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Economy

Under The Sea

BY JORDAN GASS-POORE

The Hays Free Press of Buda, Texas

Shipwreck off coast thrills Texas State archaeologist

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For five days, Frederick "Fritz" Hanselmann, chief underwater archaeologist with Texas State University's Meadows Center for Water and the Environment, lived and worked on the exploration vessel Nautilus off the Gulf of Mexico in an effort to examine a well-preserved shipwreck thought to have sunk during an early 19th century storm.

Hanselmann said he and other crew members may have gone into the expedition with an open mind, but never expected to discover two other sunken vessels 170 miles southeast of Galveston that may be associated with their initial finding.

"It's been really exciting," he said. "And tiring."

Crew member activity on board the ship, such as four hour shift rotations to stand watch, was captured live on the Nautilus Exploration Program website, a worldwide first, according to Hanselmann.

Having previously researched historic shipwrecks, including that of Capt. Henry Morgan, Hanselmann said he was asked by friends and colleagues last year to be the principal investigator for the 2013 program.

However, Hanselmann said this was the first project he participated in that utilized remotely operated vehicles, doing so because the wreck is too deep for divers to explore.

"We accomplished in five days what would normally have taken three-to-four weeks," said Hanselmann of this year's Nautilus Exploration Program.

According to researchers on the Nautilus website's expedition blog, not much is known about the ships that came to rest 4,360 feet below the water's surface, making them the deepest Gulf or North American shipwrecks to have been investigated by archaeologists.

During the eight days of exploration, researchers used the robotic arms of the remotely operated vehicles, or ROVs, to recover more than 60 artifacts from the initial shipwreck site, including liquor bottles, three British muskets, and a spyglass still wrapped in its leather casing.

"We found some artifacts that really speak to the human condition," said Hanselmann, on his way to escort the found artifacts for preservation at a Texas A&M University research facility.

He said he and other researchers are now working on a field report while the artifacts

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undergo a one-to-three year conservation process. Findings will eventually be curated at Texas State.

"Hopefully, the findings will be unveiled so that the general public can walk in our shoes as archaeologists," he said, adding that because of the expedition's live feed his nine-year-old son wants to be an ROV pilot.

Researchers were not allowed to retrieve artifacts from the two new sites, but took photos of all three ships, whose country of origin has yet to be identified, that came to rest within five miles of one another. The "international flavor" of the ships is what most intrigues Hanselmann, along with the possibility that, based on the found cargo, the ships may have been privateers, or armed ships hired by a government. According to Hanselmann's reports on the National Geographic website, the Nautilus Exploration Program's initial cause for the expedition was discovered by a Shell Oil Co. survey crew, who notified U.S. Interior Department officials in 2011 that its sonar detected what appeared to be wreckage.

A year later, a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration vessel determined the ship's dimensions using an ROV during an examination of seafloor habitat and naturally occurring gas seepage.

Called the "Monterrey Shipwreck" after the name Shell had proposed for its development site, the copper-clad sailing vessel sits 84-feet-long with a 26-foot-wide wooden hull.

The excavation and recovery of this ship is a collaboration between the Meadows Center, NOAA offices, the federal bureaus of ocean energy management and safety and environmental reinforcement, the Texas Historical Commission, the University of Rhode Island and the Ocean Exploration Trust.

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