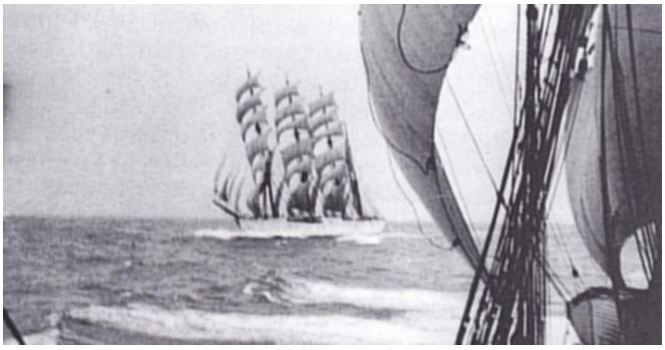
The Last Grain Races

Windjammer against Steamer

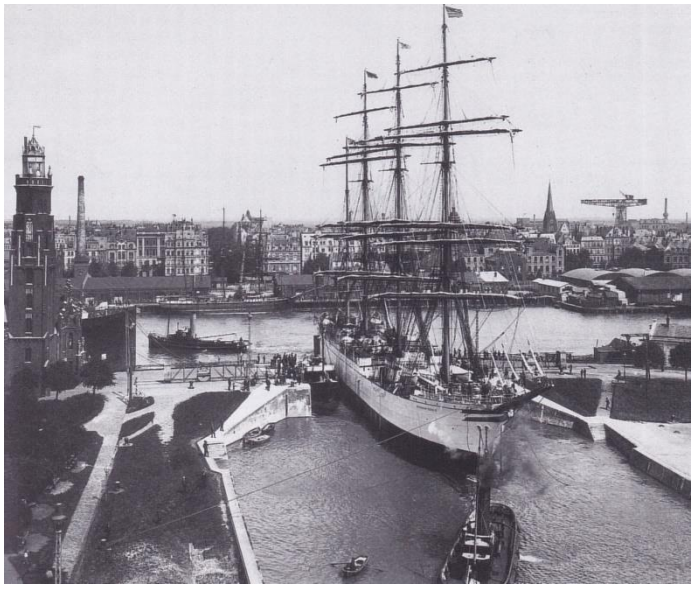
Volker Börkewitz

At midnight, she was first spotted as a distant figure on the moonlit horizon. By daybreak, her dimensions had grown to majestic size. Passengers and crew of the British passenger ship crowded the railing to gaze at the tall ship they were approaching. She seemed to be an apparition from another era. A graceful barque with a white hull, her four masts fitted with wind-stretched sails. It seemed as if she belonged on another ocean, on sea routes that were not yet stained by the smoke of the steamships.

The captain of the liner signalled over his engine telegraph, "Full steam ahead!" He wanted to demonstrate his passengers something they would remember for a long time; he would catch up with this old windjammer, cross its bow in a risky manoeuvre and then continue on course towards Rio de Janeiro. But on board the magnificent steel barque in the South Atlantic, on that October morning in 1934, he had not reckoned with Captain Sven Eriksson. For him, the HERZOGIN CECILIE, the 32-year-old ship under his command, was no lame old-timer. The *Herzogins*' destination: Port Lincoln in South Australia, where she was to take on a cargo of grain. The barque still did her duty undaunted and brought profits to her owner.



