

The Newcomer

The ocean unfurled its surf to my right as I walked along the beach toward the headland of Cape Disappointment. The breeze was from the southwest and almost warm. There was a bench up ahead and I decided to rest for a few minutes before beginning the steep climb up the Cape. The bench had a memorial plaque, the person honored I noticed was born in 1899. The sun broke through the marine layer of clouds and now it was really warm. I stretched out on the bench and closed my eyes.

I don't know how long I napped but when I woke up the landscape was changed. There were no longer sand dunes stretching out between me and the sea. In fact, I was almost at the water's edge. How odd. It was still warm and sunny and I started off again on the trail. It was now just a track. I felt disoriented by my nap but oddly energized and I assumed I had slept deeply. The trail into the forest was getting darker and darker because enormous western red cedar blocked out the sky. This too seemed unfamiliar to me but the beauty of these immense giants dazzled me. I imagined I might see Emily Carr at her easel nearby. I trudged up and up through the forest and finally reached a gap in the trees near the top and saw the vast Columbia river and right below me, Baker Bay. Where I expected to see the marina, however, I saw only a few large sailing vessels some distance out to sea. A small boat was being rowed by several men out to one of the ships. It rode low in the water and the men rowing it strained through the light chop.

It was a totally surprising and lovely scene. I must have come out at an overlook I had never visited before. I wished I had remembered to bring my binoculars on this walk. The trail ended at this gap. I had planned to hike out to the west side of the Cape but from where I stood there was no way to the west. All I could do was turn around. I was new to this area and I was used to finding myself in unfamiliar territory, gazing on unfamiliar scenes. "Wait till I tell Bob about what I saw today!" I thought to myself. My neighbor Bob had been fishing the Columbia all his life and was always able to identify what I had seen on my walks. "He'll tell me I was seeing some annual regatta of tall ships or some other special sailing event." I headed back down the hill.

Bob wasn't home. I don't know why but that date I had seen on the bench – 1899 – kept coming up in my mind like an appointment I had to remember. I am a retired school teacher – 4th grade - and now I have the time to let my mind go wherever my curiosity takes me. I googled 1899.

May 9, 1899 the Quarantine station at Knappton is opened

Nov. 28, 1899 Wreck of Lightship Columbia #50

I had already visited the quarantine station museum and frankly the photo I saw there of a young man's naked torso covered in small pox blisters made me gag. I turned my attention to the story of the Coast Guard vessel, Lightship Columbia No. 50 but before I could finish the first paragraph I heard Bob pull into his drive in his beloved 1971 Chevy truck.

I was out the door before he reached his front steps. And before I could ask a coherent question Bob suggested we stroll over to the Ship Shape, his favorite Tavern. Luckily, they also serve fresh oysters and a wonderful clam chowder. As I chowed down, Bob finished his first stout and assured me there was no regatta underway. He ordered his second stout and regaled me with the story of that 1899 wreck, the

Columbia No. 50, a Coast Guard lightship that was pulled off its station 5 miles from the mouth of the Columbia. Fierce winds and waves managed to break each of its 3 anchor cables and set it adrift. Given its duty as a lightship, essentially a floating lighthouse, the ship had no engines and the crew scrambled to set sail when it became clear the boat was breaking free. Their assignment had been to illuminate the passage for vessels as they crossed the treacherous Columbia River bar, the so-called grave yard of the Pacific. Now they were in trouble.

In those days there was no jetty to modify the Bar's dangerous characteristics and, in any case, all sensible mariners would be hold up out to sea until the storm past. This meant the lightship was all on its own. Communications with the radio station on shore were reduced to crackling bursts of sound as thunder followed streaks of lightening across the sky. The wind was ferocious. The skipper had but one choice – with all sail set - he aimed his ship toward the sandy beach beneath McKenize Head and ran her deep aground. The crew, though soaking wet and bruised, escaped without serious injury.

The salvage operation would take another couple of pints and was a good tale in and of itself but I found I was tired from my long hike and eventually left Bob to his reflections on the sea. I walked along the channel to the harbor and the air had a bracing effect. I sat on a bench along the way and thought about the Columbia Bar. Again, I fell asleep but not for long.

When I awoke it was pitch black and a stiff breeze had come up. I thought I heard voices out on the water but realized I must be imagining things – there were no running lights visible, I could make out a faint light but had no idea what it might be. Then the sound came more clearly “Help! Help!” I ran to the edge of the seawall and strained my eyes into black water. There it was again! I looked frantically around for a boat but saw nothing. I was going to have to swim for it. I pulled off my sweater and boots and jumped off the seawall, calling “Here I am!” The water made my clothes heavy. “Hello! Hello!” I called out but now there was only the wind. I could not see anything. I was getting cold. Then out of the dark I saw a heavy row boat moving toward me. There was a man at the oars and a woman in the bow. “There he is” I heard her shout and then she called to me “Hang on! We are almost to you.” The boat suddenly swung toward me and one of the oars just missed my head. I think I swallowed some water when I ducked under to avoid it because I was coughing when I came back up. I was able to reach the gunnel and my rescuers managed to drag me aboard. The woman was dressed oddly. She had a long dress and a scarf like a bonnet over her head. The man seemed to be wearing an old oil skin coat. There was a single lantern in the bow near the woman and it cast a yellow light on us.

When I finally got my breath back I asked – “Did you hear it? There was someone in trouble out here.”

The woman and the man exchanged a glance. Then the man said, “Well you seemed to be the one trouble, Mister.”

“I went into the water to help the fellow I heard calling out” I explained – “didn't you hear him?”

“All we heard was you, Sir.” The woman said

“Well where are you coming from” I asked feeling irritable with embarrassment.

“The Clarence” the woman replied, “she's out there a way, waiting for the wind to die back before attempting the Bar.

“But you didn't wait?”

“No,” the woman said, “we couldn’t wait. My husband is a fine fisherman and we have managed very well. The mail barge that came out to us yesterday brought news of our son. He is up the river. A place called Knappton.”

“But Knappton isn’t a place anymore.

“Oh, that can’t be right sir – he sent a letter saying he was being sent to quarantine. That was written just 5 weeks ago”

“But we don’t do that anymore.”

The women looked alarmed, “Do what, Sir?”

“Keep people in quarantine.”

The woman and man exchanged another look. The man spoke next. “We’ll put you under the tarps and keep you warm for now. I reckon we are not far from this Knappton and then we shall see what is there.”

“No!” I protested – “Pull into the marina immediately. I tell you there is no more facility at Knappton. No, No No....”

I felt a warm hand on my arm and assumed the woman was trying to calm me down. I knew I was frightening her. I peered up at her and saw, to my amazement, the grizzled cheeks of my neighbor Bob.

“Bob! What are you doing here? Tell them the quarantine doesn’t exist anymore.”

“Tell who?” Bob’s grinned down at me and laughed. “I am glad to see you back among the living even if you still don’t make any sense!”

I looked around. I seemed to be in an infirmary. “What’s happened” I asked a little sheepishly. “What have I missed?”

“Oh, I don’t think you missed anything – sounds like you had a great adventure. I found you on the path between our houses when I got home. I couldn’t wake you up, you moaned and groaned. I got the medics and they brought you here. When they pumped your stomach, you were ranting like a banshee. “No, no not Knappton” you cried; “Don’t try the bar tonight” you shouted and then my personal favorite – hollered at the top of your lungs - “It can’t be 1899!”

Submitted by Cathy Cruikshank

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