

# COLUMBIA 1888

## Epic cruise of the USS Albatross netted details of pioneer fishermen

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The 1887 to 1889 cruise of the USS Albatross all along the mainland West Coast would have been an awe-inspiring adventure for anyone interested in American industrial and social history.

The resulting "Report on the Fisheries of the Pacific Coast of the United States," by J.W. Collins based on work by W.A. Wilcox and A.B. Alexander, is one of the best first-hand accounts we possess about the people and resources of the West Coast in a pivotal period. The Albatross poked into dozens of "small streams, bays, and harbors along the coast, many of which had not previously been investigated."

The original edition of the report — I recently found one for about \$20 — is packed with detailed charts of river mouths and estuaries, showing canneries, fish traps, gillnet drifts, shellfish beds and dozens of other features. The charts of the Columbia River are humble masterpieces, but far too large to reproduce for a newspaper article.

Here in the Columbia-Willapa area, the big news in 1888-89 was salmon, distantly followed by oysters. There were 122 West Coast salmon canneries, including 36 in Alaska and 24 in British Columbia. Oregon had 35 — mostly centered on Astoria — and Washington state had 18 split between the Columbia, Willapa Bay, Grays Harbor and Puget Sound. There were nine canneries in California. Together, these canneries produced nearly 82 million 1-pound cans in 1889.

Between 1875 and 1889, West Coast canneries consumed 876 million pounds of salmon, which the report notes is equivalent to 1 million head of cattle. These salmon generated retail sales of \$75 million in 1889 gold — roughly \$4.45 billion today.

Salmon in that pre-dam era were still a force of nature. "When the Almighty made the salmon he endowed it with a degree of obstinacy unparalleled in the animal kingdom. The persistent courage of the bulldog and the wild charge of the buffalo when stampeded is nothing compared to the unending rush of the salmon upstream when he makes his annual trip from the ocean to his favorite spawning ground," according to a passage from the April 20, 1884 issue of the Alta California newspaper quoted in the fisheries report.

### Columbia pack winding down

Salmon packing was declining in Astoria by the late 1880s as fisheries investments migrated up to the highly productive waters of Alaska. There were 17 canneries in Astoria in 1887, 14 in 1888 and 11 in 1889. In 1889, Astoria's population was 5,000 in the winter and 6,000-plus in salmon season.

Even though declining, salmon fishing remained a massive economic powerhouse:

"The canning industry on the Columbia supports the most important river salmon fishery in the world. It has built up and still maintains many settlements, and gives employment to much capital and a large number of people. The annual product is measured only by the millions of dollars, and it is doubtless safe to say that nowhere else on the globe has a like area of water produced such an immense yearly yield of wealth."

The report includes this atmospheric description:



**The USS Albatross was an iron-hulled, twin-screw U.S. Navy steamer. It may have been the first vessel ever built specifically for marine research, often operating out of the still-famous oceanographic science center at Woods Hole, Massachusetts. In 1887-89, the Albatross made a major survey of West Coast fisheries.**

"Astoria has many peculiarities, among which is the fact that it is built on piling and extends out over the river; the steep hills that come down to the water's edge afford little opportunity for the erection of dwellings, stores, etc., and it has therefore been necessary to construct the town in the manner mentioned. Another cause for building the city this way was that the river was shallow at this point, and it was necessary to extend the limits of the town some distance into the stream to get the requisite depth of water to enable ships to float while loading. In recent years some private residences have been built on the side of the hills back of the business portion of the town. There are few places in the world that are centers of greater activity than Astoria during the salmon season, but at other times it is comparatively quiet and uninteresting."

On the same page, the report describes Ilwaco as "a small settlement of a few hundred inhabitants, situated on Baker's Bay, in the center of the pound-net fishery. It is the southern terminus of the railroad line to Shoalwater Bay. Its inhabitants are engaged chiefly in fishing and in operating the lumber mills of the region. There is a cannery located at Ilwaco. A large percentage of the catch taken at Baker's Bay goes to other canneries on both sides of the river."

In its section on Shoalwater (Willapa) Bay, the report notes that freight charges on the new Ilwaco Railway & Navigation Co. were too high, leading oystermen to convey their products by boat to the south end of the bay and then 7 miles overland to Ilwaco for transshipment to the south or east.

### Fishing lives: 1888

It's highly evocative of this lost era to learn of the practices of Columbia River estuary gillnetters.

"During the fishing season the fishermen live a good deal on board their boats. After the nets are hauled and the catch disposed of, the boats are often run into some cove or bay, where they are brought to anchor. The fishermen in each boat then unship the rudder and set it up amidships to sup-

port one end of the gaff, the other end of which rests upon the bow. The sail is thrown over the gaff, like an awning, and this constitutes the roof to an improvised cabin or cuddy, under which the crew sleep. Coffee or tea is made over a lamp, and when the meal has been eaten the men crawl under the sail and sleep until the tide is favorable for fishing. It is not uncommon to see hundreds of boats anchored in this manner along the coves or bays in the river, out of the way of passing steamers. Absolute quiet reigns, and one who for the first time sees such a fleet, literally sleeping upon the river, is little prepared for the scene of busy activity presented when it wakes with the turning tide, and the broad bosom of the great river is almost instantly covered with boats putting out from all directions."

