

THE BATTLESHIP

U.S.S. ARKANSAS AND ITS SILVER

By Charles S. Curb

At the conclusion of the Civil War, the United States briefly had the most powerful navy in the world with the possible exception of that of Great Britain, having pioneered in the invention and construction of ironclad warships and having built up its navy steadily throughout the course of the war, primarily for the purpose



Dr. Charles Curb speaking about the USS Arkansas silver at the Governor's Mansion in Little Rock.

of blockading the southern states and strangling their commerce. But the nation quickly turned its attention to other matters, principally the settlement of the American West, and the naval fleet was allowed to decline steadily. By the late 1880's the U. S. Navy ranked seventeenth in the world. Even Chile had a larger navy. This situation disturbed an ever-increasing number of Americans, especially those beginning to have imperialistic designs upon territory beyond American shores, and in the 1890's the United States undertook the construction of a steel navy that would ultimately become the best in the world.

The first ships in this new American navy were the *Atlanta*, *Boston*, *Chicago*, *Dolphin*, *Charleston*, *San Francisco*, *Philadelphia*, *New York* and *Maine*. All were cruisers, though the *New York* and *Maine* were later re-designated second-class battleships, and thereafter the custom was maintained of naming battleships only after states and cruisers mostly after cities. All of these ships, with the exception of the *Dolphin*, were presented with silver services for their officers' dining quarters, and so the American tradition of fine silver for

warships was already well-established by the end of the 19th Century.

The American naval tradition of ship silver is unique in the world. This is not to say that ships of other nations have not had fine silver on board for use by the captain and other officers. But in no other country has there evolved such a complex tradition of presenting an elaborate silver service to the ship itself (though technically, the service was commonly presented to the United States "for the use of the ship.") Such silver as was on board the ships of other nations was usually the property of the captain himself (or possibly of some other high-ranking officer), given to him by his family, purchased with his own money, or given to him by some benefactor from the aristocracy, or by a wealthy merchant or banker. Ship captains were, of course, nearly always well-connected people. In Great Britain, for example, to become a high-ranking naval officer was a common career-path for the sons of noblemen, other than the first-born son (who of course was expected to stay at home and inherit title, lands, and wealth).

The silver service on an American battleship was there for formal dining, not merely for the ship's officers, but for their family, friends, and domestic and foreign dignitaries and politicians. It was a common practice, when a ship docked in a foreign port, to invite local persons of consequence on board to impress them favorably with American

hospitality, friendliness and style—and with the talent and skill of American manufacturers. The ship silver was not used on an everyday basis, and, officially at least, was never left on ships going into battle (though there have been exceptions, some of them disastrous). Navy rules strictly forbade knowingly putting the silver in danger. Thus, for example, the U. S. Pacific Fleet went "strip-ship" in 1940, a term which meant removing from a ship all articles not related to actually doing battle, and so, officially, not a single piece of silver was ultimately lost when the Japanese sank five American battleships at Pearl Harbor in 1941. A persistent myth has held that the Battleship *Arizona* silver service is still at the bottom of the ocean at Pearl Harbor, together with the remains of the unfortunate men who went down with her, but this is emphatically not the case. The *Arizona* silver service resides in the capital city of that state and is on public view nearly every day. The U.S.S. *Tennessee* silver, however, in defiance of Navy rules, was unaccountably on board when that ship was sunk. But the silver was later recovered by divers and restored. Amazingly, the U.S.S. *New Jersey* had its silver service on board during the entire time that ship participated in the Viet Nam War, also in open defiance of Navy rules. Of course, it is also the case that a U. S. Navy ship will sometimes be attacked quite unexpectedly. For example, the U.S.S. *Cole* had its silver on board when terrorists

rammed it with their rubber boat filled with explosives in Yemen on October 12, 2000, but the ship, though significantly damaged, did not sink, and its silver was not harmed.

As a public-relations strategy, the Navy's decision to name ships after states and cities can only be regarded as a huge success. It was a symbolic way of connecting the citizens of states and cities to "their" ship, and it led to people giving not merely fine silver to their favorite ships, but other gifts as well: flags, pennants, local products, library books, musical instruments, clocks, ship's bells, religious objects, and sundry other things. Many people paid extra attention when "their" ship was in the news, especially if that ship was engaged in hazardous duty.

