Escaping in the “Tender, Blue Haze of Evening”: The Morro Castle and Cruising as a Form of Leisure in 1930s America

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Escaping in the “Tender, Blue Haze of Evening”: The Morro Castle and Cruising as a Form of Leisure in 1930s America

Abstract
The paper demonstrates a microhistory approach to the development of cruising as a form of leisure in the early twentieth century of American history. Using the 1934 Morro Castle disaster and the subsequent attention the ship and its survivors received, this paper provides a window into an unexplored topic of American leisure. This paper is unique in its finding because the disaster provided numerous firsthand accounts of cruising in the 1930s. The findings illustrate that this form of leisure was directly connected to larger events and trends of the time, including the Great Depression, Prohibition, and America’s Cuban connection. Cruising as a form of leisure, thus, developed out of a social and cultural demand, illustrating escapism in a tumultuous period.

Keywords
cruising, leisure, America, Prohibition, Cuba, Havana, steamship, Great Depression

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On September 8, 1934, the steam-liner *Morro Castle* was sailing up the New Jersey coast on a return trip from Havana, Cuba when it mysteriously set on fire. The captain had suffered a fatal heart attack just hours before, adding to the level of suspicion cast on the tragedy that claimed the lives of 137 of the passengers. Over the ensuing years, investigators, researchers, and historians alike gathered hordes of evidence and testimony concerning this voyage in an attempt to decipher what exactly happened on that fateful night. Although a tragedy such as this brings nothing but pain and anguish to those involved, much can be learned historically from the increased collection of information. In this way, the tragedy of the *Morro Castle* can thus provide a window into various facets of American history that otherwise would be shrouded in the normalcy of events. It is no surprise, for example, that the historical sources on the *Morro Castle*’s sister ship, the *Oriente*, are rather sparse in comparison.

After the Roaring Twenties, etched in memories by F. Scott Fitzgerald and his contemporaries’ portrayal of a society bent on lavish and pleasurable pursuits, Americans experienced a depression unparalleled before in the annals of United States history. Leisure in the 1930’s, which had been so accessible in the past decade, suddenly became something of dreams for many as the Great Depression took its toll. The development of cruising, however, tells a different story. Until this point, cruising had been reserved for those in the elite echelons of society. One needs only to think of the abundant excesses from the *Titanic* as a point of reference. Developments such as the Great Depression, Prohibition, and the allure of Cuba in its American connection modified and expanded cruising as a form of leisure in the 1930’s. Rather than from any
inherent consumer demand for cruises, these external forces helped shape the cruising industry and set it on a path that would see increased demand in subsequent decades. These developments expanded the cruising industry to not just the economic elite but also many in the middle-class as well. What is all the more remarkable is that this increased accessibility for the middle class to cruising as a form of leisure occurred in the midst of incomparable economic hardship. Using the Morro Castle as a case study will thus provide insight into the development of leisure in 1930’s America and show how and why this was a pivotal moment for cruising as a form of leisure.¹

The development of the Morro Castle and its sister ship the Oriente in 1930 arose out of unique circumstances in regards to the American economy. While both of these ships were designed for a New York City to Havana run, steam-liners traveling between these two cities were not a newfound invention. Rather, by 1930 this run had been prevalent for almost a century. In 1840 and 1841, Samuel Cunard, head of the newly founded Cunard Line, designed four steam-liners to carry mail between the U.S. and Great Britain in a timely and scheduled fashion. These ships, along with carrying the Royal Mail, also had the capacity to carry 115 passengers.² By 1859, there was a similar type of mail run between the U.S. and Cuba. Richard Henry Dana’s 1859 travel account To Cuba and Back: A Vacation Voyage, illustrates the fact that this mail run also took passengers on its scheduled runs between New York and Havana. As the U.S. Mail

¹ I owe a great deal of thanks to Deb Whitcraft and all the others at the Museum of New Jersey Maritime History in Beach Haven, New Jersey for providing me with access to all of their abundant resources and personal interviews on the Morro Castle. For more information on the Morro Castle disaster that took place on September 8, 1934, see Brian Hicks, When the Dancing Stopped: The Real Story of the Morro Castle Disaster and Its Deadly Wake (New York: Free Press, 2006); or Gretchen Coyle and Deborah C. Whitcraft, Inferno at Sea: Stories of Death and Survival Aboard the Morro Castle (West Creek, NJ: Down the Shore Publishing, 2012). These two more recent works provide very definitive explanations of the mysterious events surrounding the fire and the ensuing investigation.

