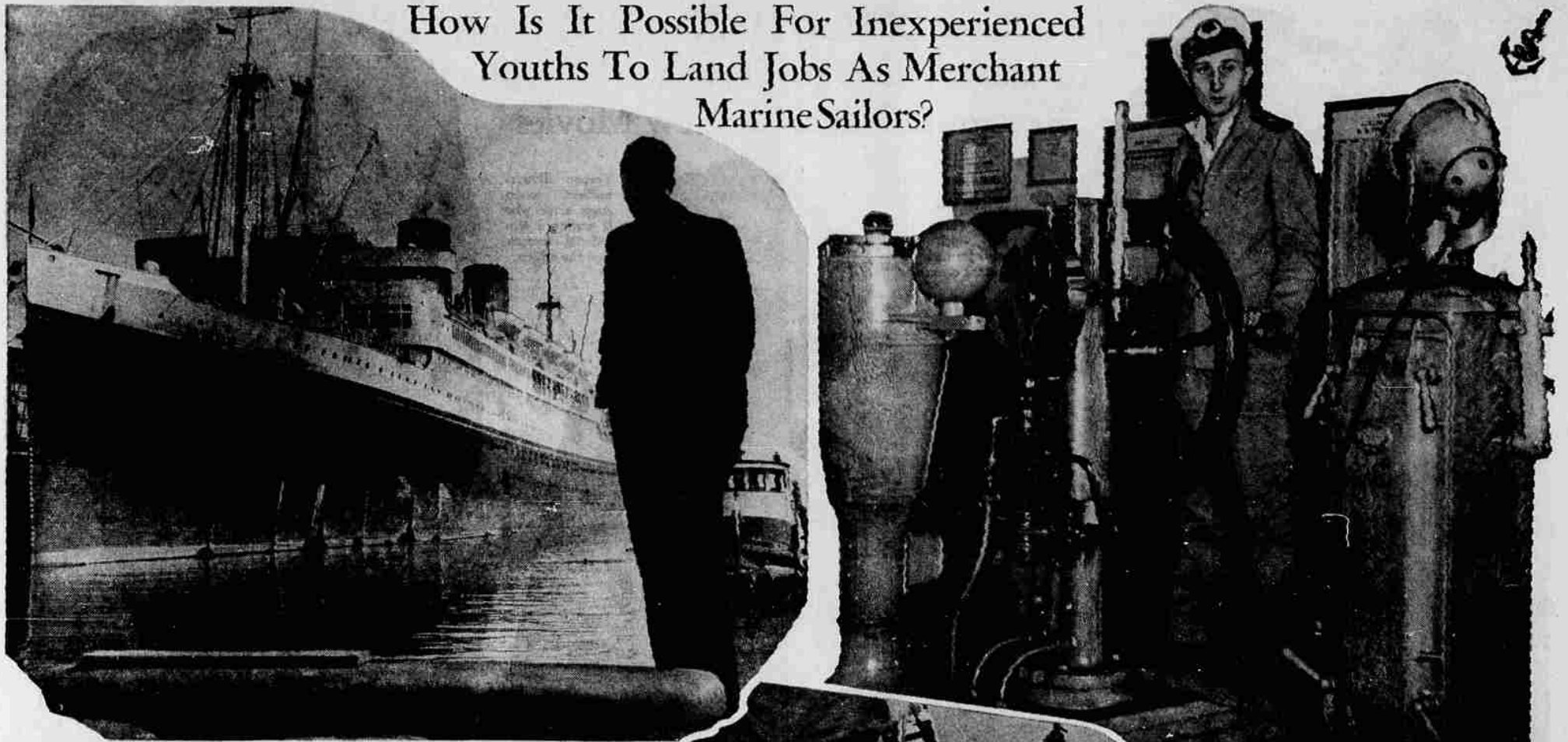


What Is Future Of American Merchant Marine?

How Is It Possible For Inexperienced Youths To Land Jobs As Merchant Marine Sailors?



Editor's Note
The author of this interesting story has requested that his name be withheld as he is now engaged in gathering material along the San Francisco waterfront for another story and believes that should his identity become known his chances of getting the material he seeks would be impaired. This story is written by a youth from a youth's prospective and does not necessarily express the beliefs and opinions of Five Star Weekly magazine.

