

Discovering Maritime Monuments from World War I

By Jim Saye

Port side view of the Selma from Pelican Island. White spots at her waterline are fishing boats. The tanker at right is in the shipping lane, headed out to the Gulf.

Photo courtesy of Herbert W. Boerstler.

Two historically important seafaring monuments dating back to World War I (1914-1919) can be found in the Greater Houston area. The grander of the two is the Battleship *Texas* BB-35, saved from the scrap yard by donations from the people of Texas, and brought here for retirement. Few people realize, however, another World War I monument rests in Galveston Bay.

As the Bolivar Peninsula ferry clears the Galveston landing slips, she gains headway, surging through the wavelets. On the port side passengers can see the mass of Pelican Island, with Seawolf Park and the pavilion. Rounding the tip of the island, the ferry sets her course across the busy ship channel towards Bolivar.

Now, as passengers gaze to their left, they are astonished to see the weather-beaten hulk of a full-size ship, standing motionless in the murky water. When the ferry passes closer, people on the port side stare in wonder. Long ago

abandoned, bleached by sun and sea and countless storms, this mystery ship rises above the waves like a Texas Sphinx.

The onlookers have discovered a “Texas Treasure” – the good ship *SS Selma*. Not just any ship – a concrete ship. A proud veteran of the U.S. Navy, with wartime service in World War I. Just like other ninety-five-year-old veterans, the *SS Selma* (though reluctant to do so) could tell some exciting tales. Tales of dangerous voyages to hazardous ports, of riding out storms and hurricanes, of brief fame as a movie star, of unsung service during a terrible local disaster, of a midnight visit by a barge loaded with contraband treasure . . . and of a “Hollywood ending” with cheering audiences and enduring recognition!

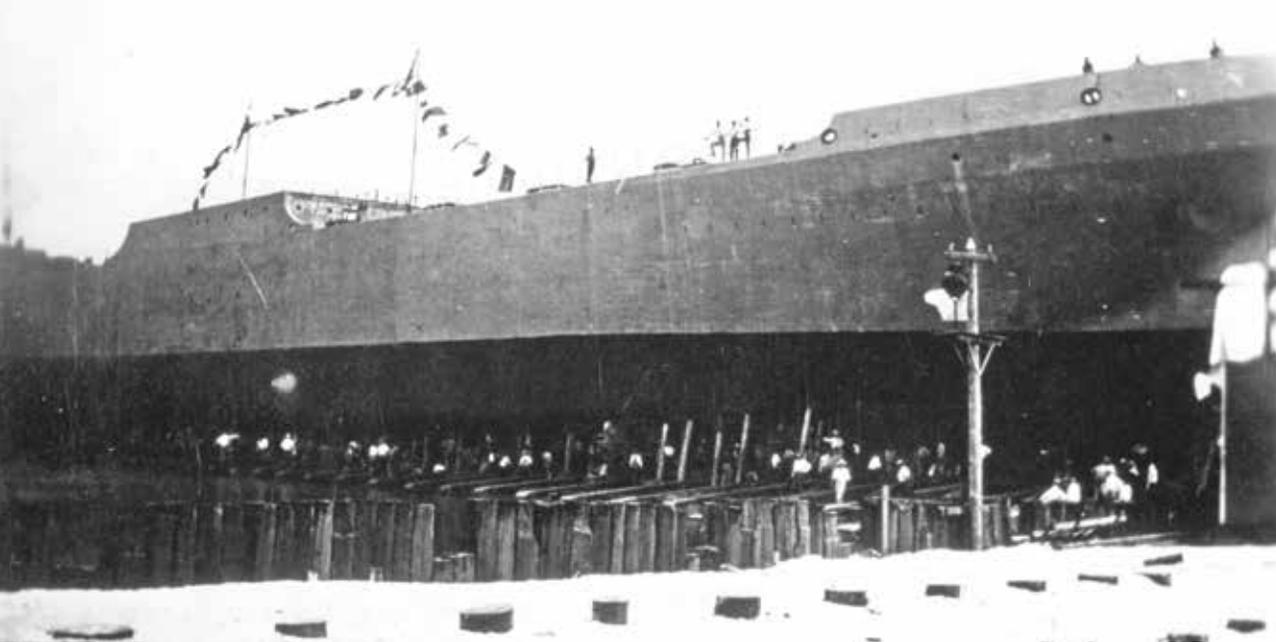
Total War on a Global Scale

World War I was characterized by savage trench fighting in Europe. Newly devised weapons of mass destruction – tanks, airplanes, giant cannon, machine guns, poison gas,



