



PHOTO BY JIM McCAFFERTY

BONES OF THE POTTER

BY JIM McCAFFERTY

Hard by busy West Marine Drive in Astoria, Oregon, lie the remains of one of the Columbia River's favorite steamboats, the *T. J. Potter*, submerged in the waters of Young's Bay except at low tide. Abandoned and burned for her metal, the *Potter's* bones have lain there since 1921, a forlorn reminder of a once glamorous and luxurious steamboat.

I scrambled down the twenty-foot bank, dodging blackberry brambles and getting only a few ugly gashes from the thorns, stumbling over overgrown rocks and logs, slipping on the rank sea grass, and stood at last on the keel, wet and black where the tide had just receded. Wavering a little from sixty odd years of immersion in Young's Bay, the keel still supported some ribs, green with moss and seaweed, a few fishing lines draped forlornly from them. I unlimbered the trusty Olympus.

A couple of kids rode up on their bikes and stopped. "Hoy," one shouted. "What you doing?"

"Taking pictures," I said. Seemed obvious to me.

"What is that?" the kid asked.

"Skeleton of a dinosaur," I replied. I know how to deal with smart kids.

"Ho, tell me another," he shouted, and chucked an empty Coke can at me. I dodged lightly, slipped on the muck and went down on one knee in the black slime. For the tenth time that day I realized I wasn't as spry as I once was.

Laughing happily, the kids rode off toward the Dairy Queen. I surveyed the dripping black smear on my pants and wiggled my knee; not broken, but bruised. The Coke can bobbed, iridescent red and incongruous among the flotsam, jetsam, and detritus of the riverbank. Traffic roared past on West Marine Drive. I looked at the wavering keel, the gaunt ribs. How the great have fallen, I thought.

It was not, of course, the skeleton of a dinosaur, it was the bones of the once-noble sidewheel steamboat *T. J. Potter*. I

snapped off a few artistic shots; the light was good, the tide was out, and I'd saved the camera from immersion in the not-too-clean water.

The *Potter* was launched in 1888 in Portland — that is, the hull was; the superstructure and engine were taken from the *Wide West*, a sternwheeler of 1877. So some modifications were necessary to convert to side wheels. Fast and sleek, the *Potter* operated on the Columbia for a season, running from Portland to Astoria; then the owners, the Oregon Railway & Navigation Company, decided to send her to Puget Sound. A riverboat through and through, the *Potter* sailed the Sound like a grand dame wading through the mud, daintily lifting one paddlewheel and then the other out of the water. Passengers, after one lurching trip, took other means of transport between Seattle and Tacoma unless their stomachs were of cast iron. The *Potter* came back to the river, a much happier environment for her slim hull. There, for 25 years, she was a crowd pleaser and legend of luxury.

Rebuilt in 1901, the *Potter* grew four feet, from 230 to 234 feet, and lost some of her grace and speed. She continued on the Portland to Astoria run, adding Ilwaco on Washington's Long Beach Peninsula during the summer. Eventually age caught up with her and she was condemned for passenger service in 1916. Serving as a barracks boat for a few years more was a severe come-down, and in 1921 (maybe 1925 — the records are vague) she was towed into Young's Bay in Astoria and burned for the salvage metal.

But there are people along the river who still recall her melodious chime whistle echoing from the pine-clad hills,

the chuff of her mighty steam engine, the sibilant shush of her paddles. They loved that boat.

I stumbled back up the bank clutching the camera, dragging a wave-battered plank. My wife, sitting stoically in the car, looked out the window.

"You've got your pants all muddy," she said. I knew that. I was also bleeding at the knee and from several blackberry gashes. "What do you want with that old chunk of wood?"

"It's a piece of the *Potter*," I said. (Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't; who can say. There was a lot of junk wood down there.) "It's a piece of history."

"Oh yeah," she said. "What are you going to do with it?"

"Well, how about mounting it over the mantle, with maybe a brass plaque telling about the *Potter*?"

"No way," she said firmly. She has distinct and, I feel, rather rigid ideas about home decoration. "You could split it up for kindling. It's just a piece of trash. It might burn nicely."

One person's junk is another person's treasure. It is now in the basement, along with a piece of planking from the *Charles W. Morgan*, a whaling ship, seventeen times around the Horn, restored and on display at Mystic Seaport in Connecticut. I don't know what to do with that either.

Jim McCafferty and his wife Caryl live in Astoria.

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