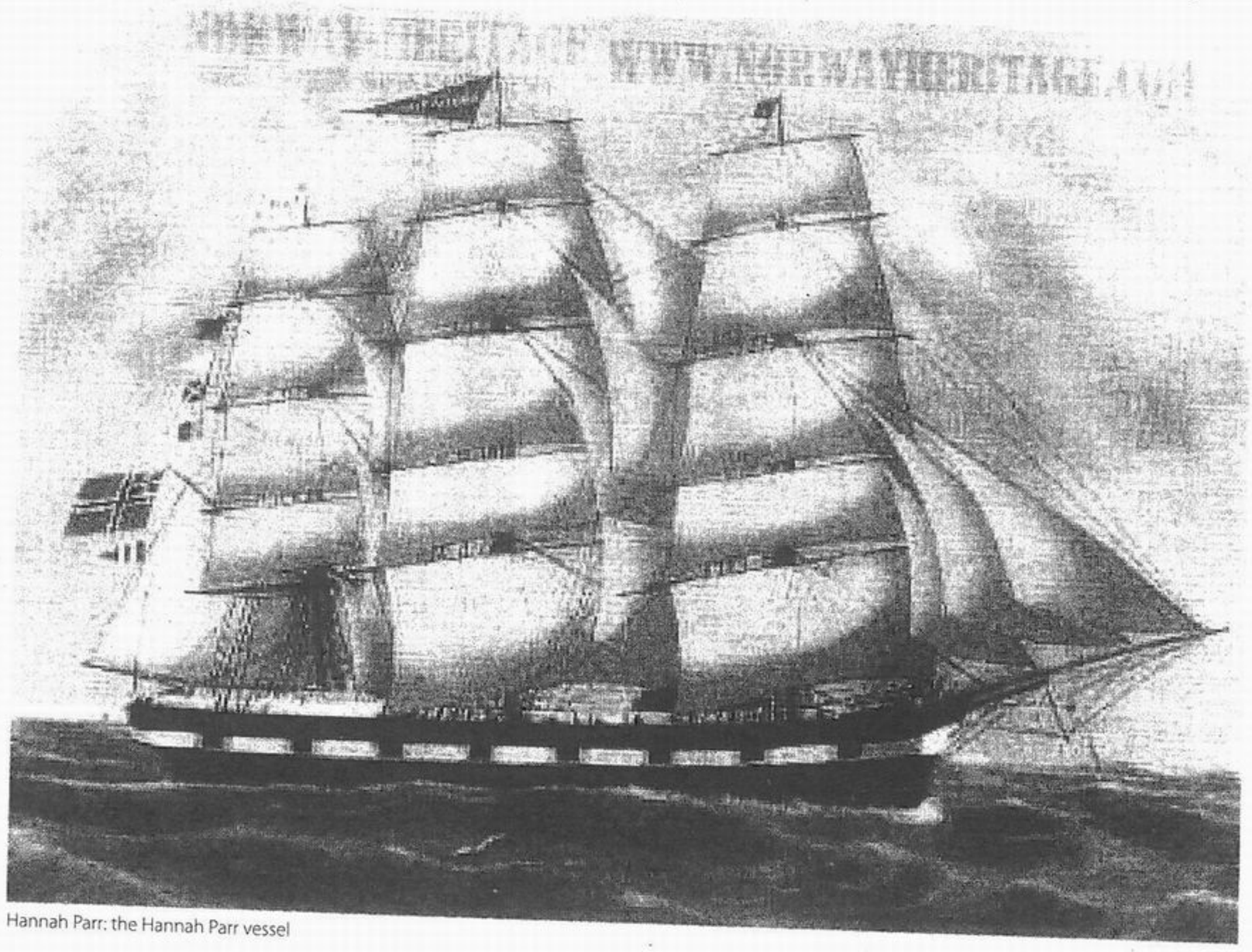
