

EGIL UNANDER, 'OUTWARD BOUND' (ETCHING, 1986)

BRIDGE TO NOWHERE

The Astoria/Megler Bridge over the Columbia River was opened up to automobile and truck traffic on August 27, 1966. The governors of Oregon and Washington, Mark Hatfield and Dan Evans, cut the ribbon (a rare period in which both states were governed by high level and capable governors at the same time, both of whom were liberal Republicans, a very rare species these days). The Astoria Clowns, who had vigorously promoted building the bridge, were the first to drive its length.

The bridge was built at a cost of \$24 million and one human life, a construction supervisor who was knocked off the bridge and his body never recovered. One woman remembers the early 1960s when the bridge was under construction as an unceasing pounding of piledrivers. When the bridge was completed it was the final link to a continuous highway from Mexico to Canada, and it displaced a ferry fleet that daily crossed the four-mile river.

The bridge arches over the river like a huge museum skeleton of a prehistoric beast. Its body towers 200 feet over the water so that ships can pass underneath, and its long tail drops to just above water for about three miles beyond the dredged ships' channel to the opposite bank on the Washington side which is called 'Megler', but there is no *there* there.

Besides displacing the ferries, the bridge took a large segment of people off the river, which no longer plays a major role in the lives of those who live alongside it as a result.

Once and for a long time the river was the main highway and means of livelihood for most of the emigrants who settled on its banks and built small busy towns on both sides of its lower length. For several decades paddle-wheeled steamboats hauled supplies, merchandise and passengers up and down the river. Timber companies floated huge log rafts from the decimated forests downriver to the deepwater ports of Portland, St. Helens, Longview and Astoria for shipment all over the world in square-rigged sailing ships, or to the large local fleet of timber schooners that worked along the Pacific Coast from Canada to California. A majority of Astoria women and men were salmon fishers on the river, in the bays and out in the ocean; or they worked in the fish canneries that once made Astoria the cannery capital of the world.

All that has changed, and nearly all of it is gone except for a few exhibits in the Columbia River Maritime Museum that acts as a time capsule for preservation of what is nostalgically called (publicly for commercial purposes) Astoria's 'Golden Era'. The city suffered a series of economic disasters, primarily from careless overexploitation of the timber and fish resources that briefly

made it rich and famous, and also from two calamitous fires that destroyed its downtown business core each time. Astoria was denied federal aid after the tremendous fire of 1922 and was forced to rebuild from its own resources, *i.e.*, loans and bonds it might still be paying off more than 80 years later, which continues to affect the city's economy in the 21st century.

The fires changed the character of Astoria. Landfill at the riverfront replaced the wooden pilings and piers much of the downtown had built upon over the river and which proved fatally flammable. The waterfront was reconstructed, a forest-like reseeding, although many charred pilings and burnt cannery buildings were left as they were instead of being cleared away.

Overlogging of the type that cut down forests from Maine through the entire northwest changed the environment, and too much silt from runoff from the cutover mountains and hills poured into the river's tributaries and disturbed salmon cycles. Huge electricity generating dams were built upriver that virtually wiped out the large salmon spawning runs. The fishing industry along the lower river dwindled until only a very few men and women are able to make a living on fishboats. The canneries that bought the fish are gone. The waterfront that used to be so busy is virtually abandoned except for new restaurants and motels, and planned shopping malls.

Initial hopes that the bridge would bring prosperity to Astoria never materialized. The beachtowns to the north and south have been the bridge's major benefactors.

The Astoria/Megler Bridge was early nicknamed "The Bridge to Nowhere," though there remain differences of opinion as to which side of the river was meant. It is not as old, nor anywhere close to the beauty of the delicate and decaying bridges on the southern Oregon coast.

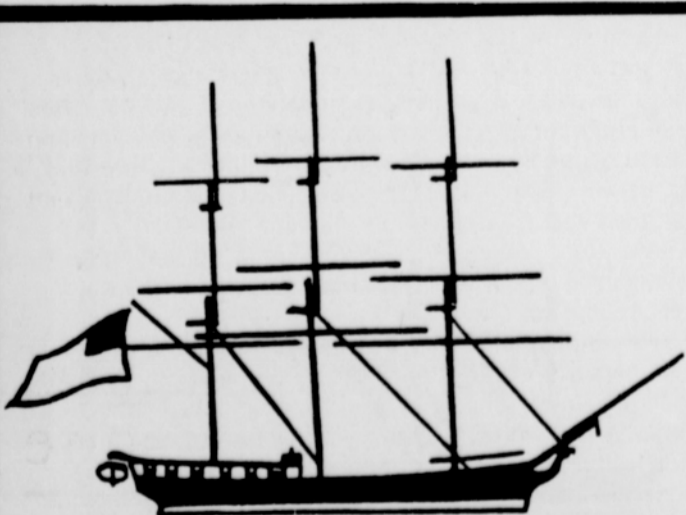
A brochure about the Astoria/Megler Bridge printed soon after it opened 40 years ago said that "the bridge is designed to withstand some of the toughest attacks of nature. Gusts of wind of 150 mph from the fierce Pacific storms that occasionally batter the coast still leave the bridge a safety factor. The concrete piers are built with an eye toward the river flood speed of 9 mph when whole trees sometimes are swept along by the raging water."

