



**Buoys and Gulls - by Olive/VE7ERA**



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SOWP is truly a global society as our new publication's name, World Wireless Beacon, would indicate. Total count of 'member' countries, according to our last directory, was 39. It could be higher now. In future issues it would be great if we could visit with our fellow brasspounders from as many of these nations as possible.

Our port of call this trip, is in Scandinavia via, Köping, Sweden – home of Birgitta Gustaffson, SOWP 3854-M, former deep sea radio operator and at present a scribe in her own right. Birgitta responded quickly with ready agreement, to my request for background material and a few reminiscences. It was nice hearing from another YL," she wrote. "I was very happy to be reminded of the old days when I pounded the key in ships. I'll be pleased to make a contribution by writing of my seagoing experiences, but I'm aware of being a lengthy storyteller. Her solution was to write a short article for this newsletter. with a longer, more detailed one for a future Sparks – Journal. Birgitta's full time journalistic chores keep her occupied, but regardless of a very full schedule, she and OM Thorsten, retired harbourmaster of Köping, try to make yearly vacation trips to places they once visited by ship. Then we mostly saw only the ports," muses Birgitta, "now we can travel to the interior and look for those castles in Spain: Birgitta has recently begun research on a writing project involving her first love – the sea, and wireless. This will undoubtedly consume much of her time, but we're pleased that she was able to send us the following 'abbreviated' version of her life as a Sparks in the Swedish merchant marine: When I was three, I made up my mind - I'd become a sea captain when I grew up! When I was 17, I was sent to sea to get those whims out of my head. I signed on as a second cook/messgirl in an old steamboat in the Scandinavia-England trade, where I cleaned messy pots and fought with the coal-heated stove for two months during my school holidays. It didn't cure my longing for the sea, but I found out that working in the galley was not for me. But what was? This was in the early '50s; I was a female and born 20 years too early to be allowed to sign on as a deckhand and start making my way up to the bridge. So I went back to school. Then, a couple of years later, I heard a radio interview with the first Swedish YL at sea. Eureka! This was the answer! We were five girls out of 24 students in training school. Four of us went 10 sea for longer or shorter periods: the fifth joined the Foreign Service, where she is still working in the radio department. but not with Morse, I guess. We had only one year of training, quite insufficient, and I never got further on the technical side than to change valves and fuses. Many lessons were spent on book-keeping, as the ROs in Swedish ships do the accountancy of wages and most of the other desk work on board. After passing our exams, we were kicked out into the world with full responsibility for a ship's radio station: No apprentice time with an experienced RO. Those were the days when crystal-

controlled equipment had just taken over. But my first ship<sup>1</sup> the M/S DAHLIA, had the only 'non-crystalized' transmitter left in the Swedish merchant navy. I had no idea how to operate it. My predecessor had gone on sick leave and my ship sailed for the Mediterranean a couple of hours after I'd come aboard. Out we headed into the rough seas. I got the station started, but couldn't raise enough antenna power to send my QTO. I had to report my failure to the skipper. He, a very kind man, took one look at my green face and asked if the emergency transmitter worked. When I stammered, "Yes, sir;" he told me to go to bed. I solved my problems with the DAHLIA's transmitter later, but we never made friends. I stayed on the Med. trade for a couple of years in the DAHLIA and her sister ship, the INDUSTRIA. A round trip took four to six weeks with stops in a lot of nice ports - and some not so nice, like Algiers where their liberation war was underway. My quarters offered no luxury beyond a washstand. The cabin was located in a different deckhouse than the bridge and the radio room. I had to go down one outside ladder, cross an open deck and climb two more ladders to get up to the station. As a consequence, mine was never the first station on the air when the alarm sounded, as it did now and then in the North Sea and the Channel. My cabin door opened out onto the deck and, during wintertime in northern waters, the deck crew sometimes had to clear away the snow or ice made by the washing seas in order to get me out in the morning. I met my 'husband-to-be' in those ships. He was Second Mate in the DAHLIA and later became First Mate in the INDUSTRIA. When he advanced to relieving skipper, he had to start in the company's smaller ships without a radio operator. I changed to another shipping company then in order to see some more of the world. From 1958 to 1959, I sailed in the M/S COOLANGATTA, a reefer of 3200 deadweight tons, half the year on a worldwide charter. She must have been uneconomic, always sailing in ballast when outward bound. When empty, she rolled something awful! But she was clean and beautiful, my dreamboat on a dream trade. I always loved those weeks in the tropic waters when we were just a spot on a wide open sea. After that year in the COOLANGATTA, I only took short trips in different ships, alternating with sailing with my husband as the 'Skipper's wife'. Then in 1961, he got a job ashore and we started to raise a family. We now have two grown up children and I work as a journalist at the local newspaper. In the long perspective, my seagoing years seem like a pleasant dream. Of course, I must have been unhappy now and then; I always had to go through some days of seasickness in every new ship. I must have been lonely, too; the people around me couldn't always have been nice. But you have a tendency to forget the unpleasant things. I do remember the good comradeship, the kind fuss around me, the care. When I arrived in the DAHLIA, I was the first YL in the company and I was treated like a mascot on board. The skipper offered me his bathroom, the chief steward fed me candies and the engineers switched seats in the mess room so I didn't have to push my way past them to get to the RO's seat. Well, I got older and tougher. I wasn't spared the rough times but I had a good start. And if life now and then seems too filled with routines, I stop and think - I have those five years at sea when life was an adventure. No one can take that away from me.