



Season 6, Episode 7: USS Olympia Glass

Wes Cowan: Our next story asks if this fragile glass door once took part in a decisive battle during the Spanish-American War. On the morning of May 1, 1898, Commodore George Dewey steams into Manila Bay in the Philippines for a critical confrontation with the main fleet of the Spanish empire. For the next seven hours, the harbor is set ablaze in a barrage of exploding shells. When the battle is over, the world has been transformed. Ten Spanish ships have been destroyed, and the naval might of the once-great Spanish empire lies in ruins. Dewey's victory in turn launches America onto the world stage. He returns home a national hero. Now, on a salvaged door from an old farmhouse, Earl Pedersen of Fremont, Nebraska thinks he may have part of Commodore Dewey's flagship – quite literally, a window on history.

Earl: I wrote a letter and sent it to the museum and got the reply back that this window was from Admiral Dewey's quarters, I says, whoopee!

Wes: I'm Wes Cowan, and I've come to landlocked Nebraska to check out what may or may not be a piece of one of the nation's most famous warships. Earl takes me to a small study that was once his family's back porch.

Earl: It came from a farm about a mile east of where I live. Played softball and baseball right in front of this window so the miracle it isn't broken.

Wes: Earl says that farmhouse was homesteaded in the late 19th century, but abandoned around the time of the great depression, and then destroyed. Earl's father salvaged this door from that farmhouse, and eventually used it to replace a broken door in this doorframe.

Earl: I had no idea of what ship it was or its history so I went to the Fremont Public Library did some research and came up with the fact to my knowledge that this was the *USS Olympia*.

Wes: So if it's the *USS Olympia* that's like Admiral Dewey's flagship during the Spanish-American War.

Earl: That's right.

Wes: Earl explains that in 1977 he made a rubbing of the window and sent it off to the Cruiser Olympia Association, a nonprofit group of veterans and enthusiasts who were then in charge of preserving the retired ship. The association told Earl that his window had been on the ship, and may even have seen action in the Philippines.



Earl: Except I had to wonder how in the world it got here in Nebraska.

Wes: But Earl's youngest son, John, has always been skeptical of the association's claim that the window was part of the *Olympia*, because their response was based solely upon Earl's rubbing. Earl's son convinced him to finish the investigation he began over three decades ago.

Earl: I want you to find out if this window came from Admiral Dewey's cabin on the *USS Olympia*.

Wes: The letter Earl received from the Cruiser Olympia Association back in 1977 acknowledges that they can't pinpoint the exact date the window would have been installed onboard. Many changes were made to the *Olympia* over the years. But they do sound confident that the window is authentic.

Wes: Hah! Listen to this: "There were periods of time when the etched glass that you mentioned was in use on the various windows of the two cabins which were occupied by Admiral Dewey and Captain Gridley." He was the captain of the ship. It is our belief that the etched glass that you speak of is from their quarters." Wow – well pretty amazing. This frosted glass with this very decorative door, I have never seen anything quite like this. And I'm not sure that's the *USS Olympia*, but it certainly wouldn't surprise me. There is something about it though that strikes me as strange. Why would you have a piece of decorative glass on a battleship? It measures 24 inches square. How on earth did a window from perhaps the most celebrated warship in U.S. history make its way to a Nebraska farmhouse? I'm looking up a local glass artist to see what he can tell me about Earl's window. Dick Baines lives in nearby Omaha, Nebraska. He's spent much of his life working with decorative glass.

Wes: Dick, have you ever seen a window like this before?

Dick: I haven't. Normally there are more pastoral scenes of streams through a forest maybe some deer, elk something like that. Never seen one with a ship on it.

Wes: Dick says it's a Victorian style window. He occasionally still sees windows from this era on farmhouses in the area.

Wes: Who would make a window like this?

Dick: It had to be someone that had a very particular attachment to this battleship.

Wes: How exactly did they make this?



Dick: If you run your hand across you can feel where the etched areas are actually raised from the glass surface and that indicates that it was acid etched. If you would like I can show you how it's done.

Wes: Inside Earl's workshop, Dick begins the demonstration.

Dick: So I've applied a self-adhesive mask to this. It's a vinyl so it's resistant to the acid.

Wes: Dick says the design on Earl's window would have been created on a silkscreen and attached to the glass surface with beeswax.

Dick: Then I take the acid etching cream and I paint it over all the exposed surfaces. Then we leave it sit for one minute.

