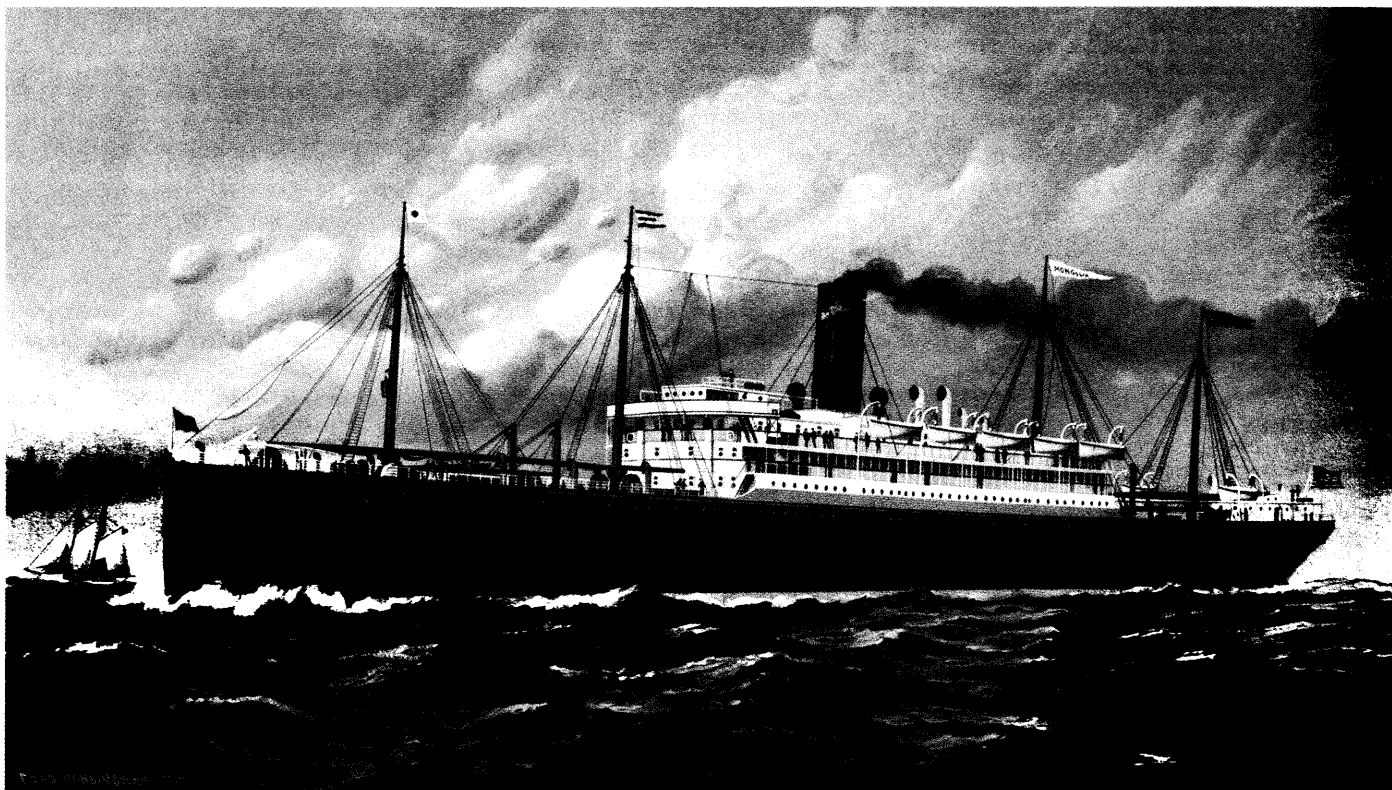


The Scandalous Ship *Mongolia*

By Robert Barde



The Pacific Mail Steamship Company's *Mongolia* as depicted by artist Fred Pansing. – Courtesy of the Bancroft Library, The University of California, Berkeley.

On April 25, 1917, the steamship *Mongolia* had her moment of glory. With but a single shot, she sank—or disabled, depending on the source—a German U-boat off the coast of England. Captain Emery Rice was hailed as a hero, as the captain of “the ship which boasts of being the first of Uncle Sam’s maritime traders to sink a U-boat... the steamship *Mongolia*.”¹ Nearly fifty years later, this feat was recounted in detail in this journal in George Seeth’s article “The Illustrious Ship *Mongolia*.”²

When I first made the *Mongolia*’s acquaintance, this event and Seeth’s article were unknown to me. The vocation of the ship I knew, though the very same vessel, had been carrying passengers and freight across the Pacific between San Francisco and the Orient. That career came to an ignominious end in October 1915, and in my mind she had always been “The Scandalous *Mongolia*.”

The big steamer’s last voyage across the Pacific could have been a gracious farewell. After thirteen years—and fifty-three round trips³—ferrying travelers

and cargo between China, Japan and California, the *Mongolia* was being transferred to service out of New York. She wasn’t a particularly old ship, but her owners, the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, were getting out of the shipping business and selling her. The *Mongolia*’s Pacific career was set to end when she arrived in San Francisco on Wednesday morning, October 27, 1915.