Now the race was on. No lumbering steamer with smoking funnels was to show him, Sven Eriksson, the stern. At this moment the wind freshened and the HERZOGIN CECILIE steadily picked up speed. Eriksson gave orders to set all canvas. As the steamer approached, the royals of the HERZOGIN CECILIE, the topmost sails, were set and hauled close; the mighty windjammer was soon carrying full sail with 35 sails, an incredible 4180 sqm. The men vigorously cranked the Jarvis winches, which were mounted on deck behind each mast. The yards had to be breasted so that the optimally aligned sail area absorbed the maximum drive from the rapidly freshening wind. Now the wind was blowing at 18 to 20 metres/sec, almost gale force. The bow wave of *Herzogin Cecilie* piled up in the sunlight as she got faster and faster - 16 knots, then 17, almost 18. Her lee rail was

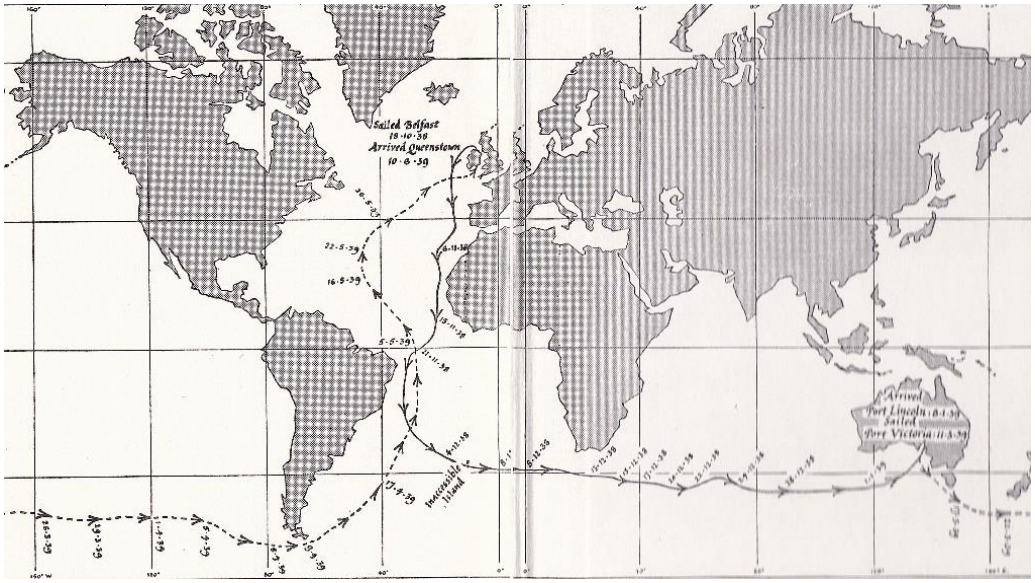


slightly dipped. The two helmsmen at the mighty wheel had to strain to keep her on course.

For a few moments, steamer and sailor sailed side by side. Then the barque steadily picked up speed and pushed forward. As the passenger ship slid inexorably astern, her captain gave three long blasts on the steam whistle to acknowledge his defeat. He then dipped his red British flag in salute to the victor. In return, Captain Eriksson on the HERZOGIN CECILIE dipped the blue and white Finnish national flag. The two ships continued on different courses. Soon the masts of the HERZOGIN CECILIE disappeared behind the horizon.

This or something similar may have happened. The reputation of the HERZOGIN CECILIE, the four-masted barque of German origin, was legendary in those years of the decline of tall ships. Reporting on this will be the subject of another article. This is about the question: how in the 1920s and 1930s were the few windjammers still able to assert themselves as cargo sailors and what had been their cargoes.

It is the scheduled freight that made it possible to use tall ships economically. Until the First World War it was mainly Chilean saltpetre that found its way from South America to Europe. From the mid-1920s, the focus was on wheat transport, primarily from the Spencer Gulf in Australia but also from La Plata in Argentina. The wheat was loaded in sacks, like the saltpetre, in January and February, only to be unloaded in a European port after a 90 to 110-day crossing. In May, stocks from last year's harvest were exhausted and the market for imported grain was particularly good. Those importers who had decided to ship wheat from Australia by sailing ship - at



times up to 20 sailing ships were on their way to Northern Europe - had calculated that they would save about two months in storage costs thanks to the three-month sailing ship voyage. This three-month sea voyage was a good opportunity to trade the expected grain at the stock exchange at top prices. Provided the bulk goods arrived on time. And she did!

