

Getting to Ocracoke in the 1940s and early 1950s was an exciting adventure. This was before the road to Hatteras was built, and before the state of North Carolina established their free state-run ferry system. At that time Ocracoke's main link to the mainland was the privately owned and operated mail boat, Aleta, which made one daily round-trip between the island and Atlantic, North Carolina. The Aleta left Ocracoke at 6:30 every morning and arrived back at its home port about 4:30 in the evening.

Below is an article written in 1951. It provides a rare glimpse into a typical trip across Pamlico Sound on the Aleta. Enjoy.

The Aleta Carries Anything

by Woodrow Price, The News & Observer, August 12, 1951

Ocracoke — The gods could have found no better an introduction to this island, where Time sits beneath a live oak fanning himself lazily and frowning darkly upon any speed exceeding 20 miles an hour, than the mail boat Aleta.

For the Aleta, rolling easily over the wavelets of Core and Pamlico sounds at a jaunty eight to 10 miles an hour, provides the perfect transition from the automobiles, the trains and the airplanes of the rushing, workaday world, to the peace and the quiet of Ocracoke.

Daily Round Trip

Like the island from which she sets out determinedly each morning and to which she returns gaily each afternoon, the Aleta offers a blithe stumbling block to the mile-a-minute living of the 20th Century. Speed has no place in the scheme of things on the island, nor in the placid existence of the Aleta.

Fast living is left behind when you park your car in Atlantic and prepare to climb aboard the little Aleta, a stubby 42-footer whose 40-horse diesel carries her over the 30-mile route in three and a half hours.

Once the Aleta made it in three hours and five minutes, but speak of this in whispers only. A brisk tail wind over which the Aleta had no control pushed the little craft rudely along and therefore must bear the blame for that record crossing.

But if speed and some other appurtenances of present day civilization are parked with the car in Atlantic they will scarcely be missed. By the time the hurrying businessman has

geared his tempo to that of the Aleta, he has fallen into the proper stride of living on the Outer Banks. And it is an abundant life, rich in the friendliness of the coastland.

To tell the truth, the Aleta is bigger than she looks, or than the records show. She must be, for mountains of baggage, mail and freight disappear into her hold every day to emerge later when she pulls into port here. When the Bessie Virginia, a freight boat which normally plies between here and Washington, N.C., once a week, is out of commission, the mountains are even taller than usual, for then the Aleta becomes the principal supply line for most of the stores here. Bread and ice cream are a regular part of the cargo, anyway.

Mailboat Aleta leaving port loaded with passengers & mail:



(Photo courtesy Earl O'Neal, Jr.)

On weekends, when the passenger list is long, the baggage piles up, too. Besides the normal complement of baggage, every vacationist on board brings a good supply of fishing tackle, for Ocracoke has a well-earned reputation as a fine sports fishing center.

There are rumors that way back before its present owners took over the Aleta, she once carried 90 passengers. But the maximum now is 60, and when the load limit is approached, the Aleta literally overflows with people. Early arrivals find comfortable cushions in the cabin or on the upper deck underneath the green canvas awning made into a cover resembling an abbreviated hood for a prairie schooner. Latecomers find seats on fish boxes thoughtfully placed on the top deck, or they sit up forward on the roof over the engine and freight compartment.

A favorite spot on the calmer days is the curved wooden seat on the stern. But this is only a few inches above the water when the Aleta is carrying a full load, and in choppy weather passengers studiously avoid the stern seat. Sometimes, they have found, a thoughtless wave climbs too high and slaps down wetly on a pants leg.

The Aleta was designed for a mail boat run. She was built in Atlantic 28 years ago by Ambrose Fulcher for Howard Nelson, who named the craft for his sister, now Mrs. Brooks Ball of Cherry Point. Nelson ran the Aleta between Atlantic and Morehead City until the highway was extended into Atlantic and mail and freight began moving by truck and bus.

For the past 13 years, the Aleta has been on the Atlantic-Ocracoke run, first under the command of Wilbur Nelson for six years. Seven year ago, the Aleta changed hands, however, and Elmo Fulcher and George O'Neal, both of Ocracoke, have owned and operated

the mail boat since. They alternate in making the mail run, Fulcher, taking over one week, and O'Neal the next. On off weeks, Fulcher goes shrimping and O'Neal works around his home or goes flounder gigging. Roy Parsons is the Aleta's first and only mate.

Misses Few Trips

Crew and passengers share a common love for the Outer Banks way of life, so the crossing from Atlantic to Ocracoke always is a pleasant journey, even though the sound may become a trifle roiled or ;an occasional rain squall may be encountered. It seldom is too rough to hold the Aleta back. Bad weather causes her to miss two, maybe three, trips in a year's ;time, but her schedule is the most certain thing in the island's existence. She leaves at 6:15 a.m., arrives in Atlantic between 9 and 9:30; departs from there at 1 p.m., and sometime around 4:30 can be seen coming through the "ditch" into Silver Lake and her resting spot at the end of the pier in front of the post office.

On the way, her passengers sleep, read, gossip or just sit and enjoy the scenery. maybe some over-eager fisherman will go to the stern and let out a handline in hope of catching a bluefish. Some folks break out a lunch and eat it. And there is singing, if a leader can be found.

For years, the Aleta and her predecessors — the Bessie M, the Ocracoke and the "M" City — dropped off mail at Cedar Island for Lola and Roe, two small villages on the Carteret shore — but last year, when the highway was extended from Atlantic, trucks took over that duty. Now the Aleta's only stop on her 30-mile journey is just off Portsmouth, a few miles south of here. Since there is no channel into Portsmouth deep enough for the Aleta, a skiff comes out to meet her, exchange sacks of mail and take off passengers.

From Portsmouth it is only a few minutes' run into Ocracoke, and the Aleta breezes along as though she scents the nearness of home. When she arrives, virtually the entire village — plus summer visitors — is on hand to welcome her. For the Aleta is the island's most solid link with the outside world, and therefore something deserving of special treatment.

Mailboat Aleta docking, greeted by local residents:



(Click on photo to view larger image. Photo courtesy Earl O'Neal, Jr.)