Selma, underway in the Gulf of Mexico with a full head of steam, trailing a cloud of black smoke, shuttled back and forth between Gulf ports, carrying oil and petroleum products.

Photo courtesy of Mariners Museum, Newport News, Virginia.



This view of Selma's port side shows preparation for the ship's sideways launch from the shipyard in Mobile, Alabama. Decorative flags stream from the masts before she splashes into the water starboard side first.

Photo courtesy of the Expanded Shale, Clay, and Slate Institute.

long-range submarines – produced a tragedy of unspeakable suffering. German submarine “wolf-packs” decimated convoys carrying food and other necessities to Great Britain and France, and sunk American-flagged cargo ships.

On April 6, 1917, the United States declared war on Germany and her allies. A woefully unprepared nation set out to mobilize for war. Multitudes of soldiers were drafted who had to be clothed, fed, housed, trained, and armed. Lumber and steel, meat and wheat, guns and ammunition, trucks and tanks were dedicated to the war effort. Then it became apparent that the United States lacked enough ships to transport our forces to the war zone. (In both World War I and II, British ships transported the majority of American soldiers to the European theater.)

Every shipyard on the East Coast worked twenty-four-hour shifts, handicapped by shortages of steel and facilities. Modern, mechanized warfare required vast amounts of petroleum to fuel tanks, airplanes, and machines, thus the nation desperately needed freighters *and* tankers.

Ships of Concrete? Preposterous! Concrete won't Float

The concept of a concrete ship seems strange, but it is not unnatural. While a chunk of concrete (or a bar of steel) thrown into the sea will sink, a concrete (or steel) ship will float so long as it is lighter than the weight of the water it displaces. A ship is essentially a sturdy container filled with air. It will float until the container wall is pierced, allowing water, which is heavier than air, to fill the ship and force out the air. By World War I, shipbuilders had extensive experience building ships of concrete, which was ubiquitous and proved to be a practical material for shipbuilding.

The Government Shipping Board chose the Fred T. Ley Shipbuilding Company of Mobile, Alabama, to build twelve reinforced concrete ships. Time elapsed while the yard made changes in its production procedures and facilities and specially trained its workforce. Often production methods required drastic change when application did not match theoretical plans. The first and largest of these concrete ships was the tanker USS *Selma*. The city of Selma won naming rights by selling more “Liberty Loan” war bonds than any other Alabama city its size.

Hindered by delays, the *Selma* remained under construc-

tion when the World War I Armistice was declared on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918. Work continued on the ship, and the hull was launched on Saturday, June 28, 1919. With wartime restrictions relaxed after the Armistice, the shipyard threw open its gates and a large crowd witnessed the unusual sideways launching. Because of its extraordinarily heavy weight and ponderous size, the *Selma* slid sideways down the launching ways and slammed into the water with a huge splash, marking the first sideways launch of a ship that size into the Gulf of Mexico.

The *Mobile News-Item* reported that the *Selma* was “gaily decorated with flags and bunting for her trip down the launching ways.” While the *Selma*'s launch made headline news in Mobile, the eyes of the world on that historic day focused on the Palace of Versailles, where world leaders gathered to sign the treaty that officially ended the Great War. By the thinnest of margins, *Selma* became a World War I service veteran.

After launching and outfitting, the USS *Selma* was 7,500 tons, 421 feet in length, with a width of fifty-four feet and a depth of thirty-four feet. Her hull tapered from a thickness of five inches on the bottom to four inches on the sides. She had two decks, with a raised forecastle and amidships, two masts, and a round stern. With full cargo she had a displacement of 13,000 tons and a draft of twenty-six feet. Her top speed was optimistically listed as 10.5 knots. A three-cylinder steam engine provided the main propulsion driving a single screw. The crew numbered forty-nine.

