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A reporter makes the news;

THE SUN'S 175TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

BYLINE: BY HELEN DELICH BENTLEY, THE BALTIMORE SUN

BODY:

As The Sun's maritime editor from 1949 to 1969, I was given a free hand to cover the shipping world as I saw fit. And in those days we believed our mission was not just to make certain that The Sun was the leader in maritime news but also to enhance the status of the port of Baltimore.

The port community welcomed The Sun's coverage, and my stories showed how the railroads' control resulted in the port's lagging behind New York, Philadelphia and even Norfolk. In 1955, the governor's citizens committee recommended transitioning into a public port authority, and to support that effort, The Sun published a 56-page section about the history and state of the port. However, the railroads, Baltimore Gas & Electric Co. and the Baltimore Association of Commerce objected and prevailed before the General Assembly.

The day after the 1955 defeat, a new push began. By then I was producing a television series on WMAR ? which The Sun owned at the time ? called "The Port that Built a City," and invited legislators on to teach them the port's economic value. Eventually we won BGE's support, the railroads soon gave in and a public port authority was established.

We continued covering the port all the while. In January 1950, the battleship Missouri ran aground at the mouth of the Chesapeake, and at virtually the same moment we got word that the first postwar merchant ship from the Soviet Union was planning to call in the United States, and it was hitting Baltimore first. The Cold War already had set in.

Managing editor Buck Dorsey let me fly daily to Norfolk, visiting the Missouri and keeping in touch by pay phone about the Russians until I returned each evening. This flitting lasted the two weeks that the Missouri was stuck.

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In 1966 and into 1967, as the Vietnam War escalated, nearly the entire American merchant fleet was idled in Saigon because of the difficulty in discharging cargo there. When the number of laid-up vessels reached 91, Paul Banker, then managing editor, sent me to Saigon to "break that jam-up."

I arrived in January 1967 and joined up with Bob Erlandson, The Sun's war correspondent. My stories focused on the jam-up in the port and the failure to clear cargo on the American ships. The story we heard back from Washington was that LBJ would wake up feeling good each morning until he read The Baltimore Sun; then he wanted to throw up.

That visit also resulted in the construction of the new container port at Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam.

My last assignment for The Sun was sailing through the ice floes of the Northwest Passage aboard the SS Manhattan ? the first merchant ship ever to make the trip. Although President Richard Nixon had nominated me for chairman of the Federal Maritime Commission, I stipulated acceptance only after the trip on the Manhattan.

But the Manhattan voyage ended up in unflattering headlines when allegedly the Federal Communications Commission shut down the only phone from the icebound ship because Al Forman on The Sun's rewrite desk couldn't understand the word "reading" (even though I dictated it to him four times) and I had uttered "aw, s - - -."

The male correspondents onboard were furious, blaming me for shutting down communications. I realized later that sponsor Humble Oil was trying to one-up the only female correspondent onboard, and management eventually admitted that it had seized the chance to eliminate press traffic from the ship.

Helen Delich Bentley is a former maritime editor for The Sun, who left in 1969 to head the Federal Maritime Commission and later served 10 years in Congress. In 2006, Baltimore's public port facilities were renamed the Helen Delich Bentley Port of Baltimore.

>> at thesunmag.com

See more photos from Bentley's reporting career

GRAPHIC: PHOTO(S)

Maritime editor Helen Delich Bentley reporting from the port of Baltimore, which she covered ? and championed ? for two decades. Bentley served in the U.S. house of representatives from 1985 to 1995.

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