Steamer Cahawba takes off from its crowded pier, Dana recalled, “inexperienced passengers run against everybody,” not knowing who is who as they commence an uncertain but exciting journey south.³

In the early 1900’s, cruising as a form of leisure had increased in popularity. It was “fashionable for the wealthy to cross the Atlantic,” often going to Europe but sometimes to the Caribbean as well.⁴ These ocean-liners were reserved mostly for the social elite. The second and third class accommodations that did exist were consequently “Spartan at best,” with a “crowded public toilet and bath facilities.”⁵ Throughout the first thirty years of the twentieth century, this exclusively elite image held dominance in the realm of cruising. Again, one can only think of the exquisiteness of the Titanic. Although this type of vacation attached to a practical mail route had been going on for almost a century, many in 1930 still saw it as something newfound. Thomas Torresson Jr., third assistant purser on the Morro Castle, believed that the idea of people “going on a round trip, on a cruise, such a thing, was kind of new.”⁶

The Ward Line similarly had a humble, one man beginning in 1841, founded singlehandedly by James O. Ward. In 1930, the Ward Line was still considered to be the “oldest operating company in the United States.”⁷ In 1930, under the auspices of the Merchant Marine Act, designed to “increase private shipbuilding and help the merchant marine get an edge in world competition,” the Ward Line designed two new ships, the

⁵ Dickinson and Vladimir, Selling the Sea, p. 6.
Morro Castle and the Oriente. It was through this 1928 Merchant Marine Act that the Morro Castle received its main source of income—a $750,000 a year government contract to carry mail between New York and Havana.\(^8\) Although the Morro Castle was designed to hold 489 passengers and 240 crew members, advancing the trend of vacationing on these practical-oriented voyages, “the passengers were not their bread and butter, not how they made their money. The Ward Line that owned the ship made most of their money in shipping.”\(^9\)

Apart from the main source of income through the government mail contract, the Morro Castle also had a plethora of other ways in which it made money, most of which were not entirely legal, including an illegal fur trade. Marjorie Gianini, a twenty-three year old newlywed honeymooning onboard during the Morro Castle disaster, remembers having jumped off the ship because of the horrid smell of pelts burning.\(^10\) Stories of contraband and other illegal activities were not uncommon on the Morro Castle, which consistently made headlines due to many of these nefarious activities. Helen Brodie Hoye, another passenger during the time of the disaster, recalled in a later interview that they were “most definitely carrying arms on its downward voyage to Havana on a weekly basis.”\(^11\) Torresson noted that the ship often carried automobiles along with arms and munitions, and brought back pineapples, bananas, coconuts, and

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\(^8\) *Ibid.*, p. 15-17; Brian Hicks, *When the Dancing Stopped: The Real Story of the Morro Castle Disaster and Its Deadly Wake* (New York: Free Press, 2006), p. 9, 13. This government measure, also known as the Jones White Act, despite being put forth as an economic stimulus for shipping, also was a way in which the government could provide naval auxiliaries in the event of war. Each ship had to be built to specifications that would “allow for quick conversions to warships or troop transports.” Hicks, *When the Dancing Stopped*, p. 13; *Inferno at Sea: Morro Castle*, directed by Melissa Jo Peltier (Burbank, CA: MPH Entertainment Inc., 1997), DVD.

\(^9\) Marjorie Gianini, interview by Deborah Whitcraft and Gretchen Coyle, undated, DVD. Accessed in Museum of New Jersey Maritime History.


Illegal immigrants and stowaways were also commonplace on the *Morro Castle*. Jerry Edgerton, fourth assistant radio room operator for the ship, remembered that “there were always stowaways,” on board. Despite this “dubious reputation” held by the *Morro Castle*, executives of the Ward Line either did not know or (more likely) “did not care as long as the mail was faithfully delivered and bottom line financials showed a profit.” Notwithstanding these disreputable undercurrents, those running the ship put on a façade of regality and relaxation for its passengers on board.

