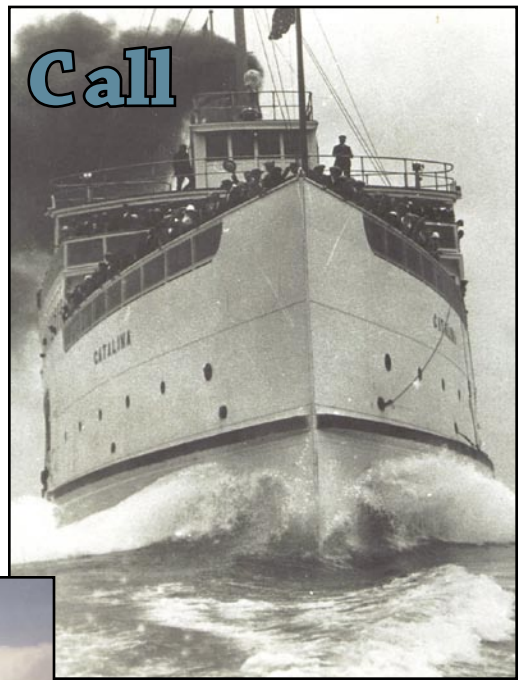


SS Catalina, Mayday Call

by Deirdre O'Regan



Full speed ahead, 1924

In dire straits is the status of the SS *Catalina*, currently half-submerged in Ensenada Harbor in Baja California, Mexico. Dire because it is inundated with harbor water, home to sea lions and birds, and also because the Port of Ensenada has plans to dredge the harbor where the ship is aground to make way for a new marina. To accomplish this, the Mexican Navy is standing by to cut it up, drag it out to sea, and dump it. The ship's only hope appears to be through the dedicated efforts of the SS *Catalina* Preservation Association (SSCPA), a group formed in 1999 to raise interest and funds to raise the ship and tow it back to US waters for restoration. The Mexican government relinquished ownership of the vessel over to the group in a joint effort to salvage the ship—but still remove her from the harbor, as she poses a hazard to navigation and takes up valuable space in the harbor. Her plight would seem hopeless considering her half-sunken state, but professional marine surveyors who dived on her in 2003 reported the one-inch thick steel hull salvageable.

SS *Catalina* was the last steamship in service to Santa Catalina Island, 26 miles off the southern California coast. Built in 1924 by the owner of Catalina Island and chewing gum tycoon William Wrigley, Jr., she was put in service ferrying passengers between Los Angeles and Avalon on Santa Catalina Island, home of the famous Avalon Casino Ballroom. At 300

feet long and 52 feet on her beam, the ship carried passengers in style as they danced to live music in the ship's ballroom, while in the engine room, two triple expansion engines propelled her along at sixteen knots. She and her running mate SS *Avalon* were known as "The Great White Steamers."

During World War II, she served as an army transport ship ferrying over 800,000 troops across



Half-sunk in Ensenada harbor, August 2003

San Francisco Bay. Returning to her original service after the war, the ship operated as such until 1975—logging in 9,807 crossings in her career. In 1976, she was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. She is also registered as a California State Historic Landmark (No. 895) and as a City of Los Angeles Historical Cultural Monument (No. 213).

In 1977 she was sold to a private party and afterwards went through a series of problems and a number of owners, many with good intentions but failed plans. She has twice been seized by US Marshals and eventually by the Mexican government. She ended up in Ensenada in 1985 after a lessee towed her there after she had been evicted from several southern California harbors. A failed attempt to turn her into a restaurant-bar, followed by the death of her owner, eventually led to her abandonment in the harbor in 1998. She

started sinking at her mooring and now sits on the bottom in fifteen feet of water listed to port.

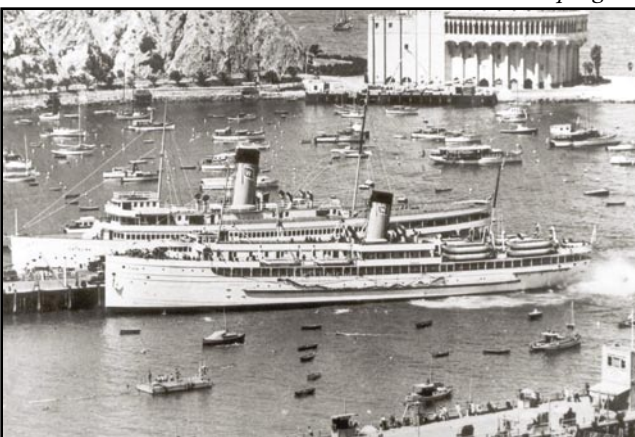
SS *Catalina* Preservation Association has new, albeit guarded, hopes that Hollywood may come to the rescue...if it can make it happen in time. Movie producer Ken Wales and Crusader Entertainment have approached SSCPA about using the SS *Catalina* to "play" the part of the SS *Dorchester* in a mainstream movie about the sinking of the USAT *Dorchester* in World War II. It was Wales who paid for the 2003 survey and has offered to underwrite the cost of salvaging the ship. Estimated costs for raising, repairing, and moving *Catalina* to drydock come in at under \$2 million, well under the \$4- to \$6-million cost of building a replica and sound stage from scratch. After its use for the movie, the ship would be returned to SSCPA for use as an educational and historic vessel.

SSCPA is waiting for Wales to finalize negotiations with Crusader Entertainment. If these negotiations move forward, will it be in time? ⚓ ⚓ ⚓

For information contact: SS Catalina Preservation Association, 18242 West McDermott, Suite J, Irvine, CA 92614 or visit their web site www.sscatalina.org. All images provided by David Engholm. View his web site on SS Catalina at www.escapist.com/sscatalina.

Some information for this article was provided by Coty Dolores Miranda and The Log, San Diego.

SS *Catalina* and SS *Avalon* docked in Avalon, Santa Catalina Island, 1930s. The Avalon Casino Ballroom is shown, top right.



ALL IMAGES FROM THE DAVID ENGHOLM COLLECTION