

Summer relief: Send son to 19th century

By Dedria Humphries Barker

Our teen-aged son is squared away for the summer. We're sending him to the 19th century.

Yes, David is going to another century, which just might be far enough away to recover from this school year.

Many parents feel as Michael and I do about the looming summer and their teen-ager. They desire to send their child out of this world. We found a good example in the 19th century. Then, boys ran away to the sea. In January, we signed ours up.

David will be sailing on a War of 1812 ship complete with cannon. He will be a volunteer sailor on the U.S. Brig Niagara owned by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. He will be a beginning seaman, with duties like the professional crew and the other volunteers. He's got some useful skills to contribute. David can cook, and he cleans our bathrooms, which surely qualifies him to scrub the poop deck.

The main thing David will do is be a docent (tour guide) on board either in the Niagara's home port in Erie, Pa., or away. The mission of the ship is to forward understanding of the War of 1812, of Commodore Perry and the Great Lakes fleet by presenting living history.

The Niagara sails the Great Lakes, and on David's three-week tour will ply Lake Ontario, stopping in upstate New York, the port of Oswego. He'll answer the questions of thousands of

shiny-eyed tourists; old people like his parents and young guys, like him, fascinated with the cannon on deck and the hammocks below.

Later in the summer, after David disembarks, the Niagara stops at Cleveland and Detroit (July 20-21).

Space is tight on board, and David will live out of a duffel bag. On board, mess refers to meals, but on shore back here in East Lansing, it's his room. Maybe, after sharing a berth deck — five feet of headroom under the beams — with 24 people, David will keep his room more shipshape. Meanwhile, we are glad to be able to stow our son safely away in somebody's else's care for a few weeks.

Don't get me wrong. David is no discipline problem. But at age 16 years, this 5-foot-8, 190-pound football linebacker will get this summer what he obviously needs. He is getting a master, i.e. the captain of the Niagara. The captain says everyone on board serves the needs of the ship.

The Niagara is part of the modern 19th century. The ship has navigational radar, a radio and an engine that can assist the sails. The crew handbook says there is no flogging, no grog, no live ammunition and no surgery without anesthetics. As his mother, I was looking for information on walking the plank. It wasn't there.

Now, I'm not just having fun at David's expense. David himself appreciates that this summer is a chance for

him to show his maturity. He jokes that while out on Lake Ontario, possibly when they sail from the Oswego, N.Y., harbor, that instead of heading back west toward Erie, the Niagara will head east up the St. Lawrence Seaway.

At the corner of the seaway and the Atlantic Ocean, David says, the ship will make a sharp right turn. At this point one of the mates will push the button, and with a va-room fitting for the Daytona 500, the ship's 21st-century gas-powered engine will start, and the Niagara will pick up speed. Heading down the East Coast of the United States, he will watch Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and Baltimore pass in a blur.

Drawn forward by the gravity of the equator, the Niagara moves south at a good clip. At this point in the story, David smiles — he is glad to be able to show what he's learned at home and school.

"I'll be headed into the real 19th century, Mom," he says. "And though the rest of the crew will try to soothe my anxieties, I'll know we're headed into the golden triangle of trade, with a slave cargo of one. I'll be headed for the Caribbean to slavery."

But I just smile at David and shake my head. No, no, my son, that's next summer.

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