

MORGAN, from page 4

been covered to keep people from coming into contact with creosote, a tar-based wood-preserving carcinogen used by McCormick and Baxter, which operated on the site for nearly 50 years.

The Department of Environmental Quality is working with the Port of Portland and Metro, the site's owner, to remove more of the toxic upland soil later this year. In July, the DEQ covered a pathway found to contain high levels of dioxin and furan with compacted gravel. The cove is located within the boundaries of an 11-mile stretch of the Willamette River that the EPA has designated as a high priority site. The fate of the area, a Superfund Site, will be decided in 2017 when the responsible parties are determined and the EPA announces the plan for cleanup, which will include containing contaminants in both the sediment in the river and along its shores, as well as natural restoration projects.

Members of The Portland Harbor Community Advisory Group are working to raise Portlanders' awareness of the Willamette River in hopes that citizens will chime in when the EPA opens the floor for comment before issuing its final order on the Superfund Site cleanup. Two of the PHCAG members, Barbara Quinn and Laura Feldman, are compiling an oral history of the river with \$3,500 in grant money awarded by Metro. They first met Morgan when they walked down to the cove in search of subjects to interview for their project.

"It was an eye opener for me as a neighborhood activist to hear his story and see how regular he is. We thought it would be good for others to actually hear and interact with him too. There is a lot of misconception between the housed and houseless communities here," says Quinn. She invited him to take part in a series of storytelling events that are part of the Willamette Speaks oral history project, and he accepted. Last month Morgan, along with a representative from the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde and a Lewis and Clark memorabilia collector, shared stories about the river with a crowded room full of activists and neighbors at the Water Pollution Control Laboratory next to the St. John's Bridge.

According to Kenneth Thiessen, the DEQ Project Manager assigned to the site, the surface sand on the beach shifts seasonally, making it difficult to characterize, but previous surface samples collected from the cove indicated elevated levels of lead, which prompted the Oregon Health Authority to prepare a consultation. After reviewing soil samples taken over a period of nine years and finding high levels of lead, the public health authority concluded that people coming into contact with the beach were susceptible to lead poisoning. While there is no safe level of lead exposure, the report stated that "Children and teenagers who trespass on the East Parcel beach are at higher risk for lead exposure because they engage in behaviors that put them more at risk than adults." A summary of the report warns that lead poisoning can cause "reading, learning and behavioral problems; slowed growth; brain damage; and lowered intelligence."

Morgan bathes in the cove's water and spends a lot of his time working on the beach — cleaning up trash that's been left by visitors or that's floated in from the river and working on car batteries that he says play a big role in his unplugged life. But he says he doesn't spend a lot of time worrying about the toxins. And he doesn't contribute to the contamination either. He takes regular trips upstream to dispose of sewage at designated dumping stations, and calls local authorities when particularly toxic-looking debris washes ashore. PHCAG refers to him as a "steward of Willamette Cove."