This picture is symbolic of stories related to the author by young American boys trying to "see the world." Hope is hard to banish.

WHERE will America get her merchant marine officers in the future? This question is now becoming a serious one, even with the present insignificant number of passenger and cargo ships of American registry sailing the seas as compared with those of other world powers. America's merchant marine has remained so small through the years that the few officers needed could be recruited from the Navy, officers' schools, school ships, and from the small number of men who came up through the "hawse-pipe", that is to say, from rank of seamen.

American shippers who sailed the seas 20 years ago are still commanding ships. But what will happen a few years hence, especially if the American merchant marine is increased as it must be to keep pace with the political and economic trend of the times.

There are several pertinent reasons why young Americans do not "go down to the sea in ships", the two principal ones being that, in the first place, it is next to impossible to get a job on a ship and even if he obtained shipboard employment, the American boy, according to statistics, is not sea-minded—at least not permanently so. There is an evanescent, at the time often very definite and determined yearning to sail the seas, but the motivating force is in their desire to see the world and not that they wish to become sailors. Boys of officer calibre invariably engage in some more profitable business ashore, after they have had their fling at seeing the world. Painstaking research proves this beyond the question of a doubt, ship owners say.

THE records of the largest steamship company in the United States over a period of 12 years shows that less than one-half of the young men hired as ordinary seamen in that period stuck to the ship and became licensed officers. This is born out in the records of various other steamship lines. After a few trips at most the young men returned to shore life.

Mindful of the need of training young men for careers at sea, the United States Government enacted a law requiring all passenger ships to carry cadet officers. But this law, meant to encourage young men to go to sea, has been shamefully abused by the shipowners, deteriorating to the place where a cadet's berth is held only by sons of the shipowners' friends or men of influence, that they might have a free trip abroad.

Few, if any, deserving young men who might have carved out a career for themselves at sea today are given the opportunity of obtaining a cadet's berth, the choice being left wholly to the shipowners, with the result that less than one per cent of the cadets hired by the various lines operating passenger ships under American registry have become licensed officers and remained at sea.

In May, 1934, when the various marine unions enforced a virtually closed shop on the shipowners, hiring of crews at the pierheads by shipowners ceased. Today practically every member of a ship's crew must be obtained through their respective union. This eliminated the hiring of ordinary seamen by the shipowners, narrowing the berths open to inexperienced young men down to those of cadets, in some instances minor bellboys, and pursers' clerks, the latter berths being acquired only after months in the home port office and on the docks before a ship could even be hoped for. And that providing the lad got the job at all, which was seldom.

TODAY it is as difficult for a young man to go to sea, perhaps more so, than it is to break into the movies. Not over enthusiastic in the first place, this discouraging condition sends most of those hopeful youths who come in

search of a ship home, cured of their "sea fever." After a few days haunting the waterfront in which they find their chances of going to sea are about equal with their chances of flying to the moon. They watch a few sailings, perhaps, provided they aren't thrown off the dock by some crochety old watchman because they "just look" like they might be looking for a job. Enviously they see the gold-braided, uniformed cadets, the one-trippers, sons of "friends" then, wearily return home to develop a bad taste in their mouths whenever they think of steamship officials, dock watchmen, or hard-boiled company detectives who not only give them no encouragement, but make life miserable for them because they want a job.

The youths fare no better at the union headquarters. Provided they get an opportunity to talk at all, their views on union labor are sound. What was their attitude during the strike? Would they take militant activity in union affairs if taken into the fold? All questions which to a youth of 18 or 20 means very little. The normal American youth is not concerned in these activities.

To the fact being that he is not especially interested in the sea, and that it is made quite clear to him on every hand that he hasn't the remotest chance of getting a berth on one of the ships anyway, it is only natural that he turns elsewhere where there is opportunity and encouragement.

AND just suppose the youth of officer calibre, which means at least a high school graduate, did obtain employment on board ship—as an ordinary seaman, a wiper in the engine room, a bellboy, or even as a cadet. He would be paid from \$30 to \$50 a month, depending upon his job. For the same work ashore he would get twice or three times as much, perhaps more. The temptation is to see what he can of the world, then come ashore and, with his broadened background, obtain more profitable employment.

