

Chapter 2

Norwegian Shipping

The Atlantic and Arctic oceans border Norway; this closeness has given the Norwegians a long shipping tradition. Of its 125,053 square miles, over 70 percent is uninhabitable, 25 percent is forests, and just 3 percent is suitable for farming or grazing. Norway has always had to rely on its connection with the oceans for growth and has developed what historian Eilif Paulson has called a high degree of “sea mindedness” (1961:2).

Domestically, Norway depended on its fisheries for exports, but it was the repeal of the British Navigation Acts in 1849 that allowed its merchant marine to flourish internationally. Prior to 1849, exports were limited and voyages were short, usually between northern European ports. As domestic and international tonnage rose (148,000 tons in 1815 to over 1 million by 1875), Norway’s Merchant Marine climbed to the third largest in the world, behind the United States and the United Kingdom (Drake, 1969:74). Three tactics not used by other shipping nations contributed to the quick rise of the Norwegian Merchant Marine: Norway’s experienced sailors, the use of old sailing ships like *Catharine*, and the shunning of traditional routes while shifting to bulk cargoes (tramping).

2.1. NORWEGIAN SAILORS

In the late nineteenth century, a typical successful career for a young Norwegian man began at sea before age 20. He usually rose to the rank of master by 25, and then settled in as a merchant by age 40 (Soltow, 1965:24). Young seamen were recruited at regional exchanges or markets where sailors sold their services to the ships’ masters. After

selection, an Article of Agreement was worked out between the two parties for salary and duration of employment. Agreements often were made by the voyage or for the short term generally not exceeding one to three years; only the Master and First Mate were employed longer than the voyage. There was no guarantee of long-term employment in the Norwegian Merchant Marine (United Kingdom Board of Trade Crew Agreements, 1870–1890). Harsh economic situations and unemployment in Norway often led to a large pool of able-bodied seamen from which masters could choose; thus coercion against their will or Shanghai tactics were not needed to fill crews. Poverty often pushed young men into sea service when no other jobs were available. As a result, Norwegian seamen often had very little commitment and they “showed the highest propensity to desert of any national group on sailing vessels” (Fischer, 1994:138–139). The desertion rate was 60 percent in some North American locations, prompting the Norwegian government to state, “It is clear from the record that few Norwegian seamen were especially interested in making a long term commitment to a particular vessel or owner—or indeed, even to a life at sea” (Fischer, 1994:139). Low wages were often to blame for desertion.

The huge labor pools allowed masters to keep seamen’s wages low while still employing the best of them. If one seaman, was lost, another easily replaced him. On average, Norwegian seamen were paid \$9 a month while American seamen wages were as high as \$25 a month (Blegen, 1931:335). As Norway continued to develop into a shipping power, the number of sailors rose from 11,279 in 1835 to over 62,000 by 1878 (Drake, 1960:168; Sætra, 1997:184). These seamen continued to work on sailing ships long after most countries had switched to steam.

2.2. NORWEGIAN SHIPS

Early in Norway’s development, domestic timber resources were exploited for shipbuilding. In the 1840s, it was cheaper to build ships at home than buy them abroad. A typical 500-ton ship built in England averaged 9000 British pounds (approximately 15,000 US dollars), in Sweden 5000 pounds, and in Norway 4500 pounds (Kolltveit, 1990:168). By 1857 high import duties, often 20 percent or more for foreign built ships, were dropped. Therefore, Norwegian owners could

purchase ships at a much lower price (Kolltveit, 1990:168). This prompted Norwegian owners to purchase ships abroad whether they needed them or not, even purchasing several vessels from the United States after the Civil War (Peterson, 1955:43). Additionally, as the world powers switched to steam, the owners realized that there was an advantage to building and buying sailing ships abroad: "Norwegians picked up cheaply, vessels that were discarded in England" (Houde, 1943:259).

Norway relied on these old reworked sailing vessels mainly for three reasons: (1) Norway was not a colonial power and did not need the sea as a means for communication, (2) most Norwegian owners lacked the capital and backing to build steam ships, and, above all, (3) sailing ships were still turning a healthy profit for their owners (Kolltveit, 1990:191–192). Old sailing vessels were bought at the very end of their working lives for small amounts of money, often for hulk or scrap values (Johnsen, 2001:15). The price of the vessels would be regained then after a few voyages, therefore these old ships were seen as a short-term investment that reaped high profits with little or no risk besides the loss of the sailing ships and the sailors themselves (Kolltveit, 1990:176; Johnsen, 2001:4).