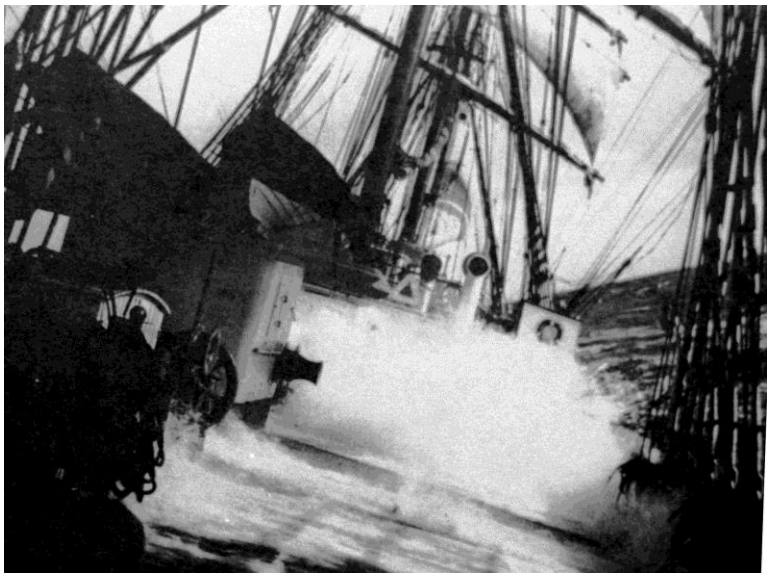
MAGDALENE VINNEN – KOMMODORE JOHNSEN

The maiden voyage of the MAGDALENE VINNEN was to Argentina. The built-in engine made the journey there one of the fastest sailing ship voyages ever, in only 30 days from the exit of the Channel to Buenos Aires. The four-masted barque was first used in the saltpetre voyage from Chile, when it was also loaded with wheat, which was taken on board in La Plata - Argentina. From 1930 onwards, the wheat voyage departed from Australia, the outward voyage around the Cape of Good Hope, the return voyage around Cape Horn, always obeying the wind directions. On a voyage home, as Captain Spötter reported to me in 1991, who had signed on as an ordinary seaman on MAGDALENE VINNEN during his training period 1927-1929, there was the following encounter:

"The voyage around Cape Horn took place under normal weather conditions, and it was not until we reached the Falkland Islands that we encountered heavy seas. Only one critical situation I can still remember very clearly. We were sailing at night and a steamer came up to us amidships. He couldn't see us because he was heading straight for us in the blind spot of our position lights. Apart from these lights, there was no other lighting on board, as is common today. The 1st officer was on watch and, realising the situation, ran into the chart house to get a blue Bengal light. This suddenly made the ship appear in bright light. The captain of the steamer must have had a great fright at the sight of this mighty sailing dome. Anyway, the ship abruptly changed course and went around us in a great arc."

There were other sailors, most of them sailing under the flag of the Finnish shipowner Gustav Erikson - Sven Eriksson was not related to Gustav. But Laeisz had also sent ships on voyages again after the war, by buying them back from Italy and Greece and with a new windjammer, the PADUA. The four-masted barque was the last cargo ship ever to be launched at the J. C. Tecklenborg shipyard in Geestemünde in 1926.

Erikson, Laeisz and Vinnen were in constant competition for the fastest voyages to Europe. It was rare for several sailors to leave Spencer Gulf in Australia at the same time. It was all about the best times and the fastest journey. The route back led around Cape Horn as well as the Cape of Good Hope (called Needle Cape). The decisive factors were the time of year and the associated wind currents. Thus, in the southern summer (December and January), the sailors could still make good trips around the Cape of Needles without being forced to cross in significant headwinds. From March onwards, the voyages on this route became longer, so that the route around Cape Horn was preferred, although it is 1000 nautical miles longer. On average, the

