

Aloys Wilhelm Escher  
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German Immigrant  
President Harding  
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An Exciting Adventure in a New Land

This is the story of a stubborn, ambitious man who beat the odds. A man who had a dream, a man who could see a new life, happiness and a place of respect in the America he's heard about from his older brother Theodor who had preceded him to the United States of America. This is the story of Aloys (Anglicized as Alois) Wilhelm Escher, born March 13, 1906 #26 Kampstrasse, Gladbeck, Westfallen, Germany. That particular house still stands: my sister and I have been there and have seen it.

Al, as he was later called in the US worked from the age of 12 to aid his family. He drove a wooden milk delivery wagon pulled by a blind horse, helped restore the castle Wittringen, assisted the local farmers at harvest time and was a coal miner as well. He even managed, with his meager salary, to buy gum and cigarettes for the prisoners in a WWI - POW camp he passed each day when mined at the collier. Al told his family in America in later years that the POW camp was his first introduction to citizens of the USA and even though he couldn't speak or understand English, he was intrigued by the men and their thankful smiles and hand shakes through the prison wire fences of the camp kindled the flame of adventure in his young mind.

Little by little as he grew older, Al managed to save enough money to pay for his eventual voyage to the United States. Besides the train fare from Gladbeck to Bremen (the sailing harbour), the cost of the trip to America was: \$115.00 for 3rd class passage, \$10.00 for his visa, \$8.00 U.S. head tax and \$30.70 train fare from New York (Ellis Island) to Chicago, Illinois which came to a total of \$163.70, a hefty sum at that time.

Finding a sponsor in the U.S. was of utmost importance. Since Al's brother, Theodor had not yet become a citizen of his newly adopted country and, therefore, could not act as sponsor, a cousin, Herman (Babe) Weinauer agreed to accept the responsibility. The cousin lived near Chicago. And so, on the day before his ship voyage to America from his homeland was to begin, members of Al's family accompanied him to the railroad station in Gladbeck and proceeded to say their fond farewells - FOREVER as it turned out since all the family who remained in Germany were never to see him again. One sister, Friedel Franz and her

husband, Hans as well as a niece did finally manage to come to the US in January of 1976, sadly, however, just months after Mr. Escher's death in August 1975.

Dad (as I will call the subject of this story hereafter) boarded the train for the Bremen ship port prior to sailing to the USA on the USS President Harding under the command of one Captain Van Beek. The sailing departure date was to be January 26, 1927 and Dad was just 20 years old. He arrived at Bremen the day before he was to sail. While awaiting the ship, fellow male passengers and he decided to have a 'going away' party before leaving their native land. The result of that party was such drunkenness that when the Harding arrived, Dad and his large wooden trunk containing all his worldly goods and possessions were loaded into a wheelbarrow by his newfound sailing companions and were unceremoniously wheeled aboard ship and dumped in a drunken heap on the ship's deck. Dad was an altar boy in the Catholic church back in his home town and had previously been only 'slightly' acquainted with the altar wine - or so he professed while recounting this true tale many years later - so he and his newfound 'friends' became quite well acquainted with the ship's railing before reaching Queenstown, Ireland, which was the last port of call before arriving in America.

Our father was never to see his homeland, Germany, again. However, Ann and Barbara, 2 of his daughters, did, and Barbara still has possession of the travel trunk Dad used which is over 70 years old now. It's scratched in a few places, gray and weathered, but aside from its age in quite good condition and will remain a cherished memento to be passed on to some lucky member of Dad's progeny.

The date: 28 January, 1927

After taking on more passengers in Ireland, a total of 551 people, 199 of whom were listed as 1st class passengers on the manifest of the ship were on board. The seas were very rough and cold that January in 1927 and there were many storms in the area which had to be skirted making the journey longer than usual. With the extra days added because of the storm's presence, the food supply was very low. The storms had also done damage to the fuel tanks of the Harding and had caused the ballast in the bowels of the ship to shift, leaving the Harding at a precarious list in the water. Ballast pumps were needed to pump water out of the lower engine compartments of the ship to keep it afloat. Since there was not enough fuel for the furnaces to heat the cabins and supply power for the engines AND ballast pumps, Capt. Van Beek gave the order to burn ANYTHING made of wood to maintain power. So there went the furniture, cabin doors, ship's railings and hatches into the furnaces. The man-power was provided by the crew and male passengers who were

only too willing to be of service to stay afloat, alive and reach safe harbour.