Profits also drove the owners to keep the ships afloat for as long as possible. To save money on crew costs, ships would be cut down to barques. The fewer sails you have, the less crew you need to handle them. However, since Norwegian seamen are often considered some of the best sailors in the world, despite the small crews, the old ships were well manned. This practice prompted one writer to note that "Norwegians had excellent sailors and rotten ships" (Popperwell, 1972:28–29). Sailing ships like *Catharine* were still suitable for transport of lower quality but high volume bulk cargoes such as coal, timber, guano, and nitrates (Popperwell, 1972:28–29). In addition, Norwegians were not interested in the traditional liner operations and passenger traffic that other nations, utilizing steam ships, already had in operation. Instead, Norway focused on, and perfected, tramp shipping and cross trading.

2.3. CROSS TRADING

Norway's fleet was, and still is, much larger than it needs to be for domestic purposes. This size allows the fleet to cross trade between

non-Norwegian ports. For a fee, cross trading or common carrier vessels transport goods owned by other nations. This permits a carrier to combine several small shipments into a single large shipment for greater efficiency (Bauer, 1988:73). This philosophy allowed Norwegian ships to specialize in a certain trade while still adhering to a tramp policy. Because speed was less important than low costs and high volume, 20 percent net profits from sailing tramp ships were not uncommon and profits usually averaged between 10–33 percent in the 1890s (Johnsen, 2001:5; Ramskjaer, 2001:12–13).

2.4. CATHARINE IN NORWAY

Catharine, a typical Norwegian tramp ship, was reclassified by *Det Norske Veritas* (The Norwegian Register) as A2* which restricted its cargoes and routes (1894). Cargoes had to be raised in the hold and were generally restricted to bulk goods such as coal, salt, guano, sand, and timber (Det Norske Veritas Index, 1894:25–35). Repairs were also a constant distraction for the crew and had to be carried out frequently. During its 1893 insurance inspection in Hamburg, the ship had some of the external hull planking replaced and was rebolted along the keel and framing (Barron, personal communication, 1998; Det Norske Veritas Index, 1894). The yellow metal hull sheathing had to be replaced and the bottom was recaulked (Det Norske Veritas Index, 1894). The vessel was sold again before 1894 to C. Zernichow and its homeport was switched to Kristiania (Oslo) (Det Norske Veritas Index, 1894).

Very little is known about the new owner, C. Zernichow. In the late 19th century, ownership was usually by single ship companies, the share system, or the joint stock company (Ramskjaer, 2001:3). Because markets fluctuated, being a single ship owner was risky. *Catharine*'s new owner, C. Zernichow, later partnered with Ole Gotaas and the two may have been partners in a share system (Murphy, 1993:249; Bruzelius (*Collingwood*), 2002:1; Bruzelius (*Wairoa*), 2002:2). Typically, a managing owner organized the shipping, but each partner was "economically responsible for only his limited share" (Ramskjaer, 2001:3). Partnership was a very economical and simple way to finance ships.

Despite the change of ownership, restrictions, and constant repairs, the ship continued trading throughout the world. *Catharine* often sailed

from Marseilles, France to ports throughout Europe and America, including Trapani (Sicily), La Pallice (France), Stettin, Germany (today Szczecin, Poland), Boston, Philadelphia, and New York (Lloyd's of London, 1891–1894). Cargoes would have included salt from Trapani, timber to La Pallice (for shipbuilding), and coal from Stettin (Alexanderson and Norström, 1963:148–9). Coal was also imported to Boston and New York and exported from Philadelphia. Cotton and wool were also imported and exported from New York and Boston (Bauer, 1988:111–9). Timber, however, began to dominate Norwegian traffic.

2.5. NORWEGIAN TIMBER SPECIALIZATION

To say that the Norwegians were experts in timber production and shipping would be an understatement. Early Viking exports included dry fish and timber, and by the end of the 15th century and the beginning of the 16th-century Norway was basically separated into the “fish” west and the “lumber” east (Norwegian Shipping, 2001:6). Conflicts in Europe throughout the 17th and 18th centuries kept Norwegian shipping busy, and by 1825 Norway was carrying 42 percent of all the Baltic timber (Norwegian Shipping, 2001:9; Kolltveit, 1990:174). The experience of the Baltic trade combined with the profits of the international timber markets led to Norway's domination of timber traffic. In the 1870s, 53 percent of gross freights were in timber, with grain, petroleum, naphtha (solvents and diluents), resin, and coal far behind (Johnsen, 2001:5). One Norwegian historian even stated that the “transport of lumber from all over seems to be the Norwegian trade fleet's specialty, to the point of excluding competition from all other seafaring nations” (Worm-Müller, 1926:24). The growing trade along the Gulf Coast of America was particularly enticing to Norwegian ships and Pensacola, Florida played a major role in that trade.

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