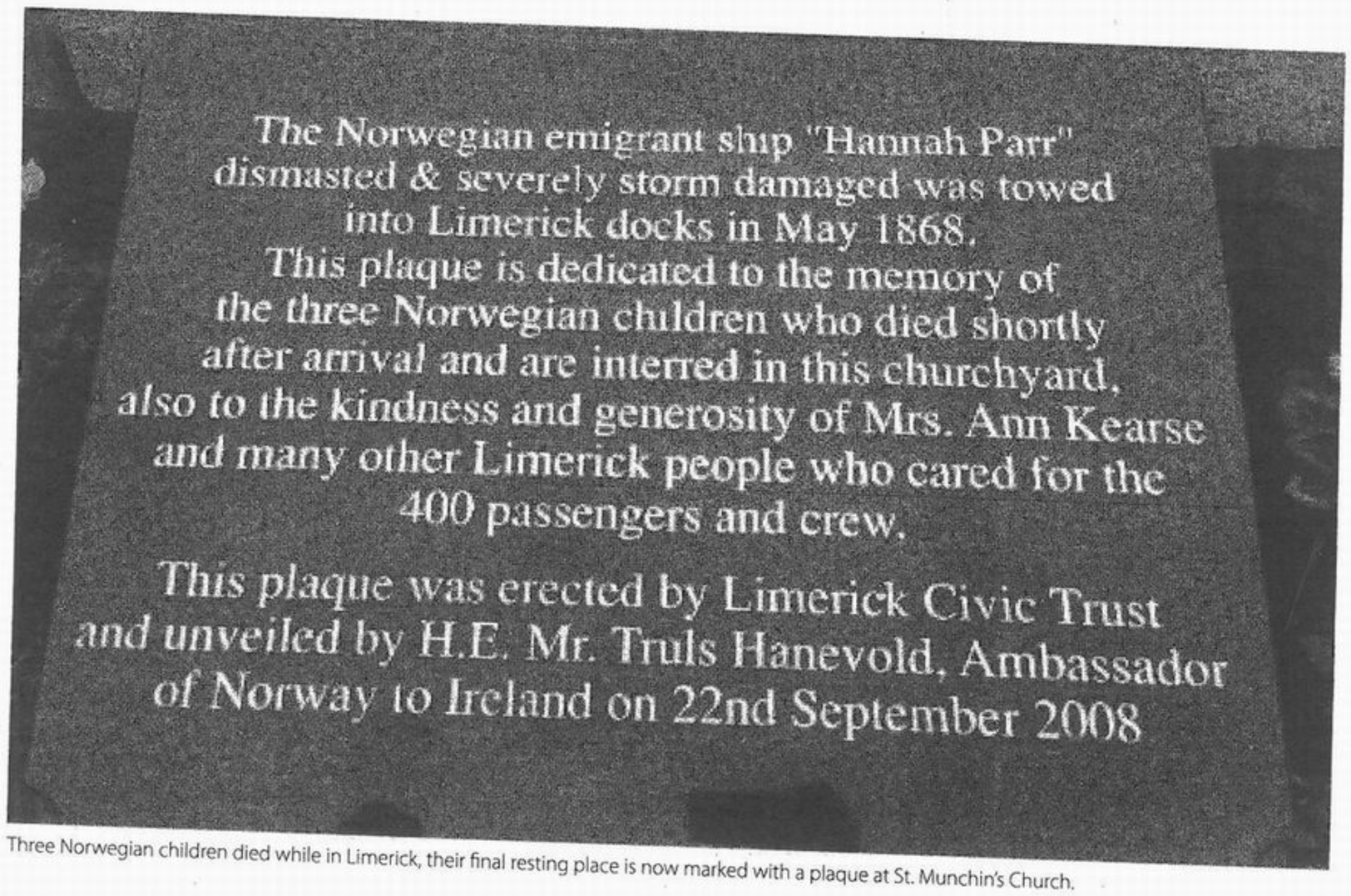
the 12 HISTORICAL JEWELS OF LIMERICK

