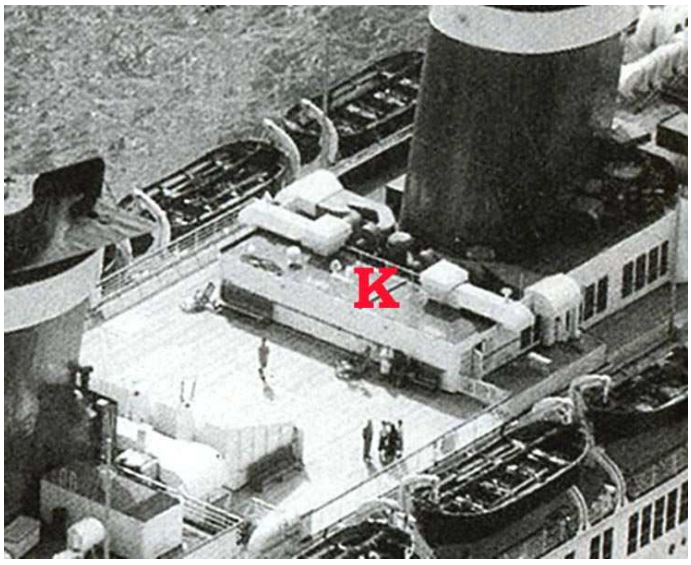
AMERICA'S Kennels

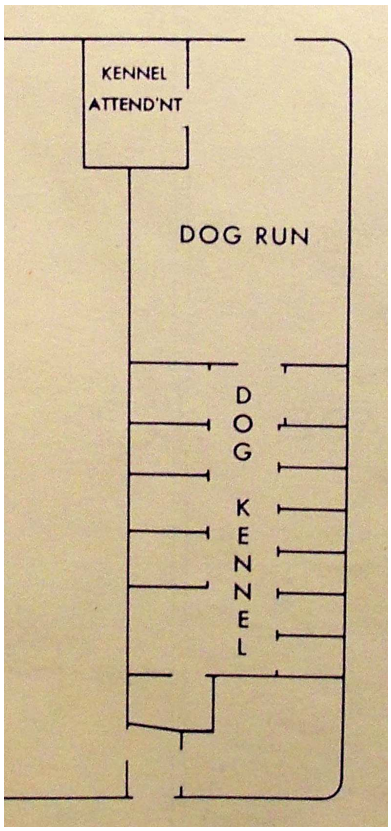
Where Pampered Pooches Once Lounged in the Lap of Luxury

In the heyday of trans-Atlantic travel, canines were provided comfortable quarters, exercise and 'relief' areas, and expert care on ocean liners like the SS AMERICA. It was hardly a dog's life, in the classic connotation of that phrase.

AMERICA's kennels were designed by P.V.G. Mitchell, a vice president with United States Lines who was also a champion dog breeder. In addition, the official veterinarian of the American Kennel Club (AKC) assisted in the creation of suitable quarters for the ship's four-footed guests.



The kennels were located on Sun Deck, the AMERICA's uppermost deck, between the ocean liner's two smokestacks in the area marked by a red K on the photo to the right.



Twenty-four individual kennel compartments were provided; each one equipped with plush bedding and a water dish. Walking areas were tiled, and a porcelain dog bath, a grooming table and a fully stocked medical chest were located immediately adjacent to the pets' enclosures.

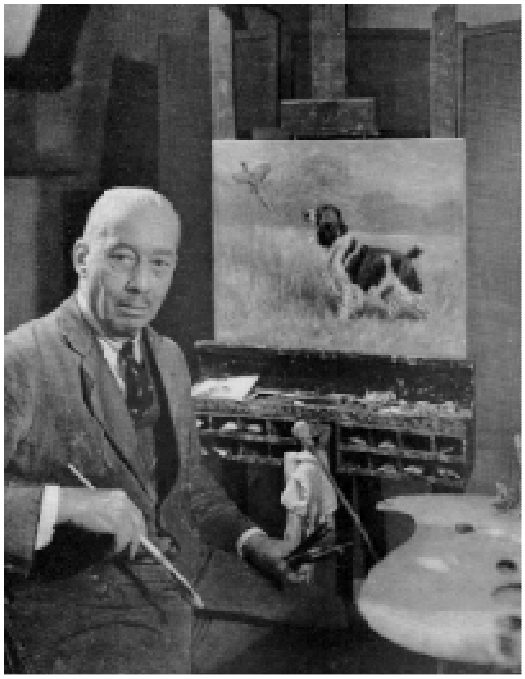
A large, wire-enclosed exercise area was included in AMERICA's kennel area. Each dog was exercised four times a day in this area, which had been thoughtfully provided with a large sand box that included a tree stump. Sparse quarters for the ship's kennel master were also provided in this area, thus assuring constant attention and instant care.

United States Lines was noted for its high-class treatment of animals. A highly qualified kennel master on each of its liners kept daily records of each animal's temperature and pulse, and noted any irregularities. In 1940, when the AMERICA first went into operation, pet passage, one way, cost fifty dollars. That was roughly 30% of what a 3rd Class, one-way class passage cost at the time.