There was no set size or number of pieces or standard list of piece-types for the U. S. Navy silver services—though certain pieces, most notably, a huge punch bowl were nearly always included. Such sets did not usually include flatware—except for the virtually inevitable punch ladle to go with the punch bowl. However, the U.S.S. *Chicago*'s silver service, probably the largest ever produced, included a complete flatware service in addition to the hollowware. And at least one other ship service that of the U.S.S. *Brooklyn* included elaborate flatware. The U.S.S. *North Carolina* service, presented by the state legislature in 1907, and described as "second to none," consisted of 120 pieces and in-

cluded such exotic items as three cut-glass decanters with silver stoppers, under plates and decanter labels with the words *Port, Sherry, and Madeira* elaborately cut out. Its punch bowl had six silver electric lamps attached to the rim and a wire mesh that allowed it to hold an enormous floral arrangement when not in use as a punch bowl. By contrast, the U.S.S. *Wisconsin* service included only 35 pieces. The Battleship *Arkansas* for which the fine silver service now in the Arkansas Governor's Mansion was produced was actually the third of four U. S. Navy ships which have been named for the twenty-fifth state. The Battleship *Arkansas* silver service is, relatively speaking, in the mid-to-upper range of battleship silver services. Interestingly, although most ship silver services included liquor-related articles, Prohibition came early to the U. S. Navy. In 1914, Josephus Daniels, President Woodrow Wilson's Secretary of the Navy (and a devout teetotaler), issued an order absolutely prohibiting alcoholic beverages of any kind on all ships of the American Navy, a rule which was not changed until Franklin Roosevelt became president in 1933.

Nor was there a standard method of ordering or paying for a ship service. Sometimes a service was simply ordered and paid for by the state legislature. Sometimes one or more organizations would pay for part or all of a ship service. Sometimes all of the citizens of a state, even school chil-

dren, would be asked to contribute. In a few cases, one or a small group of wealthy individuals provided the money. Usually the state or its citizens did not deal directly with the silver manufacturer, but rather ordered the service through a prominent jewelry or “fancy-goods” store within their own state, and the competition could be keen for the privilege of playing this role. Charles S. Stifft, the most prestigious jeweler in Little Rock at the time, performed this service when the first portion of the *Arkansas* silver was ordered.

Few people nowadays are aware of the difficult and complex struggle involved in acquiring a silver service for the U.S.S. *Arkansas*. Three successive silver commissions worked for a total of six years to achieve the goal. The promoters of the project originally proposed to spend \$10,000 on a silver service for the Battleship *Arkansas*, half to be paid by the state and half to



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be raised by popular subscription. But the Arkansas General Assembly of 1913 declined to appropriate any money at all for battleship silver. The state was still recovering from the financial disaster of the present Capitol Building, which took far longer to build and cost far more than expected. So the Little Rock Board of Trade formed a commission which set out to raise the entire sum through voluntary contributions. However, the first Battleship *Arkansas* Silver Service Commission, headed by Charles S. Stifft, met with no conspicuous success. They distributed 100,000 circulars throughout the state requesting donations and dispatched Miss Daisy Delony by train to solicit funds statewide. But at the end of two years only \$1556 had been raised – at a cost of \$1731 in rail fares and other expenses. Clearly, this was not a viable strategy. Arkansas county judges failed to respond favorably to the suggestion that each Arkansas County should contribute a sum equal to the cost of one silver goblet. Someone even suggested that they give up entirely on the idea of a silver service for the U.S.S. *Arkansas*, in favor of an “All-Arkansas” service made from Arkansas aluminum and adorned with Murphreesboro diamonds and White River pearls. Fortunately, this idea was a non-starter. It would have been embarrassing indeed for the U.S.S. *Arkansas* to have had the only ship service made of aluminum instead of silver among more than five hundred known to have been produced.

Late in 1915, a second Arkansas Silver Service Commission was organized with Little Rock Mayor Charles E. Taylor as chairman. Inactive members from the previous endeavor were dropped. Commercial salesmen affiliated with an organization who called themselves "The Arkansas Travelers" and representatives of cities and towns were added. This expanded and reorganized commission decided to go ahead and order and pay for part of the silver service. Accordingly, on Feb. 5, 1916, a contract for 33 pieces at a cost of \$2350 was negotiated with the Gorham Manufacturing Company of Providence RI and New York City, represented locally in Little Rock by Charles S. Stiff. Efforts to raise an additional \$5000 to pay for the rest of the proposed *Arkansas* service were lagging badly at the end of 1916. Fortunately, Governor and Mrs. Charles H. Brough (pronounced *Bruff*) took a strong personal interest in the acquisition of a silver service for the Battleship *Arkansas*. It was frankly becoming an embarrassment that a ship which had been authorized by Congress in 1909, launched in 1911, commissioned in 1912, and named for the State of Arkansas, still did not have a set of ship silver five years later, when there was already a well-established twenty-five-year American tradition of citizens cheerfully buying silver for ships named after their states and cities. And thus far, the Arkansas legislature had not ap-

