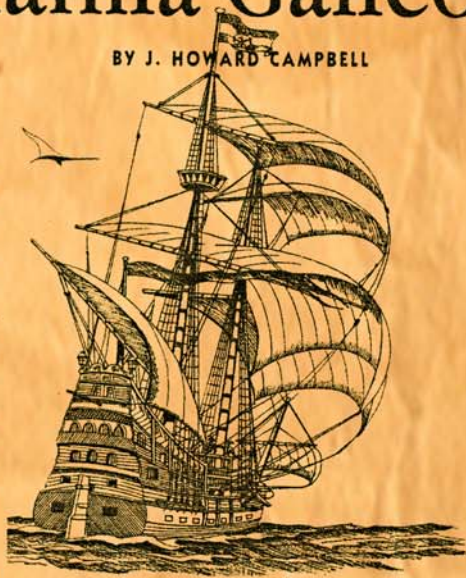


Treasures of the Manila Galleons

BY J. HOWARD CAMPBELL



It was Ferdinand Magellan, in 1521 who opened the door for Spain to tap the wealth of the islands of the Pacific. When Magellan reached the Philippines he discovered a cultural crossroads that for hundreds of years had been the trade center for the Chinese, Japanese, Malaysian, and Hindu.

In 1565, 44 years after Magellan's death on Mactan Island in the Philippines, the first treasure galleon crossed the Pacific. For the next 250 years Spain tapped the wealth of the East and established a colony in Manila.

In 1542, explorer Ruy Lopez de Villalobos, named the Philippines after Prince Philip who later became King Philip II, the Spanish monarch whose reign made the words "Spanish Armada" infamous.

The Manila Fleet sailed from New Spain Acapulco, Mexico en route 9000 miles to the Philippines. The first galleon to return with treasure from the Philippines was the *San Pablo*. The average duration of the voyage from Manila to Acapulco was close to 6 months. However, it all depended on the wind and the weather. The treasure galleon *San José* was found adrift after a year at sea. All her provisions were gone. The crew had perished from scurvy and starvation. The *San José* was a treasure ship drifting with a cargo of silk, pearls, diamonds, ivory, chinaware and cadavers.

Galleons of the 16th Century carried a crew of from 60 to 100, according to the size of the vessel. Crewmen who made the round trip from New Spain to Manila and returned earned a wage of 350 pesos.

Most of the Manila galleons were built in the yards at Cavite in Manila Bay. The ships were built by Chinese and

Malaysian workman, who worked for rice rations and very meager wages. The vessels were built of durable tropical hardwood as some of the best wood came from the Philippines. The ships rigging and anchor lines were made of Manila hemp; sails were sewn in nearby Ilocos. Iron used for fastenings came from China and Japan.

The voyage of the Manila Galleons was the longest continuous navigation in the world. The more familiar route of the trading fleets across the Atlantic was a comparatively safe voyage that could be traveled in a few weeks or months. The fleets of the South Seas, so-called the silver fleet sailed on what the Spanish called the open Pacific as the "gulf." The westbound galleons would drop south from Acapulco and sail due west near the 13th parallel, where they were pushed along by the steady trade winds straight across the Pacific. Galleons usually left Acapulco for Manila in the latter part of February or the first weeks of March. The reason was to reach Manila before the monsoons and typhoons had begun. If undertaken in the proper season the westward voyage was called *Mar de Damas*, or "Lady's Sea". The later the season the greater chances of running into the typhoons of September. The entire voyage often required only three months.

In 1530 King Charles I of Spain declared that none but Spanish ships should sail in the Pacific Lake. Little did he know that the Pacific Lake was the largest body of water on the planet.

Eastbound galleons were scheduled to leave Manila by July of each year. It took seven weeks to thread through the inter-islands, another month to reach the 35th degree of latitude, and under the best of conditions, it took another 3 months to

reach the latitudes of Japan. From here they caught the west-
erlies where they reached the North Pacific current. Crossing the Pacific their first land sighting was Cape Mendocino along the California coast. From here the galleon pilots sailed south through the foggy rockbound coast line, past Point Reyes staying well out to sea to avoid the Farallon Islands and point Pinos at the south end of Monterey Bay. From here they sailed past the Santa Barbara Channel and the Channel Islands, along Baja California and then on to their destination of Acapulco. Many people weakened by diseases died in large numbers along this homeward voyage. It was recorded in one 17th-Century galleon that deaths occurred three to four times a day. When they arrived at Acapulco only 192 of the 400 people remained alive with many of them woefully weak.

The passage rates for the voyage from Manila to Acapulco were from 2 to 4 thousand pesos. Those who made the round trip often had to lay out another 3 to 4 thousand pesos for food. For those unable to pay the full amount it meant months of suffering on an endless voyage with very meager offerings. On the passage across the Pacific many men went mad with suffering, some passengers even threw themselves overboard. Many crewmen were so delirious with raging fever, they could not lift a hand to man the vessel. A galleon which left Manila after the middle of July was practically certain of running into rough weather within the next 3 months of their voyage.

