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A Peak At The Past

Man of the world

By MATT CONNOR

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It was a strange, memorable day for Lock Haven University geology professor Loretta Dickson. She'd been rummaging around in the attic of the house she had just purchased at 421 West Main Street in the city when she stumbled upon a large cardboard box filled with old photographs. Dragging it downstairs, she began to pull out handfuls of the photos, each representing another page in the life of a man who had lived there eighteen years earlier. And what a life it was, set in a time when the super-rich traveled in floating palaces, luxury liners that compared favorably with some of the most lavish land-based homes of European royalty. Inexplicably, this huge cache of photos – hundreds, perhaps thousands of them – had remained, seemingly untouched since the 1990s, in the attic of this historic 1870 Italianate home. The box of photos represented an intriguing mystery to Dickson, who was then new to the area and knew few local folk outside of the university setting. A title search and some scribbling on the back of a few of the photos identified the former owner depicted in so many of the old images as Vaughan Rickard, but the name meant nothing to Dickson. Who was this impeccably-attired gentleman, photographed here on the deck of a luxury liner, there outside India's Taj Mahal or China's Great Wall? There were images of sophisticated revels with men in black tie and women in glittering ball gowns. There were costume parties and smiling film stars and immaculately turned-out crewmen in gold braiding and epaulets. Who, after all, was Vaughan Rickard, and why had this vast photographic treasury been left behind in the dusty attic of his old home? After spending a couple of hours on a recent Sunday in Dickson's home, perusing through the mysterious box of photos, I decided I wanted to find out for myself. A google search of Vaughan's name leads one to an excellent website (www.caronia2.info/home.php) and a reference to "Liners to the Sun," a fascinating book by John Maxtone-Graham, who has written extensively about luxury life on the high seas, most recently in the gorgeous coffee table tome "Normandie" (W.W. Norton & Company, 2008). Rickard, it turns out, had been cruise director of the RMS Caronia, the cream of the crop of Cunard luxury liners. Launched in 1949, the Caronia "was, quite simply, the most successful dual-purpose Cunarder the company ever launched; only the Queen Elizabeth 2 or the second Mauretania belongs in her league," wrote Maxtone-Graham in "Liners to the Sun." The vast ship, Maxtone-Graham wrote, "became instantly synonymous with top-drawer, luxury cruising. No other postwar vessel was built to her demanding specifications and no other attracted the same level of traveling aficionados, people with a great deal of money, time on their hands, no particular destination in mind, and a penchant for booking with the same friends year after year on a vessel that seemed more club than cruise ship." Through Maxtone-Graham's publisher, I was able to email the author, who had interviewed Rickard for "Liners to the Sun." He received my email while on board the Star Princess, where he is lecturing for two months until his return to New York in May. "I was most interested to hear about the find of Vaughan Rickard's photographic treasure trove," Maxtone-Graham wrote. "How remarkable that the box survived a previous owner, and how nice that the present owner of the house got in touch with you." I interviewed Vaughan for the Caronia chapter in 'Liners to the Sun,' as you surmised, and found him a nice man, a rather typical cruise director of the period. He had, alas, very little to tell me; since I spend so much time on ships and have been crossing since the 1930's, there was very little I needed to know. "Moreover, I sensed he was not about to tell me anything that might have been scandalous or unhappy making; I think he was still fairly close to Cunard, although retired, as far as I can recall. But I think it was he, now that I think of it, who told me about the woman jumping over the side." For a complete accounting of "the woman jumping over the side," you'll have to consult "Liners to the Sun" yourself. It's out of print but still available on amazon.com and other online booksellers. Maxtone-Graham closed his email to me with the following suggestion: "You might care to get in touch with an old friend of mine, Brenton Jenkins, who worked for Cunard for years and doubtless knew Rickard." An email address for Jenkins followed. I sent him a note and a few days later received the following message in my inbox: "Dear Matt, I was so delighted to receive your email and I bless my good friend John Maxtone-Graham for giving you my information. I knew Vaughan very well from my Caronia days with Cunard and have been trying to trace him for a very long time, to no avail." Jenkins was assigned to the Caronia for her maiden voyage in 1948, where he first met Vaughan on cruises out of New York, he said. Now an 83-year-old Florida resident, the former Caronia chief purser remembers Rickard as "such a tremendous character, larger than life, and much beloved by our rich and famous passengers cruising in those days. "Only the rich could afford to cruise in those days," he added. "Vaughan knew exactly how to handle them with such ease and aplomb. He was a master at his job and without a doubt, the best in the business. He held the most enviable job in the industry." For over 35 years, Rickard served on the Caronia and the Queen Elizabeth 2. As such, his life on the high seas was characterized by endless entertaining, visits to exotic locales and brief friendships with movie stars, corporate titans and even the occasional gangster. "One has to keep in mind, the Caronia was the first and largest ship built after the war, specially for cruising around the world, launched by Queen Elizabeth, then Princess Elizabeth," Jenkins wrote. "The ship was known throughout the world as the 'Green Goddess' or 'Millionaires Yacht' and her passenger list read like pages out of 'Who's Who.'"

