

THE

HISTORIAN

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OF HANCOCK COUNTY

Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi

August 2016

COMING EVENTS AT LOBRANO HOUSE

The monthly luncheon meeting will be held on Thursday, August 18, 2016, at noon at the Kate Lobrano House. Guest speaker for the program will be Bill Whitfield, who will speak on the logging and lumber business based on his life experiences with his family and their business. **Reservations are required** and may be made by calling 467-4090. **Respectfully we must request that you please call by noon on Wednesday, August 17, 2016,** to make your reservation, to help us plan seating which is limited to forty-eight people, and to apprise us of the number for whom to prepare. The price of lunch is \$12.00.

CEMETERY TOUR

Even though October is a couple of months away, it's time to make final plans for the Hancock County Historical Society's 23rd Annual Cemetery Tour. It will be held on Halloween night, Monday, **October 31, 2016**, at Cedar Rest Cemetery on Second Street. We will need members to volunteer to prepare the cemetery for the tour (mark the path, etc.), to portray citizens buried there, to act as guides, and to serve at the Lobrano House. To volunteer, please call the Society at 467-4090.



A German U-boat sinking an American steamer

German Submarine Activity in the Gulf of Mexico in World War II

From the M. James Stevens Collection, HCHS Archives

Edited by
Eddie Coleman

As in all American wars, the people of the Gulf Coast became very involved and contributed their fair share of action during World War II. One of the biggest surprises (and one of the most hidden secrets) was the great success the German submarines had in the Gulf of Mexico. Aiding Britain

and France with warships, airplanes, supplies, etc., had depleted the defensive armor of the United States. Because of the gaps in the equipment and manpower which were created by this aid, the Gulf Coast had a close brush with catastrophe, far removed from the major theaters of action in Europe and Asia or the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

The United States declared war December 7, 1941, on Japan. On December 11, 1941, Germany and Italy declared war against the United States.

Along the Gulf Coast war preparations were underway in many areas. The Army Air Corps School—later Keesler Air Force Base—had been started at Biloxi in June 1941 with construction on the golf course of former Biloxi Country

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Marianne Pluim, Webmaster**LOBRANO HOUSE
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“TO PRESERVE THE GENERAL AND ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF HANCOCK COUNTY AND TO PRESERVE THE KATE LOBRANO HOUSE AND COLLECTIONS THEREIN; TO RESEARCH AND INTERPRET LIFE IN HANCOCK COUNTY; AND TO ENCOURAGE AN APPRECIATION OF AND INTEREST IN HISTORICAL PRESERVATION.”

Club. Ingalls Shipbuilding Corp. had been organized at Pascagoula in 1939 to construct all-welded tankers, but it had refused to build twelve submarines. Drafting of men for military service was underway with much discussion about war preparations. In essence, everybody was busy—if confused as to where they were going.

The enemy struck first! On March 4, 1942, the U.S. freighter *Norlindo* was sunk seventy-five miles west northwest of Tortugas in the Gulf. [Tortugas is about seventy miles west of Key West, FL.] On March 13, 1942, the U.S. tanker *Gulfpenn* was sunk just south of the mouth of the Mississippi River with the loss of thirteen of the thirty-eight men in the crew. These were the first of many lives to be lost and injuries to be suffered.

The Gulfport Army Air Field was activated on April 18, 1942, and in the same month the Seabees were successful in obtaining land for a training facility in Gulfport. In addition the U. S. Coast Guard was stationed on Ship Island and other barrier islands to patrol the Gulf, yet in May 1942 the German submarines attacked thirteen tankers and freighters, most of which were just off the northern Gulf of Mexico coast.

This terrific loss in May finally caused an effective blackout of shore lighting. Since ships were forced to follow the curve of the shoreline in sailing through the Gulf, the lights onshore enabled U-boats to lie quietly until vessels were silhouetted and formed an easy torpedo target.

News blackouts also occurred to prevent “loose talk” which might enable German or Italian sympathizers or spies to pass word along. There was much suspicion of people with foreign accents who were presumed to be un-

American. Exhaustive investigation of Axis files after the war, however, found no record of any such activity occurring in transmitting information.