Growing steamboat traffic was a significant factor for the fishing fleet. In about 1888, canneries quit providing nets to the fishermen. "A common saying on the Columbia is that a fisherman who is fishing his own net rarely catches a steamboat in it," a phrase due to the fact that formerly, when the nets were owned by the canneries, the gear was often destroyed by passing steamboats, because the men did not exercise the necessary care to avoid such mishaps."

On April 11, 1886, gillnet fishermen organized as an association named the Columbia River Fishermen's Protective Union — still in existence in 2016. No love was lost between gillnetters and their era's economic villains. The following excerpt from the union's constitution shows the limitations of membership (rich folks need not apply):

"No liquor dealer, gambler, politician, capitalist, lawyer, agent of or for capitalists, nor persons holding office, whether under the national, state or municipal government, shall under any consideration become members of this organization, but all such shall be strictly excluded from membership in this union. No stockholder or shareholder of any cannery is eligible to membership in this union."

Dues were \$4 a year or \$1 per month for the fishing season. There were no benefits, except \$50 toward the burial of members in good standing. There was a decent chance a member might need this assistance. The U.S. Life Saving Service at Fort Canby — now U.S. Coast Guard Station Cape Disappointment — reported that, "In 1888, 14 gillnet fishermen and four who were engaged in operating pound nets lost their lives between Kalama and the outer bars of the Columbia. Most of the boats, however, were picked up, only three being reported as a total loss." There were years when losses were far worse.

The union's main essential function was leveling the playing field in negotiations with cannery owners. Also, as a practical matter, nonmembers couldn't fish:

"The union fixes the price of gill-net salmon at the beginning of the season. ... No gillnet fishermen except a member of the union can sell salmon at the canneries, since a cannery who bought of others would be liable to have his supply of fish cut off. The employment of a nonunion man on the boats is strictly prohibited.

... Nets are all handmade by the fishermen themselves or their families; the fishermen's union prohibits the use by any of its members of factory or Chinese-made nets."

The union told the fisheries survey that the average catch per boat in 1888 was about 500 fish, for which the canneries paid \$1.25 each. "In the early history of the fishery it was not uncommon for a boat to catch four or five times that number," the report asserts.

In 1888 there were 1,578 gillnets valued at \$262,725 engaged in fishing on the Columbia, plus two seines valued at \$1,050, 52 weirs and pound nets valued at \$40,050 and 24 fish wheels valued at \$63,613.

Fishing was a tough life, but one that was reasonably rewarding for at least some West Coast fishermen in the 1880s.

The report includes this quote from the San Francisco Chronicle, Nov. 11, 1883:

"The fishermen's life is full of hardship and work. The dangers of the calling are manifold. They are hardy, temperate, and frugal. Their days are spent on the water and their families see but little of them. They are generous and kind to each other. They are keen in business matters, and do not allow themselves to be cheated by dealers on shore. Some of them have amassed a competency and retired from business. There are but few instances of poverty to be seen among them, and nearly all of them have a snug sum put by for emergencies. ... They are seldom idle. After a trip has been made and the boat's load of fish sold, they may generally be found on their boats or the adjoining wharf, repairing or drying their nets and seines, making lines and adding hooks, or doing some kind of labor on their boats, preparatory to another fishing voyage."

The report's author scoffs a little at this relatively rosy picture, noting that while outright destitution was uncommon among fishermen, some just barely got by. If the union was correct in its 1888 estimate, income per boat was \$625, split two ways — a modest living at best. Then, as now, fishermen probably looked for logging jobs or other seasonal work when not fishing.

As 21st century gillnetters struggle to preserve what is left of a proud way of life, we should reflect on their links to this amazing tradition of honorable labor on the water.



## 9-1-WHAT?

THE BEST OF THE WORST CALLS TO ASTORIA 911 DISPATCH

## Local knowledge

We may not be very sophisticated out here on the coast and what not, but we know our seafood.

So when two people in Seaside tried to sell a man \$150 worth of crab for \$10, they "left in a hurry when they discovered he was a local."

Follow reporter Kyle Spurr on his 9-1-What? Twitter watch, where a few of the sometimes head-scratching calls to area dispatch take center stage. The full feed is at [www.twitter.com/9\\_1\\_WHAT](http://www.twitter.com/9_1_WHAT).

9-1-WHAT? [Following](#)

{5/30 @ 3:38 p.m.} Man with an eye patch and boot on a broken foot is banging on stuff, yelling, singing and swearing. #Astoria

1

9-1-WHAT? [Following](#)

{5/31 @ 7:02 a.m.} Report of a man near an old yellow school bus acting suspicious. #Astoria

1

9-1-WHAT? [Following](#)

{6/1 @ 8:33 p.m.} A transient is using pipes on the court house windows as drums. #Astoria

1

9-1-WHAT? [Following](#)

{6/1 @ 1 p.m.} Two people tried to sell a man "\$150 worth of crab for \$10," but left in a hurry when they discovered he was a local #Seaside

1

9-1-WHAT? [Following](#)

{6/2 @ 9:49 a.m.} Bird trapped inside a boat. #Astoria

1

9-1-WHAT? [Following](#)

{6/1 @ 8:33 p.m.} A transient is using pipes on the court house windows as drums. #Astoria

1

# our coast

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