Post-war Career of a Concrete Tanker

With no wartime role, the *Selma* (now SS *Selma*) began her service as a tanker, shuttling petroleum products to and from Gulf Coast ports. *Selma* performed successfully until 1920 when she rammed a jetty and tore a sixty-foot slash in her hull while delivering cargo to Tampico, Mexico. Two tugs towed the damaged ship to a shipyard in Galveston, but it lacked the specialized facilities and the craftsmen to make the necessary concrete repairs. After almost two years of futile attempts to repair the *Selma*, the Shipping Board authorized her disposal.

A trench 1,500 feet long and twenty-five feet deep was

dredged in Galveston Bay, near Pelican Island. Three tugs guided the *Selma* from her berth at Pier 21 around Pelican Island to the trench in the flats on the far side. Unexpectedly, she grounded before reaching the trench. *Selma* continued to resist for several days. Finally four tugs and a dredge shoved her into a bed of sand and mud on March 9, 1922. And there she stands to this very day – ninety-two years later!

Galvestonians J. L. Bludworth and Captain J. E. Petersen purchased the ship, and *The Galveston Daily News* reported, “The new owners expect to convert her into a fishing pier and pleasure resort.” They fell short of their expectations and, in 1929, sold the ship to H. G. and B. R. Dalehite, owners of the Galveston Boat Company. Resting serenely in her bed of sand, *Selma* was largely out of sight and out of mind for a couple of decades.

During World War II, rumors circulated of a Nazi spy living on the ship and reporting movements in the Houston Ship Channel to submarines lurking in the Gulf. This seems unlikely because early-on *Selma* became a mecca for fish – and countless fishermen, who cast their lines from the ship’s decks and small boats. Also, Coast Guard cutters continually patrolled the area.

On May 3, 1946, Clesmey N. “Frenchy” LeBlanc bought *Selma* for \$100 in “ten easy payments.” Living in Galveston, Frenchy and his friends spent leisurely days fishing around the ship, returning home with a sizeable catch.

Isom Swift, a fisherman and native of Bolivar Peninsula, also frequented the waters around the *Selma*. His detailed knowledge of those waters characterized that of the seafaring men who live in the Bay Area, and it proved very important on a day of unspeakable tragedy in a neighboring city.

Selma Serves in Time of Disaster

Historically, April 16, 1947, is remembered as the day of the Texas City explosion. On that day a French ship, the *Grandcamp*, stood moored at a Texas City wharf near the Monsanto Chemical Company. A converted World War II American liberty ship, the *Grandcamp* had a huge cargo capacity and was loaded to the Plimsoll lines with cargo and 100-pound paper sacks of ammonium nitrate fertilizer.

Fire in the hold! At twelve minutes after nine the *Grandcamp* blew up, destroying Texas City. The next morning, another ship at the docks, also loaded with tons of ammonium nitrate, exploded, increasing the shock and horror.

Texas responded. Massive resources arrived to aid the injured and shelter the survivors. An armada of small boats swarmed in to provide access to harbor areas isolated by debris. Isom Swift was one of the boat captains who piloted through the destruction to provide aid.

To help clear debris from the docks and channels, Isom and other captains loaded their boats with all manner of flotsam and jetsam and carried it away to the deck of the nearby *Selma* for temporary holding. In later years, Isom shared vivid memories of the chain of boats and the men’s endless hours of toil in collecting and loading debris, and transporting it to the *Selma*.

Galveston’s famed “Mosquito Fleet” of commercial fishing vessels provided an example of selfless, unflagging,

dangerous labor worthy of remembrance and commendation. And don’t forget the *Selma* . . . a marine landmark – at the right place, at the right time to serve.