Brought to you by Ivans – The Fresh Food Emporium

The exotic Norwegian shipwrecked emigrants and their five-week Limerick sojourn



Hannah Parr: the Hannah Parr vessel



Three Norwegian children died while in Limerick, their final resting place is now marked with a plaque at St. Munchin's Church.

RACHAEL KEALY

IT'S easy nowadays, in the age of the internet and affordable travel, to forget that not so long ago, one could spend a year, a decade, or even a lifetime without hearing a foreign accent.

This would have been the case for many in Limerick on May 7 1868, when a ship named 'Hannah Parr' limped up the Shannon, her mast cracked and her sails slack. She had been almost destroyed in a great storm in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Her exhausted passengers, some 400 men, women and children, were from Norway. For the next five and a half weeks, Limerick was to be their home.

Much of the detail about the ill-fated voyage comes from diary excerpts, newspaper cuttings and The Long Crossing of the Hannah Parr, an impressively-researched essay written in 2000 by Clair O Haugen and James Overdahl.

continued page 24

from page 23

Together with other descendants of the original passengers, they gathered together a wealth of information under the Hannah Parr Project.

The ship itself was built in 1846 in Bordeaux, France and originally served as a freighter, under the name 'Sønner av Norge'. Visitors to Greenwich, London may recall seeing the Cutty Sark moored nearby; the Hannah Parr was of a similar construction, with three strong masts supporting a spread of canvas sails arranged to harness the ocean's wind.

In 1867 it was bought by Søren A. Parr, of Christiania (now Oslo), an Anglo-Norwegian shipping magnate who exported chunks of ice from Norway to the continent. He renamed it the Hannah Parr, after either his wife or daughter. He had it reconditioned and repurposed into a passenger ship, to take advantage of the surge in demand for affordable transatlantic crossings.

When it set sail from Oslo on the 12th April, it had on board some 400 people, including 378 ticketed passengers. The oldest was 80 and the youngest just three months.

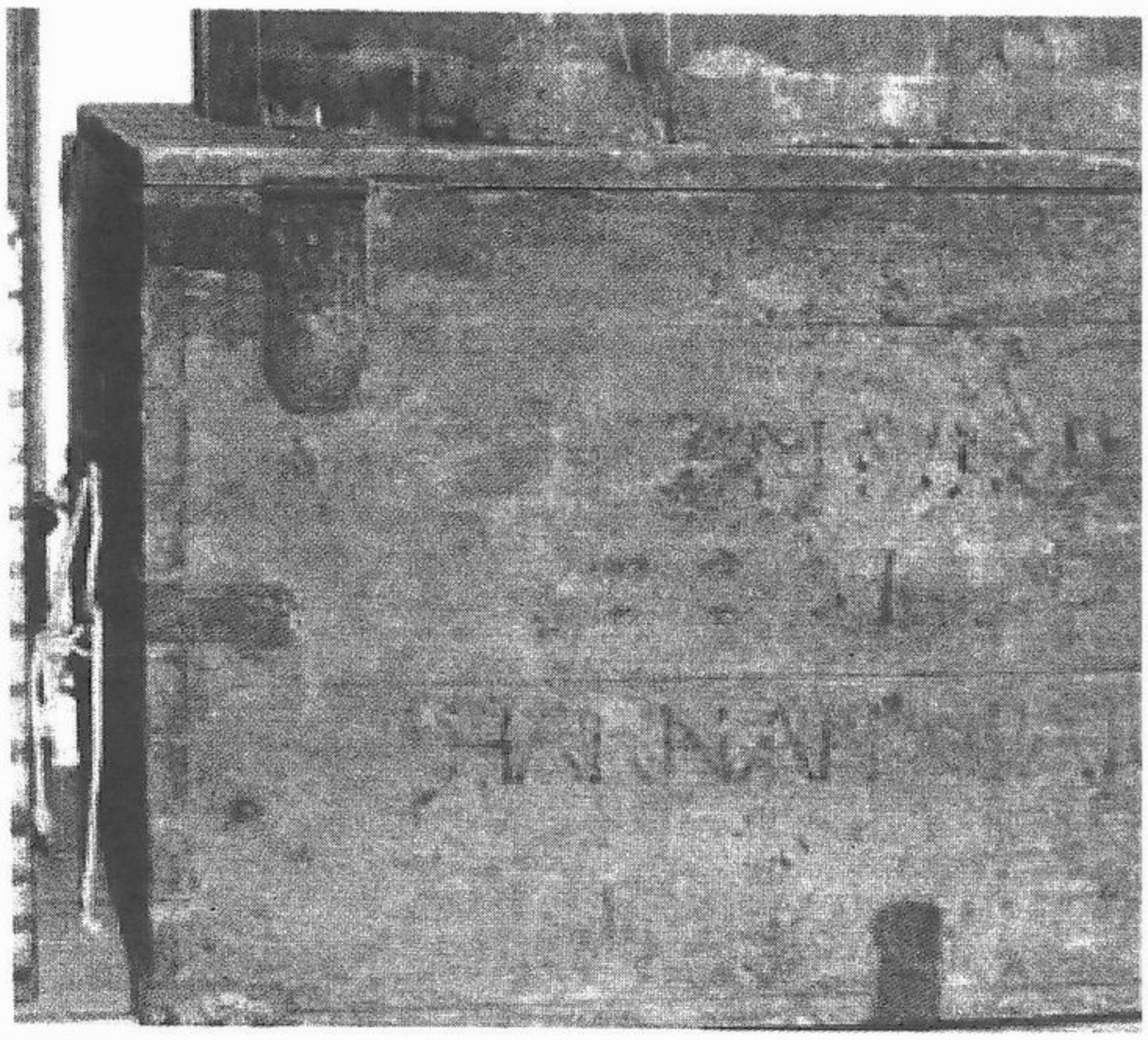
An adult ticket cost between 12 and 15 speciedalers (Norweigan dollars), depending on luggage, etc. According to research carried out as part of the Hannah Parr project, this was two to three years' wages for a farm labourer in Norway (he would have received bed and board separately). By contrast, the ticket cost as little as one day's wages for a labourer or a railroad worker in the US mid-west at that time. This example goes some way to demonstrating why the passengers risked life and limb to get to America.

