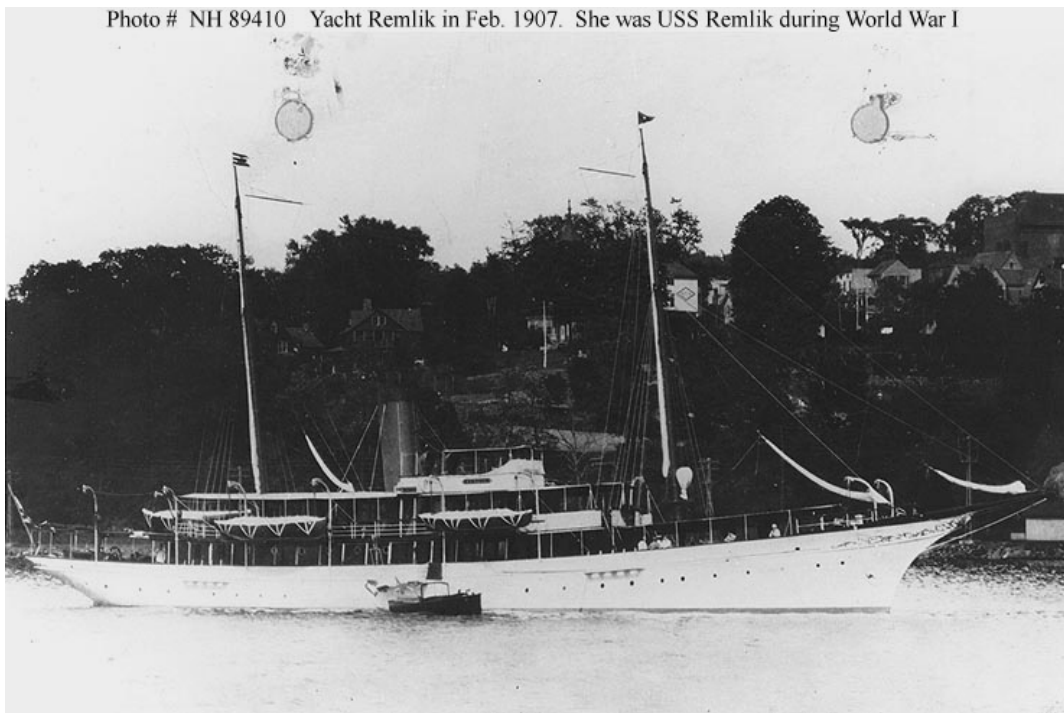


The USS Remlik and the Medal of Honor

By Dan Gill, Ethno-Gastronomist

Around 1909 a large yacht named Remlik sailed up the Rappahannock River and moored at West Urbanna Wharf at the mouth of Robinson Creek. She was probably the largest and finest private yacht ever to visit this neck of the bushes. Built in England in 1903 as the Candace, she was 200 feet long, 23 feet wide and powered by steam. No one could then imagine that within ten years the United States would be fighting in a world war and that the luxurious Remlik would become a warship and a participant in a remarkable act of heroism. The owner, Willis Sharpe Kilmer, and his father, Jonas, had come down from New York to hunt birds and waterfowl. They took special notice of the wooded peninsula across the creek from their mooring and paid a local waterman fifty cents to row them across so that they could explore. Willis Sharpe allowed as how it would be an ideal location for (another) mansion, game preserve and training facility for his extensive stable of racehorses, and set about buying the old “LaGrange Plantation”.



Shortly after purchasing the 1000-acre farm and timberlands, he changed the name to Remlik Hall (if you haven't already guessed, Remlik is Kilmer spelled backward). He also had the name of the post office changed from Streets to Remlik. He built a sprawling 52 room Tudor mansion on the point complete with a lighted goldfish pond, carriage house, kennels for hunting dogs, stables for pleasure horses, etc. He had a 50-foot flagpole erected near the mansion with a large cannon beside it. When his yacht would round Towles Point and come into view, a sentry would fire the cannon; ostensibly as a welcome, but also to warn all of the workers that “Old Swampy” was coming. The rest of the land was turned into a premier training facility for his racehorses. He built a one-and-one-eighth mile outdoor track, the finest in the South at that time. Thoroughbreds need to

be exercised every day, but not run on frozen ground, so Kilmer built a quarter-mile indoor track and lined it with fire barrels to keep it thawed in the winter.

Willis Sharpe had made a large fortune selling a patent medicine called Kilmer's Swamp Root. Developed by his uncle, Dr. S. Andral Kilmer, Swamp Root is a vile herbal concoction, then touted as a kidney liver and bladder "cure", and still sold at some drug stores, such as Marshall's in Urbanna. It is an effective diuretic containing alcohol "for the purpose of preserving the ingredients of vegetable sources from fermentation". It became even more popular during prohibition. Willis Sharpe, a Cornell graduate, was an ingenious advertising pioneer who soon made Swamp Root a household word. He and Jonas turned the small manufacturing plant in Binghamton, NY, into an empire with facilities all over the world, and then "bought out" Dr. Kilmer, The popular consensus held that Dr. Kilmer was only paid a pittance and was swindled out of his company. When asked what Swamp Root was good for, Willis Sharpe said "about a million a year".