The Hermits Convention

Celina Guyewski recalled her father, Frenchy LeBlanc, decided in 1948 to live aboard the *Selma*, which he owned. His attempts at an oyster farm in the flooded holds below deck did not prosper, but his chickens and goats adapted and multiplied. Frenchy was a congenial and colorful character, popular among the “old salts” who hung out on Galveston’s waterfront.

Christi Mitchell, a Galveston newspaper reporter and columnist, restaurant owner, and world-class publicist, saw an opportunity to use Frenchy and his friends, the “Happy Hermits,” to gain national publicity. He staged a “Hermits Convention” on the *Selma*, with Frenchy as host and emcee. To draw a crowd, Mitchell advertised free beer for all.

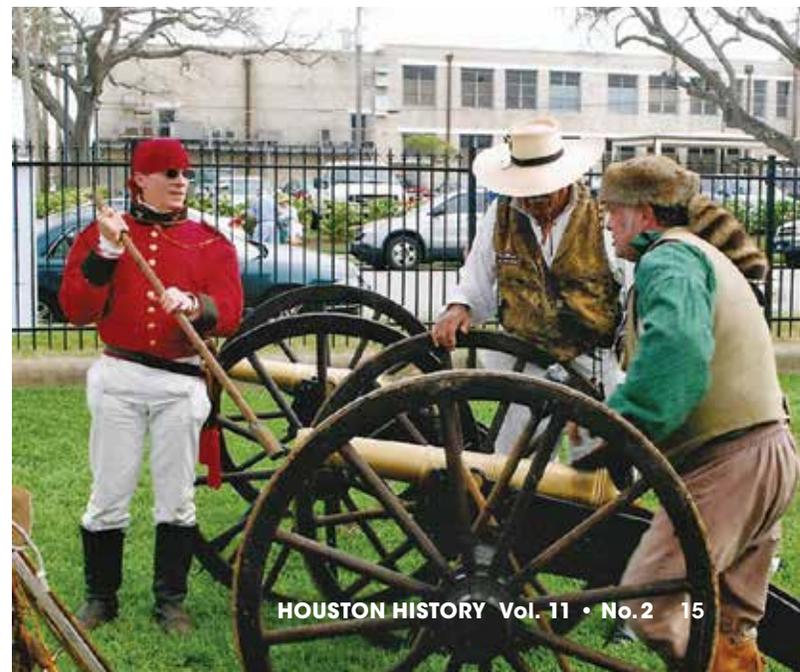
The Happy Hermits turned out in large numbers. The *Selma*’s deck boasted a rowdy crowd of grizzled ancient mariners that ranged from the whimsical to the eccentric, even bizarre. All guzzling free beer, shouting, singing, and pushing each other overboard. A grand spectacle. Which was (as planned) caught on film by both Fox Movietone and Universal News and shown as “short subjects” in movie theaters from coast-to-coast. A publicity coup for Galveston!

Buried Treasure

When Texas Attorney General Will Wilson closed down illegal gambling in Galveston County in 1957, he delegated the disposal of hundreds of confiscated slot machines to a local authority who arranged to have the Texas Rangers load them on a barge in the dark of night. After transporting the slot machines around Pelican Island, the Rangers pushed them into the Bay between the island and the *Selma*.

At the annual Selma birthday bash, Texas Army Colonels Tony Emmitte (left), Earl Shanks, and Sam Martin (in raccoon cap) load and fire the cannon, replicas of the famous “Twin Sisters” in the Battle of San Jacinto. As a safety precaution, the Galveston Fire Department has a fire truck and crew on standby.

Photo courtesy of Jim Saye.



The problem was considered solved – until some of the slot machines rose to the surface and floated into the ship channel. That made the five o'clock news!

Official Recognition for the *Selma*

After Frenchy LeBlanc died in 1964 at the age of eighty-nine, ownership of the *Selma* passed through several hands before reaching A. Pat Daniels. In the late 1930s, after studying at the University of Texas, Daniels began a distinguished newspaper career as a reporter on *The Galveston Daily News*. He became city editor in 1941, before being drafted into the Army. After World War II, Daniels worked for newspapers in the Houston area. He wrote several books, including *Bolivar! Gulf Coast Peninsula*. Writing that book, Daniels researched the *Selma's* history and became concerned that this monument was neglected and forgotten. When he learned in 1992 it was for sale, Daniels jumped at this opportunity to “own a piece of Texas history.”