Quite likely an earthquake and tsunami will be a part of the bridge's future.

~MICHAEL McCUSKER

BILL'S TAVERN

BREW HOUSE
 Cannon Beach, Oregon



**COLUMBIA RIVER
 MARITIME MUSEUM**
 VISIT THE MUSEUM SHOP
 IN ASTORIA, OREGON

LNG IS FOOL'S GOLD

'Astoria is the Paris of the Columbia River!'

~EGIL UNANDER, 'PRINCE OF ASTORIA'
 (1934-1998)

There have been many and varied flamboyant economic schemes to make Astoria a world class port city surrounded by thriving satellite communities.

First, of course (if early hopes of fur trading are left out), was Astoria's golden era of salmon fishing and canning that made the lower Columbia River the cannery capital of the world in the late 19th century, as well as logging of the great spruce and fir forests that dominated the landscape. For a brief time, Astoria had a population of nearly 30,000 (in the 1920s) and anticipated a peak of 100,000 — shamelessly touting itself as the New York City of the Pacific Coast.

But a century of short-sighted greed and careless oversight of the environment that enriched Astoria decimated the salmon, clearcut the forests and ripped apart the big dreams; and the lower Columbia decayed on both sides.

More recent grandiose (perhaps desperate) schemes such as wall to wall aluminum plants on both sides of the river (which would make the lower Columbia, in the words of President Nixon, "the light metals capital of the world"), giant coal docks, oil module manufacturing for the Alaska oil fields, to name a few, were stillborn. Now we are preemptively invaded by LNG right here at the end of the Lewis & Clark Trail.

The notion of liquefied natural gas as an interim energy source between oil and alternative fuels is as short-sighted as every other response to the oil crisis that is crafted to keep profits in the hands of current oil and energy moguls — and would prolong the deliberate delay in research and development of bio-fuels.

Whatever value put to LNG as a brief alternative energy source, the method of Calpine LNG corporation (with silent complicity of the Port of Astoria Commission) to sneak through the back door and abrogate public participation laws, renders suspect every claim they make. Apologists say the secrecy was necessary because of competition and point to the three other LNG corporations who want a piece of the Columbia — but that is an egregious argument at its very root: the competition was probably waiting for Calpine to covertly get its lease and

then rush in to gobble up the lower Columbia while the shock was still setting in.

The lower Columbia community is divided over the prospect of LNG terminals. Alternate media seems to have an affect on people's opinions: commercial radio, for example, booms with LNG ads, and those who listen are more likely to support their point of view. Listeners to public radio station KMUN -FM, on the other hand, are generally in opposition, not least for the reason they are spared the torrent of LNG spin, and programming is often critical of devastating the river estuary and destroying Columbia River culture for corporate profit.

As usual the pro-corporate agenda gets the most press and fanfare: LNG banners at the Clatsop County Fair are just one example.

There are all sorts of serious LNG issues that are not being honestly addressed by the PR spinners: problems of safety, security, pollution, ocean and river travel, fishing and commerce, the wisdom of building such a volatile terminal on an earthquake subduction zone. And there is also the matter that the federal government claims the right to overrule any local decision to exclude LNG. In June (2005) the U.S. Senate rejected a proposal allowing state governors to prevent LNG because of public health or environmental concerns.

Astoria is experiencing a self-styled 'renaissance', primarily a population explosion intermingled with an influx of tourism, waterfront "renewal" and restoration of old properties. Although supporters hope for so-called 'family-wage' jobs from LNG to alleviate the menial and lowpaying employment chronic in River City and environs, others are concerned LNG terminals and traffic will wipe out what they see as vital economic and cultural gains of the past few years. Others fear for their health, even their lives.

Columbia River dwellers are threatened from two directions — federally-sanctioned low-level radioactive release from Hanford Nuclear Reservation, which developed the plutonium used in the Nagasaki atomic bomb in August 1945; and gaseous pollution/combustion (possibly much worse) from liquefied natural gas. The river gets hot stuff on one end, LNG on the other.

~MICHAEL McCUSKER
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