was delivered to the USSB on December 15, 1919.

Here are some of the *Sundance's* vital statistics:

- She had over 625,000 steel rivets in her.
- There were no less than 17,389 separate pieces of steel used in her construction.
- She measured 410 feet long, 46 feet wide and 27.5 feet deep.
- Her Gross Registered Tonnage was 5,590, and she had 373,220 cubic feet of cargo space.
- Her normal crew consisted of 45 men.
- She had an average speed of 8-10 knots (top speed of 11.5 knots when fully loaded), powered by a three-boiler, oil-burning turbine engine turning at 3,380 revolutions per minute.
- She could store 347,579 gallons of oil onboard, which was good because when she was under way, she burned 9,000 gallons every twenty-four hours.

(Incidentally, the "Hoagie" sandwich originated at Hog Island, where it was a favorite food of the Hog Island shipbuilders. Good thing they didn't call it the "Hoggie!")

Like many Merchant Marine ships, the *Sundance* did not stay under the control of any one company for very long. She went from cargo line to cargo line. Prior to World War Two, she was in service to no fewer than six cargo lines:

- The USSB first allocated the *Sundance* to the Ward Line, which was attempting to operate a cargo route from the U.S. to Spain and Brazil.
- In February 1921, the *Sundance* was operated by the New York & Cuba Mail Steamship Company based in New York City. (Rosa Maye was advised by a friend that "her ship"

had sailed from Hamburg, Germany to Balboa, Spain, thence to Santander, Spain, and onto Rio de Janeiro in South America).

- Unfortunately, that route didn't seem to be a paying one, so the vessel began working the route between Tampa, Florida, and Rotterdam, The Netherlands, operated by the Shore Line Company of Jacksonville, Florida.
- In July 1921 the USSB allocated the *Sundance* to the Tampa Interocean Line, which in turn assigned the vessel to the American Palmetto Line of Charleston, South Carolina.
- The USSB sold the *Sundance* to Charleston's Carolina Steamship Company, but she was soon turned back to the USSB.
- The *Sundance* went back to the American Palmetto Line, which was entrusted to the South Atlantic Steamship Company of Savannah, Georgia, after the Carolina Steamship Company went out of business.
- The ship was bought by the South Atlantic Steamship Company in 1928 and her name remained SS *Sundance*. The tonnage was changed to 5183 GRT and 3181 NRT.

In 1941, the Alcoa Shipping Company purchased the *Sundance* and changed her name to *Alcoa Banner*. Like most American-flagged vessels, the *Alcoa Banner* was requisitioned by the War Shipping Administration (WSA) for war time service, carrying Army cargo to Europe and other locations during the Second World War. She saw heavy service during this time, undergoing several enemy attacks:

- In May 1942, the *Alcoa Banner* was bombed while sailing as part of a convoy from Reykjavik to Murmansk in the North Sea. While she was damaged by near-misses, other ships in the convoy weren't so lucky; eight were sunk. She made a second North Sea run in September of the same year.
- On July 7, 1943, she was part of a convoy operating off the coast of Brazil when a German U-Boat attacked. Though not torpedoed, the *Alcoa Banner* was struck by another damaged ship, the *James Robertson*.
- In 1944, Seaman First Class Thomas Catlett was serving on the *Alcoa Banner* as an armed guard. He recalled one foggy night when the ship joined a lot of other ships waiting for the fog to lift. After several hours they were able to move away and found to their horror that the surrounding ships "were not our ships." They escaped successfully
- That same year, the *Alcoa Banner* was one of 320 ships used to carry men and vehicles from the United Kingdom to the beaches at Normandy.
- The *Alcoa Banner* was heavily damaged when German bombers attacked Antwerp, Belgium, in January 1945. Two of her sailors died in the attack.

The *Alcoa Banner* stayed afloat, but she wasn't very serviceable. At the end of the war, the U.S. Army turned the vessel back over to the War Shipping Administration, which loaded the ship

with German mustard gas and scuttled her off the coast of Norway in May 1946 (research is ongoing to determine the disposition of this gas, whether it is still in the ship, or if it has escaped into the ocean).

THE SS JOHN B. KENDRICK

The Kendricks were involved – sort of – with another Merchant Marine vessel. On November 22, 1943, the SS *John B. Kendrick* (Hull No. 2530) was launched from the Oregon Ship Building Corporation in Portland, Oregon (interestingly, her hull was laid down on November 3, 1943, the tenth anniversary of her namesake's death).



SS *John B. Kendrick*, 1943 (Private Collection)

One of about 2,700 of the slow cargo ships built for the U.S. Maritime Commission between 1939 and 1945, the *John B. Kendrick* was known as a "Liberty Ship." She was 441 feet long and could carry over nine thousand tons of cargo at a top speed of eleven knots.

Described as "ugly ducklings" because of their unattractive design, the Liberty Ships nonetheless formed the backbone of America's emergency fleet during World War Two. The *John B. Kendrick* was leased out to the American Mail Line of Seattle, Washington, one of over a hundred shipping companies operating America's "Victory Fleet."

Like the *Sundance*, the *John B. Kendrick* was sold shortly after the end of the Second World War. She then sailed for sixteen years under the Italian flag, first with Pietro Bibolini and later Transoceanica Genovese. In 1963, the *John B. Kendrick* was sold to the First Steamship Company of Taipei, Taiwan, which changed her name to the *Ever Protector*. The ship sailed under the Taiwanese flag until she was scrapped in 1967.

Though they were only twenty-four years old, the Liberty Ships were known for their poor construction and many were scrapped around this same time (when built, their life expectancy was only five years). While some continue to function as floating docks, canneries and visitor attractions, very few Liberty Ships, if any, are still in operation today.



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