Since many coastal people were involved in water activities, their knowledge of sinkings was effective in aiding with military enlistments, gas rationing, food coupons, and the condemnation of hoarding. Oil and even bodies were washed onto beaches. Such firsthand knowledge of the war and the constant action by the Coast Guard planes and boats in search and rescue work kept people worried.

Because of the numerous attacks and loss of lives, General George C. Marshall wrote to Admiral Ernest J. King to see if everything possible was being done to halt these attacks by German U-boats. Still, losses continued in June with nine vessels sunk and in July with seven more lost.

Things took a positive turn for the U. S. on August 1, 1942. A Coast Guard utility amphibian J4F airplane with two men aboard—Chief Aviation Pilot Henry Clark White and Radioman First Class George Henderson Boggs, Jr.—were patrolling an assigned area in the Gulf one hundred miles south of Houma, LA. Suddenly in the bright early afternoon, they saw a submarine (U-166) on the surface. While Chief White turned to attack by diving over it from the stern, Radioman Boggs sent a hurried position message. Although the submarine began a crash dive, Boggs leaned his head out of the window and watched as White fired and scored a direct hit.

In a total of sixty-one bombing attacks, this was the only submarine destroyed by a Coast Guard plane in the war. White was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, and Boggs received the Air Medal.

For whatever reason, it seems destruction of this submarine signaled the end of the German submarine success in the Gulf of Mexico. Only two ships were reported lost in August, one twenty-five miles south of Key West, FL, and one south of Houma, LA. The last ship destroyed by a submarine in the Gulf occurred on November 2, 1944, off the coast of Tampa Bay, FL.

SOURCES cited by M. James Stevens:

- Berman, Bruce D. *Encyclopedia of American Shipwrecks*. Boston: Mariner Press, 1972.
- Bloomfield, Howard V. L. *The Compact History of the U.S. Coast Guard*. New York: Hawthorn Books, 1968.
- Morison, Samuel Eliot. *The Two Ocean War*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1963.
- Soberano, Ph. D, Rawlein G., C.J. Christ, *et al.* "The Gulf Was a Nazi "Hunting Ground," *Dixie Magazine/N.O. Times-Picayune*, 2 April 1978.

U-Boats in the Gulf

By Russell Guerin

The following personal essay comes from notes Russell Guerin took when he attended a lecture given by C.J. Christ, listed in the sources above, in late 2008.

There has always been some interest in this subject among members of the historical society, especially those of us who are old enough to remember 1942. I recently attended a lecture at UNO's Eisenhower Center given by C. J. Christ, the foremost authority on U-boat activity in World War II, especially connected to the Gulf. Christ's primary focus was to present some information that he has

accumulated over many years that may not be in most articles.

Christ shows that the submarines came into the Gulf from two directions, one through the Florida straits and the other off Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. They were equipped with fuel and supplies to travel 11,000 miles, while they only needed to go 4,000 each way to and from Germany.

Their primary purpose of the subs was to sink tankers. Petroleum was being produced in Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi at Pascagoula. It was not their intention to fire on passenger ships or to kill refugees from an attack. The one case that violated this resulted in trial at Nuremberg, and the captain was convicted and hanged.

One passenger ship was sunk in other waters, that being off the Atlantic coast.

No military ships were attacked in the Gulf.

However, even though the Gulf attacks on civilian tankers and freighters lasted only four months in 1942, their concentration was not equaled anywhere else. Fifty-four ships were sunk, forty-one during the month of May alone. In addition, eighteen were damaged. At least four hundred people died; there were more that could not be accounted for who had been taken to area hospitals and died subsequently.

At least twenty-four U-boats were active. One had a mission of laying mines outside the mouth of the Mississippi River, but the others attacked in the shipping lanes. My brothers and I recall seeing the fires on the horizon at night during those months. I asked (Mr. Christ) whether it was possible for us to see over that distance, perhaps one hundred miles. He said it was

certainly possible and that one ship took nine days to burn.

