



THE WHITTLERS BENCH

Southport Historical Society

501 North Atlantic Avenue
Southport, North Carolina 28461

VOLUME XVIII, NUMBER 2 March 1994

MESSAGE FROM NEW PRESIDENT OF SOUTHPORT HISTORICAL SOCIETY:

My name is Eleanor Potter Smith, and I want to extend a warm welcome to all members of the Southport Historical Society. Currently we are working on several interesting projects and considering new ones that promise to be exciting.

Many thanks to the outgoing officers for a job well done. The new Executive Board hopes to make the next two years a rewarding experience for us all.

MEETING INFORMATION: The March meeting will be held on March 24, 1994, at 7:30 P. M. in the Fellowship Hall of Trinity United Methodist Church at the corner of Nash St. & Atlantic Avenue. The Rev. P. D. Midgett will show video tapes that he has made of events which took place during the city's Bicentennial Year of 1992. We hope you will all plan to attend. This will NOT be a covered dish dinner meeting, but refreshments will be served. Visitors are always welcome. We will have some of our books on hand for sale.

SCHEDULE OF MEETINGS:

May 26	Regular meeting. Time and place to be announced
July	Old Jail will be open at specified times during 4th of July Festival. Members are encouraged to volunteer for duty at the Jail and take part in other Festival activities. There will NOT be a regular meeting of the Society, although we do plan to get out an issue of Whittlers' Bench
September 22	Regular meeting of Society. Time and place to be announced.
November 17	Regular meeting. Time and place to be announced. This is planned as a covered dish dinner meeting and officers are to be elected, as necessary.
January 26, 1995	Annual Business Meeting and Installation of Officers, if necessary.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

(1) If you or anyone you know left two rolls of film at the Community Building on the mantel on Saturday, March 12, please call Susie at 457-6940 and identify them, so they can get to the rightful owner. And in this respect, please share copies of any pictures which you took with the Society so they can be permanently preserved.

(2) Sorry - but we must postpone Founders' Day because of several reasons. The Community Building is undergoing extensive repairs; quite a few events are planned for spring and summer by other organizations and will involve many Society members; and last, but not least, those who worked hard on the Dedication Ceremony are tired! Several of the members of that committee are also members of the Founders Day Committee. We know you will understand and forgive us! As soon as we can choose a new date and get together to finalize some plans we have in mind, then we will be letting you know the details.

(3) One more reminder - some of you have not yet paid your 1994 dues. We want to keep you as members, but our by-laws say your name must be dropped if you do not pay your dues. Please do so as soon as you receive this. If you have any questions, please call Francey Wertz, Treasurer, at 457-4553, or Susie, Sect. at 457-6940. Or just mail your check to the Society at 501 North Atlantic Ave.

The Southport Historical Society made history on March 12, 1994, as we dedicated the monument to those brave seamen serving aboard the Oil Tanker JOHN D. Gill when she was torpedoed off Cape Fear on March 12, 1942. The entire event - program on the waterfront and luncheon at the Community Building (Which was the USO Bldg. in 1942- see the Chris Suiter article which follows) was a huge success. Compliments and congratulations and expressions of thanks are pouring in. The committee that planned and executed the affair was outstanding in everyway. It was a beautiful and meaningful occasion. Many thanks to Mary Shannon, Bill Reaves, Edgar Keal, Christopher Suiter, Walter Reinheimer and Francey Wertz. Some of you know that I was Chairman of the committee, but I cannot and do not claim credit - my committee members did it!

Our three survivors who were with us were more than happy with their reception in Southport and the dedication of the monument. You will note that I used the word "our". I did this because they very quickly endeared themselves to all who met them. They are very special guys and we hope they will return to Southport again and again so all of you can meet them. Hurry back, Floyd, Herbert and Gary, and we'll have another one of our "Famous Southport Covered Dish Dinners" for you! I had hoped that I might be able to prove Gary Potts a descendant of our town's founder, Joshua Potts, but I couldn't, even with the help of Sam Potts who is a descendant of Joshua and who was here to share the occasion with us. Sam took time out from an extremely busy schedule to come up from North Myrtle Beach for the ceremony and luncheon.

