Warship's artifacts sought for La. site

Civil War gunboat fought in attack on Alexandria

By EUGENE SUTHERLAND
The (Alexandria) Town Talk

FORT DeRUSSY (AP) — The USS Arizona could play an important role in helping draw Civil War buffs to Avoyelles Parish.

That's a pretty tall order for a ship that now lies 80 feet in the Mississippi River about 35 miles south of New Orleans.

This USS Arizona is not to be confused with the more-famous USS Arizona which was sunk by Japanese warplanes during the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The USS Arizona which lies in the depths of the Mississippi River was a 200-foot warship built in 1858. It saw action during the Civil War and sank in 1865.

Artifacts that might be recovered from the USS Arizona, which was involved in a Civil War gun battle on the Red River, may wind up being featured at Fort DeRussy, located near Marksville in Avoyelles Parish.

Putting the artifacts on display could help lure tourists.

Fort DeRussy is being renovated to help recapture some of its past glory. The earthen fort was built in 1862.

Remains of what is believed to be the Arizona were found in the Mississippi River on June 28, 2001, during an expedition led by history teacher Rob Christopher of Castle Rock, Colo.

The battle-worn Arizona capsized on Feb. 27, 1865, but not because of gunfire. It succumbed to an onboard furnace fire fueled by kerosene-laden decks. Out of a crew of 98, five men died — three drowned, one died from smoke inhalation, and one was burned alive.

In proposed salvage efforts, the Arizona would not be raised, as was the case in 1965 with the remains of Civil War Gen. Lewis G. DeRussy at Fort DeRussy in a 1999 file photo taken near Marksville.

Questions recently surfaced over whether the ship found was actually the Arizona. Christopher and his team will revisit the site this summer.

With or without artifacts from the Arizona, the revival of Fort DeRussy should prove beneficial to the area, officials say.

"It's already had a positive effect on the community. People have come together to make this happen," Mayeux said. "We've gotten everything we need" from the area.

The USS Arizona started its Civil War career as a Southern blockade-runner but was captured in 1862 while attempting to enter Mobile Bay with a load of munitions.

The Arizona was seized by the USS Montgomery. It was then converted to a gunboat and put in Union service.

In May of 1863, the Union ships Arizona, Estrella and Albatross came up the Red River as part of a Union offensive to capture Alexandria.

As the three ships reached Fort DeRussky, they were confronted by two Confederate gunboats, the Cotton and Grand Duke.

A deadly battle, the Union gunboats were driven away by the Confederate boats. However, the Union ships returned several days later, and Union forces found the fort abandoned and the Confederate boats gone.

The Arizona proceeded upriver toward Alexandria, arriving ahead of other forces, thereby "capturing" Alexandria although the area had been abandoned by the Confederate forces.

The Queen of the West, a Union boat, ran aground at Fort DeRussy during a February 1863 battle and was captured by the Confederates. The Queen, once repaired and refitted by Confederates, later traded gunfire with the Arizona in a river skirmish.

Construction on Fort DeRussy began in November 1862. A year after first being captured by the Union in 1863, Fort DeRussy was recaptured by the Union in case Confederate forces attempted to reoccupy it.

In a best-case scenario, the rebuilding of Fort DeRussy will be completed so it can be publicly unveiled in five or six years.

Both the Louisiana Office of State Parks and La Commission des Avoyelles have purchased additional land for the Fort DeRussy Historical Site.

The boat believed to be the Arizona was found 20 minutes after a sonar equipment search began last summer.

Christopher apparently established a good rapport with the Navy. He has been granted permission to further investigate the wreck site.

If the ship is indeed the Arizona, the possibility exists that the Navy will allow artifacts to be removed from the wreck.

"This is going to bring many visitors to the area," Mayeux said of Fort DeRussy. "We've had a man from Australia and a couple from Canada.