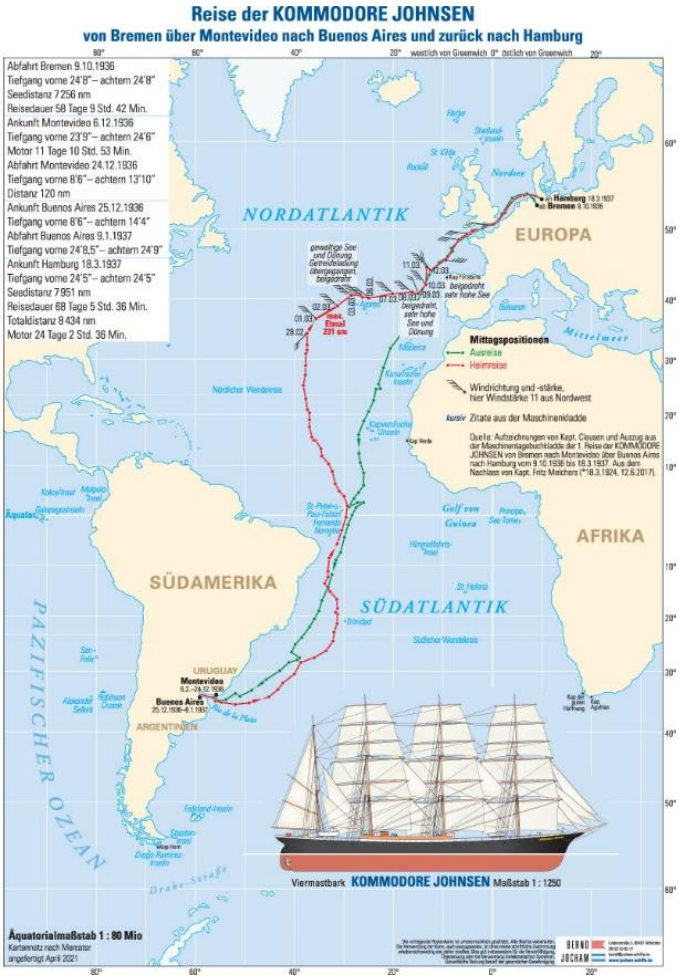


voyages from Europe to Australia took between 85 and 95 days, the voyages home took between 110 and 120 days.

If one compares the windjammers with the clipper ships on the Australia route - the clipper ships transported wool to England in the second half of the 19th century - the THERMOPYLAE and the CUTTY SARK stand out with 60 and 64 days respectively. But also, the German full-rigged ship MELPOMENE and the four-masted barque HERZOGIN SOPHIE CHARLOTTE shone in 1909 with 67 and 69 days on the Channel-Sydney route. Even faster were the PRIWALL in 62 days and the PADUA in 63 days on the Channel-Spencer Gulf route at the turn of the year 1933/34. An enormous increase in efficiency in relation to the clippers, which had only about 1000 GRT compared to the PRIWALL's 3185 GRT measurement. These two windjammers made the fastest voyages ever. Captain of the PRIWALL was Robert Clauß and Jürgen Jürs was in command of the PADUA. Even the voyage from the mouth of the Elbe to the exit of the channel at Lizzard took only two days, from 2nd to 4th November 1933. Then they set sail with a steady wind towards Australia. Not far from the destination, Spencer Gulf, Captain Clauß noted: "... While PADUA is 116 nautical miles from South Neptune Island, the guard posts off Spencer Gulf, on 4 January, we still have 43 nautical miles to the same point to the north-east and then another 17 nautical miles to the entrance to Spencer Gulf. A ridiculous 60 nautical miles out of 15,000!" He goes on to describe heavy weather coming in. But PRIWALL clips through the seas at a steady 14.5 knots. The mizzen staysail was blown away, but no more sail is taken away, too time-consuming. On 4th of January PRIWALL passes the entrance line to Spencer Gulf, after 62 days. One day later, Captain Jürs steers the PADUA into the calm inland water.

