

# Columbia River Maritime Museum

## *Shipwrecks, navigation and crossing the bar*

Story & photos by Tracy Beard

The Columbia River Maritime Museum sits on the shore of the Columbia River in Astoria, Oregon. According to Membership and Marketing Manager Caroline Webben, “The museum’s mission is to educate people about the history of the Columbia River and its tributaries.”

The museum boasts a movie theater, numerous maritime vessels, maritime artifacts and the National Historic Landmark Lightship *Columbia*, a floating lighthouse. (*This fully renovated ship will return and be on display in June 2022.*) Various exhibits chronicle the river’s extensive history, bring to light its unique influences, and expose its unprecedented dangers.

The Columbia is the largest river in the Pacific Northwest region of North America. Originating in the Rocky Mountains of British Columbia, Canada, it flows northwest, then veers south through Washington state and finally heads west, slicing between Oregon and Washington as it makes its way to the sea.

The bar between the Pacific Ocean and the mouth of the river is known as the Pacific Graveyard, home to more than 2,000 shipwrecks. This vast river was an integral part of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, instrumental in the local fur trading businesses, and influential in naval history.

The most popular exhibit at the museum is the retired Coast Guard cutter located in the museum’s front window. *Semper Paratus*, “Always Ready,” is their motto, and today’s Coast Guard works 24/7 to keep the Columbia River safe. Daily routines consist of maintaining hundreds of navigational buoys, markers and lights when members are not out rescuing those in need.

The Mapping Gallery showcases numerous maps of different people’s interpretations of the globe throughout history. Focusing on North America, it is interesting to see how over time and through multiple

explorations, the maps have grown more intricate and detailed. The progression is fascinating.

The new Shipwrecks section is scheduled to open this June. “The concept is not about a particular shipwreck,” explained Webben, “but about what causes shipwrecks, the consequences, and how shipwrecks have affected how we travel on the river and the ocean. History has romanticized shipwrecks, but we want to learn from them,” she said.

The exhibit’s primary theme encompasses a broad educational view, but several well-known wrecks will be highlighted. The discovery of ships and the archeology involved in the process will be another exciting part of the exhibit.

Weather plays a significant role in everything that transpires on the river. Visitors can take turns standing against the green wall on stage as a meteorologist and report the day’s weather. An entire wall is designated for the Science of Storms section, which includes a video with real-time weather information on storms, rain, atmospheric pressure and more.

Although the museum offers a plethora of exciting info, from how the two nearby jetties function with the river to a peaceful return of Japanese family legacy flags, I found the “Crossing the Bar” exhibit the most interesting.

Bar pilots are essential personnel. They navigate ships in and out of the Columbia River, maintaining commerce year-round. The Bar, or Pacific Graveyard, originated at the mouth of the Columbia River when the freshwater slowed down and dumped sediment. This area is one of the most dangerous crossings in the world. Wind and the violent collision of waves from the ocean and the river create waves reaching 40 feet high, and the bar pilots risk their lives every day bringing ships in and out of the river. The ride back and forth is risky enough, but jumping from tiny boats onto the rope ladder to climb aboard each ship is chilling.

“I would like people to walk away with an understanding of how that body of water affects us as a community, as individuals and as businesses,” Webben said, “and for



**Bar Pilot Pulling Boat** The entrance to the Columbia River is one of the most dangerous in the world. Skilled pilots are required to guide vessels in and out of the river. Before 1965, pilots used small boats (like the one pictured at right) to transfer between the pilot schooner *Columbia* and vessels off the mouth of the river. Boats of this type were in use on the Pacific Coast for more than 100 years. This sturdy pulling boat has short oars so that the crew can get closer alongside a ship. Timing his leap, the pilot grasps a Jacob’s ladder hung from the side of the ship to scramble up to the deck. Disembarking from the ship can be even more hazardous, especially in rough seas.

The boat has thole pins in place of oar locks. With a sudden surge against the ship, pins would break away, whereas oarlocks would hold, snapping the oars and injuring the oarsmen.

On a stormy night in September 1962, Captain Edgar Quinn and two oarsmen were cast adrift after capsizing. Driven by 60-knot winds, Captain Quinn and oarsman Donald Nelson came ashore through the surf 40 miles north of the Columbia, 17 hours later. The second oarsman, Bill Wells, perished in the incident.

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them to realize what it means to Astorians, Oregonians and Americans.” The various boats, movies, interactive exhibits and informational placards give visitors an inside look at how this 1,243-mile waterway has shaped the civilization and the area’s economy for thousands of years. With plenty to entertain people of all ages, spend a few hours or the entire day, and don’t forget to stop in the museum for some memorabilia to take home.



**Celebrate Columbia River Maritime Museum’s 60th Anniversary • May 11\***

1702 Marine Drive, Astoria, Ore 97103  
Museum open 9:30am – 5pm

FREE Admission! Please bring a canned food donation for a featured non-profit.

\*Also the anniversary of Capt. Robert Gray sailing into the mouth of the Columbia River, May 11, 1792 ... a coincidence??

