

Concrete ships

Unusual vessels were constructed in this area

Mention concrete ships and some people are likely to look at you funny.

That is until they happen to think how ships are generally made of steel today.

Or, perhaps they have heard of the wreckage of the Selma in Galveston Bay or the Darlington just off Matagorda Island about 14 miles southwest of the lighthouse, two concrete ships that were constructed as part of a World War I experiment when there was a shortage of steel.

Larry Young, who now lives in Victoria but grew up in Galveston, recalls climbing on the Selma when he was a boy.

"If you hadn't climbed on the Selma," he says, "you hadn't done anything."

The boys would row out to it in skiffs.

"It used to be good fishing." He adds.

At the time, he recalls the ferry also ran close to the Selma.



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Henry Wolff Jr.

The Texas Historical Commission recognized the 421-foot concrete steamship in 1996 as an archaeological landmark.

The ship was crafted from 15 million pounds of cement and steel reinforcement and launched on June 28, 1919, having missed the war for which it was designed, that being the day that Germany signed the Treaty of Versailles.

Largest of a number of concrete ships built during that time, the Selma was used until May of 1920 to transport Mexican crude oil. It ripped a 60-foot gash in its 5-inch thick

concrete hull when it struck a jetty at Tampico and was towed to Galveston where several attempts failed to repair it.

The Selma was then set to rest in a 25-foot channel that was cut into Galveston Bay and it has been there ever since.

Pat Daniels, a retired reporter who had worked for a Houston newspaper and had long been interested in the old ship, purchased it in 1992 with the intention of having it recognized as a historical object.

In his book, "Galveston, A History," David G. McComb notes that among a succession of owners the most colorful was "Frenchy" LeBlanc, who had bought the grounded vessel for \$100 in 1946.

"He retreated from the world, lived on board, and caught most of his food," McComb says.

Like the Selma in Galveston Bay, the Darlington became a popular beach attraction and fishing spot on Matagorda Island and there is a

picture at Clark's Restaurant in Port O'Connor of Loyd Hawes and his sister, Evelyn, and their father, Loyd W, wading in the surf around the old ship.

Another of the Hawes siblings who remembers it from those days. Joe D. Hawes of Port O'Connor recalls "crawling all over it"

The Darlington was built at Harbor Island near Aransas Pass and Port Aransas, one of two concrete tankers that were built there around 1919, the other being the Durham.

There is a picture in the Blacklands Museum at Taft showing the shipyard to which workers were taken on a special tram, a Model-T with a bus-like body that ran on railroad tracks to the island.

The late E. L. Kelley of Refugio worked for a time at the shipyard and said the Darlington was damaged during heavy seas on its maiden voyage. When Kelley left the shipyard in 1920, the Durham was still tied at the dock and he was later told it had been towed to an island off Galveston and beached, it having possibly been confused with the Selma.

At any rate, there were ships built of lightweight steel, reinforced aggregate and the wreckage of two of them remain today as historical

oddities on the Texas coast For years the name of the Darlington was visible on its super-structure sticking up from the surf.

There were others at the time of the Selma and Darlington including nine concrete ships that were later used as a floating breakwater for log booms in British Columbia.

Another was used as a floating sardine factory off Alaska.

Some concrete ships were in use as late as World War II. Charles Husak of Port Lavaca having served aboard a 365-foot U.S. Army transport in the Pacific.

Sam McKone of Victoria remembers when beer rations were brought into Dutch New Guinea in concrete ships.

That had to be some kind of a floating beer box.