

# Why Chelm Needed a Navy

By Philip *Fishl* Kutner

It all began with a visit from America. Some of our readers may recall that the Yenemsville Yiddish Club U.S.A. visited Chelm to research their genealogical heritage. While there, they told the Chelmers all about the great inventions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

After the Yiddish club left, it was decided that the newly founded Chelm Chamber of Commerce needed to promote visitation from Amerike to Chelm. This required products that everyone would associate with Chelm, and thus was founded the Chelm Chreyn un Charoses Company. What has this to do with Chelm needing to have a navy? Good reader, wait, it will all unfold in good time.

That part was easy. The women of Chelm were great balebostes and making the chreyn un charoses was the easy part. They had learned the art from their mothers who had learned it from their mothers. Since these two food products are seasonal, the local market was soon exhausted.

At a hastily called meeting of the Chelm Chamber of Commerce, one of the entrepreneurs recalled hearing that when you produce too many goods locally, it needs to be shipped elsewhere. It never occurred to them to use the freight train that stopped daily at the Chelm Train Station. After all if you wanted to ship something—don't you have to ship it by ship?

Luckily the Uherka River goes by the Chelm knolls and it leads to the Bug River which leads to the Baltic Sea and to the Atlantic Ocean.

Before the ship could be built, there had to be a naval yard. Nachum had a skiff that he used to ferry farmers across the Uherka River. He had built his ferryboat/raft by tying together planks until it was big enough to carry a whole wagonload of people plus the horses needed to pull the wagon.

Chelmers always plan ahead. After all why meet problems the last minute when they could be solved beforehand? One of the minor problems was who was going to sail the ship across to Amerike?

Naturally sailors need to be ready in case, God forbid, the ship would hit an iceberg and sink. Thus sailors had to know how to swim. Luckily all the boys in Chelm would swim in the river even after the spring rains turned the water into a fast running, muddy current.

It was decided that only good swimmers would be permitted to join the Chelm Navy. To select the officers it was decided to have a swimming race across the River. The fastest swimmers would be the officers and to be a crewmember one had to swim across and back without resting—after all the Atlantic Ocean is very, very wide and ...

On the day the bokhers were tested another test was given. It was to determine the admiral of the fleet. The fact that there would be only a single boat/ship, in the beginning, did not deter Chelm from selecting an admiral. The question was, how do you decide from among all the Chelmer naval officers who would be their leader?

Many suggestions were made and tried, but none of the "sailors" who had passed the qualifying test was able to pass the new tests. Finally everyone agreed on a single contest to choose the one with the best credentials to lead the new Chelm Navy.

Since the "officers" were the best swimmers, the contest was limited to the "officers". Since the selection was based on the best swimmers, the endurance factor was very important. Everyone knows that swimmers sometimes swallow water. Therefore the one who could swallow the most water would be the admiral.

It was not that simple. The fact was brought out that if you drink a lot of water, you must void the water. Since voiding the water in the sea would make the Atlantic Ocean unfit to swim. Thus the winner would be the contestant who could drink the most water in an hour and not void any.

Imagine the laughter that erupted when contestant after contestant stopped drinking and quickly ran to the Chelm Community Outhouse (CCO). Since no author has ever written about the CCO. Let us digress a moment to tell you that it was the pride and joy of Chelm.

Only the Chelm Synagogue was more ornate than the CCO that was located next to the Chelm Mikve. The reason given is that visitors to Chelm would use the CCO. These travelers would go home and tell everyone about the magnificent CCO.

So Chelm has a navy and one boat/ship. If any of the *Der Bay* readers visits Chelm and its CCO, your editor would appreciate a detailed description with architectural drawings of the stately edifice and its luxurious accommodations.