Morgan says he sees about 50 people a

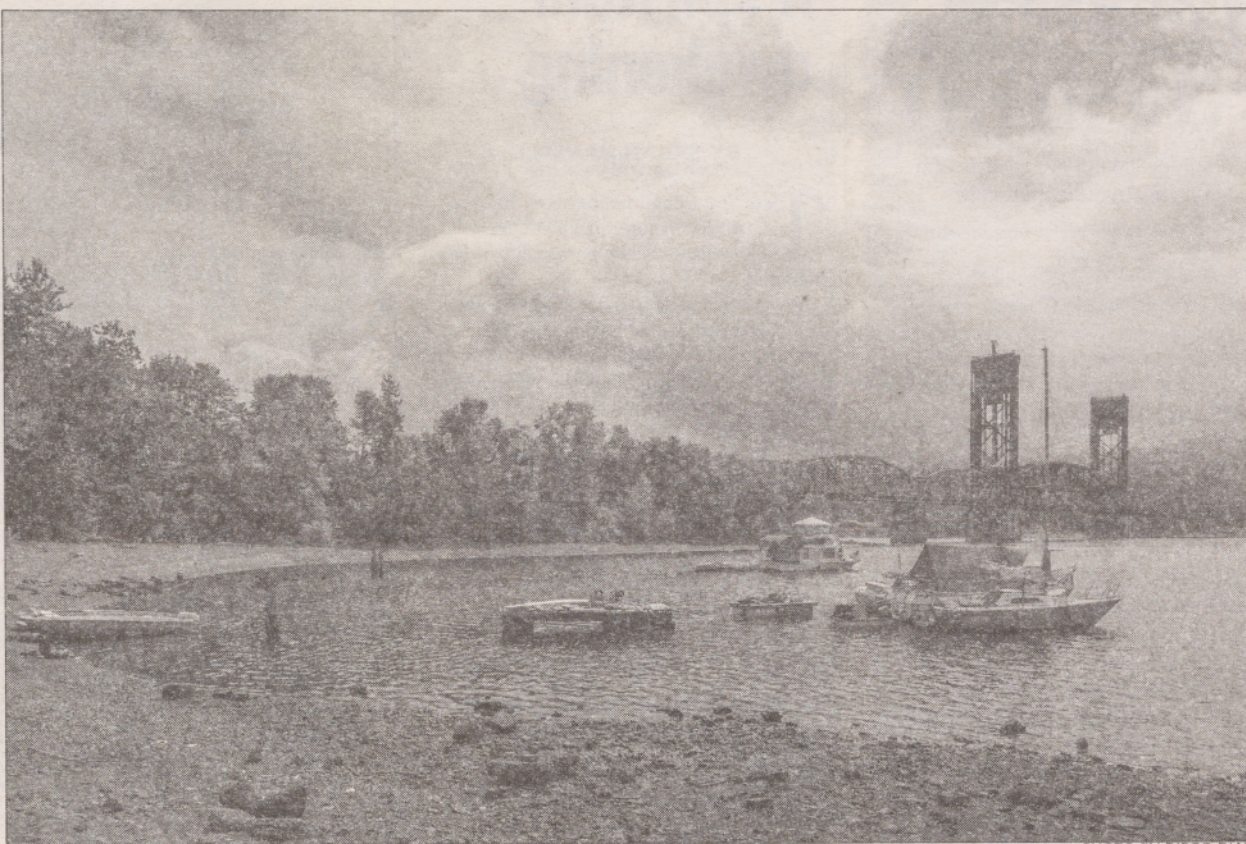


PHOTO BY DIEGO DIAZ

Clouds gather over Willamette Cove where Sean Morgan and others have docked boats along. The cove is one of the most environmentally contaminated areas along the willamette River. The Burlington Northern Railroad bridge rises in the background.

week recreating in the area when the weather is nice — a statement echoed in the health authority's report, which noted many signs of public use, including joggers and dog walkers. But most of the year, Morgan is alone in the cove, which he says suits him. "Sometimes I get depressed and it just feels better being alone, I can just read a book on my tablet, [charge] batteries, work on the boat, clean up the beach, there's a variety of things I can do out here by myself. Sometimes I just don't want to see people," he says.

Morgan, an only child, has resided in Portland and Vancouver most his life, living mainly with his grandparents in his youth. He says he doesn't know his father, and his mother was busy battling her own demons as he was growing up, although he says his relationship with her now is much better. He says without anyone to help with his homework and keep him focused, he didn't do too well in school. After 9th grade, he decided to go into Job Corps where he learned drafting and got his GED. Later he took classes at Oregon Polytechnic Institute for a while, but says he couldn't wrap his head around computers. He took all kinds of jobs, from delivery driver to stagehand, but spent most of his working years laying concrete.

"I watched my grandpa work really hard, and I thought I could never work that hard until I was in the [concrete] trade for about six months; I sat down next to my grandpa and he says, 'It looks like you worked really hard today.' Coming from him, it was like the biggest compliment I had ever gotten," Morgan recalled. But years of concrete finishing can be hard on the body. These days he says his back and neck injuries make it difficult to keep a job. Life on the river comes cheap, and he's able to get by each month on \$189 in food stamps and about \$50 in funds that he earns selling computer parts and services on Craigslist, and recycling cans.