The occupants of these canine cabins could be visited during the day by their owners and taken out on the open deck; weather permitting. Owners received daily menus of what their pampered pets were going to be fed...luxurious items such as Swedish health bread and broiled Halibut.

During a typical trans-Atlantic voyage, United States Lines could expect a dozen or more dogs to occupy the AMERICA's kennels. Occasionally, they received and honored requests to transport monkeys, cats, birds and once...a small alligator! Reportedly, most of the animals transported onboard the AMERICA and other luxury liners that plied the Atlantic did not get sea sick, in spite of extremely rough weather often experienced during the winter months. But, understandably, primates did exhibit signs of Mal de Mar. Strange as it may seem for a creature that lives in the water...so did the unhappy alligator.

When the AMERICA went into service in 1940, she was considered to be the last word in luxury travel. Her well appointed public spaces were adorned with an impressive and irreplaceable collection of original art work that was largely influenced by the art deco period...as were the ship's streamlined smoke stacks.



Some of America's best known artists of that period of time provided sculptures, paintings, metallic ornamentations and several massive murals; making the AMERICA a virtual floating art museum. Even the ship's kennels featured a series of appropriately themed original paintings.

Mr. Mitchell arranged for Edwin Megargee [right], noted American painter of pedigreed dogs to produce portraits of twenty four AKC champions in the form of nine inch diameter medallions for mounting on the doors of the individual kennel compartments.

Each of these little treasures was signed by the artist. They all had similar sky blue backgrounds and were encased in round 'porthole' frames with clear glass protective covers. Instead of nondescript numbers, the individual quarters for dogs were referred to by the breed depicted on the medallions

Two examples of these artistic items have survived unblemished, almost three quarters of a century since their creation. Complete with original faming, they sold at auction in 2013 for $2,000 and $2,250, respectively and are depicted below. It is not known how many other of these 'medallions of champions' still exist, or their whereabouts.

However, it is believed that these unique pieces of artwork were removed in 1941 when the AMERICA became the troopship WEST POINT, and then were reinstalled when the ship was reconditioned and returned to civilian passenger service in 1946. Then, again in 1964, apparently they were removed once again when the ship was sold foreign. Quite likely at the specific request of Mr. Mitchell.

During World War II, the kennel served as the WEST POINT's armory. Obviously, the kennel compartments were ideally suited for securing small arms when not in use. The dog run area became the ship's auxiliary radio room, where...according to veteran crewmembers...many a crap game took place.

But during the war, there were often dogs and other pets onboard the WEST POINT. Although strictly prohibited by naval regulations, it was not uncommon, once the ship was at sea, for soldiers' mascots that had been smuggled onboard to be discovered. Although the ship's captain could have had these pets destroyed, he usually allowed those in good health to be taken care of by the naval regulation violators...providing they exercised the creatures in the open line handling area one deck below the fantail...and cleaned up afterwards.

The ingenuity and resourcefulness of the American military man reached it zenith when a Great Dane...huge by that breed's standards...was successfully smuggled onboard. Cleverly hidden in a cleaning gear locker by soldier conspirators, this monster of a dog bounded out after a couple of days at sea, surprising a member of the ship's crew only expecting to find mops and buckets.

Restored to its original function in 1946, AMERICA's kennels again hosted 'passenger pets' on numerous Atlantic crossings between 1946 and 1964. Photos such as the one on the left, and others depicting movie stars and their pampered pets were often publicized...to the delight of the steamship lines' publicists.

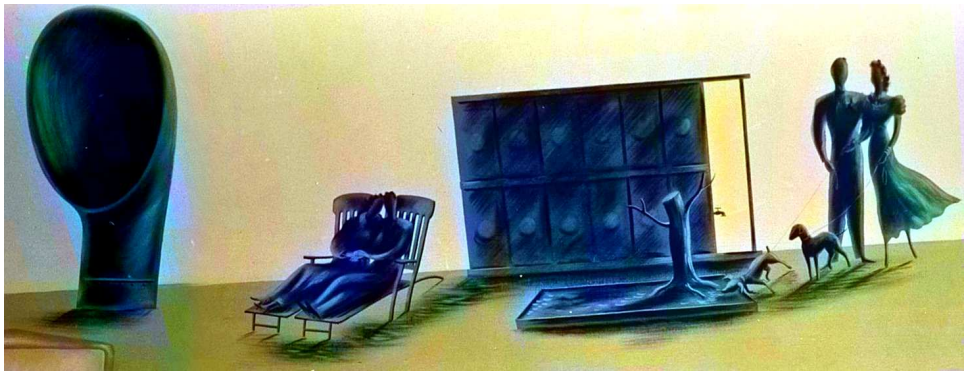
In a lengthy article in the August 1947 issue of Holiday magazine, the ship's kennel master was described as "a stout, frayed sort of man with a refined far-away voice which he seldom used to speak to humans". When questioned about that, he replied: "I keep talking to them because I think they are lonesome up here."