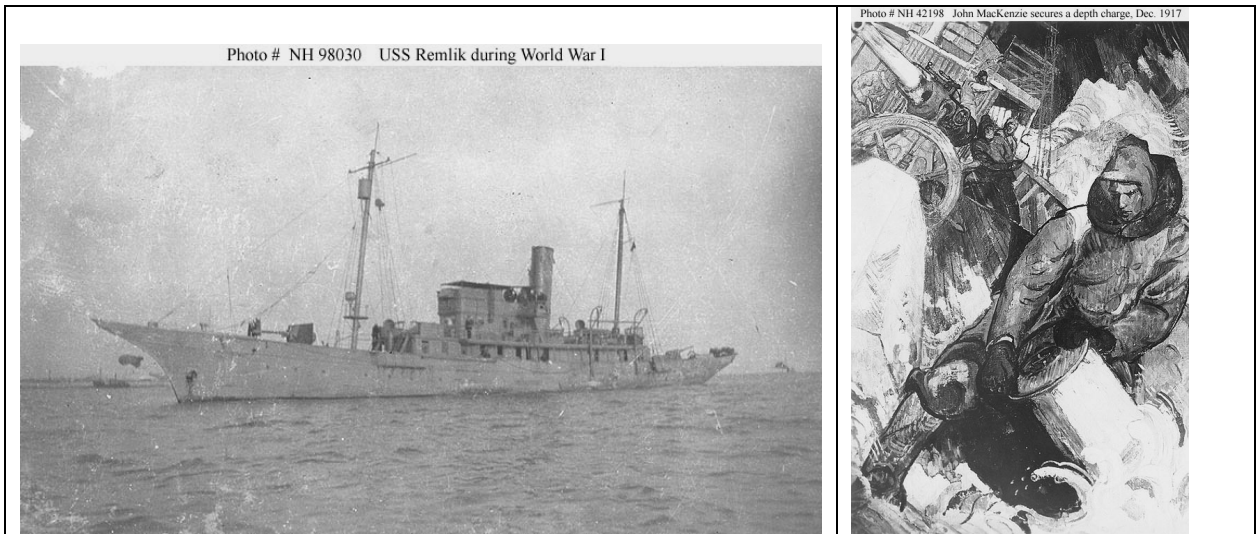
Dr. Kilmer, whose distinctive visage still adorns Swamp Root packaging, concocted several other successful preparations including Consumption Oil, Ocean Weed for heart ailments and various cure-alls. He also founded a popular cancer sanitarium near Binghamton. His regimen of mineral waters, herbal treatments and diet reputedly reversed some cancers. Dr. Kilmer, embittered because his holistic approach was ridiculed by the medical establishment, took his secrets with him to the family mausoleum.

Willis Sharpe Kilmer was the quintessential flapper-era tycoon, as epitomized by James Cagney in early "talkies", complete with fedora and spats. He tried to hobnob with the Vanderbilts and Carnegies, but they never had much truck with him: Though he lived lavishly and competed in all of the "gentlemen's games", he was Nouveau riche, and lacked the culture and background to handle his wealth with grace. He had the most opulent private railway car he could find and the biggest yacht, both named Remlik. He owned at least five horse farms and manor houses scattered from Florida to New York. In addition to Remlik Hall, he owned Court Manor near New Market in the Valley of Virginia, which was used as a breeding facility. At one time he owned more than 400 racehorses including Sun Beau and Exterminator or "Old Bones", one of the finest and best loved horses ever to run in America. Exterminator won the 1918 Kentucky Derby, went on to win 50 races out of 100 starts and held the record for earnings for four consecutive years. He was such a strong runner that he was required to carry as much as 140 pounds of extra weight in handicap races. He had heart, savvy, and an almost-human intelligence; if an unruly horse acted up at the starting gate, Exterminator just leaned on him until he settled down. Many thought that he could beat Man-O-War, but Kilmer was never able to arrange a match race: Man-O-War was a stallion and had much more to lose than Exterminator, who was so ugly as a colt that he was gelded. Exterminator retired to Remlik Hall until Kilmer's death in 1940. Sun Beau held the worlds record for earnings for many years until he was finally surpassed by Sea Biscuit in 1939.