Wes: The acid chemically alters the glass, causing the design to frost over.

Dick: Ok, let's clean this off and see what we have.

Wes: Wow there it is. Artists today use a less toxic cream. But Dick explains that when Earl's window was etched, they used hydrofluoric acid, a highly caustic substance that was used for glass etching between the 1870s and 1920s. Earl's window does appear to date from the right period. But why would a warship have been fitted with elaborately etched decorative glass? Come in Frank.

Frank: Good to see you. It has been a while.

Wes: It has been. Dr. B. Franklin Cooling is a Professor of History at the National Defense University, and author of a book on the *USS Olympia*. He says Dewey's flagship was at one time the most potent weapon on the high seas.

Frank: She was better than anything else that had been produced in the new American Steel and Steam Navy up to that point Americans wanted to show the world how successful we were, how innovative and war particularly against Spain was a device for doing so.

Wes: For hundreds of years Spain had been one of the dominant maritime powers, its fleet helping win them a global empire. But Frank explains that by the 1890's, that empire was faltering, with only a few remaining overseas colonies, such as Cuba and the Philippines. This weakness tempted a number of politicians,



industrialists, and businessmen, who wanted to seize these foreign markets and expand America's economic reach. The Philippines was an irresistible target.

Frank: The importance of the Philippines was that it was a stepping stone for coal refueling of both merchant and the navy on this trek out to the Far East for trade.

Wes: But Frank says not all Americans were as eager to embark on an imperial venture and attack the Spanish in the Philippines, or anywhere else. Farmers in the heartland were especially skeptical.

Frank: The anti imperialist, the anti expansionist many of whom were small farmers were concerned with the competition from foreign producers of grain and goods and certainly coming out of a depression in the mid 90's they were not as in favor of any war which could lead to further expansion.

Wes: Frank tells me that all changed on February 15, 1898, when the battleship *USS Maine* exploded in Cuba's Havana harbor. 260 American officers, sailors, and marines were killed. The U.S. government and media blamed Spain for the atrocity, giving expansionists a reason for war. A nation divided over expansion now united against a common enemy.

Frank: Dewey had the orders immediately to steam for the Philippines and take Manila the capital. It was a turkey shoot: Manila Bay was perhaps the most glorious of American victories, not a single man was lost, a couple of shells struck the *Olympia* but no damage was done.

Wes: And so a once great empire crumbled...and the American century began. Frank says that George Dewey returned home a national hero, and the virile new symbol of American manhood. After his victory, Dewey's order to Captain Charles Gridley at the start of the Battle of Manila Bay, "You may fire when ready, Gridley," became as famous as the man himself. Commodore Dewey was promoted to Rear Admiral, and five years later, he became the first and only officer to ever be commissioned the Admiral of the Navy, a rank he held until his death in January 1917. I tell Frank about Earl's letter from the Cruiser Olympia Association. He shows me a picture of the *Olympia* from the time of the Spanish-American War, so we can compare it with Earl's glass.

Frank: The configuration of the hull and the super structure, the smokestacks arrangements, the masks and also the forward and aft gun turrets are just one for one between the photograph and this edge glass. This is the *Olympia*.

Wes: But why would a warship be outfitted with fragile decorative glass? He explains that Dewey's ship was used for both battle and diplomacy.



Frank: It wouldn't surprise me in the least that this kind of a glass window was aboard the *Olympia* at that particular time. The *Olympia* was built specifically to be the flagship of the Asiatic squadron, the Captain's and Admiral's cabin particularly were replete with the finery of decoration that were all necessary for entertaining dignitaries

Wes: But Frank can't say if this specific window was part of that finery. He suggests I head over to Penn's Landing in Philadelphia where the *USS Olympia* is permanently docked. If this really is a piece of the ship, Jesse Lebovics, the ship's manager, should be able to tell us. When I show him the letter written by the Cruiser Olympia Association, he's dubious of its claim that Earl's window came from the Admiral's or Captain's quarters.

Jesse: Clearly they hoped it was off the *Olympia*. They clearly wanted it for their collections.

Wes: Jesse's familiar with the association, which merged with Philadelphia's Independence Seaport Museum in 1996. He explains that when Earl originally contacted them, the association – comprised mostly of WWII vets – lacked the funding and resources to do a comprehensive investigation.

Wes: So what's your take on this? Could this have come from the *Olympia*?

Jesse: It's possible. The ship has refit several times, most aggressively in 1901-1902 where a lot of the ornate wood work and various other pieces were removed.