Of course, First Class passengers were allowed to take their pets outside the confinement of the kennel area as long they did not interfere with other passengers. The nearby game deck area, immediately forward of the kennels provided a handy area for walking dogs, when not in use. Or, as this vintage photo indicates, for passenger and pet to lounge together on one of the several wooden benches strategically placed around Sun Deck.

When the AMERICA, renamed AUSTRALIS, returned to service in 1965 as an immigrant ship for Chandris Lines, it is believed the kennel area was utilized for other purposes. There is no record of dogs being cared for by Chandris on long voyages from England to Australia and New Zealand. Most likely, the kennel space was utilized to house air conditioning equipment added to service the ship's expanded public spaces and staterooms.

However, one reminder of the kennels remained in view onboard the ship until the very end. On the overhead of what originally had been the AMERICA's First Class cocktail lounge, Constantin Alajalov, whose work was frequently seen on covers of the *New Yorker* magazine, had created a multi-panel mural.

This fascinating display included multiple, humorous scenes of passengers enjoying a carefree life at sea, plus images of the crew and working areas of the ship not otherwise normally seen by the ship's passengers. One of these composite scenes [below] included representations of the kennels, the sand box and the famous tree stump...being 'investigated' at night. Apparently the stump had captured the imagination of Mr. Alajalov.



The designers and interior decorators of the AMERICA provided many comforts and conveniences for the ship's passengers. None more unusual or thoughtful, perhaps, than the accommodations and associated services furnished for passengers' pets.

Thanks to Mr. Mitchell, United States Lines raised what had been a modest service on its previous ocean liners to a higher standard for those who wished to travel with their pets...and could afford it. It was a quaint and gracious custom that unfortunately has not survived the transition from ocean liner to cruise ship.

'Now and Then' About Pets at Sea

~ NOW ~

Other than service dogs, it is an extremely rare occurrence when a cruise line allows a pet to sail with its master. Today, there is only one ship, QUEEN MARY 2 that is known to have accommodations for pets, and those can only be utilized when that vessel is engaged in trans-Atlantic crossings.

QM2 has a kennel with twelve enclosures for pets, plus a restricted, open deck area where passengers can walk their dogs. There is a kennel master onboard during such voyages, and dog food is provided; albeit probably not of the extravagant nature once seen onboard the AMERICA.

Currently, the cost for a dog's passage, one way, is five to seven hundred dollars; depending on the animal's size. Plus the dogs' vaccines have to meet the strict requirements of the United Kingdom's Pet Travel Scheme. But each pet that...presumably...enjoys that experience gets a QM2 logo coat, a name tag and a personalized crossing certificate.

~ THEN ~

Animals have been transported on passenger ships as far back as 1840, when three cats were quartered on Cunard Lines' BRITANNIA during that vessel's maiden voyage...and perhaps even before then. While domestic dogs were, by far, the most common pets thus accommodated, a variety of other creatures once traveled abroad on ocean liners...including some celebrities.

A performing golden eagle made over twenty trans-Atlantic crossings according to Cunard records. Rin-Tin-Tin, star of thirty-six silent films also made a number of such trips. Perhaps the most unusual animal to make multiple crossings as a passenger, rather than as cargo, was a western movie star named Tony; Tom Mix's famous horse. Tony's hooves were fitted with rubber shoes to prevent slipping on steel gangways and decks.

The kennel onboard the French liner NORMANDIE was built in the base of the ship's aftermost [dummy] funnel. One of the much publicized features associated with that service was the provision of custom-fitted life preservers for the kennel's guests. Also, similar to the practice onboard AMERICA, the NORMANDIE's staff provided daily menus detailing the canine fare...but printed in French...parbleu!

But such stories of sea-going pets did not always end happily. Largely unknown, when the TITANIC went down, there were twelve canines onboard.

Three small, pedigreed pooches survived, thanks to their female owners rushing to the ship's kennel area and insisting on carrying them into lifeboats. The others perished in their kennels, including this trio photographed on a weather deck at the beginning of the TITANIC's fatal voyage.

On a brighter note, there is the story of Chota Peg [Hindustani for 'small drink']. A cocker spaniel, he was the personal pet of John Anderson, one of the senior ship captains that worked for United States Lines and commanded that firm's top ocean liners. Whenever the good captain was transferred from one liner to another, his constant canine companion accompanied him as officials looked the other way, ignoring the steamship lines' strict rules about allowing dogs to be quartered onboard liners anywhere other than in kennels.

Chota Peg led a storied seafarer's life. For fourteen and a half years, between 1943 and 1957, he sailed with Anderson in four different ocean liners, including the SS AMERICA.

During this time, this privileged pet logged over two million nautical miles; mostly staying in Anderson's cabin or adjoining office. Even with all that experience, stormy seas always made him nervous. This true sea-dog seldom went ashore; not even doing so when his master took vacation. Whenever a steward took the dog topside for a walk, Chota Peg 'insisted' on using an elevator instead of stairs.

Appropriately, when Chota Peg passed away, he was onboard the SS UNITED STATES while she was underway in the mid-Atlantic. His little body was wrapped in a traditional canvas shroud and then buried at sea.

Bill Lee

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