



Vigilance and Service

The fitful storms and rain squalls of June have abated and the withering mists of July have skittered through the beach sands into memory. Summer has finally unfolded its promise along the coastal upper left edge. The spectacular beauty of our beaches, Tom McCall's bequest of universal accessibility to these fond strands, and the sweet climate of summer bring multitudes to the water's edge in our area. This month the professor tips his weathered hat to those stalwarts, both past and present, who go about the business of water safety on our beaches.

Cannon Beach and Seaside boast long-standing and well-sustained programs of surf-lifesaving, stretching back to the years following the turn of the century. We are distinguished by the only beach lifeguard programs north of Stinson Beach, California. Early crews on our beaches consisted of United States Lifesaving Service, Coast Guard and Volunteer operations. These groups received scant remuneration for their services and often depended upon donations from community members.

In Cannon Beach, Delno R. "Mac" McCoy used his position as chief constable and fire marshall to catalyze citizen concern and organize lifeguard activities in the 40's, 50's, and 60's. In Gearhart and Seaside Ralph and Betty Davis laid the foundations for Seaside's beach safety program. Both communities recognize the essential services provided by the lifesaving programs and allot funds for the operations. Since the late sixties, local support for the programs was augmented by State of Oregon funding. Recently, the state funding, which has helped pay for part of the lifesaving equipment and wages, was cancelled as a reaction to ballot measure #5. Write your representatives and request reinstatement of these public safety funds.

Hundreds of people owe their lives to the men and women patrolling our beaches. Life expectancy is short in the frigid waters of the Columbia-Pacific. Hypothermia is always a factor. Rip currents flowing from shore are brutally unforgiving. Weather patterns are mercurial. Both waves and tides can offer the uninitiated rude surprises. In this shifting milieu, our lifeguards ply their trade. It is a trade necessitating considerable knowledge of conditions, constant vigilance and continual training.

Preventative measures have always characterized a prudent lifeguarding program. Educating the public to potential dangers in the aquatic environment, encouraging good swimming practices, and promoting safety awareness on the beach are priorities. The first line of defense against drowning is the alert guard, ranging along the dry sand, with a cautionary word for those headed into potential trouble.

Despite our lifeguards' best efforts at educating the public, the drama of pulling somebody from the surf is periodically played out. Waders and swimmers will find themselves held in the fearsome cauldron of currents, crashing surf and cold water. Then the lifesaving crews engage in the dicey enterprise of retrieving panicky swimmers and returning them safely to shore. Even under the best conditions, the rigors of a swimming rescue put a lifeguard at considerable risk. The process requires teamwork, clear thinking and confidence in one's training, body and equipment.

We are doubly fortunate. Not only are the local surf rescue crews and equipment of a high order, but the medical response for any emergency is fast and excellent. Both Cannon Beach and Seaside operate superb volunteer fire departments. Their presence is essential in the treatment of any medical complications resulting from a water emergency. Here in Cannon Beach, the fire department has a Zodiac rescue boat for situations beyond the scope of a lifeguard swimming rescue. The dedication and expertise of the fire department personnel are crucial to the water safety program.

The scope of water rescue is strengthened considerably by the U.S. Coast Guard Station in Astoria. Flights by Dolphin helicopters put their rescue swimmers on site in minutes. The Coast Guard can also respond to nautical emergencies with cutters designed for foul weather and high seas.

Although preventing aquatic emergencies remains priority for lifeguards, much of their activity is non-aquatic. Their arena does not end at the waterline. Countless people on the beach benefit from the ministrations of first aid by lifeguards. Anxious beachgoers turn to the lifeguards for help finding their wallets full of vacation money and credit cards. More important than lost objects, is the distraught parent who comes running across the sand for help in finding his or her missing child. Under such circumstances the lifeguards coordinate a search and locate operation with the police. The Cannon Beach lifeguards also assist the Haystack Awareness Program and the Marine Mammal Stranding Network in their efforts to protect local habitat and wildlife.

The history of lifesaving along the north coast of Oregon is a long and honored one. Today it continues that tradition in spirited service to the well-being and future of our communities.



Cannon Beach Lifeguard

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