

Posted on Thu, Apr. 26, 2007



email this



print this



reprint or license this

# A film and dreams of renewal put liner back in the spotlight

By Jacqueline L. Urgo  
Inquirer Staff Writer

Launched in 1951, it is still the fastest ocean liner the world has ever seen.

But now docked and decaying in a Philadelphia boatyard, the iconic SS United States is going nowhere fast.

Last night, just after sunset, a cadre of men in the business of getting things moving - the movie business - stood looking at the ghost ship, eerily lit up for the first time in years, and dreamed big dreams for it.

Could the legendary ship, still a jaw-dropping sight when one comes upon it driving along Columbus Boulevard, ever be restored to its former glory?

Could its rusting hull, peeled-paint decks, and completely torn-apart insides ever



HIROKO TANAKA / For The Inquirer

"Once you see this ship, you want to know everything there is to know about it," says Robert Radler, a director and producer. His group, Big Ship Films, is making a documentary about the 56-year-old SS United States, which set the speed record for an Atlantic crossing.

» [More images](#)

become a luxury ocean liner again?

Hollywood movie director and producer Robert Radler thinks so. So does Mark B. Perry, an Emmy- and Golden Globe-winning television producer and writer. As does renowned lighting artist Robert Wogan.

As part of a group called Big Ship Films, they have set out to prove the importance of the rusting relic in maritime history and are producing a major documentary for PBS that will be ready for distribution in early 2008.

So for one night only, the makers of the documentary captured the crisp profile of the hull, the distinctive lines of the twin funnels, and the United States' majestic aura after commissioning Wogan to work his magic.

Wogan spent two days installing twelve 1,000-watt metal halide bulb fixtures that brilliantly illuminated the ship.

Five of the gigantic lights were placed on each funnel, while one was placed in the bridge, lighting the space from the inside out, while another created a glow around the mast.

The effect was spectacular.

"Normal everyday life has a tendency to make things recede into the landscape," Wogan observed. "By lighting them up, you bring them back to life, revealing what's right in front of you, that you may have never noticed before."

That's the point, said Perry and Radler, whose Big Ship Films endeavor is working with the SS United States Conservancy, a group dedicated to preserving the history of the 990-foot vessel.

The owner of the vessel, Norwegian Cruise Lines, spends about \$1,000 a day to keep it docked at Pier 82, across the street from Ikea in South Philadelphia.

Included in the National Register of Historic Places, the United States has led a pedigreed life. It was the brainchild of Philadelphia native William Francis Gibbs, one of the world's foremost marine architects, who made building a fireproof ship his life's work after he saw the wooden cruise ship Morro Castle burn off the Jersey Shore when he was a child.

Ultimately, the only wood on the United States was a butcher's block in the kitchen and the Steinway piano in the ballroom.

The ship was built, at the expense of the federal government, to carry as many as 15,000 troops in wartime. Experts at the time said it could outrun anything afloat, and steam nonstop anywhere in the world in less than 10 days.

But the ship was never used in combat. As a passenger vessel in July 1952, the United States set the world record for crossing the Atlantic Ocean from Southampton, England, to New York (via Le Havre, France) in 3 days, 12 hours, 12 minutes with an average speed of 35.59 knots.

It was recently discovered that in its heyday, the ship could reach 50 m.p.h.

In 2003, Norwegian Cruise Lines bought the ship, which made its final commercial sail in 1969. The company commissioned a study to determine how it could best use the ship in its mass-market line. Early estimates indicate that refurbishing the ship could cost more than \$500 million - more than \$150 million more than a cruise ship costs to build from scratch.

But new ships don't have the history of the SS United States.

And at 56 years old, it still cuts an impressive swath.

"What we hope is that by lighting it up, people who may have never noticed this ship here before will see her and be awed and will realize her importance and will want to do something about making sure she doesn't end up a rusted heap somewhere," said Mark Perry, who first became entranced by the ship when he stumbled upon a piece of collectible memorabilia from it.

Radler, who was as struck by the ship as Perry - but at the tender age of 6, when he first saw it in port in New York - agreed.

"You can't help it. Once you see this ship, you want to know everything there is to know about it," Radler said.

---

Contact staff writer Jacqueline L. Urgo at 609-823-9629 or [jurgo@phillynews.com](mailto:jurgo@phillynews.com).