

THE CHAB ON HISTORY CHANNEL

by Serge Noirsain

The phone rang on the evening of June 13 or 14, 2001. It was Norman Cohen, producer of pictures for History Channel TV. He was calling from Cherbourg and explained that he wished to interview me in the framework of a two-hour documentary film that he was making on the *CSS Alabama* and the Confederate ships built in Great Britain during the Civil War. I agreed to meet him on June 16. Hubert Leroy and Gerald Hawkins were more than willing to accompany me on this unprecedented CHAB venture in the world of media and television. After all, had they not been the players directly or indirectly responsible for the success of my recent book?

Norman Cohen, who speaks fluent French, and Mike De Witt are the co-producers of *Kraylevich Productions Inc.* with headquarters in a commercial building of 30th street in New-York. Since many years Norman Cohen has been cherishing the idea of producing a documentary film on the European aspects of the American Civil War. The echoes in the US of the archeological diving campaigns on the wreck of the *CSS Alabama* have formed the backbone of his long-term project. However, Norman has failed to find a French-speaking historian who has ever tackled the subject in depth. Good fortune smiled at me when Mrs. Ulane Bonnel, who was then in Cherbourg, handed him a copy of my book. Judging by Norman's questions on the phone, it was evident that he had meticulously examined my work and found in it what he had been looking for so long.

Thus, the three CHAB musketeers headed for Cherbourg in Gerald's car and in the afternoon of June 15, they checked in the Naval Circle where rooms had been booked for them. By coincidence, we bumped into Norman Cohen and other members of his crew while waiting for the elevator to our rooms. It was decided that the interview would take place the following morning at the Fort du Roule, a prestigious historic site that overlooks the commercial and military harbours of Cherbourg.

Sunday, 10 AM. The deep blue sky contrasted sharply with the downpour of the previous day. The sun had come out, illuminating the imposing panorama that lay before us. I had expected to perform in front of a portable video camera, but as can be seen on the accompanying photographs, a full array of professional movie and sound equipment had followed us all the way up to the fort. Upon arrival, the American film crew lost no time in setting up this sophisticated gear while the curious bystanders were politely requested to remain outside the shooting perimeter.

Norman briefly explained how he wished to proceed once the camera and sound recorder had been properly tuned: before each sequence, he would ask me specific questions on the contents of my book and on the famous duel between the *CSS Alabama* and the *USS Kearsage*. I had naively thought that these questions would be submitted beforehand so that I could go through some sort of rehearsal. It was not to be so, and I was immediately put on the firing line. The camera started rolling and I answered each of Norman's questions in the best manner possible (thank God, in French!) while constantly fixing the lens and trying to remain in the field of view pre-determined for each shooting sequence. At one point in time, the producer asked me to walk up and down the old guard's path with, in the background, the panoramic view of the eastern and western passes of the harbor. Believing that an American TV serial was being shot, a crowd of curious tourists and spectators lingered behind the cameraman and the sound engineer. The instructions of the latter coupled with the questions of the producer constantly drew my full attention to the point that I felt no stage fright. It was just like one of those CHAB Saturday afternoon presentations. Norman's queries reminded me of a high school examination. He had no

doubt dissected my book, very flattering indeed, and he wanted me to repeat in front of the camera what he had read.

Once the interview over, I felt uncertain of my performance in the same way a scholar feels after an oral exam. My barometer, that is to say the smiles on Gerald's and Hubert's faces, somewhat reassured me. Norman Cohen and Mike De Witt relieved me of any remaining anxieties: no sequence needed to be re-done. Once more, the CHAB had come out of it with all the honours of war!

But let us remain modest. This interview is in no way a documentary on Serge Noirsain's book. I am barely a component of a documentary film that I believe will include other interesting testimonies such as those of Jerry K. Williams (the British specialist in Birkenhead) and perhaps of Graham Hopner of Dumbarton (Glasgow) who provided invaluable help during my research on the blockade runners. During the interview I also mentioned the two books on the subject written by professor Balace of the Liège University. Of all the material published in French on the European policies during the American conflict, his work remains a definite reference.

Finally, our new Honorary President, Ethel Seabrook Nepveux, is also on the list of people to be interviewed by History Channel and I trust that she will, as always, speak highly of the CHAB.

As Hubert Leroy said in the aftermath: *"Not only will this fabulous event remain engraved in our memory, it will also be remembered as one of the high tides of our association!"*



The camera of History Channel is rolling at the Fort du Roule with Cherbourg's military harbor in the background.



Facing the camera, Serge is interviewed by Norman Cohen on the history of Confederate ship building in Europe.



Pointing out to the area where the action took place, Serge describes the duel between the Alabama and the Kearsage.



The three CHAB musketeers (Hubert, Serge and Gerald) pose for a photograph after the emotions and stress of the interview.