Daniels prepared the extensive documentation necessary for government officials to include the *Selma* on the National Register of Historic Places. Meanwhile, his presentation to the Texas Antiquities Committee resulted in *Selma's* designation as a Texas State Archeological Landmark.

At this time, macular degeneration was dimming Daniels's eyesight so listening to music, especially jazz and classic pop tunes, became his favorite recreation. Every Wednesday night he dined at the restaurant where the Over-the-Hill-Gang performed. Listening to this jolly band of senior citizens, featuring a hot piano, slide trombone, clarinet, trumpet, bass, and drums, became the happiest time of Daniels' week. The masterful drummer of the band was seven-star General Carroll Lewis, a Texas legend as the founder and commander of The Texas Army.

The general and Daniels had a longtime friendship, and the two carried on lengthy conversations during the band's breaks. One night the general bemoaned the loss of The Texas Army's flagship, the Goodyear Blimp *America*. “It just got up and flew away,” General Lewis remarked.

In the twinkling of an eye, Daniels said, “Problem solved! I've got a flagship for you that will never fly away!” With a handshake, the good ship *Selma* became the Flagship of The Texas Army.

Raising the Flag on the *Selma*

Daniels organized a “Birthday Party for the *Selma*,” for Saturday, April 24, 1993. The weather was a disappointment. The sky remained dark all day; rain fell intermittently on the freeway to Galveston. Fierce, howling winds made the dash across the Causeway frightening. The Texas Army found the choppy waves on Galveston Bay too rough for its fleet of small boats. The “raising of the flag” on the *Selma* was scratched, and all hands gathered for a lawn party at Galveston's historic Edward T. Austin House on Market Street. The fifty or so guests included a blue-ribbon list of newspaper writers and editors, business owners, advertising executives, historians, family and friends, plus a large delegation from The Texas Army led by General Lewis.

This was Daniels's party to introduce the *Selma* and celebrate with his friends, but the general carried the day. Resplendent in his 1836 officer's uniform with sword, he

conducted the ceremonies declaring the *Selma* to be the official Flagship of The Texas Army. Then he led The Texas Army Colonels, all attired in 1836-era clothing, in firing musket volleys and cannon salvos.

This party continued on Sunday, June 13, 1993, when The Army reached the *Selma*, boarded her, and raised a Texas flag. A film crew from KUHT-Channel 8 recorded this event subsequently shown on the local news.

Following the success of the first *Selma* “Birthday Party,” Daniels carried it forward, holding the twenty-first annual party in May 2013. Over the years, these unique events have attained a semi-traditional character.

The fourth party featured an unveiling of the Texas Historical Commission's Official Texas Historical Marker honoring the *Selma*. The Texas Army fired a musket salute to the ship before the gathering adjourned to the Austin House for refreshments and music provided by Dr. Paul Cloutier and The Texas Army Band. The marker stands in Seawolf Park on Pelican Island where visitors can see the *Selma* from the fishing pier.

The expansive porch of the antebellum Austin House has served as a bandstand for a variety of folk and Texas-Western musicians. Houston native and nationally known ragtime piano virtuoso “Pinky” Hull entertained at a couple of the parties. “Hickory, Dickory and Doc,” a trio of string musicians from The Texas Army, serenaded the gathering several times.

As the years passed, Daniels became legally blind, barely able to see at all. Thus the *Selma* parties featured more music, especially after JoAnna Jetton, leader of the Fun Country Band, composed a song about the ship. Each year, JoAnna and veteran country-western vocalist Frank Haley assembled an unlikely band of talented musicians: Louis Rezin, washtub bass; Lou Wilcox, drums; Mike Evans, keyboard piano; Earl Williams, trombone; Howard



Helen Mooty, director of the Galveston County Museum, gave her impersonation of Jane Long, “Mother of Texas,” at the 2013 Selma party. She is joined by Bonnie Cox, an active supporter of the event.