“Arrival” meant more than steaming right up to Pier 42 and having the ship’s passengers walk down the gangway. The process of clearing

—especially one capable of carrying over 1,500 passengers,⁴ plus crew—began well before a ship tied up after navigating the “Golden Gate” and passing the grounds of the Panama Pacific Exhibition,⁵ the *Mongolia* stopped opposite Meiggs’ Wharf⁶ and received, as required, a small flotilla of government boats and agents. As this was known as the quarantine point, a cutter belonging to the U.S. Public Health Service’s Quarantine Station arrived. A Coast Guard cutter also came alongside, carrying the U.S. Customs Service boarding officer as well as several newspaper reporters and a representative of Pacific Mail. They were soon joined by the Immigration Service’s cutter *Inspector*, carrying Acting Commissioner Mehan, Inspector Wendennin and other Immigration inspectors. The *Mongolia*’s Captain, Emery Rice, provided the inspectors with a list of all aliens aboard, and the Immigration men immediately began their examinations of the passengers.

As the *Mongolia* resumed her progress toward Pier 42,⁷ aided by the tug *Arabs*, Cabin Class passengers were inspected in their cabins. “Steerage” passengers—nearly all of whom were Chinese—were inspected in the *Mongolia*’s steerage eating areas. This was the era of the Chinese Exclusion Acts—Federal laws first enacted in 1882 that allowed only certain categories of Chinese to enter the country.⁸ Some Chinese were cleared for landing right away—“natives” (i.e., Chinese born in the United States), First Cabin Chinese holding Section 6 certificates stating that they were bona fide merchants, and Chinese officials. All Caucasians, of course, were immediately admitted. Everyone else was destined for the Immigration Service’s detention center on Angel Island.

Captain Rice and Chief Officer Ryland Drennan were on the bridge as the *Mongolia* eased into the Pacific Mail’s Pier 42. By the time she was firmly berthed, fifteen Immigration officers were aboard and perhaps thirty or forty customs officers were also on hand. Plainclothes agents of the Treasury Department were on the dock. This was all standard operating procedure, nothing out of the ordinary. The *Mongolia*’s last Pacific crossing had come to an end. She had given good service, service that deserved a stately salute at its conclusion, but her

actual reward would be two acts of the inelegant—first farce, then scandalous high drama.

Act I reprised the struggle over precisely who was in control of the port and which government agency was not doing its fair share of the work—as if any one person or organization could be said to control a port like San Francisco and its Bay. The Commissioner of Immigration, with power over those who would enter the country by sea, could not be ignored. The Surveyor of the Port had his claim to overall authority, and the Collector of Customs—the Treasury Department’s local satrap—controlled all goods moving in and out of San Francisco. On October 27 their conflicting claims surfaced in miniature. What venue could have been better suited to acting out this drama than that most American of stages, the movie set? And what cinematic story line could have been more tailored to San Francisco than a raid on Chinese opium smugglers? As *The San Francisco Chronicle* told it the next day on page one, the “Movie ‘Opium Raid’ is Cause of Customs Squabble”:

Surveyor of the Port Justus S. Wardell and Collector of Customs John O. Davis are far from agreed as to the propriety of permitting a motion-picture concern to have free run of the dock upon the arrival of the Japanese liner *Nippon Maru* and the Pacific Mail liner *Mongolia* in a “correct imitation” of “A Terrible Opium Raid.”

“I have been informed that the motion-picture actors were actually permitted to wear regulation uniforms and badges,” said Surveyor Wardell yesterday. “This can serve no good public purpose and tends to belittle the United States Customs Service.”

Collector of Customs Davis, who is said to have approved of the “movie” of the customs opium squad, was not at his office yesterday.

The matter has been put up to Special Agent W. H. Tidwell. The latter said he would investigate, but was inclined to think there had been no serious violation of the Government rules, where the motion-picture people had not represented themselves as Government agents.⁹

No further news of this incident appeared in the newspapers. Wardell was not served—certainly not by Special Agent Tidwell, no matter how “wroth” the Surveyor may have been. As the next day’s headlines made clear, Tidwell had another investigation to attend to, and it was about nothing so frivolous as a motion picture.

Treasury Department Special Agent Tidwell had been worrying about smuggling, and he had been worrying about it for some time. As Special Agent in Charge of the United States Customs Service at the Port of San Francisco, that was his job. Import duties were the Federal government’s biggest source of revenue—this was two years before the first Federal income tax laws—and his office, as in every port, was charged with making sure that duties were collected. His many responsibilities included two that differentiated San Francisco from, say, New York: he was charged with—among many other things—preventing the entry of smuggled opium and, increasingly, smuggled Chinese and Japanese trying to enter the United States.

A year earlier he had received a disturbing letter from “a native born Chinaman at this port,” allegations that must have landed like a small bombshell:

One of the most graftiest bunch in the U.S. Services of the Pacific Coast, is the immigration band with its organization in San Francisco.

The writer, a young man with keen observations, through years of experiences in representing of Chinese Societies and Tongs have gained the knowledge of the secrets and systems by which the grafting deeds is carried.

The business of making money in the immigration services is to employ Chinese secret agents so as to landed Chinese labours unofficially. And the bunch of Chinese inspectors is those that reaped the golden harvest.

In order to give a slight idea of their games; the writer have frequently seen scores of Chinese came off of the gang plank from Oriental Linnners with only a pass ticket. The pass is suppose to issued only for the Chinese crew that employed by the Steamships Companies where the bearer have

