

THE WHITTLERS BENCH

SOUTHPORT HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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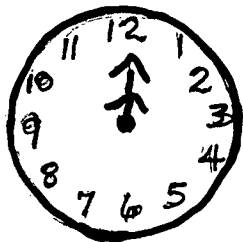
MAY MEETING: The May meeting will be held in the meeting room of the Southport Maritime Museum on Howe Street in downtown Old Southport on Thursday, May 26, at 7:30 P. M. We hope you will attend. The program, arranged by Chris Suiter, will feature Charles (Chuck) Paty, of Charlotte. Chuck and his wife

have been members of our Society for several years and have taken some of the local history courses taught by Susan Carson at Brunswick Community College. Chuck was a member of the crew of the USS Battleship NORTH CAROLINA for four years and his talk will give us an insight into what it was like to serve on a battleship in the Pacific during World War II.

"SOUTHPORT REMEMBERS WORLD WAR II" group will sponsor a Memorial Day service at the USO (Community Building) on Monday afternoon, May 30, at 2 o'clock. James E. Johnson, former Asst. Secretary of the Navy will speak and the Sea Notes will sing. There will be a raising of the flag and an appearance by the color guard from the local ROTC. "Taps" will be played by Mary G. Wigfall of Southport. Everyone is cordially invited to attend the impressive ceremony.

IN MEMORIAM

JAMES M. HARPER, JR - A TRUE FRIEND OF
HISTORY, ESPECIALLY THROUGH HIS WONDER-
FUL NEWSPAPER COLUMN "THE WAY IT WAS" -
A PICTORIAL HISTORY OF OLD SOUTHPORT.



It's Time —

TO SEND IN YOUR REMINISCENCES
ABOUT OLD SOUTHPORT - SEE THE
TWO USED ON THE HISTORY PAGE
THIS MONTH. WE NEED MORE SUCH
AS THESE.

"Looking Back" - The History Page

Susan Carson, Editor



MANY THANKS to all those who shared with us their photographs taken the day of the JOHN D. GILL ceremony. Nonie Rogers is working hard to assemble an archival history that we can be proud of. Your contributions of any items are deeply appreciated.

ALSO our thanks go to Judy Ward Thompson who wrote an article about the Gill ceremony for her DAR newsletter. This, too, has become a part of our Archives, along with an article by Franklin Scarborough, Navy veteran, who writes for the Salisbury Post. The Salisbury article was reprinted in "The Pointer", a publication of the USN Armed Guard Veterans in Raleigh and sent to us by Charles Lloyd.

NOW FOR SOME INFORMATION ABOUT OLD SOUTHPORT by Harold Watson. I'll bet Harold thought this would never get printed! But here it is, Harold, with our thanks.

THE CEDAR BENCH

Our newsletter is called "The Whittlers Bench", but that was not the original name of the bench! It was and, to me, still is "The Cedar Bench". There were two or three cedar trees, plus two poplar trees. To us young ones and the old retired captains it was "The Cedar Bench" because it was made of cedar. And we were not properly dressed if we didn't have a pocketknife. Everybody who was a regular sitter at the Cedar Bench had carved his initials somewhere on that bench. After the initials we just whittled away on the benches, pieces of white pine from boxes and crates that most goods were shipped in to Southport stores, and also branches and limbs from the trees that were right there. I know at times the cedar benches were whittled away so badly they had to be replaced at least twice before the City changed to hardwood to slow the whittlers down. And the stories that were told during all this whittling! They would fill volumes of books. The fish that were "caught" there would have flooded Fulton Fish Market in New York.

I remember one of these stories that was told by Captain Bill Wells about how a boat stretched and contracted during a storm, said that one time his boat was doing that in a storm and the planks on the deck opened up so wide that the deck lines fell down in the cracks. I was about 12 years old and I butted in and told him I wanted to know one thing. He asked what I wanted to know and I told him, "I'm glad I wasn't with you on that trip". I got a big laugh from the crowd, but Captain Bill didn't appreciate my remark.