Torpedoes were used sparingly, as they were few in number. In most cases, the weapon of choice was the deck gun. The sub would surface close to the ship and just open fire. They were said to come into shallow water, usually at night to charge batteries. That makes me wonder whether sometimes they might have come into the Sound and fired on barges in the intra-coastal waterway. If that had been so, it could account for the fires being seen from the seawall of Clermont Harbor and elsewhere. Also, we sometimes saw powerful searchlights darting across the water, obviously searching for something just off our coast.

Only one sub was sunk in our Gulf waters, plus two others, one near Florida and the other off Cuba.

Christ dispelled some of everyone's favorite legends. No sub came up the Mississippi River. There were no "Bond" bread wrappers found floating to the top, products of accomplices on shore supplying the subs. Blimps out of Houma, LA, were employed in the searches, but got into the action late, only after the subs left.

One of the more fascinating stories has to do with the one and only sinking of a U-boat in our area. It was believed to have happened south of Houma in only about sixty feet of water. Coast guardsmen clearly saw it and dropped depth charges and saw fuel oil surface. They were given credit for the kill—until recently. About the same time, and I think the same sub was involved, a military ship (Navy) was escorting a tanker which was torpedoed. The Navy officer dropped depth charges, but there was no evidence that they were successful. Later, back in

port, that officer was severely reprimanded for not going by the book in its escort maneuvers. It had something to do with zig-zag or not—I did not fully understand—but he was highly criticized through the balance of his career.

A couple of years ago, Shell Oil was laying a pipeline in deep water in the Gulf and came upon a sunken sub. This was 140 miles from the supposed kill by the Coast Guard out of Houma. Investigation proved that it was the sub that was, in fact, destroyed by the Navy escort. Unfortunately, by this time, that Navy officer had died, never knowing that his maneuvers had been correct and successful.

CENTER/CAESAR

By
Eddie Coleman

When Hancock County was formed in 1812, its boundaries included the areas of present-day Hancock, Harrison, the lower part of Pearl River, and part of Stone counties. The original county seat was established at Center/Caesar, a Choctaw Indian settlement before the first Europeans entered south Mississippi. It was bound by Catahoula Creek on the east and Playground Branch on the west and was near the geographical center of Hancock County. Its original name was a Choctaw term meaning “center” or “coming together” or “where everybody meets up.” However, when mail service was established, there was another town named Center, so to avoid confusion the name was changed from Center to Caesar.

Early Europeans discovered the settlement because so many of the original Indian roads converged here. The main chief of the Choctaws in the area had his headquar-



Remnants of
the Caesar jail

What appears to be a rectangular “door” in the photograph looks much more like a small window under a magnifying glass.

ters here, and it seems the largest Native American settlement in this section of the country was here. Thus, the Europeans, too, decided to build homes here as well. At one time Center/Caesar had a post office, courthouse, jail, hotel, barroom, small stores, and fifty to one hundred wigwams. Apparently relations between the white settlers and the Indians were quite good.

It is intriguing to note the description of the first jail. To build it, the workers dug a pit about eight feet deep and then cut logs which were tapered to fashion a roof. For a door, a hole was cut in the top. Prisoners were let down a rope ladder which was then removed so that escape was virtually impossible. Food and water were let down a rope. Local historian, S. G. Thigpen relates that in 1940 he saw the remnants of “an old dungeon, or jail, and clay deposits for chimneys, evidence of the village there.”

The county seat remained here until it was moved in 1836 to the more commercial town of Gainesville on the Pearl River.

SOURCE:

Thigpen, S. G. *Pearl River, Highway to Glory Land*. Kingsport, TN: Kingsport Press, 1965.

