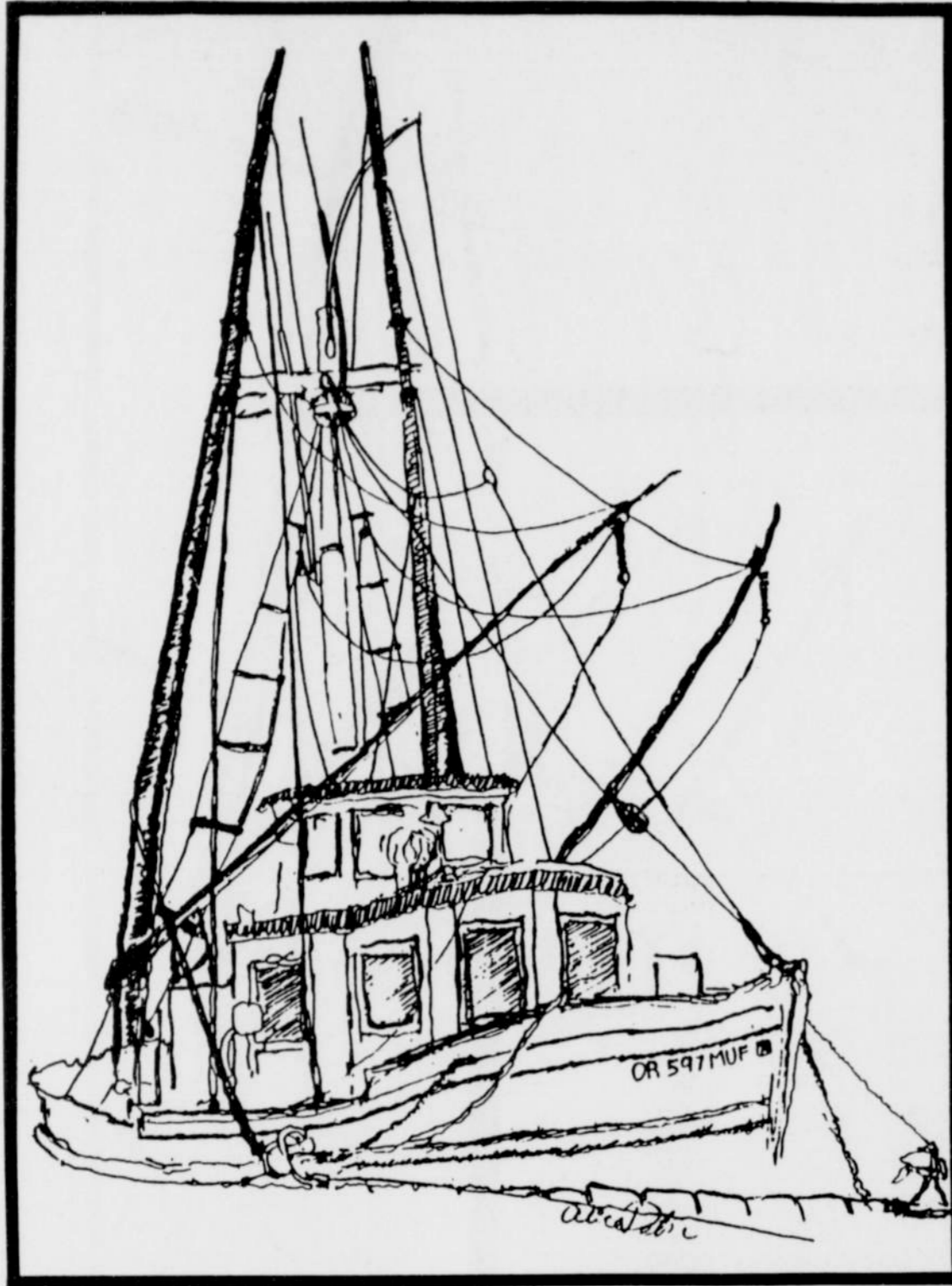


SCHOONERS ACROSS



ALICE ANN PETRIE

BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

Thirty years ago, in late August 1972, a small fishing boat capsized in the Columbia River Bar. This story is an account of that incident. It is dedicated to all mariners and anyone else who has been aboard a sinking vessel, those who survived and those who died — and to those who risk and sometimes lose their lives rescuing vessels in distress. More than 2,000 river and ocean craft have sunk in or near the Columbia River Bar in the last two centuries, and at least 700 persons have died. No records exist of the losses of native mariners who crossed the bar for thousands of years.