Many considered the two new state of the art ships to be “floating hotels capable of competition with the biggest foreign liners.” The ships, designed by America’s premier naval architect, Theodore Ferris, were “really designed after the great Atlantic liners of the 1920’s and 1930’s.” Veneered paneling, lush draperies, and plush furniture all emphasized the fact that passengers “wanted a lot of comfort.” What differed from the past ocean-liners, however, was the social and economic make-up of the passengers on board. Where in the past only the socially elite who could afford such an extravagant trip were privy to such exquisite happenings, now those in the middle class could partake in these voyages as well.

Ralph Giordano, a historian of American culture in the twentieth century, noted that as the effects of the depression set in, many leisure companies “saw the need to offer economical vacations.” Thus, “ocean liners began offering short cruises for the less

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12 Torresson, interview by Sandra Stewart Holyoak and David D’Onofrio, September 25, 2002.
14 Coyle and Whitcraft, *Inferno at Sea*, p. 13, 23. It is difficult to say how much the passengers themselves knew of these illegal activities. It seems that Marjorie Gianini was surprised at the smell of burning pelts, emphasizing the belief that many of these illegal activities were well hidden from the passengers.
16 *Inferno at Sea: Morro Castle*, directed by Melissa Jo Peltier (Burbank, CA: MPH Entertainment Inc., 1997), DVD.
wealthy vacationer.” This is just what the Ward Line did with the *Morro Castle*. On its maiden voyage in 1930, the cheapest cabins were advertised from $140. After three to four years of a depression-starved economy, however, one could find a “seven day all expense cruise to Havana for $65” a cabin. This lowering of rates, which was not necessary before the effects of Great Depression had set in, “allowed for a broader clientele” that did not simply consist of wealthy elites.

While a cruise was a regular vacation for the rich, for many in the middle class it was the chance of a lifetime who “saved religiously to afford such a luxury.” Although these lavish cruises found on steam-liners such as the *Morro Castle* “reinforced the image that had emerged from the first-class transatlantic voyages of the 1920’s,” the social and economic make-up of the passengers on board was far from simply elitist. An integral shift had occurred in this form of leisure, spurred by the depression, which witnessed a creation of opportunity for those in lower classes. Vacations for those in the middle-class were viewed as “not only desirable, but also essential.” At least, this is the image espoused in advertising. In 1930, the *Ladies Home Journal* advised readers to “save nickels and dimes from food and clothing; get your vacations, and never, never, say they are not important.”

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17 Giordano, *Fun and Games in Twentieth Century America*, p. 105-106.
18 Torresson, interview by Sandra Stewart Holyoak and David D’Onofrio, September 25, 2002; Hicks, *When the Dancing Stopped*, p. 18. On this page, Brian Hicks notes that this lowered rate is about the equivalent of $900 in early twenty-first century dollars, a considerable sum but still attainable for many in the middle-class.
20 Coyle and Whitcraft, p. 14. Apart from the work of Hicks and Coyle and Whitcraft, another good source to consult for a typical sampling of the types of passengers on board is Joseph Hergesheimer, “The Casual Ark,” in *Saturday Evening Post* 206, no. 41 (Apr. 7, 1934): 14-90, 7p. This source, contemporary to the *Morro Castle*, provides a perspective of a passenger on such a cruise ship. His section “Regimented Americans” provides clear insight into the types of people cruising at this time.
21 Dickinson and Vladimir, *Selling the Sea*, p. 16.
22 Giordano, *Fun and Games in Twentieth Century America*, p. 106.
Many who could not afford a cruise for themselves found a way to partake in a trip regardless. Helen Brodie Hoye, for example, went in lieu of her sick cousin with her cousin’s family, all staying in one cabin to save on expenses. Some passengers even boarded in Havana and took only the return trip north to New York, presumably paying a lower fare. One such woman, Madeleine Desvernine, noted that she shared a C-Deck cabin with another woman to save on expenses. The opportunity to take a vacation such as this was unheard of before this lowering of rates for many, even if they were hit hard by the depression. In an era of “desperate desires and diminished expectations,” it was a chance of a lifetime that could not be passed up.