While Norway is a large country, only a section of the land can be effectively farmed, a situation worsened with a surge in population in the first half of the 19th century. The national population doubled, and the numbers of young, landless labourers tripled. An almost feudal-style of tenant farming offered almost no hope of advancement or private land ownership and it was for this reason that the Homestead Act held as much appeal for Norwegians as it did for the Irish (this legislation allowed large tracts of land to be sold for pittance to pioneers willing to settle in the American mid-west). In the years between 1825 and 1925, Norway lost one third of its population to emigration. It is second only to Ireland as having contributed the largest percentage of its population to the United States.

Writing in The Little Book of Limerick, Sharon Slater – this paper's historian - compiled excerpts from the diary of a passenger, to get a better sense of the experience. Gulbran Olsen Berge was a 32-year-old married father, travelling towards the United States on his own. This was not unusual for the time – indeed, it still happens regularly now – as the men often went ahead of their families, to secure a job, home and sufficient savings to send for his relatives at a later date.

While Gulbran's diary is initially mundane, the entries take a dramatic turn on the 27th and 28th April 1868. He wrote of a terrible two-day storm, a raging ocean tempest in which "everyone thought they would die". The deck was destroyed: the captain's quarters, ship's kitchen and mates' cabins all lost to the sea. The Captain, Ole Christian Larsen, was himself just saved from being swept overboard. Worse, the sails and rigging had been ripped asunder, and the foremast cleaved in two. The ship was almost lame, adrift on the open sea. One anonymous female passenger later recalled that the deck looked "frightful", "like ruins after a conflagration." The next day, when the wind had at last died down, the exhausted crew, working with the most able-bodied passengers, managed to rig temporary sails and mend the rudder sufficiently to limp back towards the nearest land - the West coast of Ireland.

When sighted from shore, tugboats were sent out to assist the Hannah Parr, and she was slowly pulled up the estuary and brought to rest at Limerick Docks on Thursday, May 7th. The announcement in that night's Limerick Chronicle was sedate, containing just the barest of details: "The Norwegian ship, Hannah Parr, from Christiania, bound to Quebec, put into Scattery roads yesterday, with foremast gone, and 400 emigrants."



Two days later, however, the reports had expanded, perhaps due to their readers' piqued interest. The paper recounted, in the theatrical fashion of the time, the immense damage that befell the ship: "at nine o'clock at night a fearful wind blew those sails out of the ropes, the vessel then became unmanageable, broached to, a sea striking her bow, and sending the foremast over the lee, storm still unabating." Presumably they even had the ship's log to hand, as they could detail the exact longitude and latitude of the vessel during the "raging hurricane."

By the following Tuesday, the paper noted that "crowds of citizens have been every evening visiting the dock to see the ship and the emigrants." It appears that the onlookers – and the journalists - were rather taken with the foreign visitors, who boasted a "fair complexion, blue eyes, regularity of features, and light hair… many of the men are tall and well built, while among the females are to be found girls with exceedingly prepossessing features." Little surprise, therefore, that "they are frequently followed by a crowd who, unable to converse with those strangers, gratify their curiosity in vacant staring."

The ship's owner and crew expected the repairs – carried out "energetically" by Messrs Ryan, Brothers & Co. – to be completed within a matter of days, but this was soon proved impossible, as the shipyard had to send to Cork for timber of sufficient length and strength.

> *The sails and rigging had been ripped asunder, and the foremast cleaved in two*

The challenges of an unexpected stay in a foreign port immediately came to light: the emigrants required additional provisions, medical attention, spiritual guidance and above all, accommodation on terra firma. To stay on board indefinitely, in such cramped conditions, would have inevitably led to serious sanitation issues and health problems. By the 14th May, a little boy died aboard the ship. His funeral was attended by his grieving mother and many of her fellow passengers, who sang Norse hymns at the graveside. Two more children were to pass away before the ship continued on its journey. Their final resting place is now marked with a plaque at St. Munchin's Church.

