

HE was the fastest ocean liner in the world, an iconic symbol of American engineering, culture and glamour – the Marilyn Monroe of the seas. Cary Grant was a passenger, as was Judy Garland, not to mention Monroe herself.

When the SS United States entered port, all heads turned to look, and no wonder. Which is why anyone who was anyone in the 1950s and 1960s chose to cross the Atlantic Ocean on board. As Harry Manning, who captained the ship on her maiden voyage, is reported to have said: “You can’t set her on fire, you can’t sink her, and you can’t catch her. SS United States is a modern miracle.”

At some point in the next few weeks, time is set to catch up with this one-time modern miracle in the most dramatic circumstances.

Rather than being restored to its former glory or preserved at a museum, the SS United States will be deliberately sunk off the coast of Florida, becoming the world’s largest artificial reef in the process.

There are some, especially in the diving community, who are at peace with this turn of events. There are others, including many who remember the “Big U” as she was nicknamed in her prime, who even at this eleventh hour remain opposed to it – viewing the ship’s demise as some kind of metaphor for modern-day America.

There’s also a somewhat reluctant third party consisting of those who would love to see the liner preserved, but realise her deteriorating condition prevents that. As far as they are concerned, scuttling the SS United States 22 miles out to sea, where she will become a haven for sea life and attract divers from around the world to the Gulf Coast, has become the best-case scenario.

No matter where you stand, when the time comes for this once proud leviathan of the seas to slip beneath the waves, there’s unlikely to be a dry eye in the house.

“It’ll be a mix of sadness, great memories and relief that she isn’t being scrapped,” says Warren Jones of the SS United States Conservancy, formed initially to safeguard the ship’s future but which is now dedicated to celebrating her legacy.

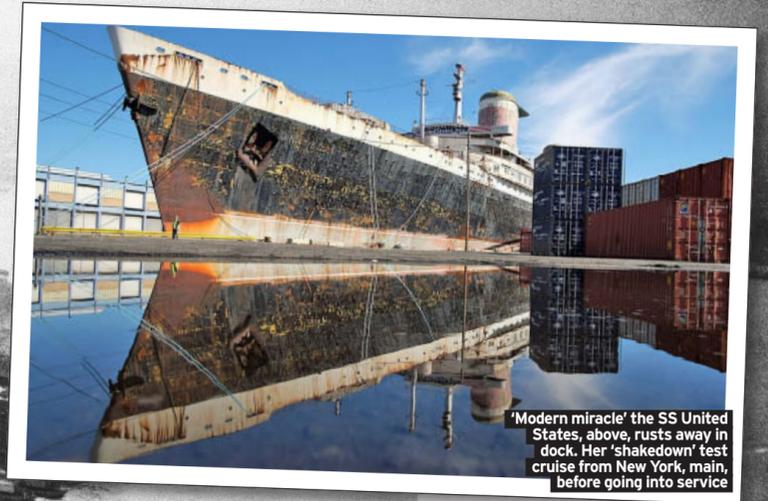
“We fought long and hard to save the ship. It was a valiant and thorough effort with hundreds of players. We were left with only the two choices – scrap, or reef. I will miss her though, no doubt about that.”

It’s all a far cry from 1952, the year of the ship’s launch. Back in the pre-jet age, getting from Europe to North America and vice-versa meant travelling by ocean liner, of which there were many, each one trying to outdo the other in terms of luxury, design and speed.

Besides being luxurious and easy on the eye, the SS United States was the fastest of them all. On her maiden voyage, she smashed the eastbound transatlantic speed record previously held by the RMS Queen Mary, taking just three days, ten hours and 40 minutes to travel between the Ambrose lightship outside New York Harbour to Bishop Rock off Cornwall, winning the coveted Blue Riband in the process.

The fastest and most beautiful ship in the world

As SS United States, the cruise liner that once ruled the waves, is prepared for deliberate sinking off the Florida coast to create an artificial reef, SPENCER VIGNES delves beneath the surface to recall her glory years



‘Modern miracle’ the SS United States, above, rusts away in dock. Her ‘shakedown’ test cruise from New York, main, before going into service



THEN, on the return journey, she went and smashed the westbound record as well, reaching New York in just three days, 12 hours and 12 minutes. Incredibly, 74 years later, both records remain uncontested.

For the best part of the next two decades it wasn’t so much Britannia as the SS United States which ruled the waves – transporting not only celebrities and royalty but also regular passengers across the Atlantic, including thousands of immigrants bound for new lives in America.

“There was a special magic about that ship which made people from all walks of life want to sail on her,” says Irene Richards, now 92 and living in Cambridgeshire. Besides travelling on the “Big U”, she also worked for her owners, the United States Lines, in the advertising and publicity

department of their London offices on Pall Mall. “She had the look of a greyhound, with smokestacks that leaned slightly giving the impression of real speed,” recalled Irene.

