

A Child's Journey of a Lifetime



Biena about age 18 (ca: 1903)

Jacobine Juliane Christine Lietz was known as “Biena” to her family and friends. Young Biena left the only place she knew as home in 1892 at age 6 ½. As an infant, she lived with her mother and father in Schleswig, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany until her father died unexpectedly in 1886. He was 24 years old and Biena had just turned 1. As time passed, her mother (Anna) was at a loss regarding her life’s direction. 3 of her brothers were already in the USA and they urged her to join them. Anna decided it was best to restart life some place new, and in March 1890 she was headed for America. Upon arrival in New York harbor, she next set her eyes on Iowa to be with her brothers. She left her daughter behind with her parents in the small village of Busdorf, Germany. 2 years later, once Anna was settled, she sent word back to Germany for the family to join her and to bring Biena.

Biena travelled with her grandparents (Hans Heinrich Lorenzen and Christina Margaretha Carstensen), their youngest son (Thomas Lorenzen) and a few other friends. They would pack all their belongings and carry everything they wanted to begin a new life across the ocean. The first step of the journey was traveling from Schleswig to Hamburg, which is about 85 miles. Most likely they travelled by train or wagon and possibly some on foot. Once in Hamburg, their excitement and fear had to be overwhelming. Hamburg was one of the busiest ports in Europe that provided travel to the United States for many, not only the Germans. Their 3rd class (steerage) ticket to travel would be aboard a steam ship named the “Normannia”, and would cost \$60-\$80/person (a value of \$1,760-\$2,350 in 2022).

At the time, the Normannia was only 2 years old, 500 feet long, 57 feet wide and weighed 8,800 tons. It was steam powered and could travel at a speed of 18 knots, which was about 21 mph. This meant it could cross the Atlantic from England to New York in about 8 days. It had 4 decks and held a maximum 2,594 passengers (432 first class, 162 second class, and 2,000 third class).¹



The Normannia (1890-1906), built for the Hamburg American Line

The Normannia left the port in Hamburg, Germany on 26 August 1892. Making a stop at the port in Southampton, England, they departed for America the following day, 27 August. The expected arrival in New York harbor would be 03 September. This meant that Biena and her family would only have to put up with the discomfort of living in the third-class/steerage area of the ship for about 8 days.

¹ “Normannia: Ship Information,” *The Statue of Liberty – Ellis Island Foundation, Inc.*, website; (<https://heritage.statueofliberty.org/ship-details/czo5OijOb3JtYW5uaWEiOw==/czoXMDoiMTg5Mi0wOS0yMil7/czo4OijtYW5pZmVzdCI7/czowOiliOw==/czoZOil2MjQiOw==#passengerListAnchor> : accessed 31 Jan 2022).

It was just two days later, at sea, that cholera claimed its first victim; a cabin passenger named Carl Heggert. The following day, cholera claimed the life of an 11-month-old child in the steerage area. And the next day were 2 more deaths.² The news of the illness preceded the ship's arrival at New York and was a headline in all the newspapers.

Back in Europe a pandemic of cholera was taking hold and all were panicked about exposure to the deadly illness. That same year (1892) Hamburg, Germany reported the largest cholera outbreak in Europe resulting in 8,600 deaths in the city. The newspapers of the USA propagated the belief that the disease was spread by the poor and foreign immigrants.

Six ships, including the *Normannia*, were scheduled to arrive to New York harbor within the same week. All had departed from the ports of Hamburg, Germany or Havre, France. The Hamburg-American line ran these passenger ship lines and shut down operations when learning of the outbreak on the ships. The country was in a panic, as reported by the *Middletown Times-Press* in New York:

*"The health officers have adopted the most stringent measures to prevent the spread of the disease from the vessel, and strict orders have been issued by Dr. Jenkins and Dr. Sanborn, the doctor left in charge to the Morvian, to shoot any one who attempts to board the vessel."*³

The *Normannia* arrived at New York harbor around 4 AM on 03 September. Normal protocol was for a physician to inspect and accept the arriving ship into port where the passengers could disembark. After the port physician conferred with the ship's medical authorities, the *Normannia* was denied entrance and informed to quarantine. The *Normannia* was re-directed to a lower bay, 8 miles from any shore. The ship joined 2 other passenger ships, that had already been in quarantine.⁴

Biena and her family remained on the ship until the following day when all steerage passengers gathered their baggage and disembarked via a tug boat to Hoffman Island. As reported in the newspapers:

*"There was a great panic on board the Normannia among the steerage passengers when the new cases and deaths occurred. They begged the health commissioners [for a] tug [boat], which came along side, to take them off, and said they could get \$3,000 together in a minute, if it could get them ashore. They were only quieted down and relieved from their terror, on being landed on Hoffman Island."*⁵

The same newspaper goes on to report:

"The transfer was a great relief to the cabin passengers detained on board the Normannia".⁶

Cabin passengers (those in 1st and 2nd class) were thought to be more resistant to cholera, as they believed themselves to have better hygiene practices than immigrants and the poor. This belief was propagated by the press.

² "A Hand To Hand Fight," *Democrat and Chronicle* (Rochester, New York), 05 Sep 1892, pg. 1, col. 1-3; website, *Newspapers.com* (<https://www.newspapers.com/image/135199823> : accessed 31 January 2022).

³ "Cholera is Here", *Middletown Times-Press* (Middletown, New York), 01 Sep 1892, pg. 5, col. 3-4; website, *Newspapers.com* (<https://www.newspapers.com/image/18703127/?terms=normannia&match=1> : accessed 31 Jan 2022).

⁴ "The Cholera," *Star-Gazette* (Elmira, New York), 03 Sep 1892, p. 1, col. 1-3; website, *Newspapers.com* (<https://www.newspapers.com/image/275374708/?terms=normannia&match=1> : accessed 31 Jan 2022).

⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 2, col.4.

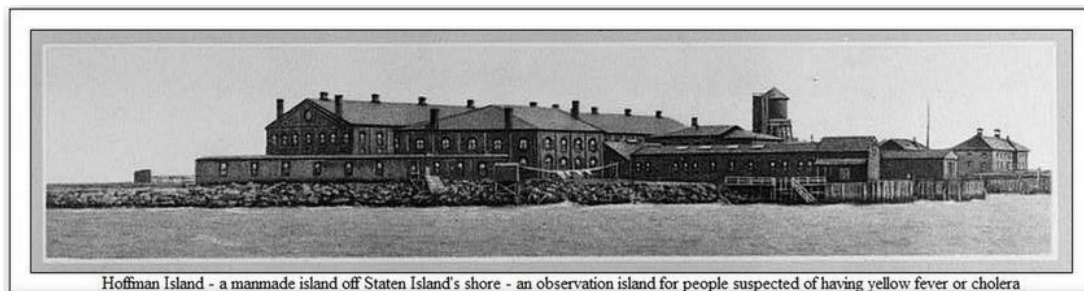
⁶ "A Hand To Hand Fight," *Democrat and Chronicle* (Rochester, New York), 05 Sep 1892, pg. 1-2; website, *Newspapers.com* (<https://www.newspapers.com/image/135199823> : accessed 31 Jan 2022).

The Traer Star Clipper had the following to report regarding the confusion and fear on the Normannia in this 16 September article⁷:

The panic on board the Normannia was somewhat quelled when the steerage passengers and the sick had been removed. The steerage passengers were transferred to Hoffman Island, which had been made ready for them, and the six patients were sent to the hospital pavilions on Swinburne Island. On board the Rugia and Moravia the imprisoned emigrants were given very little knowledge as to what was going on, and they made correspondingly little trouble. But the air of gayety which formerly prevailed on the Moravia, the original pest ship, had departed. Sullenly the emigrants were massed against the sails, watching the pleasant panorama which is always unfolding at this busy gateway of the sea, and wondering how long their banishment would last.

The crematory retort on Swinburne Island has been kept at a white heat night and day since the first pest ship, the Moravia, arrived. At midnight Saturday it received its first dead, the three who died during the day. The bodies of all who die in quarantine will be cremated, unless friends are prompt in making other arrangements. It is possible to embalm the bodies in such a way as to kill all cholera germs, and conveniences for this process are at hand.

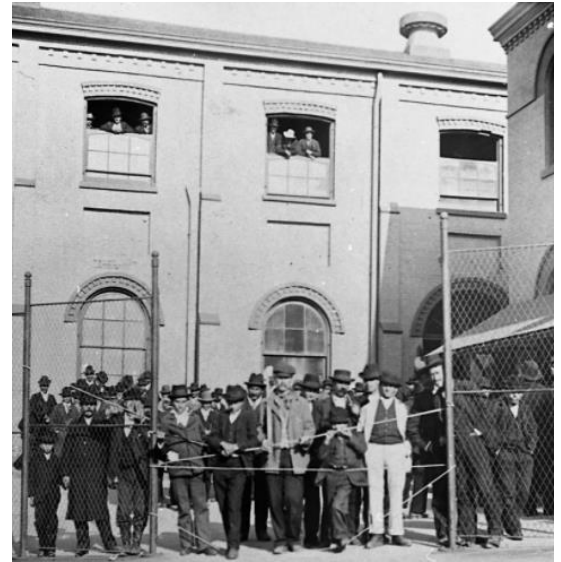
Hoffman Island is a 11-acre man-made island in the lower New York Bay. The island was commonly used as a quarantine station for arriving immigrants until 1937. Receiving houses were built to house those quarantined



⁷ "The Pest-Laden Fleet," *The Star Clipper* (Traer, Tama County, Iowa), 16 Sep 1892, p. 2, col. 8; website, *Community History Archive* (http://tamacounty.advantage-preservation.com/viewer/?k=normannia&t=35663&i=t&by=1892&bdd=1890&d=09011892-09301892&m=between&ord=k1&fn=star_clipper_usa_iowa_traer_18920916_english_2&df=1&dt=2&cid=2711 : accessed 01 Feb 2022).



Hoffman Island – a manmade island off Staten Island’s shore – an observation island for people suspected of having yellow fever or cholera.⁸



Those that were visibly sick or infected were sent to Swinburne Island. Swinburne was another man-made island only about 4 acres in size and just immediately south of Hoffman Island. Swinburne housed a hospital dedicated to cholera and yellow fever cases, a crematory and a mortuary. Here, patients were fumigated with sulfur, and those who passed away went to either the mortuary or crematory, depending on the season as well as the preferences of their relatives or friends.

Once the steerage passengers were ashore, their portion of the steamer was thoroughly fumigated and disinfected. As stated in the newspaper:

“The cabin passengers are perfectly safe. The sick steerage passengers have been isolated from them, and in fact all the immigrants have been kept from them, and the only death in the saloon was from diabetes.”⁹

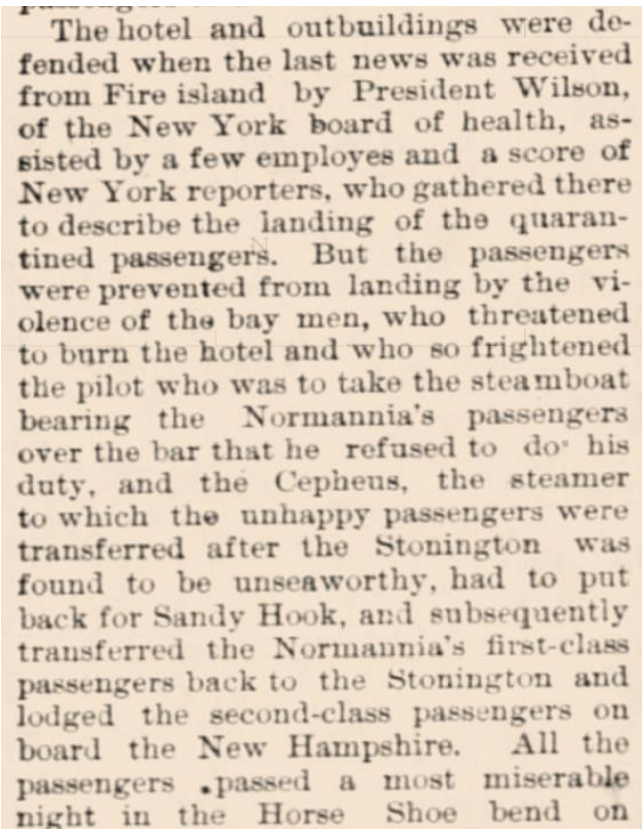
Biena and family remained on the tiny Hoffman Island with steerage passengers from all the ships. The population started around 500 and eventually grew to 800. Crowding was unavoidable.

