

**German Immigrants in Steerage:
What did They Eat?**
By Don Heinrich Tolzmann

I. Introduction

Many questions arise when researching the history of German immigration, ranging from its causes in the German-speaking countries to places of settlement in the U.S. One question in need of further exploration relates to the voyage in steerage to America, specifically what did they have to eat and who prepared it? It is a very basic question, one that we should take a closer look at.

In the early 19th century, German immigrants came to America on sailing vessels, which were replaced by steamers by the 1870s. The former took approximately 30 to 90 days, depending on the prevalent winds, whereas the latter took only 10 to 14 days. They traveled in steerage, which is more descriptively described by the German term “Zwischendeck,” which refers to the space between an upper deck and the hold of the ship. Cargo was stored in the hold, and a level above steerage is where the crew would usually be housed.

Emigrants took passage in steerage due to the affordable rates it offered. Shirley J. Riemer describes conditions in steerage as follows:

The accommodation in the steerage was primitive, as can be imagined...Mattresses and bedding had to be provided by the passengers themselves. There were few latrines, and ventilation was provided for the most part only through ten hatches. The steerage was at once a bedroom, dining-room and living room. (1)

She also notes: “Feeding was the passengers’ own concern; they had to provide their own food and crockery, and the only amenity provided for them was a ration of water.” Conditions improved greatly by the 1870s, when steamers replaced sailing vessels. This meant: “Food became more plentiful, especially since it had become possible to keep provisions fresh until the end of the passage.” (2)

So from this description we conclude that emigrants had to bring their own food early on in the 19th century, but that food was made available to passengers later on with the introduction of steamers. This had been my general impression until I came across several descriptions of food that was served to immigrants in steerage. So, the notion that all immigrants “had to provide their own food” is in need of revision.

Moreover, the question arises as to what might have been available on ships that did serve food? The following examples shed light on the answer to this question. What follows are menus from two sailing vessels and one from a steamer these for passengers traveling in steerage.

II. An 1829 Menu

In 1833, Gustav Löwig published a book about his immigration experience. In 1829, he traveled from his hometown of Strassburg to Le Havre via Paris. There he boarded a ship headed for Philadelphia, where he became a merchant. His book provides an interesting account of his impressions of America, with the first chapter focusing on the ocean voyage. He writes that there were a total of three cooks and two stewards on board to assist with the meal service, and then provides the details as to the weekly menu. (3)

Midday Meal:

Monday: Salt ox meat and potatoes

Tuesday: Salt pork and white beans

Wednesday: Salt ox meat and boiled rice

Thursday: Salt ox meat and a pudding made with flour and bacon

Friday: Salt pork and white beans

Saturday: Salt fish and potatoes

Sunday: Salt ox meat and pudding made with flour and bacon

Breakfast and evening meal:

This consisted of tea, zwieback, and salt meat. Three times a week potato soup was served with salt meat and pepper mixed in.

III. An 1831 Menu

In 1831, John A. Roebling, the famous bridge-builder, also came to America as a passenger in steerage on a sailing vessel. He emigrated from his hometown of Mühlhausen in Thuringia, and departed from Bremerhaven headed like Löwig for Philadelphia. In his diary, he described the food that was served as follows. (4)

Breakfast:

Coffee and grits

Midday Meal:

Sunday: $\frac{3}{4}$ lb. of meat with pudding or potatoes

Monday: $\frac{1}{2}$ lb. of bacon with peas and potatoes

Tuesday: $\frac{3}{4}$ lb. of meat with peas

Wednesday: $\frac{1}{2}$ lb. bacon with beans

Thursday: $\frac{3}{4}$ lb. meat with sauerkraut or peas

Friday: $\frac{3}{4}$ lb. meat with peas

Saturday: Grits with plums

Evening Meal:

Passengers retained meat from the midday meal, and also received warm vegetables. Bread, butter, zwieback were also available.



https://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/exhibition/2_3.html

Beverages: Aside from water, coffee was available for passengers. Roebing also writes: “Dependent on the behavior of the passengers” passengers received a glass of brandy daily and on Saturday evening “warm beer.” (5)

IV. An 1888 Menu

Meyer’s *Konversations-Lexikon* (1888) gives a sample survey of what was available for passengers in steerage on a steamer headed for America, and most likely for the midday meal. (6)

Menu:

Monday: Salt bacon, peas and potatoes

Tuesday: Salt meat, rice, and plums

Wednesday: Smoked bacon, sauerkraut and potatoes

Thursday: Meat, potatoes, bean soup

Friday: Herring, cereal, plums

Saturday: Salt bacon, pea soup, and potatoes

Sunday: Salt meat, pudding, and plums

Additional Items:

Coffee and tea was available, as was bread and butter.

V. Conclusion

The preceding menus of food available in steerage indicate that food service was indeed available on some immigrant ships. To what extent this was the case is unknown. Riemer’s observation that immigrants “had to provide their own food” reflects the general view on that topic, and is one I have often heard from the descendants of immigrants. However, we now have to conclude that food also was made available on some immigrant ships for passengers in steerage. So, the answer to the question about the availability of food in steerage is, therefore, more complex than might be expected, and is in need of further research. (7)

As to the food that was served in the menus we have cited here, several observations can be made. Standard items included: salt meat, potatoes, rice, grits, beans, sauerkraut, plums, bread, zwieback, and butter. Additionally, coffee, even beer and brandy were listed. The kind of food available here certainly was not the standard fare that Germans were accustomed to, but had enough items they could relate to, so as to make it tolerably palatable to them. (8)

Further research on the food that was available to German immigrants in steerage in the 19th century might further shed light on the preliminary conclusions we have come to here. (9)

Notes

1. Shirley J. Riemer, *The German Research Companion* (Sacramento, California: Lorelei Press, 2000), p.100.
2. Ibid.
3. Gustav Löwig, *Die Freistaaten von Nord-Amerika: Beobachtungen und praktische Bemerkungen für auswandernde Deutsche* (Heidelberg: Karl Gross, 1833), pp. 11, 14.
4. John A. Roebling, *Diary of My Journey from Muehlhausen in Thuringia via Bremen to the United States of North America in the the Year 1831* (Trenton, New Jersey: Privately Printed by the Roebling Press, 1931), pp. 25-26.
5. Ibid,p. 26.
6. See: Bettina Meister's book: *Auswanderer Kochbuch* (Wintrich: Verlag FELIX AG, 2009), pp. 32-33.
7. Immigrant guidebooks need to be examined to see what they have to say regarding the availability of food. One such guidebook by August Rauschenbusch, for example, has advice in this regard for those embarking from Antwerp, Le Havre, and Bremerhaven. He writes that those taking ships form Antwerp and Le Havre should bring their own food, especially smoked meat. However, he notes that food is provided by ships from Bremerhaven, but that immigrants would be well advised to bring additional food items as well, such as: zwieback, oatmeal, vinegar, and dried apples and plums. See: August Rauschenbusch, *Einige Anweisungen für Auswanderer nach den westlichen Staaten von Nordamerika und Reiseberichte. Dritte Auflage.* (Elberfeld: Julius Bädeker, 1848), p. 20.
8. For a history of German food items, see: Ursula Heinzelmann, *Beyond Bratwurst, A History of Food in Germany* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2014).
9. The author requests references to books, articles, letters, etc. which provide information regarding food that was available on immigrant ships in the 19th century. Please send to the author at: dhtolzmänn@yahoo.com.