

BEHIND THE MUSEUM



Wikimedia Commons
Steve Morgan

Columbia River Maritime Museum's exhibits are just the tip of the collection's iceberg

By ERICK BENDEL
The Daily Astorian

The Columbia River Maritime Museum has never advertised the hidden treasure, let alone put it on display, but it is one of Deputy Director Dave Pearson's favorites from the collection:

The broken hull plate from the infamous Exxon Valdez oil tanker that, in March 1989, struck the Bligh Reef and spilled millions of barrels of crude oil in Alaska — the worst oil spill in United States history until 2010.

The Salvage Chief, the marine salvage vessel that pulled the tanker from where it ran aground, brought the hunk of split steel to the museum shortly after the accident. Sitting next to it on the pallet shelf in the collection storage facility is a bottle of the original oil.

"That will make a great exhibit someday," Pearson said.

As in most museums, the space in the Maritime Museum is limited and the collection vast, so the materials that visitors see represent a small fraction of what the institution actually possesses.

"By our very nature, we're collecting more than we could ever put on exhibit," he said.

The museum currently features the floating lightship Columbia, flags that Japanese soldiers took with them into battle during World War II, two cannons found in Arch Cape that came from an 1846 shipwreck, exhibits about the U.S. Coast Guard and Columbia River Bar, a photo gallery by local photographer Michael Mathers and other draws.

But the off-site artifacts — which can be loaned to other museums or viewed by researchers — are often as compelling as the ones presented to the public.

What visitors don't see

The museum storehouse holds tens of thousands of miscellaneous maritime objects from the Lower Columbia River and the wider Pacific Northwest.

Harpoons, anchors, spent artillery shells, flat-bottom race boats, scraps of wood from shipwrecks, hardware from World Wars I and II destroyers, boat engines of many makes and models.

Some items are so abundant — like octants, sextants and compasses — that the museum has stopped collecting them.

See MUSEUM, Page 3C



Erick Bengel/The Daily Astorian
Dave Pearson, deputy director of the Columbia River Maritime Museum, stands amid a group of boat engines in the museum's collections storehouse.



The fractured piece of hull plating from the Exxon Valdez — the part of the tanker that broke on the Bligh Reef and spilled gallons of oil in Alaskan waters — resides in the Columbia River Maritime Museum's collections storage facility. On the right is a bottle of the oil.

Erick Bengel
The Daily Astorian



Erick Bengel/The Daily Astorian

Matthew Palmgren, the collections manager at the Columbia River Maritime Museum, explains the use of an engine order telegraph, a piece of maritime equipment that allowed for communication between the bridge and engine room of a ship.



Erick Bengel/The Daily Astorian

Dave Pearson, deputy director of the Columbia River Maritime Museum, poses near a gillnet boat in the museum's off-site boat haul.



Erick Bengel/The Daily Astorian

U.S. Navy swords fashioned in the early 20th century are the subject of research in the Columbia River Maritime Museum's collections room, located in the main museum building. The swords have been on display in the museum's naval gallery.

'By our very nature, we're collecting more than we could ever put on exhibit.'

Dave Pearson

deputy director of the Columbia River Maritime Museum