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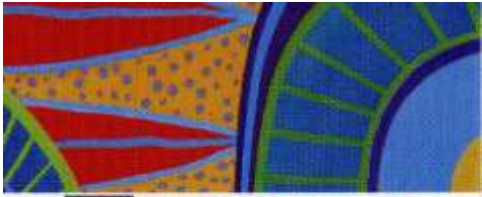
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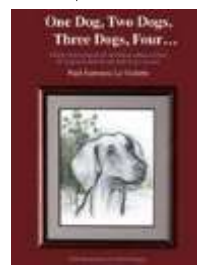
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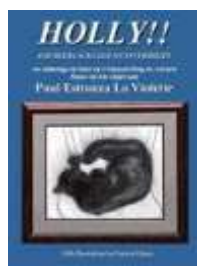
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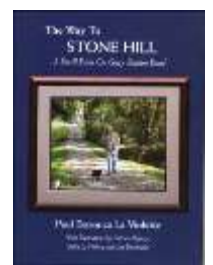
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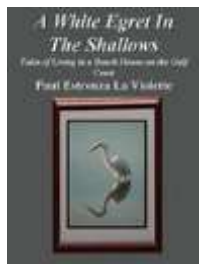
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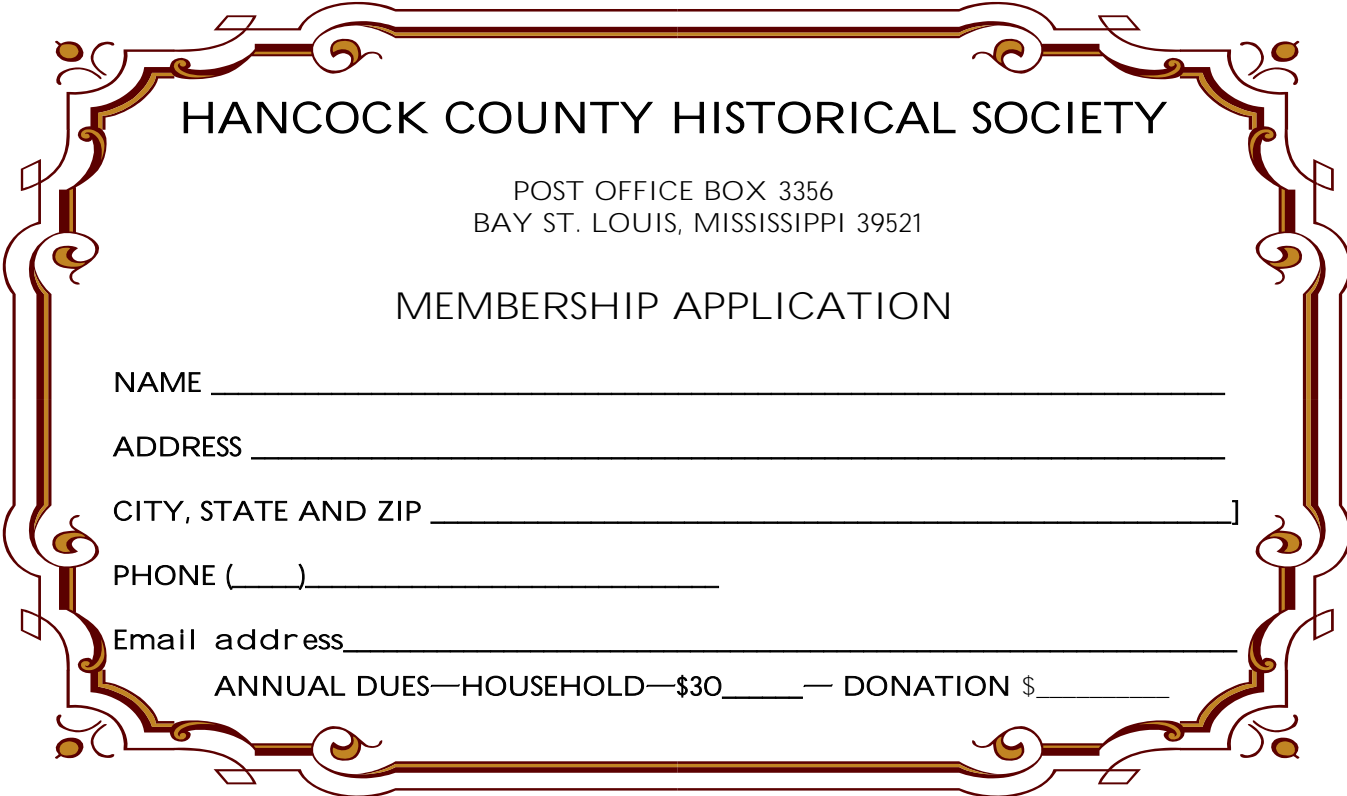


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