**Party on the Plaza 3–6pm**

•Live music by local band “The Yard Dogs”

*Family Activities:*

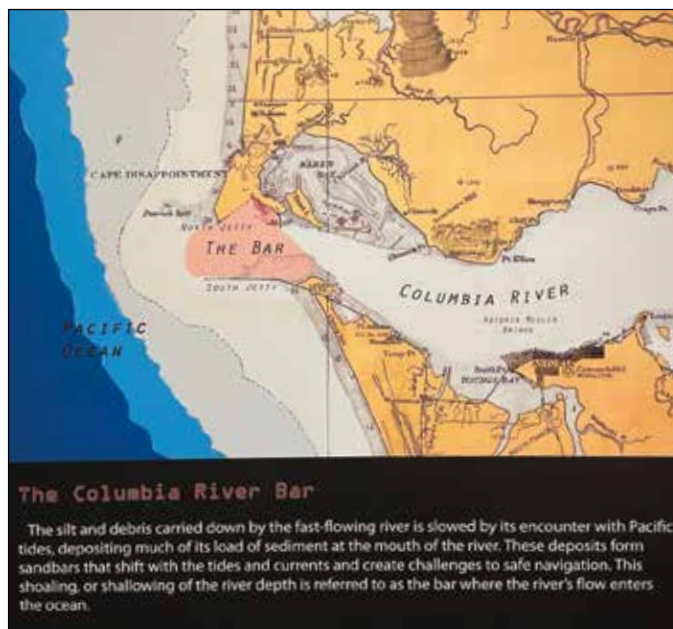
- Temporary Tattoo Station
- Popcorn & Pirate “Booty” • Cupcakes

Special Member Recognition all month, including double discount in the Museum store

More info on the museum’s website at [www.crrm.org](http://www.crrm.org). Phone: 503-325-2323

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Tracy Beard writes about luxury and adventure travel, traditional and trendy fine dining and libations for regional, national and international magazines. She is in her seventh year as CRR’s “Out & About” columnist. She recently returned to Longview after living for several years in Vancouver, Wash.



**Special Attraction!**  
**MEET THE AUTHORS**

Book Signing May 11, 2–4pm at the Museum  
*The Tidewater Reach: Field Guide to the Lower Columbia River in Poems and Pictures.* by Robert Michael Pyle and Judy VanderMaten.



By Tracy Beard

**PROVISIONS**

ALONG THE TRAIL

**Polenta and Herb Baked Eggs**

- 2 cups water
- ½ cup fine polenta or cornmeal
- ½ cup fresh or frozen corn
- ¾ cup grated fontina cheese
- Salt and pepper
- 2 Tbl. sour cream
- ¼ cup drained diced tomato
- 4 large eggs
- 1 Tbl. fresh chives – chopped
- 1Tbl. fresh basil – chiffonade

Heat oven to 400 degrees.

Bring water to boil in a saucepot and slowly whisk in polenta. Stir for 15 minutes. Add corn and cook for five more minutes. Stir in ½ cup cheese, season with salt and pepper and stir in sour cream. Coat an 8 x 8 baking dish with nonstick spray. Pour polenta into the dish. Scatter the tomatoes throughout the polenta. Smooth out the polenta and make four wells. Crack an egg into each well and season with salt and pepper. Sprinkle the remaining cheese on top. Place in the oven until the egg whites are firm and the yolks are still runny. Top with fresh basil and chives, and serve immediately.

**Brunch is not complete without the perfect cocktail!**

Try my version of the French 75 (recipe above).



- 1 ½ ounces gin
  - ¾ ounce (1½ Tbl.) fresh lemon juice
  - ¾ ounce (1½ Tbl.) simple syrup – equal parts sugar and water boiled and cooled
  - 2 to 3 ounces Prosecco
  - Lemon peel for garnish
- Pour gin, lemon juice and simple syrup into a cocktail shaker with ice. Shake and pour into a champagne glass. Add Prosecco and top with a lemon peel twist.

**Waffles with Toffee Sauce**

makes 6 Belgian waffles

**Waffle**

- 1 ¾ cup all purpose flour
  - 2 tablespoons sugar
  - 1 tablespoon baking powder
  - ¼ teaspoon salt
  - 2 eggs
  - 1 ¾ cup milk
  - ½ cup melted butter
  - 1 teaspoon vanilla
- Mix dry ingredients together in a bowl. Mix egg yolks, milk, vanilla and melted butter in another bowl. Whip egg whites into soft peaks. Add dry mix to wet mix. Fold in egg whites. Cook waffles in a Belgian waffle iron until golden brown. Keep warm in a 250-degree oven until all are cooked.

**Toffee Sauce**

- 4 tablespoons butter
  - ½ cup heavy whipping cream
  - ½ cup brown sugar
  - 1 teaspoon vanilla
- Place butter, brown sugar and cream in a medium saucepot. Cook on medium until it comes to a simmer. Lower the temp a bit. Cook and stir until thickened, about 10-12 minutes. Set aside.



**Toppings**

- Whipped cream
  - Toasted almonds
  - Flaked sea salt
- Serve waffles with toffee sauce, toasted almonds and whipped cream. Sprinkle with flaked sea salt to balance the flavors. Sausage or bacon make a terrific accompaniment.