The local people of Limerick were called upon to do their Christian duty in caring for these people, some "forty or fifty of which were of very slender means." There were contradictions as to the exact welfare of the emigrants, however. The Chronicle reported allegations of begging among the group, while also quoting the Norwegian Consul, Mr. Ryan, J.P., as saying they "cannot be in want" as he had personally confirmed that their provisions were sufficiently stocked.

Many of the city's matriarchs heard their clergymens' call for assistance and stepped forth, offering their formidable organisational skills, along with spare bedrooms and meals. Mrs Ann Kearse was one such woman, whose care for the emigrants was noted on the commemorative plaque at St. Munchin's church. Some of the passengers were transferred temporarily to the Steamship Company's sheds along the dockside, but after a number of weeks they returned to the relative comfort of the ship.

A fund was established among local merchants, garnering significant private donations (totalling £3 and 5s by the time of departure). A number of local dignitaries provided temporary relief in the form of outings or entertainments, such as a concert organised on their behalf at the newly-built Orphan Hall, near Baker Place. The Chronicle reported somewhat breathlessly, that "The Hall was tastefully decorated with evergreens and flowers, while banners and suggestive mottos adorned the walls. The tables were covered with hospitable provision, and each lady in charge offered a kindly greeting to her guests."

Later, the passengers were offered heavily subsidised train tickets allowing them to venture out to the countryside near Lisnagry. At the Mount Shannon estate, they enjoyed a walk through the extensive grounds and were treated to sandwiches, hams, spiced beef, sweetmeats and some 300 buns, generously donated by local businesses. A female passenger marvelled at the hospitality shown to her and her compatriots

A PASSENGER'S TRUNK the name of the Hannah Parr vessel can still be traced on the trunk.

"The onlookers – and the journalists - were rather taken with the foreign visitors, particularly the girls with exceedingly prepossessing features

Michael Rentz, pictured here as a mature man. He was 22 at the time he was marooned in Limerick for five and a half weeks. He later wrote of his experiences here.

"(the gardens were) handsome beyond description; there we were treated to dinner, and Limerick's finest people waited on us—all that as well as costing us merely a Thank you! (sic)"

For the most part, the passengers enjoyed their unexpected stay in Limerick, and all later wrote fondly of the experience. Many, such as Iver Iverson Ruud, were impressed with the scenery; "both sides of the river are remarkably beautiful, and this city is magnificent." One Norwegian man became intimately acquainted with the Shannon, having fallen into the water on approaching the Hannah Parr on a particularly dark night, despite being "perfectly sober". He was promptly fished out by two eagle-eyed night-watchmen.

The emigrants regularly attended church services, mostly at the Cathedral or the Wesleyan Chapel on George Street, as "nearly all the emigrants (were) of the Lutheran persuasion". Those of the Roman Catholic faith worshipped at the Redemptorist Church. No doubt, the constant monitoring of their movements was somewhat disconcerting for the passengers; one later recalled that "(Limerick people) looked at us like we had come from another world. They followed us around so much we could hardly move."

A number of strange interactions between the visitors and the locals were recorded in the local papers. In one instance, a gentleman boarded the ship and distributed religious tracts, but found himself neither welcomed nor encouraged. At the funeral of one of the children, some of the "more thoughtless of the populace" interrupted the clergyman repeatedly, causing the solemn service to be disrupted. This behaviour appears to have been roundly condemned by the local papers and citizens alike, who, for the most part, welcomed the emigrants with both curiosity and generosity.

On the 9th June, the ship was at last ready to leave the dock. It was towed by two steamers out to Foynes, but a few false starts ensued: the crew had to send back ashore for more food provisions, then for the captain himself, and finally for additional workmen, as the newly repaired mast had collapsed. One wonders if, faced with the same situation, the modern traveller would dare to re-board a similarly stricken passenger jet for a second transatlantic flight.

The newspapers at the time reported that a large crowd of citizens "thronged the pier" offering "farewell cheers" to the departing emigrants, who received gifts such as needlework samplers and scriptural texts. Written messages of goodbye were exchanged, such as the following from one Limerick inhabitant: "with feelings of deep regret, both I and my family part with our dear Norwegian friends." The passengers themselves issued a handwritten statement in halting English, including the sentiment, "In this pretty land we also met people...who took us in their houses and treated us with friendship and honour; all this have affected our hearts, and we shall never forget it (sic)."

On the 19th June 1868, the Hannah Parr and its "living freight" sailed out of Irish waters at last, heading once more for the Atlantic Ocean and all the promise that lay beyond.