

By Catherine Kozak
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It has all the elements of a compelling action drama: violent storms, heroism in the face of danger, triumph over tremendous odds.



But the saga of the Pea Island Life-Saving Station on the Outer Banks and its all-black crew - the nation's only one - has never been told in a full-length feature film.

Until now.

"Rescue Men: The Story of the Pea Island Surfmens" is scheduled to premiere next month on Roanoke Island.

Allan Smith, president of DreamQuest Productions, said he was inspired to produce a film about the Pea Island surfmen about two years ago after he read "Fire on the Beach," a chronicle about the station written in 2001 by David Wright and David Zoby.

"I was hooked," Smith said.

The California filmmaker said he used a combination of stock video and photography, historic photographs, interviews with descendants and historians, special effects and graphics, and re-enactments shot about a year ago at Chicamacomico Life-Saving Station in Rodanthe.

He said he is negotiating with a cable channel to show the film.

When the Pea Island station opened in 1878, it had an all-white crew, said James Charlet, Chicamacomico's site manager.

But a series of botched rescues resulted in the keeper being fired.

In an effort to attract and keep black surfmen,

Richard Etheridge, a former slave from Manteo and a soldier, was appointed in 1880 as the station's new keeper, overseeing an all-black crew.

Until then, there were crews of black and white men at stations, Charlet said, but black members always were kept on the bottom rung, employed as a cook or as the lowest-level surfman.

In 1996, 100 years after the fact, the men of the Pea Island station, which was then six miles north of Chicamacomico, were posthumously awarded the U.S. Lifesaving Medal for the daring rescue of the crew of the E.S. Newman.

During a hurricane in October 1896, two of the Pea Island crew bound themselves to each another with a line and, while clutching

another line held by surfmen on the beach, plunged into wild surf to bring the Newman's nine sailors safely to shore.

Charlet said the Pea Island surfmen proved to be exceptional members of the service.

"These guys knew in their heart of hearts that they'd have to excel to be considered equal," Charlet said.

Even today, Smith said he found it difficult to find substantial support for the project, including from the Outer Banks.

Smith said that a woman walked up to him after a presentation about the film last month in Manteo.

"She said, rather sternly, 'I'm embarrassed that somebody had to come all the way from Hollywood to tell a story that's in our backyards,' " he recounted.

Charlet said he hopes Smith's film spurs more interest in the history of the U.S. Lifesaving Service and the role surfmen such as those at Pea Island played in the nation's maritime industry.

"It's almost unbelievable that that much history has been ignored," he said. "Hardly anyone has ever heard of it."

The precursor to the Coast Guard, the service had 400 stations on the nation's coasts, Charlet said, each employing seven to nine men.

Between 1871 and 1915, the service is credited with saving more than 177,000 lives.

Compare that to the more famous Pony Express, Charlet said, which operated for only about 18 months:

"It's because movies were made about it."

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