Chinese merchants sought silver, crucial to their domestic dealings. Goods from Asia were the rage of Europe. Exotic spices were in great demand. A typical galleon might return with clove, cayenne, curry, cinnamon, and black pepper, along with diamonds, pearls, ivory, silk, jade, Ming-Dynasty china, pewter, skeins of raw silk, richly embroidered satin bedspreads, fine linen, gold and silver ribbons, painted shawls, jade statues, carved ivory, chests of sandal-wood, and forged ironworks. The trade bred smuggling and corruption; which in time brought about the crumbling of the Spanish monopoly in the Pacific.

By the middle of the 18th Century the English and French sailed about the Pacific in complete disregard to the Spanish claim for the vast Pacific "Lake."

When the Manila galleons reached Acapulco they unloaded their cargo onto mules for the arduous route through the Sierra Madre del Sur called the China Road. The road consisted of deep canyons, forests, crags, and cliffs, along with the extreme heat and the insects. This passage was often an ambush route for thieves. From Vera Cruz, ships waited to return to Spain. The Spanish galleons plying the Caribbean loaded with gold, silver and gems were known as the "treasure fleets" so the route became known as a piracy's hot spot for the next 3 centuries.

The Spanish shipped their plunder from the New World

over the Pacific. The Mexican silver dollar was the preferred currency of the China Trade.

Spanish galleons fulfilled the dreams of Marco Polo and Columbus, that of reaching and tapping the riches of China. For a brief period in time, Manila, one of the great natural harbors of the world became the center of commerce for all of Asia with Spain becoming one of the richest nations in the world, for at least three hundred years.

The Spanish galleons taught men that dreams of great wealth could come true, but at a heavy price. On more than 40 occasions the galleons did not arrive at their destination. These ships were either wrecked or lost at sea. The first recorded loss of a galleon was the *San Pablo* wrecked in the Marianas in 1568 while sailing eastbound from Cebu, on her

back across the Atlantic in a convoy of ships. This became the route of the Spanish Main. The route of the Spanish Main originally began at the port city of Seville but later started at the port of Cadiz.

Many homeward treasure galleons found themselves sailing through the hurricane season. The Spanish learned the hard way that hurricanes occurred from around the first of June to the end of November.

Along the Spanish Main route the estimated value had come at around \$100 billion. During the 1500's to the early 1800's the treasure fleets became primary targets for pirates and foreign navies. Pirates dreamt of the capture of treasure ships. This was the era of Jamaica's Port Royal. On June 7, 1692, an earthquake caused a major catastrophe, whereby a huge portion of the city sank beneath the sea, killing as many as 2,000.

Sir Francis Drake today is known as a hero to the English. Drake in 1577 to 1580 became the first English ship's captain to circumnavigate the world. With a fleet of five ships Drake captured three Spanish ships and three Portuguese vessels. He raided coastal ports and captured a Portuguese pilot, Nuno da Silva, who knew the South Atlantic and may also have known sea routes in the Pacific. Drake lost 3 of his ships to the sea with one returning to England. With his lone ship the *Golden Hinde*, Drake captured the *Nuestra Señora de la Concepción*, with a treasure of 80 pounds of gold, 13 chests of valuable silver plates, several chests of jewels and 26 tons of silver. The silver was used as ballast for the return trip to England. The *Golden Hinde* spent 5 weeks along the California coast. When the vessel returned to England, only 59 men of the original 164 survived. Drake had returned with the richest store of treasure ever taken on the high seas. In 1581, nine months after his return, Queen Elizabeth knighted Francis Drake. Forty one years before the founding of America's Plymouth Colony, Francis Drake landed along the California coast.

The *San Agustin* is the oldest known Manila galleon shipwreck on the west coast of California. On November 6, 1595 in what is now Drake's Bay the *San Agustin* dropped her anchor. While ashore, a storm struck and pulled the vessel loose from her mooring. The ship took a pounding before going down with her full cargo. An approximate location of the wreck site was made by the galleon's captain, Sebastian Rodriguez Cermeno. Artifacts have been found along the beaches such as pieces of Ming-dynasty porcelain.

The Manila galleons sailed from 1565 to 1815. During this 250 years the sea claimed dozens of ships, thousands of lives and millions of dollars in treasure. To those of the Orient the great galleons were silver argosies, laden with Mexican and Peruvian pesos destined to become the standard accepted all

second voyage. There were fifteen westbound ships lost all referred to as the silver galleons. From 1655-57, as many as four vessels were lost. During the next 150 years Spanish galleons would be sunk and scattered all across the Pacific.

It was not until Francis Drake entered the Pacific in 1578 that the English would know of the commerce trade. He captured a Spanish merchant ship extravagantly loaded with Oriental goods. Spanish treasure galleons became the world's greatest prize. In the next century the British exploited the Orient along with the French and the Americans.

J. Howard Campbell, Artist