

AMERICA's MOVIE PREMIERE

A Hollywood First – Onboard America's Finest

When the SS AMERICA was completed in the summer of 1940, the transatlantic steamship service for which she had been expressly designed had been suspended. The war in Europe made it impossible for shipping to safely transit the North Atlantic. Even for ships like the AMERICA that had their neutrality and nationality boldly proclaimed by huge flags and letters painted on their hulls.



Instead, the United States Lines scheduled her for a series of Caribbean cruises in the latter half of 1940 that were followed by two trips to the West Coast in the first few months of 1941 (highlighted by her first passages of the Panama Canal). The second of these intercoastal voyages started in New York harbor on March 7, 1941. Upon arrival in Los Angeles, US Lines embarked, with great fanfare, a number of Hollywood celebrities, plus about a hundred journalists and cameramen.

In keeping with tinsel town's old trade trick of a first-showing ballyhoo to promote a newly released motion picture, the producing movie studio had conspired with US Lines to premiere a classic story of the sea onboard America's newest and finest ship while underway.

During AMERICA's overnight passage from LA to San Francisco on Friday, March 21st, the ship's spacious and stunning First Class Lounge was the setting for the premiere showing of *The Sea Wolf* – a Warner Brothers' adaptation of a Jack London tale.

The star of the movie, Edward G. Robinson was present, sporting a name tag that read “Shirley Temple” – just to kid autograph seekers. The list of supporting actors in the film read like a ‘who's who’ of Hollywood in the 1940s – Ida Lupino, John Garfield, Gene Lockhart, Barry Fitzgerald and Howard Da Silva. A promotional poster boasted that the state-of-the-art film media utilized was ‘glorious black & white’.



Upholding Hollywood's history of conducting publicity stunts, a bevy of beauties were also embarked to keep the still photographers busy – and happy. The fact that none of these ladies were in the movie being premiered didn't seem to bother anyone involved!



Part of the film studio's elaborate publicity plans included a requisite visit to the ship's bridge before the ship left Los Angeles harbor by Robinson (left) and Garfield – shown here flanking Captain Giles Stedman, first captain of the SS AMERICA.



Taking full advantage of the event, Warner Brothers' publicists announced that a movie about the AMERICA's Captain, Giles Stedman, was in the planning stages. They said that *The Captain and His Ship* would star George Brent and, of course, be filmed onboard the real star of the show – the SS AMERICA.

But that promised motion picture was never made, perhaps because the AMERICA and Captain Stedman were both drafted by the United States Navy just weeks later, in May of 1941. AMERICA became the naval transport USS WEST POINT in June of 1941, and Captain Stedman was ‘demoted’ to the navy rank of Commander and assigned for a brief period of time as the ship’s Executive Officer.

However, that’s another story...

The Sea Wolf’s premiere, in addition to being held on the high seas, took place in this large and luxurious space where guests were treated to seats far more comfortable than those found in a movie theater. A permanent stage, with a movie screen as a backdrop, was located at the aft end of the First Class Lounge (out of sight, left, in the following image), so reminiscent of a grand hotel.



A spacious lobby, located directly forward of the lounge, further enhanced this ideal setting, allowing the stars to assemble and individually make their grand entrance through double doors of gold-bronze décor, surrounded and surmounted by a gesso relief of exotic birds by noted American artist Charles Baskerville.

A motion projection room, artfully hidden behind the mural above those imposing doors, seemed like a ‘made for Hollywood’ feature of the ship’s design. One supposes the media was relegated to the mezzanine levels one deck up and to either side of the center section of the lounge.

It must have been some night to remember...

But some memories of that evening didn't turn out quite as nicely as planned. Apparently the long, rolling swells of the Pacific Ocean provided what some found to be a too-realistic 'setting at sea'. About one-third of the premiere attendees retired to their cabins before the evening's festivities ended. Those suffering included Jane Wyman and Priscilla Lane. Naturally, that unplanned turn of events was downplayed by Warner Brothers – but dutifully (and probably gleefully) reported by the media onboard.

Upon the ship's arrival in San Francisco on Saturday morning, the Hollywood contingent disembarked and was transported by bus to the Jack London Valley of the Moon ranch near Sonoma, where Mrs. Jack London hosted an outdoor luncheon to climax the trip.

All in all, this combination of events marked a new and innovative chapter in that colorful film-land institution better known as 'the premiere'. At the same time, the AMERICA garnered more than her own fair share of publicity; perhaps to the discomfort of Warner Brothers' people, but undoubtedly to the delight of US Lines public relations' personnel.

The West Coast media marveled at her many luxurious features and in more than one story mentioned her blue-tiled swimming pool where numerous pictures were snapped of movie mermaids, such as Alexis Smith, who posed for news cameramen and passengers alike.



The media also enthusiastically confirmed that the AMERICA boasted nine bars...



POSTSCRIPT

The basic facts, and publicity-type illustrations for this story were scanned from the pages of a March, 1941 vintage Hollywood fan magazine which was kindly loaned to me by one of the WEST POINT's navy crew members; *plankowner* Russ McKeen. He apparently found the magazine onboard the ship, right after he became a member of her USN commissioning crew on June 15, 1941. When the ship was converted into a navy transport, US Lines left a lot of such 'stuff' behind. Russ also has an AMERICA menu dated May 24, 1941 – in use just four days before Captain Stedman received the Navy's requisition order and was instructed to return immediately to New York from St. Thomas.

Internet-based trivia for the movie says that *The Sea Wolf* was the first movie to have its world premiere on a ship: the luxury liner "America" during a trip from San Francisco to Los Angeles. Well, that ain't quite right – it took place as the AMERICA steamed northward off the California coast, going from LA to San Fran on the night of March 21, 1941. So much for Internet accuracy!

Bill Lee
October 2006