On January 31st, the President Harding was still 2,105 miles east of Ambrose Light because of the storms encountered. She limped along at 10 knots till she reached Jeddore near Egg Island where she ran aground on a sandbar. To make matters worse, during the night another storm arose and lifted the ship off the sandbar and swept her back out to sea, listing as she was, and barely able to stay afloat. At that particular point, Capt. Van Beek gave the order to ABANDON SHIP since there was little food, only oranges for the women and children, and a fierce storm was still raging. It was thought at the time that the sinking of the Harding was imminent. Guns from the ship's arsenal were delivered into the hands of the crew and a few trusted passengers (Dad was one of them) and by order of the captain. Those with weapons were told to help the women and children into the lifeboats, with the further order: "If any man tries to board a life boat, SHOOT HIM!"

Just as the lifeboats were being lowered, the Canadian Government ship THE LADY LAURIER came into view on her rescue mission. Cheers, tears and shouts of joy arose from all the crew and passengers on board the Harding. It took some doing, as is documented by the Halifax Chronicle and other newspapers but the rescue and towing of the USS President Harding by the CG ship, Lady Laurier to Halifax, Nova Scotia harbour was a success. It seems a ham radio operator had picked up the S.O.S radio signal and had relayed the message to the Canadian shipyard in Halifax where the Lady Laurier and other ships were docked. Several ships were then ordered on the rescue mission. Many accounts of that story may be read in the Halifax papers dated 7th, 8th and 9th of February, 1927. Also, according to the report in the Chronicle, when asked about the voyage, Capt. Van Beek was brief - if not eloquent - in saying: "It was one Hell of a trip!" Another distinguished passenger, Prince Don Louis de Bourbon, son of the late King, Alphonse XII of Spain was heard to extol the seamanship of the captain stating, "He did a wonderful job!"

It must be noted that a few days before the episode of rescue, since there had been no word, radio or otherwise, from the Hardin. Newspapers from Europe, Ireland and the United States had assumed the worst and erroneously reported: USS PRESIDENT HARDING LOST AT SEA WITH ALL HANDS ABOARD. The shipping agents, Pickford and Black, had nothing to say of the Harding, nor would they admit they had come to Halifax in connection with the possible doom of the ship. While in harbour in Halifax, the Harding was repaired, refitted with supplies and some 3,000 barrels of fuel were taken aboard. The ship was quarantined while awaiting repairs. Further activities aboard ship while in port went

unreported. The ship then continued its voyage to New York and Alois Wilhelm Escher arrived in America the 2nd week in February, 1927. It must be said that we, as Mr. Escher's family were told that he never passed through Ellis Island, which was the usual procedure, and Dad's passport shows no government stamp or seal to this effect, but at present we cannot either prove or disprove this claim.

At any rate, Mr. Escher, upon arriving on US soil boarded a train for Chicago where he was met by his sponsor, and the rest, as they say, is history. Dad subsequently got a job, met and married Veronica Virginia Fox and raised 6 daughters, 3 born in Illinois and 3 in Indiana. (names listed below)

One of the proudest days of Dad's life was the day he received his American Citizenship papers. He was a resident of Kingsbury, Indiana at the time. The swearing-in took place in the LaPorte Indiana County courthouse. Sadly, both our parents are deceased now. Our beloved mother died in 1996.

Had it not been for Dad's adventurous spirit, indomitable will and courage and the gallant efforts of the 'Bluenose' sailors of Nova Scotia, this true story could not nor would not have been written. Our grateful thanks to the city of Halifax, its 'saviour' ship and the citizens of that city, without whom we could not have found documentation for this tale. Barbara and I have just arrived home from a visit to your fair city and wish to thank you also for your wonderful hospitality. We have traveled from Germany to Ireland to Nova Scotia and have never been treated more warmly than by your citizens who were so willing to aid us in our personal endeavor to capture the facts about our father's adventure so many years ago.

GOD BLESS YOU ALL AND KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK.