

The following article is a special Five Quarters supplement written and designed by SJHS member Valerie Sims. It tells the tale of the legendary Captain Franz Romer, who set out to make the first recorded crossing of the Atlantic Ocean in a sea kayak. The SJHS Media Committee is grateful for Valerie's captivating contribution.

# THE LAST KAYAKING ADVENTURE 1928

©By Valerie C. Sims; Edited by Leslie Carney



Creque's Alley  
St. Thomas, Virgin Islands

Photo: © Creque Family Archives

## OF CAPTAIN FRANZ ROMER

On March 31, 1928, German-born Franz Romer kissed his new bride goodbye and departed Lisbon, Portugal, all alone, to make the first recorded crossing of the Atlantic in a sea kayak. After making a short stop in Las Palmas, Canary Islands, the 29-year-old licensed navigator and aviator traveled almost 3,000 miles and spent 58 continuous days at sea before making landfall in St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands.

Early in the morning of August 1, 1928, he was spotted fast asleep, in his usual seated position, anchored in the harbour of Charlotte Amalie.

Soon thereafter, the tired and depleted adventurer was towed to the Harbormaster's wharf. My great grandfather, Herman O. Creque, was one of the first to greet him.

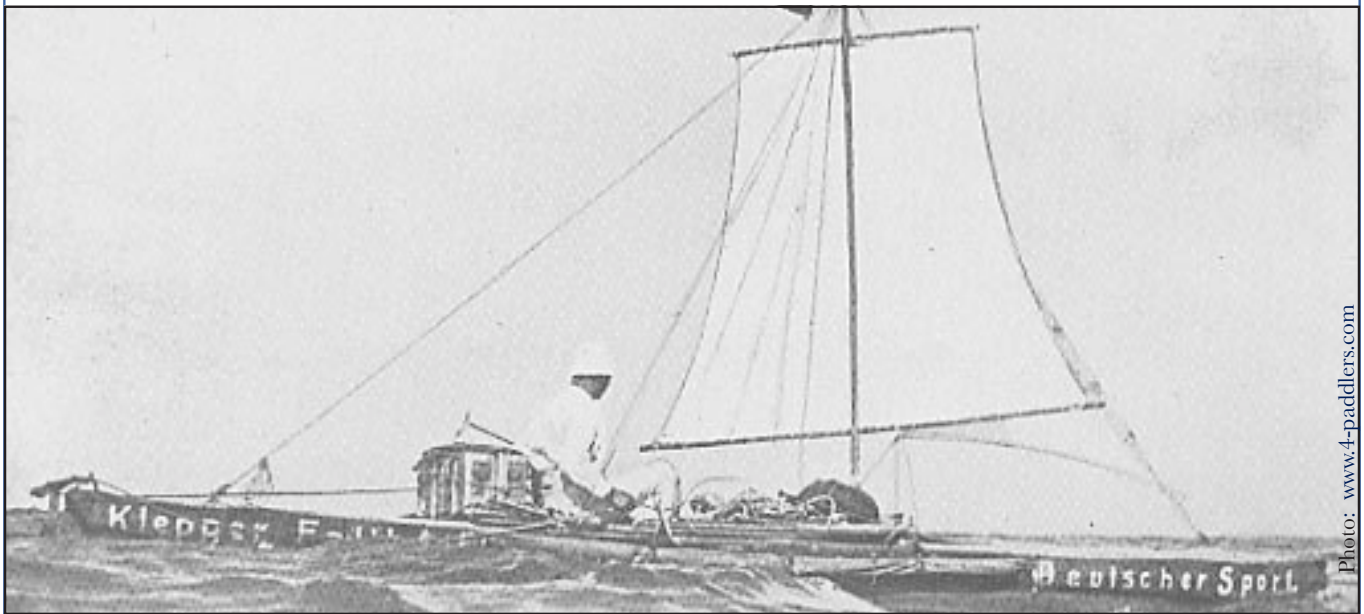
While attempting to help the Captain get out of his small craft, a crowd soon gathered and noticed that he was unable to walk. After so many weeks, his lower extremities were stiff from lack of use. His face, some reported, was like that of Robinson Crusoe, burned and covered with crystalized salt from the constant ocean blasts.



**Captain Franz Romer**  
10/7/1899 - 9/2/1928

*Born near Lake Constance in Southern Germany, he was the son of Nakasius and Maria Romer. As a child, he exhibited a special love of the sea and later became a merchant seaman.*

## THE COLLAPSABLE KAYAK



Captain Franz Romer seated in his custom-made, 21-foot kayak valued at \$2,000.

Before departing on this adventure, Captain Romer filled his specialized Klepper kayak, called the **Deutscher Sport**, bow to stern, with food and supplies to last the duration of the trip. He presumed the voyage would take him about 3 months, so he stocked up with 600 cans of food and about 75 gallons of water remembering to include lots of lemons for his favorite beverage, lemonade.

The Klepper-made kayak was a wooden framed craft, much like a sailing canoe, covered with rubber and canvas. It was made to be collapsible so that one could carry it under their arm. It was only 21 feet 6 inches long, with a depth of 18 inches and a mast 8 feet high. Captain Romer himself played an intricate part in its design and construction with the Klepper boat company of Rosenheim, Bavaria.

Once the bow was packed with foodstuffs, Captain Romer had to eat through a good portion of his supplies in order to stretch out his legs. Consequently, during the early portion of his trip, he suffered greatly from boils and muscular atrophy. Undaunted, he paddled and sailed at least 35 miles each day.

Since he couldn't stretch out, he slept upright in a seated position under a homemade rubber sheet, designed to keep the water from splashing into his face. From a small hole in the fabric, a tube extended so that he could breath. Given the situation, he was only ever permitted a few minutes rest at a time, which made the passage quite labored and exhausting.

# THE VOYAGE

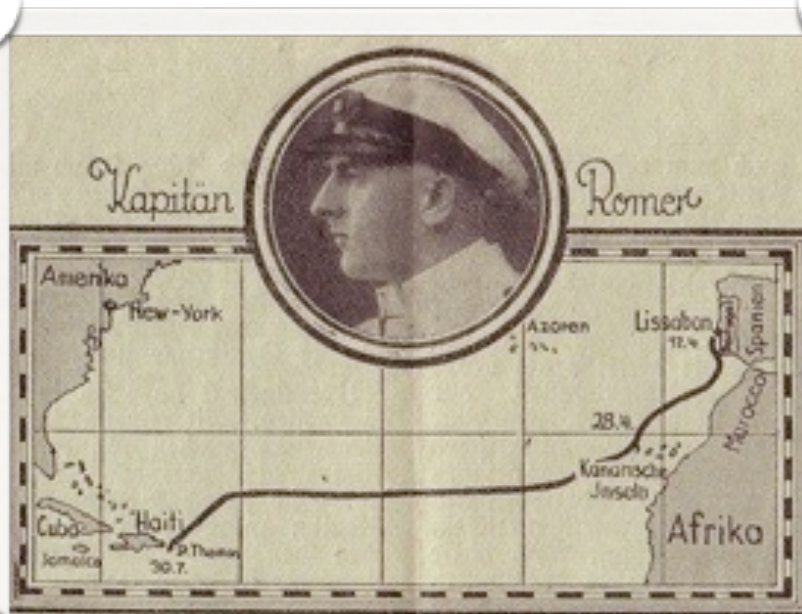


Photo: [www.4-paddlers.com](http://www.4-paddlers.com)

Map showing Captain Romer's route from Lisbon to the Virgin Islands.

The Captain made his way along his navigated route with a paddle as needed, but mostly moved with the help of the deck-mounted sail. From the boom, he attached a guideline that held his rudder true, regardless of whether he was awake or asleep. To navigate, the only technology available to him was his compass, sextant, binoculars and a barometer, which proved to be sufficient.

During his voyage, there was a period of five days and five nights that he had no sleep whatsoever. The constant exposure to the sun, wind, rain and spray; calm days and stormy ones, all took their toll on him. To elevate his spirits, and break the monotony of the isolation, he often sang or talked to himself.

According to the September 13, 1928, *New York Times* Article, titled, *Canoe Adventurer Talked to Sharks*:

*"Sun and salt spray tortured Captain Romer's hands and arms, and they were swollen, blistered and stiff. He lost his hat in a wind. Then his head, neck and back got more of the sun.*

*Three sharks took a curious fancy to his craft. They played about the canoe, swimming from side to side, at times darting under the boat and coming so close that he could feel the scrape of the fins through the flexible rubber bottom. Capt. Romer, lonely, talked to the sharks but they swam away."* Although, on another encounter with inquisitive sharks, Captain Romer had to feverishly bang two food tins together to scare them away.

Gratefully, he finally reached St. Thomas alive, after turning down the assistance of several passing ships who thought he was a wreck victim.

## ST. JOHN RESPITE

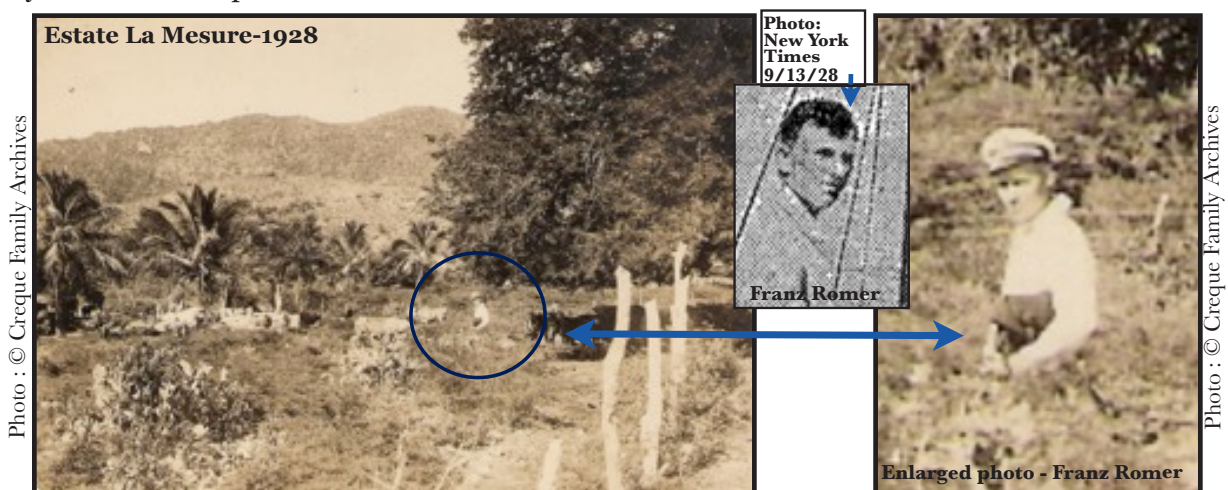
Recently, I discovered two photographs of Captain Romer amongst my great-grandfather's papers. One was the photo of him taken in Creque's Alley standing next to his kayak and the other was of his celebrated ride through Main Street in St. Thomas. Interestingly, great-grandfather was seated in the car as well. Puzzled by their connection, further research revealed that Mrs. W.M. Perry, wife of the government agronomist stationed in the Virgin Islands, had written a letter to the newspapers indicating that ***"Captain Romer planned to rest in St. John, probably a month, before resuming his voyage to New York."***

Guided by a hunch, I quickly scanned my ancestor's photos of the properties he owned in St. John during 1928 for any evidence of a visit by Captain Romer. To my surprise, in one of the photos of the cattle enclosure at La Mesure Estate, was a man resembling, none other than, Captain Romer himself! After enlarging the photo, I quickly found another picture of him online to

compare the distinguishable features. Indeed, it was evident that the man at La Mesure Estate had the same strong jawline and deep-set eyes as well as the familiar officer's hat that Captain Romer always wore. I now realized that great-grandfather must have extended him a personal invitation to recover from his harrowing journey at his home in St. John, and in time, had the opportunity to get to know him further.

It's uncertain what Captain Romer may have said about his travels as he was recuperating, enjoying the warm hospitality of the Creque family. However, he later made an insightful remark to someone about the *"heart breaking and blood curdling moments he experienced as he crossed the Atlantic."*

Sadly, little did great-grandfather know that not only was he one of the first to greet the intrepid traveler, but that he would soon be one of the last to see him alive.



Great grandfather, Herman O. Creque, snaps a photo of Captain Franz Romer as he recovers at his La Mesure Estate. The Captain, with his sailing journals safely tucked under his arm, was most likely looking for a quiet, shady place to update them, as he planned one day to write a book about his extraordinary adventure.

# THE PARADE



Photo - © Creque Family Archives

The Governor of the Virgin Islands, Waldo A. Evans, sat in the rear along with the President of the Chamber of Commerce, Emile A. Berne, as Captain Franz Romer stood to greet the crowds. Great-grandfather, Herman O. Creque, dressed in a dark suit, and his young son, Henry, were excited to be accompanying them on this parade route down Main Street, riding in a brand new cadillac.

Once the Captain made a full recovery, Governor Waldo A. Evans declared August 22, 1928, a public holiday in his honor.

In the August 25, 1928, *St. Thomas Mail Notes*, the particulars of the parade were given... At 3.00 pm, the parade started from the Chamber of Commerce headquarters headed by German and American banners. Many hearts throbbed with pleasure when the flags of these two nations, which were a few years ago spilling each other's blood on the battlefields of Europe, were unfurled in the atmosphere of affection.

The United States Naval Band, under Bandmaster Adams, sounded forth the favorite

German melody "Old Comrades," and a crowd numbering several thousands followed behind the officers of the Chamber of Commerce, in who's midst was seated the valorous navigator, Captain Romer. When the procession reached market square, a great ovation was given Captain Romer. Soon, he was paid homage for his courageous deeds by the citizens of St. Thomas. He was given a gold medal, specially made for the occasion, which the Governor pinned on his breast."



Photo: [www.dc.wikipedia.org](http://www.dc.wikipedia.org)

# THE HURRICANE

Some of the departing words for Captain Romer, as he left the Virgin Islands, heading for Puerto Rico, were printed in the August 25, 1928, *St. Thomas Mail Notes*. *His Excellency*, Governor Evans remarked... *"It is our sincere hope that the same providence that brought you here will guide you safely to your destination and preserve your life for the good of your fatherland and humanity in general. We wish the brave Captain, Godspeed."*

On September 11, 1928, Captain Romer made his departure from San Juan Harbor in Puerto Rico, hugging the shoreline to ultimately reach Florida and later Battery 3 in New York Harbour. He was to be awarded \$25,000 from an American company if he succeeded.

Unbeknownst to him, an insidious hurricane was quickly advancing up the leeward chain of islands. Soon, it would become the strongest hurricane to hit Puerto Rico in its history. It later became known as the *San Felipe Segundo* Hurricane or the *Okeechobee* Hurricane and killed upwards of 4,000 people nationally.

Unfortunately, Captain Romer missed the hurricane warning in Puerto Rico by one hour and steered straight in front of the deadly Category 5, which was silently approaching from the east.

Tragically, the hurricane followed the exact same path that Captain Romer chose to reach the Americas. He had been sailing for two days, reaching close to the northeastern tip of the Dominican Republic, before the high velocity of the winds, pelting rain and enormous waves consumed him.

To this day, no trace of him, his kayak, or his infamous travel journals were ever found. Despite his death, and despite no written record of his experience, Captain Romer's Atlantic crossing remains, inarguably, one of the greatest sea kayaking expeditions of the modern era.

August 1, 2013, marked the 85th anniversary of Captain Franz Romer's tumultuous, but yet, very celebrated expedition to the U.S. Virgin Islands.

