

Fun and Education for Younger Sailors

Baby on Board

Captains of sailing ships like the *Balclutha* were away from home for long stretches of time. The lucky ones had their families with them, which sometimes included a baby boy or girl. Two babies were born on *Balclutha*.

Families at sea had to be problem solvers. Babies, being the helpless little people they are, were especially at peril when a ship encountered rough seas. Sailors had to learn to brace themselves in bed so they wouldn't be tossed out of their bunks. How could parents keep their baby safe? Some mothers actually sewed their baby to the mattress, attaching the child's clothing to the outer layer.

Cleaning diapers was another challenge. Freshwater was precious and saved for drinking. Bathing and cleaning clothes was put off until it rained. So how could these families wash diapers? One solution was to tie the diapers to a line and then drag them behind the ship. Unfortunately, when the diapers dried, the salt in the water made the diaper feel like sandpaper, and no one likes to wear scratchy underwear! One mother made her own disposable diapers by lining them with dried sea moss that could be tossed overboard when it got dirty. If a child was old enough to crawl, he or she could be dressed without any diapers at all. When the child had to "go," he or she just went . . . a situation that gives new meaning to the term "poop deck!"

Parents faced the endless challenge of keeping their young children entertained, safe, and out of the crew's way. One captain rigged a swing on deck for his young daughter. One mother used a washtub as a playpen. Sometimes the crew could not help but be charmed by their young crew mates. Children who grew up at sea remember carved toys made for them by the sailors.

One mother recalled trying to catch her four year old son who had become so good at climbing in the rigging that he got away from her by "going aloft" in his own personal jungle gym.

Returning to life ashore was often a big adjustment. One of *Balclutha*'s captains, Alfred Durkee, told a story that shows just how different these children were from those born on land. He was in port when he saw a child take her first steps on solid ground: "...when she came ashore . . . she would take a step, then apparently wait, with her foot up, for the floor to roll so she could steady herself before taking another step. She was [on shore] quite a number of days before she could walk like other children."



NPS Photo

Agnes Tapley, wife of the captain, and Baby Della on the deck of the sailing ship *Saint James* in 1898.

Captain Christopher and his wife, Heather, had been at sea for over a month when their baby girl was born. In the word search below, find the things they might need to take care of the infant at sea.

DIAPERS

THREAD

TOY BOAT

NEEDLE

DRIED MOSS

WASHTUB

I	T	T	P	J	R	M	S	D	H
K	A	D	H	N	V	V	R	W	K
D	O	J	C	R	M	I	B	U	E
X	B	Y	G	K	E	U	D	I	B
H	Y	B	V	D	T	A	Y	I	C
N	O	A	M	H	C	G	D	A	R
P	T	O	S	R	E	P	A	I	D
K	S	A	N	E	E	D	L	E	O
S	W	Z	A	F	F	J	N	G	W
L	J	S	R	K	J	I	M	K	L

Sources: *Families at Sea*, Stephen A. Haller, National Maritime Museum Association, 1985; *Hen Frigates*, Joan Druett, Simon and Schuster, 1998.