

# Civil War Buff Spotlights Fort Fisher

BY MARJORIE MEGIVERN

When Rod Gragg was a little boy, he began spending summer vacations at his grandparents' beachhouse a mile north of the ruins of the once-great fortress, Fort Fisher. Nearly 100 years before, it had been the site of a Civil War battle that sealed the fate of the Confederacy.

Young Gragg became intrigued by the occasional artillery shell fragment he picked up among the thickets and the cannon balls and bullets his cousins claimed to have found. Between these discoveries and his older brother's interest in the War Between the States, the boy acquired an immense curiosity about that military venture, as well as the particular battle site that became his playground.

Today, the grown-up Rod Gragg is educating a generation about the Civil War through three books he has authored, the newest just off the press. *Confederate Goliath*, published by Harper Collins and reviewed in this edition on page 56, joins *The Illustrated Confederate Reader* and *The Civil War Quiz and Fact Book* as expressions of his continuing fascination with this portion of American history.

Gragg, a genial, mild-mannered man, grew up in Conway, S. C. He recently returned there, accompanied by wife Cindy and their seven children, to re-open his public relations firm. "That's what I do to feed us," he explained. Writing is obviously his activity of choice, though not as consistently lucrative.

His communications career actually began in Charlotte, during his senior year in high school, when he was hired by WVCB radio as an announcer. "I had planned to be a commercial artist," he related, "but I got this radio job and discovered the AP (Associated Press) wire. Jay Worrell and Earl Milliken, owners of that station, had a great impact on me, as professionals and as human beings."

That was the beginning of a journalistic career that took him to Wilmington's WWAY-TV as news director and anchor, to Charlotte, where he worked at WBTV and wrote columns for the *Charlotte Observer*, and into

general freelance writing.

Gragg continued his absorption in Civil War history, however, and earned an MA degree from the University of South Carolina in American history, with a specialization in the Civil War.

"I decided to write my Master's thesis on Fort Fisher," he said, "and began my research at the Library of Congress. To my amazement I learned there were no books at all on the subject. I knew the Fort Fisher battle was an important and neglected subject, and that it was also a remarkable human story."

That was 1976. His research continued for 12 more years before the actual writing began in 1988. As he wrote other books for Harper Row, (now Harper Collins) he continually researched Fort Fisher and made astounding discoveries along the way.

"This book is based largely on primary resources," he explained. "There were so many of them! I kept finding wonderful, rich materials in the form of diaries, letters, ships' logs, memoirs, and journals."

He was particularly impressed with one visit to the library of William and Mary College, alma mater of Col. William Lamb, the leading figure of the Fort Fisher battle. "I asked to see Lamb's diaries and was asked which ones. I said, 'All of them,' and pretty soon the librarian appeared, wheeling a huge cart full of files out to me. Lamb had kept a diary every day of his life, beginning in college."

Other resources included archives (including those at Duke University and University of North Carolina, as well as the U.S. Army Military Institute), general academic sources such as university manuscripts, and historical societies and local libraries. "I ended up with a big file cabinet on Fort Fisher," Gragg noted, "and 1,000 pages of notes. This was the best-documented war in American history."

The material was organized and the book written. Then came the challenge of getting it published. "I tried to sell it to every major publisher and to regional ones and I acquired

a fat file of rejections," he said. "Everyone said they'd never heard of Fort Fisher and they'd never heard of me. To them, the book was just too regional."

The persistent writer and historian was undaunted. Having had two previous books published by Harper Row, he got more than a simple turndown from his editor there. "They rejected it the first time, but I got some good advice on revising it," Gragg said. "I decided to make it a 'people' story instead of just an historical account of a battle."

Back to the drawing board! Gragg drew on those rich primary resources to portray in intimate and abundant detail every officer who was prominent in the Fort Fisher battle. The second time it was submitted, *Confederate Goliath* was accepted by Harper Collins and made its public debut early this year.

Gragg is still surprised by the response to his book: glowing reviews, brisk sales, warm response on the part of readers. "I think this interest is partly due to the recent CBS series on the Civil War," he said, "and also the movie, 'Glory.'"

The answer may actually lie in the great number of Civil War buffs in America, both North and South. "No event in American history has attracted as many devoted students as the Civil War," Gragg noted in the introduction to his *Civil War Quiz and Fact Book*. "Publishers remain unable to exhaust the national appetite for new information about the conflict."

There are several unique aspects of the war that attract devotees, he pointed out. "It was the first modern war and the last 'romantic' one. It resulted in the greatest number of casualties (620,000) of any conflict, and it was a war of great irony, with brother fighting against brother and crucial battles that could have gone either way. It produced acts of memorable courage, unpredictable cowardice, military foolishness and bungling, as well as acts of genius."

As a competent journalist, Gragg wanted to write about this crucial battle that brought the



STAFF PHOTO BY MARJORIE MEGIVERN

**ROD GRAGG** takes a break from promotion of his new book in the offices of his Conway, S.C., public relations firm.

collapse of Fort Fisher with balance and accuracy. "I wanted to portray it exactly as it happened."

Now, with the publication behind him, writer/public relations man/husband and father was still not free of the project. Much time was spent in early spring promoting the book through media interviews and book signings. While he was still very much interested in Civil War history, he said he was not working on another book at present.

"My chief preoccupation, aside from my job," he said, "is my family. With seven children, you can imagine that there's not time for anything else."

Two other books Gragg has brought to publication focus on different moments in history. They are *The Old West Quiz and Fact Book* and *Pirates, Planters and Patriots*.

## ART PLUS GALLERY

Local Art • Pottery • Jewelry  
Art Supplies • Gifts  
"THE UNUSUAL"

Sunset Beach Bridge  
Prints • Art Tee Shirts

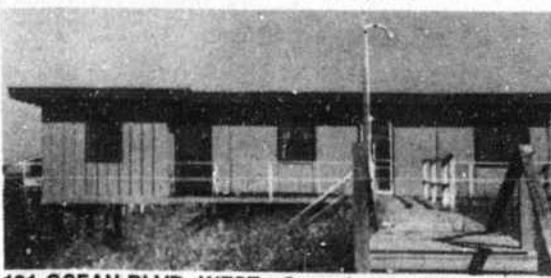
Selected for your pleasure by  
Artist • Owner  
Betty Peat

Open Mon-Sat 10-5  
Calabash Post Office Complex  
Hwy. 179 • (919)579-9929

## INVESTMENT COTTAGES AT FABULOUS HOLDEN BEACH



617 OCEAN BLVD. WEST—Oceanfront duplex. Upstairs—3 BR, 1-1/2 baths, C/H/A, hot tub on porch. Downstairs—1 BR, bath, furnished, window air. \$170,000.



191 OCEAN BLVD. WEST—Oceanfront, 4 BR, 1-1/2 baths, furnished, very deep lot. \$130,000.



546 OCEAN BLVD. WEST—Second row duplex. Upstairs—4 BR, 2 baths, furnished, C/H/A, hardwood floors. Downstairs—3 BR, 2 baths, furnished, heat and AC. \$119,000.



260 OCEAN BLVD. EAST—Oceanfront duplex—2 BR, 1 bath each side. Furnished, carpet, new showers, bulkheaded lot. \$100,000.



254 OCEAN BLVD. EAST—3 BR, 1 bath, furnished, carpet, screened porch. \$90,000.

### CANAL LOT

50-ft. canal lot at 105 Scotch Bonnet Drive. Septic tank, floating dock and boat ramp.

\$55,000

FINANCING AVAILABLE • GREAT RENTALS • CALL (919)754-9600