This downward flow of leisurely opportunity reflects a greater trend in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century American culture. It is what American cultural historian Michael Kammen called the “entertainment discount revolution.” This trend began in the 1880’s with a decline in popular pricing for amusements such as vaudeville and early cinema theaters. Similarly, in the 1930’s as a result of the depression, this discounting trend seeped into the leisure form of cruising through the lowering of rates. While it is most likely the entertainment discount revolution began in the 1880’s from a high demand for leisurely pursuits such as attending the theater, the subsequent discount revolution in cruising arose as a result of the sinking economy. Cruising as a new form of leisure for many, however, was too enticing an opportunity to pass up once the prices became affordable. Although this trend did not occur on a “mass-oriented”

23 Helen Brodie Hoye, interviewed in Tragedy at Sea [documentary], produced by John Geary, 1990. DVD.
25 Inferno at Sea: Morro Castle, directed by Melissa Jo Peltier, 1997. DVD.
scale as it did with magazines or television after the Second World War, it still reflects this ongoing development in the smaller niche of leisure. 

Regarding leisure and culture in the early twentieth century, Michael Kammen argues that the 1930’s and beginning of 1940’s represented a sort of “proto-mass culture” for many Americans. Before every family owned a radio and/or a television set—definitive examples of mass culture—there were approximately two decades in which “persons of all classes and taste levels [could] pick and choose which aspects and objects of commercial culture they [wished] to have or attend.” Although again only representing a small niche of leisure when compared to a commodity as universal as the radio, the availability of cruising in the 1930’s as evidenced by the lowering of rates for the Morro Castle demonstrates this proto-mass culture. It must be noted that even today cruising is not wholly mass culture. The widening of opportunity for people across several different class levels to choose to take a cruise as a leisurely pursuit was introduced in the 1930’s in the midst of the Great Depression. The very thought of cruising was enticing enough, but two other factors—Prohibition and the allure of Cuba—need to be considered when dealing with this increased opportunity in this form of leisure. The rest of this study will thus focus on what passengers would have experienced on a typical Morro Castle cruise, based on primary testimony from Morro Castle survivors and other contemporary accounts, to illustrate the importance of these factors.

What the Morro Castle and other cruise ships of the time represented for Americans was escape—an escape from the depression stricken streets of their

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27 Ibid., p. 32.
28 Ibid., p. 167.
29 While mass culture fosters the notion of the citizen as a consumer, this type is normally associated with the transmission of culture through media rather than through people’s daily interactions.
hometowns where people struggled to make ends meet. On a luxury cruise-liner, these same people could be treated like royalty. Joseph Hergesheimer, remarking on his own American cruise in 1933, stated in the *Saturday Evening Post* that people on board were “engaged by luxury, pleasure, and the present: the abstract future was fainter in their minds than the island of Martinique, rapidly vanishing in a tender, blue haze of evening.”

Passengers, by partaking in a cruise, attempted to mask themselves in this blue haze and hide from the hardships normally experienced in depression America. As Hergesheimer summarized, the “world of land had been replaced with a world of water.” Cruising was escapism at its finest. Even so, if escaping to Havana down the Atlantic coast on a “floating hotel” was not enough to convince someone to invest in a cruise vacation, the endless and flowing quantities of alcohol on board were.

Many cruise ships during Prohibition (and after to a lesser extent) were no more than “oceangoing bars.” Drinks were served at almost all times of day to passengers eager not to miss a beat. Drinking was “maintained at a high, unflagging level.”