When a woman I loved left me in fear I would leave her and run off to sea, I ran off to sea because my woman left me. My new love was an ocean fish boat. Its name was *Falling Star*, and had fallen far, skinny and hoary with rotting wood and flaking paint and a perpetual starboard list the skipper set me to correct with heavy bags of salt I wrestled from the dock into the dark hold that smelled of fish and diesel and wedged against the portside timbers. The Skipper was a few years older than me, in his late 30s. His were fishing stock and he had worked decks since his baby fingers could tie a knot. He was bearded and his long hair was matted and twisted from wind and neglect. His clothes were oily and smelled of fish and sweat. He looked me over ill-humoredly the day I asked for a fishpuller's job. "You ever fished?" he asked. I nodded. Two seasons, I said, and named the boats, skippers and home ports. He raised a one fingered hand to his pale freckled face and scratched beard hair that straggled up his cheeks toward his eyes which burned harshly out of the mass of hair, and from somewhere in the tangle his teeth flashed like hungry sharks as I heard terse instructions to get my seabag on board and be ready to throw off mooring lines before first light in the morning.

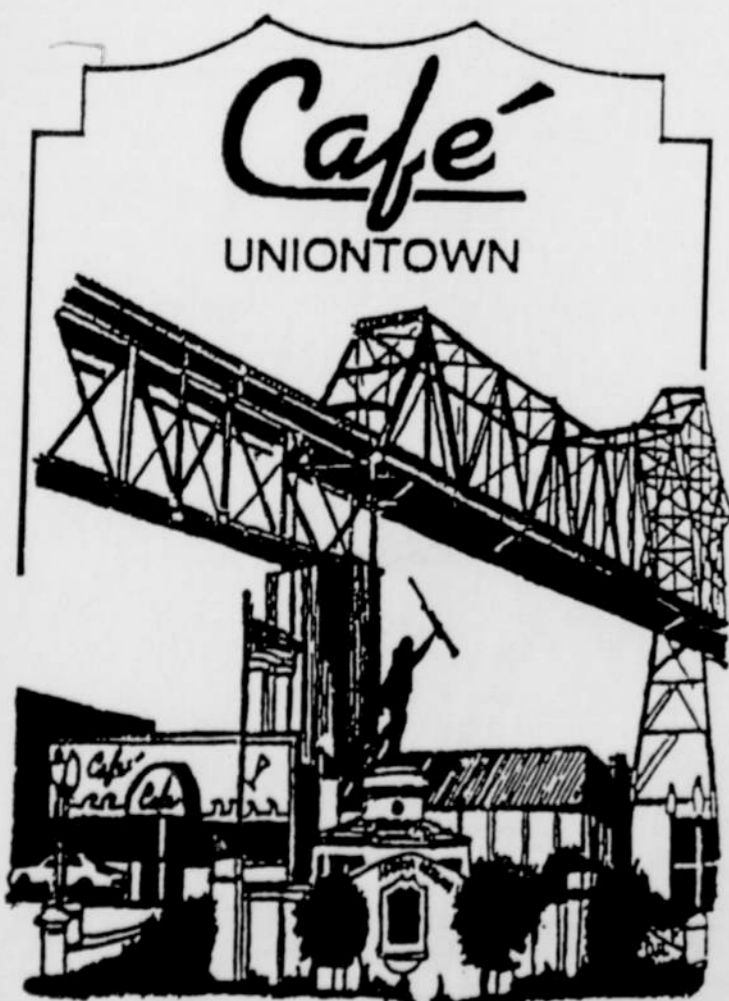
My new love was top heavy and continued to list despite the salt bags, slouched against ropes holding it captive to a salt and seagull stained pierhead. A round white topside bridge that ascended from the deck like a forehead above a pair of glass-paned eyes in the wheelhouse was cluttered with boxes filled with lines, nets and crabpots. Tuna poles, each a limbed thin conifer, rose worn and warped on either side of a spindly wood mast that made my love a hermaphrodite, and although I was suppressing sexuality because I missed the woman who took a new lover, this seahag would be a newer kind of love.