AND HERE'S ONE FROM LAWRENCE WILLING - thanks, Lawrence

THE POOLROOMS

This "small fry" didn't just strut by the poolroom (as the song goes), I went in the place - and stayed way too long.

From about the middle 30s to the late 40s, except for the World War II years, I was definitely a regular customer at our poolroom, which was then operated by John Boyd Finch. Other regulars that I can recall at the moment were: Warren Hood, Joe

(continued)

Cochran, Dr. Leroy Fergus, Paul Fodale, Dick Brendle, Wiley and Charles Wells, Bremen Furpless, Malcolm Frink, MacDonald Gilliken, Albert Arnold, Preston Bryant, Robert Jones, Reuben Guthrie and Harold St. George - just to name a few.

John Boyd was the best pool shot in town, but I think Preston Bryant was the best among the regular players. It was Preston who coined the phrase: "Southport hasn't got anything but peace and contentment - and very little of that!"

Before John Boyd operated his poolroom, there was one operated by Mr. Rob Thompson; and before him, I've heard, there was one operated by Mr. Pack Tharp, a local barber. A couple of years after John Boyd closed his poolroom in the late 40s, Mr. Rich St. George opened and operated for a few years what may have been Southport's last poolroom.

By the time Mr Rich opened, I was so married until the only thing I was racking up then was baby bottles. My poolroom days were about over - over for the next forty years, anyway. But pool has been one of the greatest games of my life, and I certainly have very fond memories as I think back on those years, and of course, about those special people.

HISTORY TIDBITS
from hither and yon

From the Wilmington Morning Star of August 16, 1874 (copied from the files of Kathryn Carson Kalmanson): River Pilot Dies. Captain Simon S. Grissom, 62, well-known river pilot of the Cape Fear, died in Smithville on the 11th. The following was written to his memory: "Solid stand thy coffin in peaceful ground, near where the waves you braved abound; But lighter as life's burden rest upon thee, the soil of Carolina, good man."

From the Wilmington Morning Star of June 30, 1875 (from Bill Reaves): Mail Route Set: The daily mail to Smithville will begin July 1. We think Mr. O. G. Parsley will be the contractor, and the quick little steamer "Dixie" will be the mail boat.

NEEDED: A copy of Whittlers Bench for JANUARY 1991. If you have a copy and will lend it to me, I will get it copied and return your original to you immediately. This is the only issue that is missing from our "Master Set". You will be helping a lot if you will search your files and lend this issue to us to copy and return to you. Please do this right away. It will be greatly appreciated.

Southport hasn't forgotten U-boat attack

Seamen who survived recall horrendous scenes that followed German sub's torpedo assault

When Everette G. Harrison of 3040 Statesville Boulevard got the notice, he wanted to attend the dedication in Southport, N.C., for the men who died in a World War II ship sinking.

Although in good health, the 74-year-old Harrison couldn't find his way clear to go. But he felt a deep kinship to the ones who would attend.

The dedication was in honor of the Navy Armed Guard and merchant seamen aboard the SS John D. Gill, a tanker which was torpedoed by a German submarine on March 12, 1942 about 25 miles off the coast from Southport.

Contrary to the general belief that the people back home never saw any of the tragedy of World War II, the people of Southport can tell a different story.

Many of them still have a vivid picture of the action that occurred that night, in which the people of Southport not only saw the flames

of the burning ship but helped with the wounded and dying.

This was during the early part of the war when German submarines infested the Atlantic and came within sight of America's shores.

Harrison was among the 144,970 members of the U.S. Navy Armed Guard placed aboard merchant ships as gun crews. Of this number 1,810 lost their lives.

Although Harrison could not attend the dedication, he can share the feelings of those who gathered to unveil the monument. He had several close calls himself while manning guns aboard merchantmen during the war.

Several of the men who survived the sinking, interviewed by newspaper reporters later, gave brief accounts of their fight to escape.