Even before the bars had opened for the day, drinks were present in high quantities. By noon, thought by contemporaries to be the time for beer, many were indulging themselves with whiskey highballs. Hergesheimer recalled that one day, in the middle of an incredibly hot morning, three passengers drinking from green cordials invited him to

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31 Ibid., p. 89.
32 Hicks, *When the Dancing Stopped*, p. 13. Although Prohibition was a long-term phenomenon, beginning with anti-alcohol sentiments in the early nineteenth century, the term generally denotes the years 1919 to 1933. Two events bookend this era: the Volstead Act on October 28, 1919, which created the Prohibition Bureau, and the Repeal of Prohibition with the twenty-first amendment on December 5, 1933. See Thomas R. Pegram, *Battling Demon Rum: The Struggle for a Dry America (1800-1933)* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1998).
have one with them on the house. Upon refusing, Hergesheimer was followed by these three (only slightly inebriated) passengers with “protests and a glass.”

The crew, instead of being instructed to monitor alcohol intake, were encouraged to facilitate it. The ship line owners knew what attracted people and did not want to disappoint passengers by having a less than considerable amount of alcohol on board. Third assistant purser Thomas Torresson noted that many crew members had only one extracurricular obligation apart from their normal jobs: to help people drink. He, like many others workers, was given a weekly bar account of fourteen dollars, with which he was instructed “to buy drinks for the passengers.” Seeing that drinks “were something like twenty cents” a piece, factored in with the large number of crew on board, this often resulted in quite the night for many passengers.

When drinking was not on the immediate to do list, Morro Castle Cruise Director Bob Smith and his assistant Herman Cluthe were put in charge of ensuring the passengers constantly remained entertained in some fashion. On the Morro Castle deck, there were bridge games, contests, courts for shuffle board, flying fish, moving pictures, horse racing with wooden horses and dice. There was a gymnasium, a library, a doctor’s office, a barber shop, a general store, children’s playroom, and a writing room. Even more, there were innumerable gambling opportunities and of course dancing at night. In 1934, the Morro Castle’s newest feature was the aptly named “Sea Spray” attraction. The crew would pump hundreds of gallons of seawater on the deck to allow passengers to splash around and cool off while

34 Ibid., p. 14, 15, 90.
35 Torresson, interview by Sandra Stewart Holyoak and David D’Onofrio, September 25, 2002.
under the hot sun. Many of these activities took place in a regal and elegant interior, with each room taking on a unique theme. Marjorie Gianini remembered the ship as being “beautiful,” while life on the ship “was just lovely.” Because the ship had no air conditioning, the ship’s architect Theodore Ferris designed “ducts that ran behind false, wood-paneled cabin walls,” allowing air to circulate throughout the ship. As a result, advertisements for the ship noted that it was “Sea Cooled.”

There was a quite popular smoking room, decorated in Italian Renaissance style with card tables, comfortable chairs, and smoking stands throughout. Hergesheimer noted the great popularity this room held, always full of excited and vivacious chatter. A wide array of galas and dances were arranged for nightly entertainment. The balloon dances, in which prizes were given, were popular. Of particular interest was the masquerade ball held every Wednesday night. Torresson noted that many of the crew were given time off to attend this dance. He recalled that “we had to dress up, masquerade costume, and dance with the girls.” In discussing his poor dancing skills, he noted that the ship “didn’t have stabilizers in those days... so the ship rolled and everybody rolled with the ship, so it wasn’t too bad.” For many, however, the real excitement began when the ship docked in Havana. This cultural allure, so prevalent in the early twentieth century, was made popular in American culture through various means and methods.

In Cuba, it is said, “all roads led to Rum.” In an attempt to escape from reality and the effects of the Great Depression, people believed that in Cuba “conscience takes a

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37 Hicks, *When the Dancing Stopped*, p. 18.
38 Marjorie Gianini, interview by Deborah Whitcraft and Gretchen Coyle, undated, DVD.
41 Coyle and Whitcraft, *Inferno at Sea*, p. 20; Torressson, interview by Sandra Stewart Holyoak and David D’Onofrio, September 25, 2002.
American perceptions of Cuba had been shaped by its seductive and intriguing appearance in theater plays and movies, songs and radio programs. In *You'll Never Get Rich* (1941), scenery behind the actors alludes to a picturesque vision of Havana: palm trees, Spanish-style façades of houses, and an entrance to Havana Harbor, guarded by the picturesque Morro Castle fortress. Fred Astaire sings Cole Porter’s “So Near and Yet So Far,” a song that alludes to the mystique and almost exotic nature of Cuba. Havana, then known as “the gayest city in the western world,” was something of a fantasy island in American perceptions. Basil Wood’s published tourist guide *When It’s Cocktail Time in Cuba* (1928) alluded to the strong presence of alcohol in this country. He stated that in Cuba you could do what you could never do in the states—“drink to your heart’s content.” In this way, Americans of the early twentieth century developed an intrigue in this country Gustavo Firmat terms the “Havana Habit.” It was truly the pinnacle of escapism for Americans mired in depression-era hardships at home.