Fog was thick on the river when we crossed the sullen gray Columbia River bar early the next morning. We tied up at a cannery wharf for bait at Point Adams then ran in the river channel awhile and frivolously bounced behind an outgoing freighter. Plush and gleaming charter fishing boats poured into the river from a side channel almost on battleline and flashed arrogantly past, showing no respect for the ugly spinster *Falling Star*, and lifted their skirts flirtily to a ponderous cargo ship as they skipped into the Pacific Ocean beyond the grazing dinosaur shape of Cape Disappointment. We turned from the buoyline and shuffled across turbulent shallows along the south jetty, so close to its huge black rocks I thought we would scrape white frosting left by generations of seabirds. The ocean was at flood tide and rammed into the river, arching over reefs of silt and sand drained from inland mountains and valleys. A crowd of seagulls watched us from the jetty's rocks as we plowed head on into roller coaster swells and into the open ocean.

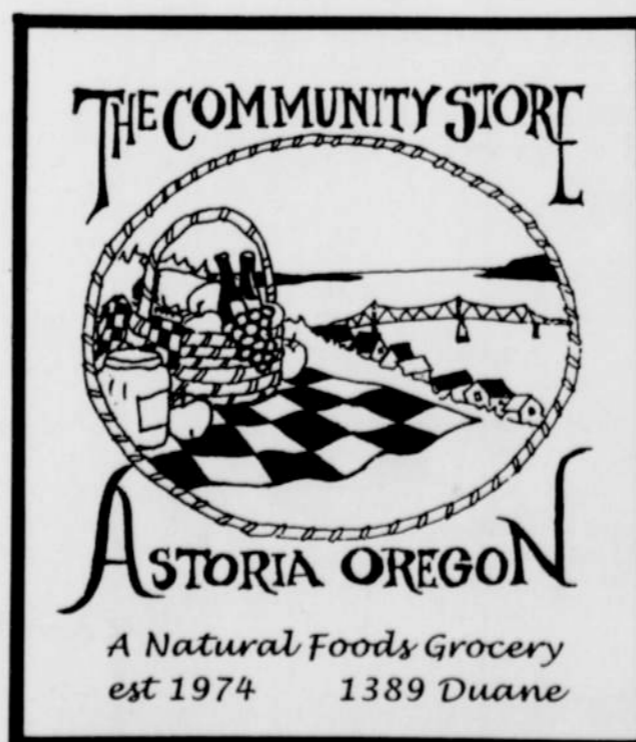
I crossed the bar the first time two years earlier, coming up from the south on another old fish boat with a load of albacore tuna for the Astoria canneries. Just before crossing from the ocean into the river we sat outside while my skipper of that season, an old man named George who had fished fifty years, studied the turbulent river mouth. An unlit cigar poked out of his ruddy face and his eyes were almost covered by a black knit cap that stretched tightly over his beachball head. He told the two of us who were his crew about the hundreds of ships and boats sunk or scattered on beaches and sandbars for miles on either side of the bar, the 'Graveyard of the Pacific' he said seadogs called it, justly so, he assured us, speaking the names of friends and boats that had died at the river entrance during his half century on the ocean. George turned around from the wheel topside and looked back over the stern while he chewed on his cold cigar and jabbered his salty palaver. Then he turned back and hunched over the wheel. He kicked the motor into gear and we crossed the bar, which threw us around like a dog with a sock.

I stayed ashore after that season ended. I settled my wages with George and got off the boat in Astoria. I took a bus upriver to Portland, found a job and got to know a woman whose smile was like all of the candles in a church lit at once. She and I shared an apartment but after awhile I started feeling smothered. I thought I needed salt air to put grit back into my blood. She knew my thoughts. I thoughtlessly whipped her with them. So she finally told me to go to hell and found a new boyfriend.

As the *Falling Star* came out of the river past a large black gullstained and spraylashed rock into the open ocean, the fog unclenched its wet stringy fingers and gave us to the rising sun, a bright wrinkled fire that etched the forested mountains against a salmon colored sky as if pasted there. The water was crystalline blue and gentle away from the heaving surge of the



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