What then is the solution to the source of officers of the future? Who will sail American ships in the merchant trade? Obviously to offer the American boy something worth-while in a career as a sailor and to give him the opportunity of making good at sea.

After a tour of the San Francisco waterfront, home port for most of the big steamship lines in the trans-Pacific service, questioning young men who still come from every state in the Union seeking a chance to get a job on a ship and see the world, I am convinced there is much material for fine officers among them. I can't help feeling sorry for them because I know they haven't a chance. Perhaps some of them, as the shipowners claim, aren't sea minded, but how does one know when one is not given a chance? I'll wager that under the right conditions there are many more than the "less than one-half of one per cent" that the big line record's show, would stick and become officers.

TALKED to all kinds and types of boys—high school age, high school graduates, university students and graduates, and boys who hadn't the advantages of other than a grammar school training. All of them wanted to see the world, most of them thought they would like to be a ship's captain, purser or chief engineer. A few wanted to make "just one trip." Talking to more than twenty boys in all, without exception they told me that their quest for work on board ship had resulted in complete and dismal failure. They lacked the qualifications to get into the union, and the few jobs still dealt out by shipowners were guarded as a dog guards a bone on which only a few shreds of meat remain. The shipowners barked at them, the unions ignored them, they told me.

"Just try to get a job on a ship and see how far you get," one disillusioned lad, whom I approached after observing him wistfully watching a great liner warp out from the dock, China bound, said to me.

"You've tried to get a ship?" I asked. "Tried!" he exclaimed bitterly. "Why, I came all the way from Elkhart, Indiana, to get a job

on a ship. I've been thinking about it for about four years—from the time I entered high school. I wanted to be a sea captain!" He laughed a disillusioned laugh. "Fine chance! I've haunted the waterfront for six weeks. I stay at the Navy Y. M. C. A. right here on the Embarcadero, and I spend the entire day everyday trying to get a job—even Sundays. But I'm going home tomorrow. I'm not a quitter, but getting a job on a ship is just impossible."

"How did you go about it," I asked him.

"WELL, when I first got to San Francisco, I didn't know a thing about what I was up against. It took me several days to find out how to go about looking for a job on a ship. At first I just walked along the waterfront and wherever I saw a ship at a dock I would go and ask the man at the pier entrance if they needed anyone on the ship. Sometimes they would just tell me to 'scram,' nothing else. Others would just say 'no,' but most of them would tell me that the entire crew was hired at the Union Hall. When I asked them if I could go down and look at the ship, they would always get furious and shout at me like I was a thief about to walk off with the boat."

"Then, I began talking to sailors I met and found that I had been talking to pier watchmen who knew nothing about the jobs on the boats and had nothing whatever to do about them, if they had known. I must go to the Union, they told me. All jobs except a few like cadets, bellboys, and pursers' clerks were hired only through the Union. They all told me, though, that without experience I couldn't join the Union. It began to look discouraging then, but I had lots of hope and thought if I were determined enough I could get a job."

"Well, I went to the Union Hall. It was terribly crowded. I couldn't even get near the window for a long time. When I did finally get there, they asked me for my papers and when I told them I hadn't any experience at sea, they said they didn't take men without experience. I asked him how I could get experience and they just laughed and told me to run along."

"I found out from some of the men that to sign on a ship as an ordinary seaman, I had to have a lifeboat ticket. How did I get that? Well, I had to be an experienced lifeboat man. I went to the United States Coast Guard and took a test. If I passed, I could get a ticket. But how can I get the experience to become familiar with a lifeboat and its equipment if I can't get on a ship without one, I asked them?"

"AND what did they tell you?"

"They said most of the young fellows starting out had some friend who gave them a letter which usually did the trick. That, or have an experienced sailor who knew lifeboats go and apply for a ticket in their name. There were lots of tricks, they told me. In the days before the Union hired all the men, most of the ordinary seamen, like cadets now, got their jobs through pull. Some company official would give them a letter that would get them a lifeboat ticket without any difficulty. They told me nobody in the Deck Department could sign on the ship's articles without one."

"You mean that it is necessary for an ordinary seaman who is not required to have any experience to start to sea, to have a lifeboat ticket showing that he is an efficient lifeboat man? That doesn't make sense," I said.