Despite his limited resources, Morgan has managed well. Solar panels provide power to his sailboat where he reads — everything from tech manuals and books about theoretical astrophysics to Dean Koontz and Frank Herbert. Last year he bought a Buddy heater, which was a vast improvement over the previous winter when he kept himself warm with two lit candles under his chair, a blanket over his legs, a coat on his upper body and a sleeping bag over it all.

"The benefits outweigh the drawbacks,"

says Morgan, noting that he doesn't miss the comforts of living on land at all. "I'd just sit on my butt all day and play video games and watch TV, but here, I gotta do something. I deplore boredom." And he tries to stay as busy as he can. Being exhausted at the end of the day, he says, helps him sleep through the night, although the rocking of the boat helps too. "It's the only place I've been able to go back to sleep after I wake up since my back went out. I couldn't do that living on land," he says.

Sometimes Morgan is visited by the Multnomah County Sheriff River Patrol, who he says has suggested he move into a marina, but Morgan says he can't afford the \$250 a month it would cost him and the idea of living in a marina again isn't appealing, mainly due to the nature of the people he says live there. But he likes Dep. Todd Shanks, the River Patrol officer who's been working to build a good rapport with permanent boaters, even though he suspects he will eventually get kicked out of the cove.

River Patrol Lt. Travis Gullberg says his department has been working with the city, state and county as well as with social service providers and land owners to find solutions to the recent increase in what he calls "live-a-boards." He estimates that there are about 20 to 30 individuals living on boats in Portland Harbor, most of which, like Morgan, are men living alone, although he does see the occasional family. "There are people who are working, some that are getting assistance, people from all walks of life," he says. The River Patrol does outreach to ensure that permanent boaters are able to access resources available to them. There is a 30-day limit on anchoring in the same spot, and boaters are required to move at least five nautical miles from their previous location after the time has lapsed, but Gullberg says, "Everyone sees that enforcement is not the answer." Thus far, River Patrol has only used enforcement when boaters are committing other crimes. For the most part, he says, live-a-boards have been cooperative and do their best to adhere to boat licensing and safety regulations.

On a cloudy Saturday afternoon in late August, Morgan was busy on the inlet's beach preparing for a party he was throwing that evening with some friends. He had fashioned a tarp shelter in case of rain and was arranging lumber and giant weathered

logs to form benches, a mixing station for his DJ and a bar. Another boat was anchored in Willamette Cove alongside Morgan's fleet that day. Loud music, ranging from death metal to Eminem, echoed throughout the cove while Morgan prepared for his party. The owner of this boat started living on the river around the same time as Morgan back in 2012 and the two have become friends.

But not all of Morgan's interactions with other river dwellers have been as fortunate. "There are a lot of trashy people who live on boats. Some are drug addicts. I can't deal with drug addicts. Well, the way I deal with them is I stay away from them or I call the police on them. You never know if they're going to steal from you," says Morgan. He had a run-in with a couple of men who were camping on the beach a few weeks ago. He got into a heated argument with one of them after telling them they couldn't stay in the cove because they were leaving needles and trash everywhere — items that Morgan will ultimately pick up in his effort to keep the beach clean. Morgan walked away from the argument, but left his backpack on the beach, which he says the men took with them. Another night he says he awoke when a man who was "tweaking" started throwing rocks at his boats. "I called the police and he left," says Morgan. But even with these run-ins, Morgan feels safe on the water. He says one thing that does scare him, however, is that something might happen to his boats when he's not there.

JOIN, a local nonprofit serving the community's houseless population, is also working with the River Patrol and other agencies performing outreach on Willamette River. Its director, Marc Jolin, says that many permanent boaters "see the boats as a level of security." For many of them, he says, it's the one thing keeping them from being completely homeless and out in the elements.

A dreamer, Morgan says he doesn't plan to live on the Willamette forever, but it's only because he hopes to one day sail the world. He says he'd start by sailing down the coast to Chile, then west to Tahiti, see New Zealand and Australia. He especially wants to see the Rock of Gibraltar and the Monaco Grand Prix. But before he can do all that, he says he needs a bigger boat: a 60-footer. "It's probably the only way I'll get to see the world," he says.

Read more about the Willamette River and our survey on whether the river is safe to swim in at news.streetroots.org