Wes: Jesse suggests we examine a few interior photos of the *Olympia* as she was in 1898.

Jesse: This is as you came into the vessel this is the entrance way...

Wes: It looks to me like that all the doors are covered with wooden louvers not glass.

Jesse: Both the doors and actually all the balconies around them to get as much ventilation in there as possible.

Wes: The photos Jesse shows me speak to the high Victorian style of the ship, with detailed woodwork and plush chairs. But none of them reveal Earl's window.



Jesse: We have other resources we can use, these are from 1895, the original as-built prints, these are spaces that are mentioned in that letter from the Cruisers Association; the Admiral's cabin and the Captain's cabin. The only window we see is right here and this actually outside of the cabin.

Wes: That should be a twenty-four inch square opening if it possibly could fit.

Jesse: If the window fit in there.

Wes: All right, let's check it out.

Jesse: It looks to me like it's under two feet. It's certainly too small for your window. There is one more space that's still intact, that isn't shown on these photographs or the drawings that's worth taking a looking at, this would have been the captain's office and right here is a spot where there would have been very large glass windows. It is the original steel of the vessel, so this would not have changed.

Wes: I take measurements of both window frames: twenty-two inches wide by nearly twenty-nine inches high. Earl's twenty-four inch square window wouldn't have fit.

Jesse: There's no place that that window would have fit on this vessel.

Wes: So if Earl's window wasn't made for the *Olympia*, why was it made? I've contacted Craig Bruns at the Independence Seaport Museum. He's seen his share of maritime artifacts – maybe he can solve the mystery. Now, I know that it didn't come off the *Olympia* but have you ever seen things like this before?

Craig: Oh yes. Absolutely. When Dewey arrived in New York, there was a huge naval parade down the Hudson River.

Wes: Craig says Thomas Edison even filmed the event. But it was the giant triumphal arch in Dewey's honor, temporarily erected in Madison Square, that really celebrated his victory.

Craig: And the project cost like something in like \$150,000 and it was only up for a couple of months because it was all made of plaster, so it was all about the moment: that one beautiful moment.

Wes: Craig explains that this was America's coming out party as a world power, and Dewey was the face of that glory. Dewey's image became the hottest selling item...and in the postwar jubilation, even many of those Americans once against war and expansion were caught up in Dewey-mania.



Craig: Everyday normal Americans could participate in this cult of Dewey by going to the dime store and purchasing pictures or a candy jar and you weren't dressed properly unless you had a Dewey pin or a Dewey pencil.

Wes: It's almost like there was a Dewey brand and advertisers in particular wanted to jump onboard the Dewey brand wagon to sell their products.

Craig: We even have this game here and you move the pieces along the track that Dewey made defeating the Spanish fleet.

Wes: How does the Olympia play into at all this?

Craig: Let me show you that. Come this way.

Wes: What Craig shows me next gives me my answer for Earl.

Wes: I am sorry to say your window never was on the *USS Olympia*.

Earl: Darn!

Wes: I'm sorry to burst your bubble. But don't be disappointed, because your window speaks of a very, very patriotic time in American history.

Craig: Here we have a clock with *Olympia* on the glass just like your door.

Wes: Wow!

Craig: Your window is just another piece of Dewey mania. From the smallest town to the biggest city you had to have a Dewey artifact to express your patriotism: it was part of being American.

Wes: According to Craig, Earl's glass window is an extremely rare Dewey memento. Most collectors haven't seen anything like it, and remarkably, it's survived intact for over a century.

Earl: It's really nice to know where the window came from.

Wes: Or where it didn't come from. And I have talked to plenty of collectors who have literally thousands of Spanish-American War souvenir items and none of them have seen this particular piece of glass.



Wes: I explain to Earl how farmers like himself were once some of the fiercest opponents of the war. But Dewey's victory rallied Americans, and this sentiment reached deep into the heartland.

Earl: Well that's nice to know also.

Wes: And what you are going to do with it now?

Earl: My youngest son is responsible for having you guys out here, he will get it eventually otherwise it's going to be sitting here in this door for as long as I am around.

Wes: "Dewey-mania" was short-lived, ending soon after he made a run for the presidency in 1900. With little knowledge of policy issues and poor public relations skills, Dewey lost the bid. Although he remained popular until his death, his supporters were unable to raise the funds necessary to replace Dewey's temporary plaster arch with a more permanent monument.