⁸ “Hoffman and Swinburn Islands,” *Old Staten Island*; website (<https://www.oldstatenisland.org/hoffman-island.html> : accessed 01 Feb 2022).

⁹ A Hand To Hand Fight,” *Democrat and Chronicle* (Rochester, New York), 05 Sep 1892, pg. 1-2; website, *Newspapers.com* (<https://www.newspapers.com/image/135199823> : accessed 31 Jan 2022).

Meanwhile, the first- and second-class cabin passengers were still living on the ship. Tensions were rising and problems with ship cleanliness were not being managed. A recommendation to move these people to hotels and outbuildings was met with strong resistance by the locals, as reported in *The Waterloo Courier* on 13 Sep¹⁰:

"...the passengers were prevented from landing by the violence of the bay men, who threatened to burn the hotel..."



The hotel and outbuildings were defended when the last news was received from Fire island by President Wilson, of the New York board of health, assisted by a few employes and a score of New York reporters, who gathered there to describe the landing of the quarantined passengers. But the passengers were prevented from landing by the violence of the bay men, who threatened to burn the hotel and who so frightened the pilot who was to take the steamboat bearing the Normannia's passengers over the bar that he refused to do his duty, and the Cepheus, the steamer to which the unhappy passengers were transferred after the Stonington was found to be unseaworthy, had to put back for Sandy Hook, and subsequently transferred the Normannia's first-class passengers back to the Stonington and lodged the second-class passengers on board the New Hampshire. All the passengers passed a most miserable night in the Horse Shoe bend on

News of the event appear in the Iowa newspapers around 09 September in *The Courier* (Waterloo, Iowa). Only minimal details reported about a quarantine for the ships "Normannia", "Stubbenhuk", and "Rugia" and nothing more. The newspaper also reported some uncertainty if mail would be permitted to exchange with any passengers.

In the midst of all this confusion and fear, Biena would celebrate her birthday on September 8th. She was 7 years old.

¹⁰ "Refused Landing," *The Courier* (Waterloo, Iowa), 13 Sep 1892; website, *Newspapers.com* (<https://www.newspapers.com/image/356603681/?terms=normannia&match=1> : accessed 01 Feb 2022).

On 16 Sep, Biena and her family, along with all steerage immigrants, were transferred from Hoffman Island to Camp Low on Sandy Hook, New Jersey. Biena and her family would remain at Camp Low on Sandy Hook for at least 8 days. The Evening World newspaper (New York, New York) explains the preparations in the following article:

TO OCCUPY CAMP LOW TO-DAY.

Immigrants from Hoffman Island to Be Lauded First.

[SPECIAL TO THE EVENING WORLD.]

CAMP LOW, SANDY HOOK, Sept. 16—The arrival here of the 800 immigrants now quarantined on Hoffman Island is expected to-day, and the entire colony from the pest ships, it is said, will be safely transferred to Camp Low before sundown.

The work of the carpenters was finished last night. The three pavilions which have been constructed contain 219 rooms, each one equipped for two tenants. More than three hundred tents have been erected, some of which can accommodate from six to eight persons, so that the camp will hold in its present condition about 2,000.

These accommodations can be stretched if necessary, ex-Surgeon-Gen. Hamilton says, so that in a case of emergency from 6,000 to 8,000 persons could be taken care of in the camp. A force of carpenters and mechanics will remain at Sandy Hook in case more room should be needed.

Among those already at the camp are the medical staff and several nurses. There are also 115 marines, and to-day the number will be increased to 200 by a detachment from Philadelphia.

Communication from the outside world has been entirely cut off, and the only way of approach is by way of the line of tug traffic buoys, which is patrolled by the revenue cutter Grant.