Photo courtesy of Jim Saye.

Hendrix, clarinet; John Wardell, trumpet; and sometimes others. They cover the lawn with incomparable music!

Texas history is the basic theme of the *Selma* parties. Col. John Martin recounted the history and activities of The Texas Army. A presentation on the history of the Edward T. Austin House, built in 1852, explained that this stately mansion has retained its “Old South” charm, remaining undamaged during the Civil War and withstanding the many storms and hurricanes that have ravaged Galveston . . . until Ike, which flooded the ground floor with brackish water to a depth of five feet!

In accordance with the long-range plan, William “Bill” Cox became the *Selma*'s owner when Pat Daniels died on July 17, 2011. Bill and Pat were close friends who had served together on the Harris County Historical Commission for twenty-five years. A prominent Houston businessman, Bill owned an accounting business and served on government committees in Houston and Austin. He is a sixth-generation Texan, proud of his pioneer forbears. In honor of extraordinary public service, Bill, a former bomber pilot in World War II, was commissioned an admiral in the Texas Navy by the governor in 1985.

Drumroll, please, for the big “Hollywood Ending”

Pat Daniels conceived the first *Selma* party as a reward for people who helped him gain Texas and national recognition for the ship. He envisioned the celebration as a congenial group of knowledgeable people chatting about Texas history, concrete ships, and the *Selma*. Gen. Carroll Lewis wanted to christen a new flagship for The Texas Army. Ray Simpson thought that a gathering of newspaper writers and editors, and historians would stimulate appreciation of his historic house.

The first party, on April 24, 1993, was a rousing success. So much so that it triggered an explosion of serendipity that produced a new type of *Selma* party that was fun, loud, musical, and history-related. A unique party celebrating a partially sunken concrete ship.

Fabulous people came from London, New York, Chicago, and San Francisco to enjoy the lawn parties. The legend grew. The “ugly duckling” concrete hulk gained excitement, even a wee bit of glamor! More like a Phoenix than a swan, but forgotten no longer.

When the party on Saturday, May 3, 2014, draws to a close, we can rest assured that once again the good ship *Selma*, an authentic World War I Maritime Monument, will have received sincere, and *loud*, birthday recognition and honors, as befitting a ninety-five-year-old lady.¹



The Edward T. Austin House, decorated for the 2013 Selma party with bunting and the six flags that have flown over Texas, is owned by Ray Simpson, proprietor of Simpson's Gallery in Houston. Fun Country Band is spread across the porch. A hundred cheering people are seated on the lawn.

Photo courtesy of Paul and Marcia Daniels.



Jim Saye is an honorary captain for the SS *Selma*. A native of Montezuma, Georgia, he joined the Navy Reserve and “was in heaven” repairing propeller planes. After attending Officer Candidate School, LTJG Saye served two years at sea during the Korean War. Spending winters in Cuba and summers in Greenland, his ship, the USS *Thuban*, carried

twenty-four Higgins boats and conducted training exercises for amphibious landings to bring Marines ashore. On one of the trips, Saye spoke to the Cuban Military Academy about amphibious warfare. The captain appointed Saye, who had a bachelor's degree in law from Emory University, as the ship's legal officer. Finding his trial duties often unpleasant, Saye opted for a career change when he left the Navy, obtaining a degree in advertising from the University of Georgia.

He joined McCann-Erickson, Inc., advertising agency in Houston in late 1955. He wrote radio and TV commercials, magazine ads, and a plethora of sales promotion materials for the agency's largest client—Humble Oil & Refining Co. Subsequently, Saye eventually founded his own agency in 1966, and in 1972 he won an award from the Freedoms Foundation in Valley Forge for a series of patriotic mailers he wrote for a Houston letter shop. After writing many articles for Texas publications, he closed his agency in 2000 and concentrated on writing cover stories for *Cowboy Sports & Entertainment* magazine. He has written several articles for *Houston History*, including one on the USS *Houston* (CA-30) in 2005.