

Capturing the Spirit of South Carolina

Shipbuilders back at work on state's classroom at sea

BY ADAM FERRELL

Of **The Post and Courier Staff**

Loads of sawdust and wood chips covering the ground in Ansonborough Field were not enough to sop up this week's heavy rains. The shipyard was a slop yard Wednesday as a woman and three men sawed and hammered away at heavy live oak timbers.

Luckily for them, enough stray lumber was lying around for makeshift boardwalks over the swampy muck.

"You wouldn't get very far if you stopped working every time the weather didn't suit," said Doug Dow, his gray, bushy ponytail whipping like a sail on a stiff breeze.

Dow is one of three paid shipbuilders working under local shipwright Mark Bayne to build the Spirit of South Carolina tall ship. The crew returned to the massive wooden skeleton about three weeks ago for the first time since the fall of 2003, when construction money ran out.

Last year, organizers researched and visited other tall ship programs around the country and raised money and developed a business plan.

The project has commitments for about \$1.3 million of the \$4 million needed to finish what will be a floating classroom for students across the state.

"Our goal is to serve as many students as we can each year," said Meaghan Van Liew, development, marketing and public relations director with the S.C. Maritime Heritage Foundation, which is building the ship.

The business plan puts that number at about 2,800 students, Van Liew said.

Plans are in the early stages, she said, including conversations with The Citadel, the College of Charleston, the S.C. Aquarium, Charleston Weed and Seed and Outward Bound. More immediate plans revolve around the ship itself, which organizers hope will be seaworthy in about two years.

Blueprints for the 140-foot pilot schooner are based on the Frances Elizabeth. Built in Charleston Harbor in the 1870s, she recently was rediscovered at the bottom of North Carolina's Cape Fear River, where she sank after her engine exploded in 1912. Though using a gigantic ship

saw and other power tools, Dow and his mates are trying to remain faithful to the way the Spirit's inspiration was built more than a century ago.

Huge trees, as wide as 4 feet and sawed into lengths of 6 or 8 feet, are delivered to the shipyard, where the shipbuilders saw them into timbers still heavy enough to sink in water. The workers use a forklift to haul those to the ship saw, where three or four people guide them along the blade. Each segment of each frame is unique.

The dirty, sweaty shipbuilders then paint, tar and assemble frames with foot-long bolts knocked into place with sledge hammers. The builders have seven more of what look like giant ribs to install on the ship. Then they'll work down the outer edges of those ribs so they can plank up the hull along smooth lines. That work should be under way this summer and last about eight months.

They agreed this is work they're lucky to have. They laugh and joke while they labor. It's an opportunity of a lifetime, they said, building an ambassador for their state and a piece of art to outlive them.

A diverse lot, some of the shipbuilders are volunteers, like Bill Porcher of James Island. The retired land surveyor who has sailed all his life shows up every Wednesday at 7:30 a.m. in clean overalls. He leaves tired, smothered in tar and dust and smiling.

Louisa Pittman, a 28-year-old College of Charleston junior studying anthropology, is a paid hand working three days a week. She started out as volunteer during the first round of work, which began in 2001. Pittman spent her adult life before college as a crew chief on various educational tall ships, most out of ports in the northeast. She said she likes the camaraderie of that life, and if the timing is right, she may stay on as a crew member with the Spirit before attending graduate school for underwater archeology.

Ken Blyth, another volunteer-turned-paid-builder, drives to the shipyard every morning from Round O. After 25 years working with hardwood floors, he turned his talents to wooden ship building.

"That was straight and flat, and this is exactly the opposite," he said, measuring a finishing cut on a 3-foot frame section.

Dow, who has worked on ships several times the size of the Spirit in his 11-year shipbuilding career, moved here from Baltimore in the fall of 2003 solely to build this historic vessel. That was his first trip to South Carolina, and he said he's here to stay.

WANT TO GO?

The shipbuilders will install the remaining timber frames, what you might call the ship's ribs, from 1 to 4 p.m. Friday. The public is invited to watch.

Organizers say the shipyard soon will reopen to the public with regular visiting hours. For more information or to volunteer with the building of the Spirit of South Carolina, call 722-1030.