



DRAWING BY ROLF KLEP

It was on his second voyage to the Pacific Northwest, entering the Pacific Ocean as before through the perilous passage around Cape Horn, that Gray claimed discovery of the Columbia River — which, as a matter of note, would have astonished the people who lived along the river for thousands of years and knew about it all along.

Gray stayed two weeks in the river. Afterward he sailed a second time to China. Later that year Vancouver, who had missed the river, sent one of his ships, the "Chatham" commanded by Lt. William Broughton, to explore the Columbia after he learned of Gray's claim. Broughton charted 100 miles upriver and named Mount Hood after an aristocrat sponsor of Vancouver's Northwest expedition, and as a result of his work, Vancouver attempted to claim discovery of the great river for himself (and, of course, for England's King George III).

Gray's claim, however, prevailed. When Britain and the United States squabbled over territorial claims to the Northwest in the 19th century, Gray's ship's logbook of his discovery was a critical factor that made Oregon and Washington two of the United States.

Although Gray put an end to the search for a liquid thoroughfare through the Americas (along with an overland jaunt by Lewis and Clark in 1803-06) that started when Columbus found them

in his way exactly 300 years earlier, a northern sea route between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans was navigated in the years 1903 to 1905 when Roald Amundsen of Norway sailed and drifted across the top of North America. And in 1969, the U.S. oil tanker "Manhattan" plowed a similar course through ice clogged Arctic waters accompanied by ice breakers. But, of course, the Panama Canal was built and has been operating for almost 80 years. And jet airplanes fly around the world in less than a day, which mocks the hardships and deaths of early globe girdling mariners who lived and died at the mercy of wind, water and disease.

This year the nations of the Americas are commemorating the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' first voyage in search of India. Some celebrate, others bitterly denounce the intrusion of Europe upon the western hemisphere and the consequences of half a millennium of conquest and epidemic. The intense eruption of controversy resembles the dispute between intellectuals of the 18th century in which Rousseau, Voltaire, et al, argued that the European discovery of the Americas had cost millions of lives and the wholesale destruction of native culture, had enslaved millions more, native and African, and was thus a blight upon the history of civilization.

A smaller, less controversial acclaim is paid this month to Robert Gray and the bicentennial

of his claim of discovery of the fabled Great River of the West on May 11, 1792. Yet the consequences have been a microcosm of all that Europe accomplished or ruined in this half of the world. Almost immediately the whites came in Gray's wake to trade, to settle, to supplant and eventually eradicate native culture. The great wild river has itself been tamed with dams, the massive forests on both sides of its banks logged and replaced with cities and farms, and the millions of salmon (which until only recently were so numerous it was claimed a person could walk across the wide river on their backs) have dwindled to only an endangered few. The exchange of a natural wilderness for a human one is relatively recent. The Pacific Northwest has been a last small corner for Western exploration, with the exception of the Poles and Antarctica. Gray opened up a major portion of the last frontier, yet the bicentennial celebration has less to do with his discovery of the great river than it does the present and future generations of native strangers who dwell among the vanished ruins of a more or less defenseless culture our predecessors overran.

The present tenants of the Columbia River basin inherit a legacy of raw exploitation and waste. The riches once so abundant have been despoiled, virtually all used up in less than a dozen generations. Even the big river has not escaped the pollution of modern society, known as one of the most radioactive rivers in the world as a result of Hanford plutonium and Trojan nuclear waste; and it is a garbage dump for towns and cities along its banks — industrial pollution is a major offender.

The present generation is bitterly divided about Gray's legacy, and each side of the controversy utilizes extremes in its arguments to exploit or preserve. On the one hand it might be considered that a great civilization has reached its maximum westward movement on the North American continent in the Pacific Northwest, on the other are the extreme environmental damages which an expanding population and its technology have wrought upon the landscape. It is unfortunate that what remains of Gray's legacy is coveted by the nation at large, including the water of the river itself. It is likely that the decisions have already been removed from local sayso. Just as likely, a massive earthquake that is predicted for sometime soon will rearrange the region into something very different.

Hail Columbia.

— MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

Richard Mickelson lives in Warrenton. He is a member and past president of the Pacific Art Guild.

Rolf Klep was a renowned marine artist and founder of the Columbia River Maritime Museum. He died in 1981.

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