The entire work represents an outlay of about \$50,000, and includes, besides the pavilions, tents and dining-rooms, kitchens and storerooms, a press headquarters, commandants' quarters, baggage-room, dynamo-house, apothecary store, a fire-engine-house with 1,000 feet of hose, a laundry, hospital, post-office and telegraph office.

Pure drinking water is provided, by means of a powerful force pump, from six newly opened wells, and is carried to every part of the camp by a system of pipes.

The quarantine authorities are finding no difficulty in getting nurses and waitresses. A corps of seventeen waitresses has already been engaged, one of whom is Mrs. Maggie Ferrington, who used to be housekeeper for Richard Mansfield.



"Cepheus Ashore – Another Deadly in the Release of the Normannia's Passengers – To Occupy Camp Low To-Day," *The Evening World* (New York, New York), 16 Sep 1892, p. 1, col. 6-7; newspaper archive, *Newspapers.com* (<https://www.newspapers.com/image/50673990/?terms=normannia%20%22hoffman%20island%22&match=1> : accessed 01 Feb 2022).

When they were finally released, the crowd was routed to Ellis Island and processed for entry. Below is a transcription that describes the scene Biena's family would have experienced as reported by *The Standard Union* (Brooklyn, New York), printed 24 Sep 1892:

*"During the morning 500 Normannia passengers were transferred aboard the steamers John Moore and George Starr. They will be landed in New York before nightfall, if nothing unforeseen occurs. Four customs officers accompanied the steamers for the purpose of inspecting the baggage. Their services were useless, however, as the contents of boxes and trunks were ruined in the steam disinfection process on Hoffman Island. The stuff had been repacked before drying, and is almost a total loss. Everything is torn, rotted and mildewed. The officers of the camp are satisfied that no sickness exists among those departing. The Boards of Health of the different States to which the released passengers are destined have been notified from here that the immigrants must leave with clean bills of health. The scene on the dock during the hours of departure was an interesting one. All the departing people looked well, happy and neatly clad, presenting a vast difference in appearance from the day of their arrival. As each passenger's name was called out, the person stepped forward, received a health certificate and trotted aboard with all the effects he or she could carry. Every one was rigidly examined by Camp Low's surgeons, and the officials feel satisfied that there need be no alarm in New York or any other point for fear of a reappearance of the disease. Commandant Major Sawtelle ordered that every passenger be provided with a good, substantial meal before leaving here. The tents and rooms which are vacated by the passengers landed to-day are being disinfected and fumigated, ready for occupancy by the Rugia's passengers."*¹¹



With this chapter of Biena's journey coming to a close, the Normannia had the following statistics to report: 5 deaths at sea, 11 deaths at port, 21 sick. During the time the family was quarantined, all six ships reported their statistics together as: 65 deaths at sea, 23 deaths at port, 62 sick. As mentioned above, more passengers were due to arrive later that same day and bring their sick to the same place Biena had just left.

¹¹ "On The Wane," *The Standard Union* (Brooklyn, New York), 24 Sep 1892, p. 1, col. 1; newspaper archive, *Newspapers.com* (<https://www.newspapers.com/image/542209916/?terms=normannia&match=1> : accessed 01 Feb 2022).

Once Biena and the family were finally released, it was time to begin their journey to Iowa. This was still another 1,070 miles to the west. Biena recalls the journey for a newspaper interview in 1975:



Traer, Iowa Railroad Depot, ca: 1918

"[We] took the train to Iowa where [my mother] and uncles lived. We were quite a party, and when we got to Traer, they ordered a hack (a long rig with seats facing each other on each side)."

It's likely that the train from New York to Iowa took about 2-3 days of travel. And probably about 1-2 hours on the hack from Traer to the family's home.



Example of a "hack"

One can only imagine how exhausted every person in the travel party felt from this extensive ordeal. The family members waiting to receive them in Iowa must have been concerned when they did not arrive on the expected date. It is not known if Anna or her brothers had access to the newspapers that reported the situation as it occurred in New York harbor.

With absolute certainty, all had to be relieved that it was over and they were finally reunited with family.