"Just the same that's the case," the boy told me. He went on. "Well, I thought I'd try the steamship companies, the big passenger lines that carried cadets. At the dock they sent me to the uptown office, where I was told in each case that there was a long waiting list and that there wasn't any chance for me. One man told me that it wouldn't do any good to put my name down on the list as it would be so long before my turn came around that I would be too old to hold a cadet's job."

I TRIED to get a job in the office or on the dock as a freight clerk, hoping to work into the pursers' department on board ship. I couldn't even get to the man who hired men in this department. In his office, his secretary told me there wasn't any opening and wouldn't be any. I was beginning to get discouraged by this time. It looked like it was impossible to get a sailor's job where I could work up to a deck officer and maybe some day be a captain like I'd always dreamed about. I did want to make a trip though. Every time I saw a ship sail I wanted to be on it."

"Well, I tried every passenger line hoping to get a bellboy's job. Mostly, the watchmen didn't even want to let me up to the office to ask about a job. When I would get up, they usually say 'nothing doing' without even looking up. I talked to some stewards and they advised me to go to the Cooks and Stewards Union and try to join up. I waited three days to see the man at union headquarters."

"He asked me a lot of questions, took my name and address, and told me I'd have to be passed on by a committee, or something. I came back next day, and they asked me what

A cadet on the bridge of an American ship. His position is gained only through influence, or "pull", with steamship officials.

I was doing during the last marine strike. If I was strong for unions, and a lot of other questions that I guess I didn't answer satisfactorily, because they told me they couldn't accept me.

"I had been in school during the strike. I never thought much about strikes and unions and politics back in Elkhart. Afterwards, one of the men in the hall told me that if I said I was militantly for the Union I would have passed the committee. Well, I didn't. That was yesterday. Guess I'm all washed up. We read a lot about how hard it is to get into the movies back home, but it couldn't be as hard as it is to get a job on a ship without experience or pull."

I talked to boys from Tennessee, Arizona, Illinois, Wisconsin, Montana, Idaho, and from many Pacific Coast states. Their stories were very much the same. Some stayed longer than others, that was all. One day I saw a young chap with a softness in his hand and a beaming face that could mean only one thing—he had a job! He was just entering the pier gate of a big passenger line. I cornered him and after convincing him that I had nothing to do with the company or the unions, or anyone even remotely connected with the sea, got his story from him. I had to give the boy credit. He learned the ropes and made use of his knowledge.

He came from Oklahoma City, just out of high school, and wanted to make a few trips to sea—to see the world. His experience was exactly like that of the other boys seeking jobs on ships, but he heard the story of how cadets were appointed from friends of the steamship operators or influential shippers—men of prominence. He began plotting. He had gone to school with the son of a prominent Oklahoma oil man, known everywhere in oil circles. Although they were no relation, his name was the same. He went to the San Francisco office of one of the large oil companies, sent his name into the vice-president, with a note that he was the son of the Oklahoma oil tycoon. The vice-president saw him. He did not know the boy's father personally, he said, but some of the other officials did. The boy's straightforward manner appealed to him. He talked to him for half an hour, an hour. When he learned that the boy wanted to make a trip to sea as a cadet, he just reached for his telephone, got hold of a steamship official whom he called by his first name, and before the plotting young Oklahoma man left the office, he had a job. A ship was in. They would make room for him. The magic was waved and he jumped ahead of dozens of names on the waiting list.

HERE was the only boy among the scores of inexperienced young men who come from all over the United States hoping to "get a ship," who got a job, so far as I could find, and it took plotting and deception for him to accomplish his purpose. Conditions are the same in New York, New Orleans, Galveston, San Pedro, Seattle, and other port cities. Among the boys I talked to were those who had tried them all.

True, the government has nothing to say in the matter of hiring and firing in private enterprise, but in the cases of big steamship companies to which the government awards huge mail contracts that amount virtually to subsidizing the line, it might not be amiss if the government took over the employment of cadets, ordinary seamen, and deck boys; eliminate the "politics" in employing them, weed out those who are not of officer calibre or who have no intention of remaining at sea, and require them to have certificates for efficiency as lifeboat men only after they have been trained and have had the proper experience. In this way, every boy would have an equal chance, and fine officer personnel might be encouraged and built up.

Give the American boy half a chance and he won't "give up the ship."