What the movies, plays, and tourist brochures did not portray, though, was the real Cuba: a Cuba full of crime, political turmoil, and Communist threats of usurpation. Because of this, the Ward Line strictly regulated the area in which passengers could travel. In doing so, cruise officials effectively attempted to create a Cuba that had been made famous in the minds of Americans by shutting out reality from their designated area. Still, Havana was “wide open,” and it was inevitable that if the passengers would not seek out illicit pleasures, the illicit pleasures would seek them out.

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46 Coyle and Whitcraft, *Inferno at Sea*, p. 23.
instead. A land full of hand rolled cigars and plentiful rum waited for eager passengers who sought to suspend reality and continue living in their fantasy world.

One way one could spend a night in Havana was by making a nightclub tour in which you followed the team of musicians known as “the rumba king and queen of Havana.” By making the tour, you could see them at about four nightclubs. In total, there were eight nightclubs you could visit in the area designated by the Ward Line, including the famous Sans Souci, “one of the most famous nightclubs in the world.” Gambling, of course, was also a prevalent activity in Cuban night life. Torresson recalled at one time winning sixty dollars at a jai alai game and then treating his mother to dinner at the aforesaid Sans Souci.

In the daytime, Cruise Director Bob Smith offered designed packages for tours in Havana. These tours, the Valdez tours, were designed to give passengers “the impression they had seen much of Cuba in a very short time.” Passengers would be loaded into the tour company’s sedans and driven around various parts of the town that the Ward Line and the separate tour company had decided were safe. Still, some passengers did make regrettable choices which showed the dark underbelly of the city and exposed the Ward Line’s attempts to construct the fantasy island of American perceptions. For example, Torresson recalled that one seventeen year-old girl had left her parents while in Havana and later that night, at 11:00, returned with a Cuban gigolo. After the ship’s crew members on watch told them he was not allowed to come on the

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47 Torresson, interview by Sandra Stewart Holyoak and David D’Onofrio, September 25, 2002.
48 Torresson, interview by Sandra Stewart Holyoak and David D’Onofrio, September 25, 2002
49 Hicks, When the Dancing Stopped, p. 19. The story of Tom Torresson winning sixty dollars at a jai alai game is actually in reference to a cruise he took on the Morro Castle before he worked on the ship. The experience left such an impact on him that he then decided to take the job on the very same ship as third assistant purser.
50 Ibid.; Hicks, When the Dancing Stopped, p. 19.
ship, he took her to the dock and tried to rape her. The crew members thankfully became aware of the situation and threw the man off the dock.\textsuperscript{51}

In sum, the allure of Cuba was an attraction to a created myth of American culture and media. The Ward Line and cooperating companies in Havana did their best to portray this fantasy island, and for the most part, they succeeded. The attraction of unlimited alcohol both on the ship and in the port city, especially during the years Prohibition was in effect, with enticing novelties and activities offered by Bob Smith on the ship, and of course the extravagant night life of Havana itself all combined to give passengers the experience of a lifetime. It is no wonder families and individuals would save religiously just to partake in one of these voyages.