propriated a single dime for the project. Soon after he was inaugurated in 1917, Governor Brough replaced the second Silver Service Commission with the Arkansas Women's Silver Service Commission, headed by Miss Daisy Delony, who had been a strong enthusiast from the beginning. Miss Delony was from a prominent family of Howard County AR. She was at the time President of the Little Rock Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. Her sister, Jenny Delony (1866-1949), was a significant Arkansas artist. Her parents were A. T. and Bettie Delony. According to the 1920 Census, Miss Delony declared herself to be 35 years old; however, in the 1880 census she was already seven years old. She was evidently born in 1873, seven years after her distinguished sister. It is probably indiscreet to note the age discrepancy. Miss Delony went to work on the ship silver project immediately, designating chairwomen in both counties and towns. Women's organizations throughout the state began to solicit contributions, with varying degrees of success. It was a decidedly slow and difficult business. The First World War was raging and most people thought that there were more important things to worry about than a silver service for a battleship. For ammunition maybe, but not silver. Governor Brough proclaimed April 23-28, 1917 as "Silver Service Week," with April 27 specifically designated as "School Donation Day." This

probably accounts for the persistent myth that Arkansas schoolchildren contributed 3000 silver dollars toward the making of the U.S.S. *Arkansas* silver, it being sometimes even alleged that those very silver dollars were actually melted and used to make the silver service. Undoubtedly, some money was contributed by the children of Arkansas on School Donation Day, but it is virtually inconceivable that they gave \$3000, when Miss Delony was able to gather only \$1556 criss-crossing the state by train for two years soliciting money from adults. It is safe to say that many Arkansas school children in those days did not even know what a silver dollar looked like. But by the end of 1918, the goal was in sight. Prodded by Governor Brough, the General Assembly in January of 1919 appropriated \$1400 of state money to complete the purchase of the *Arkansas* silver service. Late



Crewman examining the silver service presented by the State of Arkansas.

April 1919

Photo courtesy USNHC (no.NH57686)

in January the service was received from Rhode Island, and during the week of February 2, designated as "Navy Week" by a jubilant Miss Daisy Delony, it was proudly displayed in the Governor's Reception Room in the Capitol Building, and visited and admired by many prominent Arkansas citizens. Officially, the set consisted of 71 pieces, purchased at a total cost of \$7875. Original costing sheets from the Gorham archives, housed at Brown University in Rhode Island, suggest that Gorham's bill for the silver service should have been about nine hundred dollars more than that, plus an additional sum, one assumes, for getting it crated and shipped from Rhode Island to Little Rock. Samuel Hough, the librarian who first organized the very extensive Gorham archives and probably knows more about them than anyone now living, has offered a possible explanation for the discrepancy. He finds suggestions in the archives that the Gorham Company made a downward adjustment in the price in order to induce the State of Arkansas to finally complete the transaction.

A committee appointed by Governor Brough formally presented the service to the Battleship *Arkansas* on April 21, 1919. The proud ship, newly home from a victorious war, lay at anchor in the North River in New York. After a few remarks by Governor Brough, Miss Delony, as chairwoman of the committee, made the formal presentation of the silver to the ship at the end

of what was acclaimed a very refined speech. A highly dramatic photograph of the well-attended ceremony adorned the cover of the May 7, 1919 issue of the *Jewelers Circular and Horological Review*, the official trade journal of the jewelers and watchmakers of America at the time. Other members of the committee formally presented trophy pieces on behalf of the Arkansas Daughters of the American Revolution and the Arkansas Travelers. The Arkansas members of the Colonial Dames of America also paid for a piece of the *Arkansas* silver, but it was apparently not formally presented on this particular date. Miss Daisy Delony unfortunately died in 1948, narrowly missing the official installation of the Battleship *Arkansas* silver service in the Governor's Mansion.