Article Photos



The late Bill Piper, his wife Beth and Vaughan Rickard pose together during a round-the-world luxury cruise.

Among those passengers was the late William T. Piper Jr., former president of Piper Aircraft, and his wife Beth. At least one image in the photo box from the attic of 421 West Main Street shows Rickard, in black tie, with the Pipers sitting beside them. "Vaughan worked for Cunard for a lifetime, but he always wanted to come back to Lock Haven," Beth Piper said via telephone from her summer home in Florida. "He'd book us down low in the ship and then move us way up when we arrived, and charge us the same price as the lower berth. He was just wonderful." Piper suggested I get in touch with Kelly Jo Shadle-Drury, an employee of Kliney's Furniture in Avis and a second cousin of the late cruise director. "I'm not sure what I can tell you," Kelly Jo said during an interview at her place of employment recently. "I was a little girl when we used to visit him, and I don't remember much." Despite her protestations, the tastefully elegant Shadle-Drury was, in fact, able to add some interesting shading to the story of Vaughan Rickard. She also suggested another source, Mill Hall resident Emily Sohmer, who was best friends with Vaughan's sister, Betty Lou. Sohmer's nickname for Rickard was "Junej," as in "Junior," which she called him to distinguish him from his father. "I remember Junej and Betty Lou dancing at her wedding," Sohmer said. "He was a very good dancer, which put him in good stead when he was on the cruises because he could entertain the old ladies." Born in Lock Haven in 1925 to Vaughan Rickard Sr. and Ella Mae Kalmbach-Rickard of Swissdale, Vaughan graduated from Lock Haven High School and attended the New York School of Dramatic Arts, where he studied acting. "He was going to be on the stage," Sohmer said. "He told me he wanted to change his name to Ricky Vaughn, but that didn't go over well with his dad. We all — Betty Lou and Ella Mae and I — went down to New York once to see Junej. He took us to his place at 41 West 76th street, which I think is near Columbus Circle. "He was in a play, and when I tell you it was off-off-off Broadway, I mean it. It was Great Neck, Long Island. I can't remember what the production was, but it involved a lot of children. Afterwards, the mother of one of the youngsters approached Betty Lou's mother and said, 'Your son is just such a fine actor.' And he was. He was very good. "But he came on so strong, you know? And I think that was a turnoff sometimes. But eventually he found his niche and they couldn't have found anyone better to be a cruise director. He had a way with people." After word of an extravagant cast party, held by Vaughan at his Manhattan apartment, reached the budget-conscious Vaughan Sr., Sohmer said, the younger man was cut off financially and told to get a job. He landed at Cunard in the late 1940s, one of the few Americans to be employed full-time by the British company. There, he met Geoffrey Jennings, a former member of the British Royal Navy who was then working at the reservations desk at Cunard. Rickard and Jennings, both unabashedly gay, quickly fell in love, and remained together for the next 42 years. Shadle-Drury says Vaughan and Geoffrey often stayed at her mother's home in Sunset Pines during visits to the area. "He came home at holidays when he could, and he always stayed at our house, because we had a big house and his mother had a smaller house," Shadle-Drury said. "He would stay for long weekends, like a Friday through Monday. They'd just hop in the car and drive up here." Geoffrey typically joined in with family dinners and activities when visiting, Kelly Jo said. His sexuality, "was just never an issue. They went everywhere together. They did everything together. Vaughan was very fun-loving, really vivacious and happy all of the time. Geoffrey was more reserved. He was tall and slender. Very proper. But they both kept up appearances." The two men were often separated for months at a time while Vaughan was at sea and Geoffrey was working in Cunard's New York offices, commuting daily from the home they shared in Princeton, N.J. The fact that they lived so openly as a gay couple is somewhat remarkable considering the era. America in the 1940s, 50s and 60s was not as tolerant of sexual diversity as it is today. Indeed, many gays and lesbians remained "closeted" out of justifiable fear they'd lose their jobs, their homes and their families if the world found out about their romantic leanings. But life on a luxury liner was substantially easier for gays than life on dry land, according to Jenkins, Piper and others familiar with luxury cross-oceanic travel. Part of that had to do with the length of the cruising excursions, which lasted from three to six months. Spending so much time away from a spouse and children could wreak havoc on a marriage, so it was often single straight people and gay folk who were employed on these extensive journeys. "Every steward that we had — our bedroom stewards and those catering our meals — were all gay," said Robin Chalmers, a former Caronia engineering officer, now retired and living in Seattle. "I don't think we had a straight one in all the years I was on the ship. It was crawling with them, and there were never any problems." Chalmers said he often socialized with Vaughn and fellow cruise staff and engineering members at various shipboard functions. He said he was sometimes invited to mock "weddings" between two male crewmembers. "They used to have weddings in the working alleyway, which was down below on B Deck," Chalmers said. "I remember once we were there as witnesses. We were officers and the guys wanted some officers there to give the ceremony a professional touch, even though it didn't carry any validity. "There were these two stewards who were going to get married to each other," he continued, "and one of them was dressed up as the bride, and they came down this working alleyway, and Vaughan was the one that gave the bride away. He was playing the father of the bride. "I remember him making a speech and saying, 'I never had any children and I'm not likely to have any, but if I did I hope I'd have a daughter just like (the bride steward).' And they all started giggling and saying things like, 'Oh, how lovely of you.' "It was great fun, I'll tell you. They really did have a good time. Then they went off and had their little honeymoon." Rickard remained on the Caronia through the early 1960s, when Cunard took her out of service. At that point he moved on to the Queen Elizabeth 2, where he served as cruise director until his retirement in 1985. For a brief time Vaughan and Geoffrey continued their lives in Princeton, but Lock Haven was never far from Vaughan's thoughts, and in 1988 or '89 they decided to move back to the city. "I had never seen Junej's house in Princeton, but Betty Lou said it was nice, and they got a substantial amount for it when it was sold," Sohmer said. "The day they moved into the place on West Main Street, I knew they were coming and I saw the trucks and just parked the car and went in. Geoffrey saw me and said, 'How the hell are you?' I told him I had come to help. They just had a knack, a touch, and the place was very nice." Without the daily responsibilities of a professional life on the high seas, however, Rickard had little reason to restrict his alcohol consumption, which Sohmer said had been increasing steadily over the years. In retirement, she says, Rickard developed a serious drinking problem. "Betty Lou told him, 'If you don't stop it, you're going to be dead within two years of the time you've moved here,'" Sohmer said. "And he was dead in two years. He just couldn't stop. It was sad." The last time Sohmer saw her old childhood friend was on December 22, 1990. "I think I saw him three days before he died," she said. "I went to the house and he was propped up in the sun porch and he was retaining fluid, which can damage your heart. He didn't look good at all. "I was going to call Betty Lou — it was right before Christmas and she lived outside of Cleveland — and tell her she'd better come home. But then I thought I shouldn't alarm her just before Christmas. Afterward I realized that your first instinct is always the best. I should have called her." Vaughan was admitted to Lock Haven Hospital soon thereafter, where he died on Christmas Day. He was buried in his tuxedo. Jennings continued to live alone at 421 West Main for the next few years, but he never stopped mourning his departed companion. "Every week I would go to visit him, and he just mourned Junej every day," Sohmer said. "And then he became ill." In 1995 Jennings was admitted to the extended care unit of Lock Haven Hospital. As his illness progressed, his mind began to falter, Sohmer said. "Betty Lou and her husband, Harry, came in to see Geoffrey near the end," Sohmer said. "Harry said that when he got there, the nurse asked him, 'Are you Vaughan?' He said no, and she said, 'He's been asking for Vaughan.'" Geoffrey died December 30, 1995, five years, almost to the day, after Rickard's death. He was long estranged from his surviving family members. None of the Jennings clan came to pay their final respects. A neighborhood friend finally arranged for Jennings' cremation, Sohmer said, and he was buried in Swissdale cemetery, near Vaughan and other members of the Rickard family. As for the "Green Goddess," in the early 1960s the Caronia was sold and its name changed to Caribia. On one of her first cruises to the Caribbean under the new moniker, according to Maxtone-Graham, a boiler explosion