Whether in regards to the New Deal, the Popular Front, or leisurely pursuits, the 1930’s was “the decade of participation and belonging.”\textsuperscript{52} This statement is relevant to the Morro Castle context on two levels. Firstly, the “entertainment discount revolution” passengers experienced as a result of the Great Depression was followed by a vastly heightened and expanded participation rate in cruising. That is not to suggest more people went on cruises, but rather that a more socially and economically diverse group of people went on cruises. Secondly, this sense of participation and belonging permeated into activities on the cruise ship itself. Whether it was dancing around in the newfound “Sea Spray” attraction on deck or passing the time playing card games and drinking rum in the smoking room, the Morro Castle and other contemporary ships espoused a tradition of participation. For middle-class families, it was a new experience all around through which they all bonded. Elitism surely continued to thrive in such an

\textsuperscript{51} Torresson, interview by Sandra Stewart Holyoak and David D’Onofrio, September 25, 2002.
\textsuperscript{52} Warren Susman, quote in Kammen, American Culture American Tastes, p. 84.
environment, but much less so than before. Thus, many of the political ideals put forth through the New Deal and the Popular Front flooded various forms of leisure, albeit somewhat expensive forms, such as cruising.

Walt Disney, a middlebrow self-made man, in a 1942 radio address at intermission during a performance of the Metropolitan Opera in New York, discussed to the crowd what he called “Our American Culture.” In this address, Disney went on to argue that the word ‘culture’ itself seemed “snobbish” and had an “un-American connotation.” In Disney’s view, such a snobbish and tyrannous form of culture that was guarded by the socially elite was intolerable because culture belonged “equally to all of us.” In the 1930’s United States, cultural opportunities existed for the “rich and poor alike in great abundance.” The shift in cruising as a form of leisure reflects this Disney-era populism, even if on a smaller scale than many forms of leisure.

It must be acknowledged that not all could afford a vacation as extravagant as a luxury cruise from New York to Havana, even with the entertainment discount revolution, but the 1930’s witnessed a downward expansion and proliferation of opportunity for middle-class families and individuals. This was not an inherent demand by the middle-class to suddenly wish to cruise more. Rather, exterior circumstances permitted the opportunities to arise. These changed opportunities have remained salient since the 1930’s. This social and economic shift in cruising in this decade solidified and subsequently set in motion the modern notion of cruising. The cruise of today is certainly not an egalitarian vacation in which anyone can afford any cabin, but various opportunities exist for those who are very wealthy and for those with meager incomes alike. Once the ticket is purchased, activities on board and services offered are

available for all in an equal manner. This was a novel idea for many in the middle-class in the 1930’s. Where the rich expected the elegance and excesses, those in the middle-class were delightfully surprised. Abundant alcohol and a visit to the port city made famous in American culture both also served as enticing aspects that passengers would recall to their children in years to come.

The Morro Castle disaster of September 8, 1934 changed considerably the lives of all those on board who survived. It was an event that would never be forgotten by both the survivors themselves and historians who were drawn to the intrigue of this mystery. What this paper has attempted to convey, however, is that perhaps what happened before the disaster also changed considerably the lives of many passengers. For numerous middle-class families and individuals on board, this was a unique experience that they had only dreamed of before. For those on board the fateful voyage of the Morro Castle, the disaster most likely erased the fond memories of the cruise itself. That does not mean, however, that these good memories of nighttime dances, drunken socialization, and the blue haze of evening upon arriving to the alluring Havana port need be lost to memory. For most who were lucky enough to partake in such a cruise, it was an escape from reality that left an indelible mark on their lives as one of the finest examples of American culture available in the early twentieth century.
Figure 1: An advertisement from the Ward Line detailing seven day cruising schedules from July to October. This advertisement also emphasizes the $65 minimum rate for a cabin, which would have attracted many eager vacationers in the middle-class.

(Photo courtesy of Deb Whitcraft and the Museum of New Jersey Maritime History)
Figure 4: Thomas Torresson, who served as third assistant purser on the Morro Castle. When the disaster struck in September of 1934, Tom was just completing his first summer of employment with the Ward Line.  
(Photo courtesy of Deb Whitcraft and the Museum of New Jersey Maritime History)
Figure 5: Depiction of a typical horse racing game with wooden horses on the deck of the Morro Castle. (Photo courtesy of Deb Whitcraft and the Museum of New Jersey Maritime History)
Figure 6: Passengers playing shuffle board on the deck of the *Morro Castle*. Cruise Director Bob Smith is shown on the far right. (Photo courtesy of Deb Whitcraft and the Museum of New Jersey Maritime History)
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