A dramatic situation developed on a voyage of the KOMMODORE JOHNSEN in 1937. The North German Llyod had bought the MAGDALENE VINNEN in 1936 in order to be able to train prospective seamen on it as well as on the cargo voyage, as later on the PAMIR and PASSAT. The ship was on its way back from Buenos Aires towards Hamburg in January 1937 loaded with wheat. However, the cargo was only partly in sacks, otherwise loose. The wheat had been stowed in this way and, as it was not possible to use the entire hold because of the weight, the free areas were covered with tarpaulins and dunnage. In addition, the loose wheat was secured with several layers of sacking. Before reaching the Azores, Captain Lehmberg and First Officer Gottfried Clausen had to turn around in heavy weather. The ship rolled more and more to leeward and drew more and more water, which no longer drained. Below deck, the cargo had slipped and was running to port through a broken mid-length bulkhead under hatch III.

The crew's attempts at trimming were unsuccessful; with each new sea, the cargo slid back and the sailor threatened to capsize. Captain Lehmberg radioed SOS. Two tankers not far away rushed to the rescue and discharged oil to calm the waves. Finally, the crew managed to trim the cargo and KOMMODORE JOHNSEN arrived in Hamburg 15 days later, after 68 days and 7822 nautical miles.



This event was also the topic of conversation at a meeting between Captain Claussen, who took command after the spectacular voyage, and Captain Alexej Perivoshikov on the SEDOV in Hamburg in 1988.

MOSHULU and "The Last Grain Race"

What makes the period of the last grain races in the 1920s and 1930s are accounts and narratives by some well-known writers such as Alan Villiers and Eric Newby who signed on to sailors such as PARMA or MOSHULU during this time. Here is an extract from Eric Newby's book "The Last Grain Race", published in German by Delius Klasing in 1968. Newby had signed on the four-masted barque MOSHULU, built 1904, 3116 GRT, purchased from Erikson in May 1935. The MOSHULU left Belfast on 18 October 1938 for Port Lincoln in Australia. On this outward voyage around the Cape of Good Hope, Newby describes the following situation on board:

"... the wind picked up. The ship looked wild but beautiful as she stormed southeast at fourteen to fifteen knots. *Moshulu* was really beautiful, but very difficult to keep under control because of the strong windward tendency. I had to put counter rudder all the time. If she then dropped off to starboard more and more quickly, I had to catch this turn so that she didn't yaw constantly and lose speed unnecessarily.

Between noon and midnight, *Moshulu* logged 168 nautical miles. At seventeen o'clock the crossjack was set again, but the wind jumped to NNE, force 6. So, at twenty-two o'clock all hands were furled to recover the canvas again - crossjack, mainsail, the three lower topgallant sails and the flying jib - in bright moonlight.

"Stor sail ... bräck gårdingarna . . . tag i gigtåget . . . Uuuh . . . uuuh . . . eeeh . . . iiih . . . orrrr . ... "This time the (Finnish, note) sailmaker cheered us on. His skipper's cap sat upside down on his head like a motorcyclist of earlier times. He roared like a lion as he fetched at the halyards himself. "Uuuh . . . uuuh eeeh . .! toblocks Orlright. Quick, enter on." All hands dashed to the shrouds and up them to the rigged canvas, its folds flapping and flapping against the yards. Eighteen men needed the mainsail. On its yard they laid out to either side. Their feet straddled the tautly stretched the footrope. Above the roar of the wind and the sea, one could only hear the huffing and shouting of one's own crewmates as they leaned far forward, belly on the yard, to heave up the heavy canvas. The ratlines had been thrown loose. Now they had to be taken around sail and yard, no easy job with a steel spar almost half a metre in diameter. Always two men struggled with one ratline. I worked together with Hermansonn. Now he crouched on the footrope and took the ratline through between the chain sheet of the lower topsail and the yard. When this was done, he threw the end upwards until I got hold of it. I had to bend over the yard so far that my legs were higher than my head. Now I handed the rope back to Hermansonn.

Then other noises were heard - bruised hands slapping canvas, tugging and tugging ratlines, until all along the yard, in the gibberish of the crew, the cry continued, "Orlright - tight!"

Dark figures slid slowly at first towards the mast, then gymnastics faster down to the deck with the help of weaving lines and backstays. There it was a matter of clearing lines, and shooting up buntlines and brails neatly.

That night I learned what it meant to retrieve the flying jig almost at the far end of the eighteen-metre steel bowsprit. There was no safety net underneath him. Sometimes its tip pointed to the sky, sometimes it plunged into the mighty seething sea. The footrope to windward was horribly slippery, the sail itself soaking wet. It was behaving like a madman. The wire leech beat against my head and shoulders, and the sheet

block danced erratically like a giant jumping jack on a string, threatening to smash our skulls in.

"Grab the block, Kossuri," Hermansonn shouted as the monster soughed over our heads. "Quick!"

Once I missed and heard Hermansonn's derisive roar. Then I dared to do the utmost, straightened up free-standing on my footrope and truly grasped the block with both hands as it again hurtled towards us. The remaining work was easier. One by one the sail was packed onto the bowsprit and lashed down. "We got it," Hermansonn said, but it seemed to me that something like recognition resonated. Only I had had to earn it by demonstrating a foolhardiness bordering on temptation. I could only say to him: “Next time you can play alone.”

At midnight on the 4th, the wind was NNE, force 7. We only used the topsails. Above them, the bare yellow yards shimmered in the moonlight like giant bones. Suddenly the ship seemed frighteningly wild and strange. At the wheel, a Swede and a Dane struggled to keep it on course when it was running thirteen to fourteen knots in gusts. It was then that I realised that I would never again experience such a voyage under sail in my life. If ships like ours disappeared from the sea, then the end had irrevocably come, then the storm belts of the earth would be swept clean. No more would the great westerly wind and the trade winds roar through steel rigging, no more would they fall into flat canvas.

It was already light when we went to the lodging at four o'clock on Monday. I had hardly laid my head on the pillow when it was already eight o'clock and Moshulu had logged 55 nautical miles again. The topgallant and mainsail were set again, and by noon we were at 360 39.3' south latitude and 140 15.1' west longitude. This meant a noon-to-noon run of 320 nautical miles.

All day long two men had to stand at the wheel. The weather was fine. Four large albatrosses and a school of dolphins played around the ship. The sun was in a sky lined with high cirrus clouds. Although the barometer did not drop, the weather got worse in the afternoon. Again, 55 nautical miles in four hours. Now we saw a lot more birds: Cape pigeons, various kinds of petrels and albatrosses. I was with the sailmaker in his bunk, listening to his explanations while he leafed through a book with pictures of the old clippers. Then the door flew open and excitedly Jansson stuck his head in. "Come quickly," he called. "Tristan to port. But quickly." And already he had disappeared again.

"Tristan . . . Nonsense," the sailmaker grumbled gruffly. Then, as if he had heard a commonplace message, he turned a page of the book. Surely he had seen Tristan da Cunha* who knows how many times and it left him cold."

*) Tristan da Cunha Island with its uninhabited neighbouring islands Inaccessible Island and Nightingale Island lie in the middle of the South Atlantic, 1200 nautical miles south of St Helena and 1500 nautical miles west of the Cape of Good Hope. Uruguay is 1800 nautical miles away.

The era of cargo-carrying windjammers ended in 1957 with the sinking of the PAMIR. She met the same fate as the KOMMODORE JOHNSEN 20 years earlier: a slipped cargo of loose wheat picked up in Buenos Aires and Hurricane Carrie in the Atlantic doomed her. But at this time, it didn't end lightly.

Translation by deepl.com - seamanlike terms optimized by the author

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