killed one crewman and injured another. "Then she was laid up in New York after a crew strike against appalling working conditions," Maxtone-Graham wrote via email. "After four years of NYC lay-up, her contents were auctioned off. A restaurant at One Fifth Avenue used a lot of her furnishings and fittings." For about 27 years, fans of the Caronia could still visit a remnant of the ship at the One Fifth Avenue address in Manhattan, which changed names and owners over that period, but kept the legendary ocean liner's art deco bar in place. Maxtone-Graham was one of the regular visitors. He would sometimes walk into the bar with out-of-town friends and say, "This was Caronia." The stripped-down hull of the ship itself was being sent to a scrapyard in Taiwan, when, Maxtone-Graham relates, "the tow rope parted in a gale and she was wrecked on the rocks off Guam. I think bits of wreckage can still be seen there to this day." In 2003 the Caronia bar at the One Fifth Avenue address was finally torn out and replaced. The RMS Queen Elizabeth 2, Vaughan Rickard's second home on the sea, had a far better fate. She remained the flagship of the Cunard line until 2004, when the RMS Queen Mary took on that designation. QE2 will continue to cruise the sea through the end of this year, when she'll be retired and turned into a floating luxury hotel in Palm Jumeirah, Dubai. After the death of Geoffrey Jennings, the house he and Vaughan shared was sold, its contents auctioned off, the Jennings-Rickard investments liquidated. According to Sohmer and Shadle-Drury, Jennings' last will and testament stipulated that his entire estate be left to Rickard relatives. Both men are still fondly remembered by family members and friends, who continue to decorate their graves with flowers every year. As for the box of photos that was found in the attic of 421 West Main Street, Loretta Dickson says she'd like to find a member of the late Vaughan Rickard's family who would give them a good home. But for now they'll remain just where they are.

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