American ship silver of what might be called the Great Period, roughly 1891 to 1920, is characterized by substantial weight and great elaboration of form. It is most commonly in what is now called the Beaux Arts Style. Later services were plainer and, on the whole, less interesting, though there are some important exceptions. A typical set of ship silver of this period will feature a wealth of decorative elements drawn from Greek and Roman mythology, nautical motifs (considered naturally appropriate for use on ship silver), and additional motifs drawn from the history, geography, architecture, occupations, and

traditions of the state or city for which the ship is named. Certain nautical motifs were repeatedly used by Gorham on its various ship services, an excellent example being the many stylized dolphins found on the U.S.S. *Arkansas* silver, which are also to be found on services made for other states and localities. In general, the greater the number of special decorative embellishments employed in a service which was unique to the ship's namesake locale, the more costly the service would have been. The *Arkansas* service makes extensive use of such decorative motifs as the state flower (the apple blossom), the state seal, and other obvious basics, but a few pieces are decorated with elaborately engraved scenes that are unique and highly specific: the new Arkansas Capitol Building, the Old Statehouse, an Arkansas plantation scene, the monument to the Arkansas soldiers of the Civil War which stands on the State Capitol grounds, the old Army-Navy Hospital in Hot Springs, a county map of the state of Arkansas with both cities and local products designated, and so on.

The Gorham archives do not inform us of the names of any of the workmen who participated in the production of the *Arkansas* service, though "Hon. C. E. Taylor" is mentioned frequently. This was, of course, Mayor Charles E. Taylor of Little Rock, Gorham's contact person in Arkansas when the first order for part of the ship service was

placed, and the chairman of the second battleship silver commission. Curiously, one would expect Mr. Charles S. Stifft, the jeweler who was the go-between in the process of ordering the *Arkansas* service to be mentioned conspicuously, though he is not referred to at all in the Gorham archives. The U.S.S. *Arkansas* centerpiece bowl is alleged to have been paid for in 1913 by the Arkansas Chapter of the Colonial Dames of America, but since it did not exist yet, this is unlikely. Probably what happened is that the Colonial Dames agreed to pay for it in 1913 and actually did so later. This would give them the distinction of being among the very first to volunteer money for the battleship silver. According to the Gorham archives, this piece cost \$408.25, vastly more money than now-like all the other sums involved. Interestingly, it is unique among the items of the *Arkansas* service in the finely-detailed eagle heads looking outward from both ends



which are quite different from the other full-figure eagles with wings outstretched which adorn certain other pieces.

The Gorham Manufacturing Company of Providence RI was a natural choice to produce the U.S.S. *Arkansas* silver service. With roots going back to the 1830's, the Gorham Company was, well before the end of the 19th Century, securely established as the largest silver manufacturer in the history of the world. One of its first commissions for a ship's silver service was, interestingly, for the new U.S.S. *Maine* in 1891, the sinking of which in 1898 precipitated the Spanish-American War. In the literature on Navy ship silver, it is often asserted that the U.S.S. *Maine* silver was the very first elaborate ship service ever made by Gorham--or anybody--but this is not correct. The first ship service ever made by Gorham was for the cruiser U.S.S. *Atlanta*, and was presented to that ship on March 11, 1891, whereas the *Maine* service was not presented until November 27 of the same year. There were U. S. Navy ship services prior to the 1890's too, but they were few and not nearly as grand as those made later. No one is quite sure exactly how many ship services the Gorham Company made, though clearly they made far more of them than any other company. Charles Carpenter alleges in his book *Gorham Silver* (1982), that they made a total of 61 sets, the last being for the U.S.S. *Long Beach* in

1961, but we now know that the list of 61 ship services Mr. Carpenter casually observed in the Brown University library was just a list of some ship services, not a list of services made specifically by Gorham.. All told, the number of U.S. Navy ship services is more than 500, though no one knows the exact figure, as Navy records of ship silver are disturbingly (and unexpectedly) imprecise, and no other silver manufacturer has left records as extensive as the Gorham archives: most of them left almost no records at all which survive today. It was not merely battleships and cruisers which had silver services presented to them: destroyers and aircraft carriers also had silver services.

A few battleships never had silver services, most notably the U.S.S. *West Virginia*. Although a good many citizens of West Virginia persistently lamented the embarrassing lack of such a service, nothing was ever done about it. Most citizens seriously rallied to the call when it was suggested that a ship might be named after their state or city—and would need a silver service for the captain's table.

There is considerable variation in the extent to which ship silver has been used and the amount of wear and damage it has sustained. Astonishingly, the U.S.S. *Rhode Island* silver, originally made by Gorham in 1907, was stolen from the Statehouse in Providence in the 1970's and was rescued just as it