There are lots of Kilmer stories still told by the “old heads” of Middlesex County, including this author; none of them complimentary. The late Milford Bray of Remlik worked for Kilmer as a stable boy and later became our farm foreman until he was just too old to do anything. One day Milford had cleaned the stalls and was standing outside, keeping the pitchfork from falling over (think Highway Department when you picture this). Kilmer was making his rounds followed by his chauffeur-driven LaSalle, which had a “granny gear” so that Kilmer could walk ahead without being run over. Willis Sharpe spied Milford leaning on the pitchfork and fired him on the spot (of course, he hired him back the next day). As a result, Milford was known as “Pitchfork” until he died. Milford told me many stories while he was milking cows: “ Kilmer had a sixteen cylinder Cadillac and two twelves. His chauffeur, Jack, would take him to Richmond in the sixteen and put him on the train. Then he would beat the train to Tampa, Florida and pick Kilmer up at the station”. There were *no* paved roads from Richmond to Florida in the mid-thirties! In his defense, Kilmer did provide many jobs and brought much-needed money to the area during the depression.

There is a fine line between living in high style and flaunting wealth; Kilmer crossed it. By his own admission, he was known as the most despised man in the country (not counting William Randolph Hearst, of course). He was autocratic, arrogant, overbearing and ruthless. He routinely fired workers for minor infractions then often hired them back the next day. On the horse racing circuit he was accused of cruelly asking too much of Exterminator. When the daily newspaper, The Binghamton Evening Herald, ran a story that was not complementary, Kilmer reportedly stormed into the editor’s office and demanded a retraction. The editor told him that the story was based on public documents and he would not retract. Kilmer threatened to start his own newspaper and put the Herald out of business, then he built the tallest building in the whole region, hired the best editors and staff and soon fulfilled his threat. His second wife, “Lady Jane”, the inspiration for a popular flapper era song, “the million dollar baby from the Five and Ten Cent Store”, did not like coming to their Virginia estate. It was too far removed from any semblance of society or culture and she did not care to endure Mr. Kilmer’s notoriously decadent lifestyle. Remlik Hall was a working farm with double-fenced paddocks and gates across the roads. Her chauffeur had to stop to open and close each gate on the way to the mansion. She reportedly said that she hoped that “when Willis Sharpe died and went to Hell, he had to open as many gates to get there”. After his death a reporter remarked that he wished he had known Willis Sharpe. One of Kilmer’s aunts overheard and sternly said, “no you don’t, he was *not* a nice person”.

Back to our story about the USS Remlik and the Medal of Honor: When the United States entered World War I, German U-Boats were playing havoc with shipping. There were not enough destroyers to deal with the submarine problem, so the Navy instituted a program to buy private yachts and convert them to “Special Patrol” boats. The Remlik was bought in June of 1917 and commissioned the USS Remlik (SP 157) in July. She was armed with Sperry depth charges, two 3-inch guns and two machine guns, then sent to Brest, France to patrol the Bay of Biscay and to escort convoys.



On the 17th of December 1918 she was escorting a convoy bound for Brest and fighting a fierce winter gale. The Bay of Biscay is notoriously rough anyway, and she soon lost sight of the convoy. Her lookouts then spotted an enemy submarine, but the decks were awash and the seas were so high that she couldn't train her guns on it. She could only make about 3 knots in the heavy seas and therefore could not use her depth charges and then clear the resulting explosion. She played cat-and-mouse with the sub for several hours. In the process of maneuvering she was broached by a large wave that carried the depth charge cradle overboard. Chief Boatswain's Mate John Mackenzie was on the bridge and watched in growing alarm as water drained from the scuppers, revealing the depth charge cavorting on the after deck. He could see that the safety pin was gone, and he knew that the next wave could easily wash the triggering float overboard and detonate the 300-pound charge of TNT. Though the decks were awash, he was able to make his way aft to secure the rolling canister. It almost crushed him several times, but he was finally able to hook his legs on the gun carriage, re-insert the pin, stand the canister on its end and sit on it until the Remlik could be brought into the seas. Other crew members then made their way back and lashed the wayward charge to the taffrail. Mackenzie was credited with saving his ship and crew and received the first Medal of Honor ever presented to a Navy reservist. After the war, the Remlik was decommissioned in Norfolk and sold, presumably for scrap. Mackenzie returned to Holyoke, Massachusetts, and opened a restaurant.

Meanwhile, back on Remlik Hall..... The mansion burned under suspicious circumstances in 1939. After Kilmer died in 1940, Lady Jane sold the Virginia holdings as fast as she could. The "Estate" or point end of the property has now been developed as Kilmer's Point, Remlik Hall and Cedar Pointe subdivisions. My father, and then I, raised turkeys on the farm portion from the mid '40s to the mid '70s. I still own most of the farm, and now raise cattle, mostly. We lost the back third of the indoor track during Hurricane Hazel in 1954, and the outdoor track is now "Racetrack Road", the main entrance to our farm.

Published in Pleasant Living Sept.-Oct. '07

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