

Remember The Maine

by Lynne Belluscio

I came into the office the other day, and on the library table was a pretty unusual mirror. I had never seen anything like it. It was about two feet square and made of copper with a small mirror in the center. There were hat hooks on it and I was told it hung in the front hall and the woman who donated it said that her kids said it was ugly and it needed to find a new home. The unusual part of the mirror is that it has the relief of three men, and at the bottom it says: "Remember the Maine." The men are "Dewey," "Nobson" and "Sampson" - - all heroes of the Spanish American War.

Most people don't know a lot about the Spanish American War. In fact, it only lasted ten weeks. Tensions had been mounting between the United States and Spain over the fight for independence in Cuba. But economic factors may have played a more important role. Cuba exported 90% of its commodities to the United States and 40% of its imports came from the U.S. American businessmen invested heavily in the devalued sugar market.

President McKinley proceeded with caution, but he had sent the U.S.S. Maine to Havana after riots broke out. On February 15, 1898, an explosion ripped through the U.S.S. Maine, and it sunk. Two hundred and fifty-five men lost their lives, and the American press led by Joseph Pulitzer of the *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst of the *New York Journal*, capitalized on sensational headlines. "Remember the Maine, and To Hell With Spain" became the battle cry. And although it was never clearly determined who was responsible for the explosion, Spain became the target for American aggression. The Spanish American War impacted the Spanish holdings in the Caribbean and in the Pacific.

The men immortalized on the mirror were war heroes. Richard Pearson Hobson had graduated from the Naval Academy in 1889. During the War, he was ordered to take command of the collier Merrimac (coal tender) and to sink it in the Santiago Harbor, blocking in the Spanish fleet. It was con-



sidered a suicide, but Hobson was able to scuttle the ship, although not in the shallow part of the harbor. He and the six men of his crew were captured and held in Spanish prison. Upon his release, he was hailed as a hero. After his career in the Navy, he was elected to Congress, where he was a strong proponent of prohibition laws. (He was also a close friend of Nikola Tesla, and Tesla was best man in Hobson's wedding.)

George Dewey graduated from the Naval Academy in 1858, and distinguished himself in the Navy during the Civil War. At the onset of the Spanish American War he was in China aboard the Olympia. He received orders to proceed to the Bay of Manila. In six hours, on May 1, 1898, he sunk or captured the entire Spanish Pacific fleet. Spanish domination in the Pacific ended.

After the war, a special military medal was struck in honor of Dewey's victory at Manila Bay. Known as the Dewey Medal, it

was awarded to every American officer, sailor and marine present at the battle. The medals were designed by Daniel Chester French, sculptor of the Lincoln Memorial, and produced by Tiffany and Company. Because Dewey's image was on the medal, he wore his medal reversed.

William Sampson was born in Palmyra, New York and graduated from the Naval Academy in 1857. He served during the Civil War and became the Superintendent of the Naval Academy. Two days after the sinking of the Maine, he was assigned as Chairman of the Board of Inquiry of the incident. In March he assumed command of the North Atlantic Squadron.

Later in the war, Sampson would take credit for the victory

at Santiago Bay, but his omission of the efforts of Rear Admiral Winfield Scott Schley would eventually come to haunt him. A special tribunal acknowledged Schley's contribution at Santiago Bay (but he was not included on the mirror) Sampson Air Force Base on the east side of Seneca Lake, which is now the Sampson State Park, known for its white albino deer, is named for William Sampson.

So what about the mirror? Well it's not as rare as I thought. In fact it is pretty common and they come up on eBay regularly. But this "ugly" commemorative piece has found a home at the LeRoy Historical Society, and might serve as a hat holder in our office for the time being.

