

Post from the other Coast: A visit to the Graveyard of the Pacific

Steve Brookman

Actually, the closest we got to the actual “graveyard” was the lookout platform on the south jetty in Fort Stevens State Park at the mouth of the Columbia River. It was a rare sunny June day, almost calm, with only a moderate swell rolling in from the Pacific. The infamous bar of the Columbia River, one of the most hazardous stretches of water in the world, was behaving, belying its notorious past that has claimed over 2000 ships and 700 lives.

My wife, Susan, and I were on a short vacation to visit Oregon's coast. Susan had picked Newport, OR as a cool destination to run her next marathon. I looked forward to visiting a coast that I had not explored before. While the weather gods did not smile on the runners, the temps got into 80's which is not good for running and very uncharacteristic of the Pacific NW in June, it was great for sightseeing.

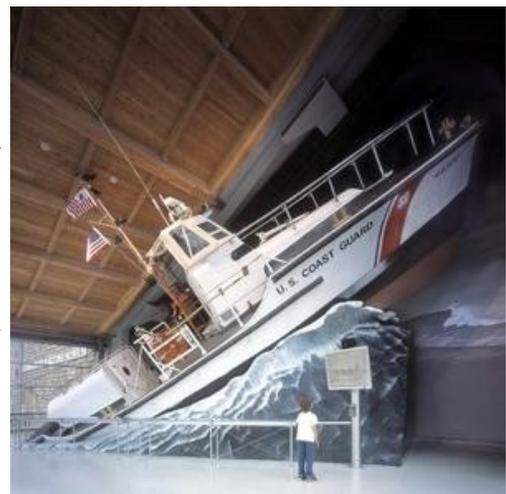
It would be hard to find a coast that is more antithetical from New Jersey's than Oregon's. Steep cliffs, pounding surf, miles of an unforgiving lee shore with only a few distant harbors and with little sheltered water in those harbors. So it wasn't surprising that I didn't find many traditional *small* craft during our visit. Most vessels had to be large and seaworthy enough to survive the only water available to them, the open ocean.



Newport is a unique harbor tucked under the iconic Yaquina Bridge with a real working fishery and restaurants, tourist shops, and upscale galleries jumbled in together. It is also home of the Oregon Coast Aquarium and Rouge Brewery, either one would make the trip there worthwhile. Leaving Newport, we pulled over several times during the scenic drive up the coast to see the sights, witnessed gray whales spouting, also viewed vintage aircraft on display in the gigantic blimp hangar at the Tillamook Aviation Museum and had some cheese and ice cream cones for breakfast at the Tillamook Cheese Factory.

The highlight of the trip though was our visit to the Columbia River Maritime Museum in Astoria. I have been fortunate to have visited many museums and seaports over the years and the CRMM is one of the best. Susan and I almost missed our hotel checkout as we lost track of time wandering through their wonderful displays.

While there are many excellent exhibits the focus of the museum is on that most dangerous body of water, the Columbia River Bar. The skill and bravery of the Coast Guard and Bar Pilots is displayed through videos, story boards and most impressively, a real rescue boat crashing up a 45 degree wave, depicting an at sea rescue.





For 100 years the bar pilots rowed out in small boats like these to guide ships over the treacherous shoals. They had thole pins instead of oar locks that would sheer off rather than break the oars if the boat slammed too hard against the ship. Notice the rope braided through the gunwales for fenders. These days they have 2 highly customized pilot boats and a helicopter but the job is still harrowing as we watched videos of the pilots leaping over heaving seas grabbing on to rope ladders that looked like they could have been in a Pirates of the Caribbean movie. As recently as 2006 a pilot drowned after falling during a transfer.

The museum has a nice collection of models on display also, most depicting the history of the Columbia River and several full size ones also, including this 26' double ended gill netter with it's loose footed sprit sail.

If for any reason you can get to the Pacific Northwest be sure to make it to Astoria to visit this outstanding museum. And you might as well add a scenic drive down the coast to Newport, the Black IPAs at Rogues really makes it worth the trip.

