



PRESS-REGISTER

Ancient mariners Remembering the 'Ghost Fleet,' mothballed freighters that for years were part of the local scenery

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BAY MINETTE -- More than a half-century later, Bud Goins remembers paving the way for the arrival in Baldwin County of what became known as the "Ghost Fleet."

Now an 80-year-old retiree who lives in Bay Minette, Goins recalls uprooting ancient juniper trees as part of the dredging project that opened the shipping channel between the Mobile and Tensaw rivers.

The Ghost Fleet was part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's plan to recondition cargo ships, tugs and tankers so the merchant marine fleet would be ready if war broke out again after World War II.

As years passed and the ships sat in dock, the vessels were scuttled for scrap metal or sold as the need for the fleet lessened.

The armada stayed in the Mobile area from 1945 to 1969, as more than 800 World War II vessels eventually made their way out of Mobile as scrap metal and recycled wiring. Some were sold to private shippers and foreign countries.

Ships were moored on the Mobile and Tensaw rivers -- most notably near Graving Island, north of Spanish Fort -- as they waited to be disassembled.

During its peak in the 1950s, the Tensaw shipyard had 347 ships in port at one time before the shipyard was officially shut down in 1973, according to previous reports. The last ships were given to state conservation departments in Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana and were sunk to create fishing reefs.

The Ghost Fleet supplied plenty of jobs for residents of Mobile and Baldwin counties, especially for folks in Spanish Fort, Bay Minette and other areas near the Mobile-Tensaw Delta.

Most of the workers from those days have died, said longtime residents of the area, and with them went the oral history of the Ghost Fleet. That has relegated the story of the project to history books, Goins said.

"Most everybody over that way, if they're not dead, worked with those ships once they got in there," said Davida Hastie, a former president of the Baldwin County Historical Development Commission and a member of the Friends of the Tensaw.

Outdoors enthusiasts also flocked to the waters around the massive ships and found it to be a promising place to fish.

"My wife and I and a friend of mine would go between those ships to fish, and we'd catch shellcracker and bream that were feeding on the barnacles that were on the bottom of those ships," said Frank Burt, a retired Bay Minette pharmacist who now serves on the Baldwin County Commission.

"My goodness, it was something else. They had big wooden barriers so the ships couldn't crash together, and it would block the wind. It was a great place for fishing."

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has little information about the opening of the shipping channel in the Delta, leaving folks to remember it through bits of family lore.

The dredging work of Goins and his co-workers helped the Gravine Island area blossom into a haven for outdoors enthusiasts, who flock there for boating and other recreational activities.

Cutting trees and pulling out stumps, Goins pointed out, supplied the first step toward bringing hundreds of ocean-going vessels to the Mobile area.

"A lot of people don't even know about that," Goins said, referring to the back-breaking work of opening the shipping channel.

Many boaters easily navigate from the Mobile to the Tensaw and back -- a move not possible before the ship channel was open.

Not much remains to remind visitors to the Delta of the Ghost Fleet, except for a few "slips" breaking through the dense underbrush to show where ships were once moored, said University of South Alabama Professor David Nelson, who said he has seen them while trapping in the Delta.

Like many north Baldwin residents, Burt has nostalgic memories of the Ghost Fleet.

"I remember going up there in a small boat, and the fog is so thick you can't see anything," Burt said, "and then all of a sudden those big, black ships loom up out of the fog."

/cut/p18.6/cCroom Collection, University of South Alabama Archives

/cut/p31.1/cS. Blake McNeely Collection, University of South Alabama ArchivesShips in the Ghost Fleet are moored along the Tensaw River in the 1940s. The Ghost Fleet, the armada of mothballed ships that were part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's plan to build up cargo ships, tugs and tankers so the merchant marine fleet would be equipped for wartime service, was a huge part of the local scene from 1945 until 1973.

/cut/p47.10/cS. Blake McNeely Collection, University of South Alabama ArchivesShips in the Ghost Fleet are moored along the Tensaw River in the 1940s. The Ghost Fleet was established as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's plan to build up cargo ships, tugs and tankers so the merchant marine fleet would be equipped for wartime service.

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economy a boost %%ehead%% %%bodybegin%%

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