was about to be melted. It was rather banged up during this dreadful episode and was restored by Gorham at no charge to the company's home-state before being returned to the Statehouse, where security has been much tighter ever since. The U.S.S. *Lexington* silver service is officially listed by the Navy as having gone down with the ship when it was sunk, but knowledgeable persons have expressed serious doubt about this. Pieces from the *Lexington* service could conceivably emerge in the antique silver market in the future. The U.S.S. *Chicago* service, the largest ever made, is also listed as having gone down with the ship, but Sherry Langrock, the reigning expert on U. S. Navy ship silver, claims to have solid evidence to the contrary, though no one knows for sure exactly where this silver is at the present time. Many of the ship services have suffered casual pilfering by persons craving "souvenirs." Of the pieces known to have been in the *Arkansas* service, it appears that only two have mysteriously disappeared, and they are relatively insignificant. One of 24 punch cups originally made to accompany the giant punch bowl is unaccounted for, though it might yet be found lurking in some dark corner of the Governor's Mansion. And one of a pair of compotes made, according to the Gorham archives, is not present, though it may be on loan, and might well return. The people of Arkansas should be very pleased, on the whole, with the extent

and condition of "their" ship silver.

Many Arkansans are not aware that the state acquired its flag as a result of acquiring its namesake battleship. There was no Arkansas state flag until 1913. The Battleship *Arkansas* was authorized by Congress in 1909, and the keel laid on January 25, 1910 in Camden, New Jersey. The ship was launched on January 14, 1911, after being christened by Miss Mary Louise Macon, daughter of Congressman Robert B. Macon of Helena AR. When the Pine Bluff chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution learned that the battleship was to be formally commissioned with Captain Roy C. Smith as Commanding Officer on September 17, 1911, they voted to present the ship with "a stand of colors"—that is, with a U. S. Flag, a U. S. Navy battle flag, and an Arkansas state flag. A letter sent to the Arkansas Secretary of State, Earl W. Hodges, by a committee of three brought forward the terrible news that there was no Arkansas state flag and never had been. So the Pine Bluff DAR sponsored a contest to produce a suitable design for an Arkansas flag. There were sixty-five entries, ranging from crayon drawings to exquisite miniature silk flags. The winning design was submitted by Miss Willie Hocker of Wabbaseka, Arkansas, who happened to be a member of the Pine Bluff DAR where the quest had originated. On February 26, 1913, the Arkansas Legislature made Miss

Hocker's design the official flag of the State of Arkansas, and with a couple of minor changes, it has remained so ever since.

The U.S.S. *Arkansas* rendered valuable service to the nation during the First World War, engaging in patrol, anti-submarine and convoy duty in both Atlantic and British waters. After the war, the *Arkansas* was relegated to routine duties and training missions, though she also made a number of good-will trips to "show the flag" in foreign ports. In 1926, she was extensively modernized and converted to an oil-burning ship.

By the time the Second World War came, the U.S.S. *Arkansas* was officially considered obsolete by the U. S. Navy and, but for the war, would soon have been dismantled. However, she remained in constant use throughout the war and gave the nation extremely valuable service. On the fateful date of December 7, 1941, the *Arkansas* was anchored in Casco Bay, Maine, and thus totally escaped the carnage at Pearl Harbor. The *Arkansas* was present when Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill met in Newfoundland to draft the Atlantic Charter.

All told, the *Arkansas* traveled 134,141 miles during the Second World War and fired a total of 18,800 shells from its main, secondary, and anti-aircraft batteries. Almost anyone would have to agree that this is an enviable record for an "obsolete"

ship. The U.S.S. *Arkansas* was awarded four Navy Battle Stars for its service in World War II.

After the war the *Arkansas* was considered truly obsolete by the U. S. Navy, and it was decided to use it experimentally in atomic bomb tests. It was expected that the *Arkansas* would be sunk in the first underwater atomic bomb test early in 1946, but to everyone's astonishment, the venerable ship survived. She was finally sunk on July 25, 1946 in the first hydrogen bomb test at Bikini Atoll, and has rested serenely, one hopes, at the bottom of the Pacific ever since.

On February 5, 1946, the United States House of Representatives Committee on Naval Affairs commenced debate on House Resolution 5121 authorizing the Secretary of the Navy, "in his discretion to deliver to the custody of the State of Arkansas the silver service presented to the United States for the Battleship *Arkansas*." The resolution passed easily in Congress, there being no opposition, and the *Arkansas* silver service was returned to the people of Arkansas and finally placed in the new Governor's Mansion in Little Rock in 1949, where it has remained ever since. Governor Sid McMath and his wife were the first of 13 Arkansas governors and first ladies who have now used the U.S.S. *Arkansas* silver for official entertaining.

Charles Curb, PhD., previously a college English professor, is now an antique dealer based in Arkansas.

Many of our members fondly remember the many lectures held by Dr. Curb for the SSC.



Dr. Charles Curb inspecting the USS *Arkansas* 'tea-urn' in the dining room of the Governor's Mansion in Little