NOW FOR THE REAL HARD PART - That is to try to thank all who had a part in making our Dedication Ceremony the memorable event that it was.

All those on the program, including the Brunswick County Band
and U. S. Coast Guard unit from Oak Island
The "angels of mercy" who were on duty at Doshier Memorial when
the survivors arrived there. Four of them were with us
on March 12, 1994.

All those who gave donations to the fund for the purchase of the large monument, and to Gene Todd who gave the monuments for the seamen of the GILL who are buried in Northwood Cemetery

Ed Marlowe who helped us locate the graves

Rob Gandy and all the city employees involved in helping us in so many ways as we prepared for the ceremony

Bob Gray, Chief of Police

Norman Holden, our Mayor

Southport Maritime Museum Director, Mary Strickland

P. D. Midgett and others who taped the ceremony

Cindy Doshier of Wine and Roses Shop for the wreath for the monument and the flowers to float out to sea as part of our ceremony

Barbara and Earl Clewis of Woodside Trailer Park for their kindness to our survivors and for their monetary contribution

The Charleston, S. C. chapter of the Armed Guard for a second floral contribution

Cheryl Daniel and her kitchen crew! What a splendid meal they put on - and how lovely the room looked in spite of the repairs and renovations that were in progress on the building. It was a meal to be remembered.

Chuck Paty who served as host for two of our survivors.

I am sure there are others that we have not named - but you were IMPORTANT, too, no matter how you helped. My feeble brain just won't let me remember everyone!

NOTE: The last two pages of this issue contain the remarks made by Christopher Suiter, Master of Ceremonies. We include this especially for those of you who could not attend and for the generation of people who were born after 1942. It tells the story well. We appreciate Chris letting us print his remarks in this issue of Whittlers Bench.

The inscription on the monument at Waterfront Park reads:

Dedicated to the memory of CATALINO TINGZON interred in Northwood Cemetery and all Merchant Marine seamen and U.S. Navy Armed Guard on the tanker S.S. JOHN D. GILL torpedoed and sunk off Cape Fear by the German Submarine U-158 March 12, 1942
The citizens of Southport cared for the survivors and mourned for those who lost their lives
Erected March 12, 1994 by the Southport Historical Society

TRIBUTE TO DON JOHNSON
OUTGOING PRESIDENT

After four years of presiding over the Southport Historical Society during a time when its activities increased greatly, Don Johnson can go back to being "just a member" for awhile - well, maybe!

However, we cannot let him do so without thanking him for his untiring and innovative efforts on behalf of the Society. Much has been accomplished during his tenure, but to try to list those things here would be to risk overlooking something that should be mentioned.

Don has left the incoming officers and directors a lot of challenges of things that should be done by the Society as it moves toward its Twentieth Anniversary in 1996.

Thank you, Don Johnson, for your four years of dedicated leadership in the Southport Historical Society as we have tried to live up to our purpose as stated in our Constitution: "To discover and collect materials which help illustrate the history of the area...to provide for the preservation of such material..and to promote a better appreciation of our heritage."

We will be calling on you in the days to come.

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TRIBUTE TO MARY GORE

In her quiet and unassuming way, Mary Smith Gore has served faithfully as Editor of Whittlers Bench for many years. Now, because of home and work duties, Mary has asked to be relieved as Editor. (Applications are being accepted!)

Mary was always patient with the History Page Editor and others who wrote items for the paper. She spent a great deal of time typing, running off copies (until recently. We now have this done in Wilmington), folding, stapling and going to the Post Office. She was grateful for the volunteer help she received, but if it was not available, Mary did it herself.

Thank you, Mary Gore, from all of us who love Whittlers Bench. We'll do what we can to keep it going. We may even have to call on you from time to time to help us out - but we want to leave you plenty of time to cook collards for the covered dish dinners. For that job we will not even look for a replacement. If we did, the members would scalp us!

Eleanor Smith, President
Cheryl Daniel, Vice President
Susie Carson, Secretary
Francey Wertz, Treasurer
Ray Bitney, Paul Sweeney and
Chris Suiter, Directors

THE SINKING OF THE SS JOHN D. GILL

(On March 12, 1994, an event was sponsored by the Southport Historical Society to unveil a monument to the crew members of the tanker SS John D. Gill, which was torpedoed and sunk off Cape Fear on March 12, 1942. The following are remarks made by the Master of Ceremonies, Christopher A. Suiter.)

