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## HFCWRT Monthly Newsletter

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- DATE:** Wednesday, November 11th, 2015
- TIME:** Dinner 7:00 PM; Program 8:00
- PLACE:** Camp Hill Methodist Church, Harpers Ferry, WV
- SPEAKER:** Hilda Koontz
- SUBJECT:** The Sultana Disaster: Freedom's Dream Gone Awry

### The Speaker:

Hilda Koontz, is a writer, editor and former journalist, and a current Board Member and Past President of the Gettysburg Civil War Roundtable. She speaks regularly at the National Museum of Civil War Medicine, the Carroll County Historical Society, the Little Big Horn Associates national conference, the Exploritas (formerly Elderhostel) program and the Roundtables of Chicago IL, Chambersburg PA, Frederick MD and Westminster MD. In 2016, she will be speaking to groups in St. Louis MO, Cedar Falls IA, Shippensburg PA and the Southern MD Civil War Roundtable.

## The Subject

This program explores the loss of the steamer Sultana on the Mississippi River on April 27, 1865 - America's most costly maritime disaster. Attendees will hear about the hapless souls, primarily returning Union POW's, who were aboard the Sultana that fateful night, their enduring heroic acts, and the many instances of greed and incompetence that contributed to the disaster. There was plenty of blame to go around!

## The Meal

A family-style meal will be served at 7:00 PM prior to the program. The cost of the meal is \$15.00 per person. Reservations for the meal **must be made no later than Sunday, Sunday, November 8<sup>th</sup>**, with Kyle Wichtendahl at [kfwichtendahl@gmail.com](mailto:kfwichtendahl@gmail.com) or 301-639-8855. The meal will consist of Baked Meat Loaf, Mashed Potatoes, Gravy, Seasoned Green Beans, Iced Tea, Coffee, Rolls, Butter, & Dessert.

## Confederate Saboteurs: Building the Hunley and Other Secret Weapons of the Civil War

by Mark K. Ragan (Texas A&M University Press, 2015)

Close study of the Civil War will uncover many examples of Confederate attempts to use technological innovation to counteract gross disparities in manpower and resources. Many of these advances were developed and implemented by a small group of men led by Texan Edgar Collins Singer. The subject of Mark Ragan's *Confederate Saboteurs: Building the Hunley and Other Secret Weapons of the Civil War*, the Singer Secret Service Corps was founded in early 1863 at Port Lavaca, Texas and was composed of a diversely skilled team of inventors and investors (perhaps 25-30 in number) drawn from Edgar Singer's Masonic lodge.

Singer, on detached duty from a Texas artillery battery, developed a spring loaded detonator for mines ("torpedoes") intended for both land and nautical uses. His demonstration to Confederate authorities successful, Singer and his group were contracted to produce torpedoes full-time, their Secret Service activities operating under the official military umbrella of the Engineer Department to prevent execution if any of the corps members were captured while deploying the devices. From isolated Port Lavaca, Singer Corps agents were distributed all the across the Confederacy, to New Orleans, Richmond, Charleston, Mobile, Selma, and other threatened places in need of their services.

Ragan notes many isolated successes in sinking Union vessels, including ironclads, but it should also be appreciated that the mere presence, and even rumor, of Singer torpedoes tended to keep enemy ships at a respectful distance from southern rivers, bays, and harbors that would otherwise have been indefensible. The biggest problem with the underwater mines lay with their relatively brief lifespan (one that was improved later in the war). It is likely that Admiral Farragut knew this and was confident that most of the mines were rendered harmless by extended immersion in the salt waters of Mobile Bay prior to his famous naval attack. While the ironclad *Tecumseh* was sunk immediately the

rest of the Union fleet reported brushing against numerous mechanically inert contact mines. This would make Farragut's immortal order "Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!" more calculated risk than popularly believed.

Over a few weeks' time in late 1863, Singer agents in Tennessee derailed eight Union supply trains with ingeniously designed land torpedoes. In most cases, repair crews were able to fix the damage in less than a day. In response, Union track patrols were quickly stepped up and the danger was largely eliminated. However, while railroad torpedoes at the limited scale used were regarded as little more than a nuisance by Union authorities, one wonders what the effect on the federal logistical system might have been had the Confederates devoted more resources to the project and operated over a much wider area. In addition to mining, other agents were involved in boat and bridge burning operations, the former of which became a serious disruption to transport assets along the Mississippi.

The Singer group not only designed and constructed static and floating mines of different varieties but also submarines and torpedo boats. Some of the technology was truly futuristic. Ragan uncovered evidence that self-propelled torpedoes (powered by some form of rocket) able to be launched underwater from tubes were under development. They even tried using an electric motor purchased in the North to propel a torpedo boat but found that these expensive engines generated insufficient power.

Of course, the most famous Singer Group project involved the submarine CSS Hunley and Ragan documents its design, construction, trials and ultimate demise. With the Hunley sinking the Housatonic and other successes by Singer torpedoes, the Confederate Secret Service attempted to ramp up operations in 1864 but suffered a crushing blow when one of its operatives carelessly allowed documents naming fifty agents and their locations to be captured. Copied and distributed to Union forces, knowledge of Confederate personnel and plans led to key arrests and severely disrupted Secret Service operations.

With many records burned (for obvious reasons) in the waning moments of the war, surviving Confederate Secret Service documentation is especially fragmentary, making it difficult for researchers to reconstruct timelines, connect the dots regarding operations, and discover information about personnel and projects. In the book, Ragan does an exceedingly fine job of taking what's known, including many recently uncovered sources by Ragan himself and others, and painting a more than reasonably coherent picture of the activities of the Singer group.

During the final weeks of the war, the group was putting the finishing touches on a massive steam powered ironclad torpedo boat at Buffalo Bayou near Houston. Unfortunately, the fate of the vessel (and that of a smaller new submarine that may or may not have actually existed) is tantalizingly unknown. Nine Union naval vessels (including five ironclads) were confirmed sunk by Singer torpedoes and there's little doubt that a number of unconfirmed kills exists among the dozens of other ships cited in federal records as being destroyed or damaged by underwater mines. The Singer group's critical role in defending ports and waterways gave the corps an impact and significance far beyond their meager numbers. Ragan is likely not exaggerating when he rates the achievements of the Singer Secret Service Corps equal to that of any ten Confederate infantry regiments. A skillfully crafted in-depth study of a very difficult subject to research, *Confederate Saboteurs* is an important new addition to the naval and covert operations histories of the Civil War.