Hurbert Gardner, a 22-year-old wiper at the time, has a vivid memory of the sinking.

He was in the mess hall having a cup of coffee about 10 p.m. and was wondering just what he would do if the ship was torpedoed. About 10 minutes later he got his answer.

A torpedo tore the metal plates from the ship's hull and a geyser of Texas crude erupted from the gash, forced out by pressure from the million gallons behind it.

An instant later the oil erupted in an inferno and 58 men began a desperate scramble for their lives.

Gardner rushed to a lifeboat. As he and seven others tried to lower the boat, it shuddered and dropped away beneath them, spilling two

men into the water. Gardner and another crewman managed to grab a line and were left dangling.

Below them, the ship's massive screws were still churning. Gardner watched as the two men dumped from the lifeboat were pulled into the blades.

He and the other man desperately tried to get a better grip on the line and each other. But the other man was too weak to climb any farther and Gardner couldn't hold him.

Suddenly, he was alone, tethered to the hull of the burning ship. When the screws stopped, he dropped into the water and swam away from the vessel. Even wearing a life preserver, he managed to dive beneath the flames. There was no way to tell where the sea was on fire and where it wasn't, he said.

"Every time I'd come up, I'd come up on fire. My head and my hands would be on fire."

But he finally made it to a life raft, where another injured seaman was helping to pull survivors aboard.

Floyd Ready, an armed guardsman, recalls that someone threw a life preserver into the oil slick. The preserver was equipped with a self-igniting flare, which burst to life.

"When that happened we started burning," Ready said.

Ready and another armed guardsman, Gary Potts, were asleep when the torpedo hit. They

scrambled to the stern to get to their gun, a 5-S1 breech-loader. All members of the gun crew made it to their posts and stayed there 15 minutes after the rest of the crew abandoned the ship, says a newspaper report of the sinking.

At 7:05 a.m. the next day, the survivors were picked up by a Coast Guard cutter from the Southport station. Only 26 men made it from the ship. Eleven of them were brought into Southport to recuperate at Doshier Memorial Hospital.

"We didn't think even half of them would live," said 80-year-old Josephine Hickman, a Red Cross nurse. "They were burned almost to a crisp and covered with oil."

Each survivor had a different story to tell of his struggle to get free from the burning ship.

The monument was erected by the Southport Historical Society. A special marker was also placed for a Philippine seaman aboard the Gill, Catlino Tingzon, who was buried an unmarked grave in a local Southport cemetery when his family could not be found.

The German submarine that sunk the Gill, U-158, commanded by Kapitaneutnant Erich Roslin, was sunk west of Bermuda on June 30, 1942 with no survivors.

Franklin Scarborough, former editor of *The South Rowan Times* and a veteran of the U.S. Navy, now writes for *The Post*.



FRANKLIN
SCARBOROUGH

Reprinted from the Salisbury Post, Wed., April 13, 1994. Sent in by Everett G. Harrison, 3040 Statesville Blvd., Salisbury, NC 28147

TRIBUTE AND MEMORIAL TO THE CREW OF THE S.S. JOHN D. GILL

On March 12, 1994, the Southport Historical Society dedicated a memorial to the survivors and to those who lost their lives on the S.S. John D. Gill. Three of the survivors were present for the dedication and memorial service. Also in attendance were members of the Merchant Marines and other military branches and organizations associated with the S.S. John D. Gill, during that horrific day in Southport.

A wreath was placed at the monument which is located on the riverfront in Southport, North Carolina and later flowers were thrown into the Cape Fear River to honor those who had drowned during the sinking and passed since.

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the crew members of the S.S. John D. Gill and to those doctors and nurses at Doshier Hospital, who worked ever so feverishly to save the lives of the crew.

Also tribute should be made to the people of Southport, for they have always opened their hearts to others.

Respectfully submitted---

Judy Ward Thompson
Recorder of Crosses