The day of the sinking of the SS John D. Gill, March 12, 1942, was the day that World War II was brought home to Southport, and laid out on her front lawn. Before that day, war was something that happened in faraway places such as Hawaii, the Philippines, or Europe. People went off to war---it didn't come to them. No hostile warships had operated off of the Cape Fear since 1865, but 1942 changed all that.

The SS John D. Gill, a tanker 523 feet long and 11,641 tons, was a new ship, the largest and finest in the Atlantic Refining Company's fleet, launched in November 1941, only a few days before Pearl Harbor was bombed. It was expected that she would go in harm's way, and she was fitted out with heavy deck guns fore and aft, with a seven-man Navy gun crew added to the 42 Merchant Seamen in her regular crew. On only her second voyage, from Texas back to her home port of Philadelphia, she was proceeding with extreme caution past Cape Fear, having been warned that submarines were in the vicinity. At 10 o'clock on the evening of 12 March, she was struck amidships on the starboard side by a torpedo fired by the German U-Boat U-158. People in the USO Building on the grounds of Fort Johnston in Southport, looking out over Battery Island, could clearly see the flash and hear the explosion of the torpedo, and spot the later glow of the fires of her burning oil. Coast Guardsmen in the building, today's Community Building, immediately raced for their boats to try for a rescue, ignoring their own risk from fire and enemy action.

After being hit, the Gill quickly started listing and leaking hundreds of gallons of oil into the sea. At first there was no fire, but a life ring with a self-igniting carbide light attached was tossed into the sea and started an enormous conflagration---burning oil covered the ship and the sea surrounding it. (Such flares were henceforth banned on U.S. ships!) A series of explosions marked the progress of the fire, culminating in a terrific explosion of the powder magazine aft at 3 a.m. on the 13th. The burnt-out wreck sank about 9 o'clock the next morning.

The Navy gun crew never had a chance to fight back against the surmerged U-Boat, and four of the seven died at their posts without being able to fire a shot.

The Gill's starboard boats were destroyed by the blast and fire; Number 2 lifeboat was launched safely with 15 crew members, who were picked up by a sister ship of the Gill, the tanker SS Robert H. Colley, and taken to Charleston, S.C. Three Coast Guard boats rescued eight crewmen and three Armed Guard, and recovered sixteen bodies. All 27 were brought in to Southport, where the victims were laid out in a row on the grass in front of the Garrison, Southport's "front lawn." The oil-covered, burned, and battered survivors were rushed to Doshier Hospital for care and clean-up. Seven of the dead were never

recovered, but most of the ones brought in were returned to their homes for burial. Catalino Tingzon, the Filipino mess man, was buried here in Southport, since his home was under the control of the Japanese in 1942.

The German naval service paid dearly for their easy victories in 1942; eight of every ten seamen who sailed in U-Boats never returned home. U-158 was bombed and sunk west of Bermuda on 30 June 1942---there were no survivors.

The hero of the Gill was Quartermaster Edward F. Cheney, the very first recipient of the newly created Merchant Marine Distinguished Service Medal, the merchant seaman's Medal of Honor. President Roosevelt personally presented this medal to Cheney, who was called to Washington for his award after surviving the sinking of a second torpedoed tanker, and preparing to sail on a third one!

"CITATION:

For heroism above and beyond the call of duty during an enemy attack when he released and launched a life-raft from a sinking and burning ship and maneuvered it through a pool of burning oil to clear water by swimming under water, coming up only to breathe. Although he had incurred severe burns about the face and arms in this action, he then guided four of his shipmates to the raft, and swam to and rescued two others who were injured and unable to help themselves. His extraordinary courage and disregard of his own safety in thus rescuing his shipmates will be an enduring inspiration to seamen of the United States Merchant Marine everywhere."

Today, fifty-two years later, we are dedicating this monument to all of those who sailed in the John D. Gill, both those who survived and the 23 who died, and particularly to the young man Catalino Tingzon, who lies buried in an unmarked grave a long way from home in a foreign country, lost to family and friends. It is a small thing, and very late, for what they suffered for us.