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Christopher F. Amer
amerc@mailbox.sc.edu

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SCIAA Conducts Hunley Lectures

By Christopher F. Amer

While the staff of the Friends of the Hunley are making history by painstakingly excavating the human remains of the sub’s crew and recovering the cultural material encapsulated within the hull, SCIAA staff have been tirelessly spreading the word about this unique historical find and its unprecedented recovery and excavation. Jim Spirek, Jonathan Leader, and Christopher Amer continue to respond to scores of public requests for audio-visual presentations to audiences that just cannot get enough of the little boat that could. While the majority of these requests come from organizations in our own state, like the Sons of Confederate Veterans and the Daughters of the Confederacy, and public groups like Rotary, and historical societies, sometimes these requests come from far afield (even from north of the Mason-Dixon line!). In 2000, I lectured through Louisiana and Texas at Civil War roundtable’s, and Spring 2001, I spoke to over 300 persons at the Indianapolis Civil War Roundtable (Their monument to the “War For The Union” is almost as tall as our state house!).

Probably the most unique lecture tour yet was the five days I spent traveling the length and breadth of Wisconsin in February of 2001 to speak at three venues. First of all, leaving a cool 40-degree Columbia in February and arriving a few hours later in sub-zero Madison, Wisconsin was a shock, to say the least. However, the grandeur of the Historical Society of Wisconsin’s building in Madison...
took the edge off the freeze as I spoke to some 70 people in their theater. After the lecture, I was greeted by Dr. George Voght, Wisconsin’s State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) and a former South Carolina SHPO himself, which gave us an opportunity to reminisce about “the bad old days.”

Then I started the road tour. Jeff Gray, my counterpart in Wisconsin, volunteered to take the wheel. First stop—Superior, on the shore of Lake Superior and a seven-hour drive. In spite of blizzard conditions that sent the mercury to the bottom of the scale and four-foot snow drifts in front of the Superior Public Library some 50 people turned out to watch slides of us working on the Hunley Project in shorts and tees. My lingering memory from Superior is everything frozen. The following morning I was given a tour of the historic face (also frozen) of Superior, visiting the ore dock where the Edmund Fitzgerald loaded her last cargo before meeting her fate at the bottom of the Lake and the late 1800s whale back ore carrier, Meteor. I also met with Davis Helberg, Executive Director of the Duluth Seaway Port Authority, who allowed us to tour the docks where the 1,000-footers lay frozen awaiting the Spring thaw when they can get out into the Lake.

The drive to Manitowoc was uneventful and very picturesque.

Manitowoc built submarines used during WW II, including the USS Cobia and is also the home of the Manitowoc Crane Company, the company that built the crane that raised the Hunley. My final lecture was at the Annual Board Meeting of the Wisconsin Maritime Museum, where I spoke to close to 200 people.

Interest in the Hunley is alive and well as much in the North as it is in the South. The significance of the recovery of the first submarine to successfully sink a warship during time of war cut across political and national boundaries, while the bravery, self-sacrifice, and general human interest of the boat’s valiant crews has touched the hearts of this nation and the world.