

Name _____



Date _____

Life on an Explorer's Ship

By Mary Lynn Bushong

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be an explorer? Nearly anyone can be an explorer of some kind now. Four hundred years ago, it took a special kind of person.

Explorers had to know how to read maps. They also needed to know how to make maps and keep a written journal. They also learned to read the sky for weather changes and knew the stars by name. They could find their way using the stars, a compass, and an astrolabe.

Sometimes life on board the ship would be exciting, but most of the time it was boring. There was not much to do if you were not working. You would not have a room to yourself. All the crew slept below the deck where it was dark and smelly. They rarely had baths and hardly ever washed their clothes.

At mealtime, they ate hard dry bread along with salted meat, dried peas, and dried fruit like raisins or prunes. Fresh water often went stale quickly, so everyone drank beer. They were allowed to drink a gallon of it every day.

No one understood the reasons why it was important to eat well. One of the curses of a long voyage was disease. The worst of those was a disease called scurvy. Scurvy happened when people did not get enough vitamins in their food. Vitamin C was most important.

A man with scurvy would start feeling like he had no energy, and then his skin would break out in boils. His gums would start to bleed, and his teeth would fall out. His arms and legs would swell up and become bruised. Finally, he would slip into a coma and die. If he got the vitamin C before he died, he would get well again.

Those men who were going to find the Northwest or Northeast Passages could be sure of only one thing—the cold. Fires were not allowed on the ship unless the sea was calm. It would have been easy for the ship to catch fire in a rough sea. That had to be avoided at all costs.

Work was never ending. Ship's sails had to be taken care of and mended. So did the ropes and rigging which controlled the sails. Accidents might happen, and often did. If someone was injured, you would call in the barber. A barber? In those days, a barber not only cut hair and gave shaves, he also acted as a doctor: setting bones, binding up wounds, and drawing blood. He also had to help those who were sick.

When the ship came close to land, it was important to know the depth of the water. A "line and lead" were used to determine this. A lead weight was attached to lines made up of cloth, rope, and leather. Depth was measured in fathoms (a fathom equals six feet). The different materials helped the seamen to see the nearest mark in daylight and feel it at night.

Out on the sea, away from land, it would be hard to see how fast you were going in the ship. It was important information for the Captain's journal or log. The speed the ship traveled was measured in knots, just as it is today. To do the actual measuring, a large piece of wood with a rope attached was thrown into the water. When it was clear of the rear (stern) of the ship, a sand glass would be turned over. The rope had knots on it at certain distances, and it was wound on a drum. The goal was to keep the piece of wood from being pulled with the ship, so the rope had to be let out carefully, not too slow or fast. When the sand ran out, they would pull the wood back in and count the number of knots that had wound off the drum. This would give them their speed.

You might wonder why young men would choose a sea life if it was so dangerous, boring, and uncomfortable. In those days, most people never went farther than a few miles from their homes their whole lives. Becoming a sailor was an opportunity for adventure and seeing new things. Sailors were also paid better than the average worker. For many men, it was this combination which made them put up with and sometimes love the hard life. Exploring was worth the risk of their lives.



Questions

1. Which of these was not used for navigation by 16th century explorers?

- A. Compass
- B. Stars
- C. Astrolabe
- D. Spy glass

2. What was the main drink for sailors?

- A. Beer
- B. Water
- C. Wine
- D. Apple cider

3. Which of these is not normal food for sailors on voyages?

- A. Canned fruit
- B. Salted meat
- C. Hard bread
- D. Dried peas

4. Why were fires allowed only when the ship was in calm seas?

5. Who would help you if you were injured on the ship?

- A. Barber
- B. Doctor
- C. Crew member
- D. Captain

6. What caused scurvy? A lack of:

- A. Clean clothes
- B. Vitamin C
- C. Exercise
- D. Fresh water

7. What was used to measure a ship's speed at sea?

- A. A piece of lead
- B. Knots on a rope
- C. A sand glass
- D. A chunk of wood

8. Why did some men go to sea?