“There was quite a lot of mystique about her too. After gaining the Blue Riband, there was almost a sense of, ‘Well, what can she really do? Can she go even faster?’ Her speed was always a big thing, but then safety also played a part. You didn’t want to be going too fast.

“Part of my job involved compiling the VIP passenger lists for the crew so they knew who needed a little bit of extra care and attention.

“That often meant meeting them off the ship at South-

ampton and ensuring they travelled on to London with no hiccups. I got to shake hands with [Russian composer Igor] Stravinsky – you don’t forget that in a hurry. “And the sound of her siren when she left port! Oh, it was wonderful, so deep it would shake your heart. I do hope they manage to salvage that from her.”

Alas, by the end of the 1960s, with the jet-age in full swing, the days of the transatlantic passenger liners had gone.

Over the following decades the SS United States was passed from pillar to post as various schemes, including plans to convert her into a casino and a hospital ship, came to nothing.

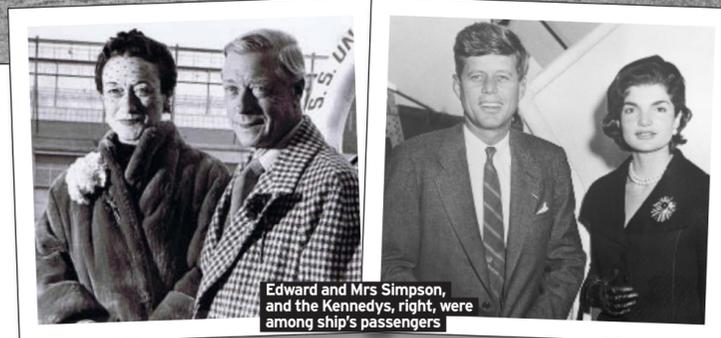
All the while her external and internal condition continued to deteriorate as the elements

took their toll. In 2024, having been laid up in Philadelphia since 1996, she was bought by Okaloosa County in Florida for \$1million and, in February 2025, towed to Mobile, Alabama, where preparation work has been ongoing ahead of her conversion into an artificial reef.

Now, bereft of her furnishings, fuel tanks, propellers, wiring, flooring, contaminants (including asbestos) and even funnels, all that remains is that one last journey from Mobile to the point of sinking off the north-west coast of Florida. There, she will sit at anchor for two days while final checks are made prior to being scuttled.

“The fact that ships are stripped and scuttled so they are in one piece is a real point of interest to the diving community,” says Mark Parry of the UK-based marine charity the Ocean Conservation Trust.

“They also become a focal point for ani-



Edward and Mrs Simpson, and the Kennedys, right, were among ship’s passengers

mals and invertebrates that grow on them. The metal becomes colonised, and then mobile fish species become interested in that over time.

“With artificial reefs, you have people who are interested in the history of the vessel, but

also people who are interested in the biology that surrounds that. When you think about the diving community, people might also choose to travel further to see the largest artificial reef in the world.

“That could benefit the local economy in

all sorts of ways, meaning the costs of sinking the vessel can be recouped within a relatively short time.”

HOWEVER, the conservationist says artificial reefs aren’t a suitable compensatory measure for the destruction of natural reefs.

“Nothing can compensate for the loss of the natural world,” he continues. “However, from a biological perspective, artificial reefs do increase the biodiversity of a given area by their presence. In that respect, they can be a good thing.”

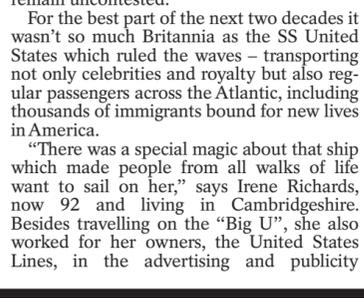
As for Irene, she has mixed feelings about SS United States’ deliberate sinking.

“She was an aristocrat, the very top of her class, which is why what’s due to happen is

sad,” she says. “But at least she’s not going for scrap. That was the thing that made me feel very, very unhappy, the thought that there would never be anything left of her. At least this way she will survive in some form.”

In fact she thinks it’s “curiously appropriate” she’s destined to become an agent of the sea. “She’s going to be absorbed by the sea,” Irene adds. “The sea will literally take her to its heart. That’s somewhat comforting, providing of course people will still be able to see her in her new location, otherwise I think it’s a waste of time. She’s got to be visible, even if the only way to see her is by going underwater.

“I would love to be able to see her one last time, but I don’t think I’m going to last that long! I love Florida, but I can’t say I’ve ever been diving. I’ll just have to remember her the way she was, the fastest and most beautiful ship in the world.”



Irene Richards met the VIPs