

COASTAL LIFE

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Visit the Hanthorn Cannery Museum

You can practically hear the artifacts talking

By JON BRODERICK

At the end of Pier 39, beyond Astoria's East Mooring Basin, stands a relic still living of Astoria's long and prosperous commercial fishing culture. Yet the James O. Hanthorn Cannery, built in 1875, owned by Columbia River Packers Association and home until 1981 of Bumble Bee Seafoods, might today be a ruin of pilings and tumbled debris if Floyd Holcom hadn't stopped by.

Holcom grew up in Astoria's Uniontown, hanging around canneries and fishermen. His father, an immigrant from the Philippines, came from California's San Joaquin Valley to Astoria, where he arranged Philippine labor for canneries in Alaska owned by Astoria's fish companies.

"The first job I ever had," Holcom says, "was filling needles for fishermen in Uniontown, where the Cannery Pier Hotel is today. I was 5 or 6 years old. They paid me five cents a needle, and the twine had to be wrapped tight." His education continued at Union Steam. "The old guys would haul in a Pepsi box for us kids to sit on in the sauna, and we'd listen to all their stories."

As he grew older, Holcom fished with the Reiter family on the Columbia River. Later, with his pal Tom Hilton, he headed north to Cook Inlet to fish Bill Gunderson's boat.

Then, years later in 2002, after Bumble Bee Seafoods had moved to San Diego and the Hanthorn Cannery had been mostly abandoned, Holcom, curious, found the building for sale. He negotiated its purchase for a dollar. "And other consideration," he adds.

Within days, though, he was called to Iraq. By the time he got home, his two partners had begun dismantling the building. "I gave them each 35 cents and bought them out," he says and wondered what to do next.

Rummaging about one day, he heard steps approaching. John McGowan, former Bumble Bee Seafoods CEO and Alan Sellers, former Chief Financial Officer, had heard rumors that the plant was to be razed.

"Young man," Holcom recalls McGowan



PHOTO BY JOSHUA BESSEX

The museum keeps local fishing history alive through salmon and tuna canning displays, (above) and boat displays (right).

saying, "you can't tear this place down. You don't know the story of this building. This is where the whole industry started."

"At the end of our conversation," says Holcom, "we'd started the Hanthorn Cannery Foundation."

The resulting museum is an old timer in work clothes telling its own story — not gussied up for visitors but gathered for local folks and their curious friends.

Walk about the Hanthorn Cannery Museum and you can practically hear artifacts talking. That's the Columbia River beneath you. Tarred Douglas fir you smell. That's the same chilly draft that blew through the building back in the 1930s.

In the warehouse, Bumble Bee 47 leans on its starboard side, a beamy double-ended Columbia River gillnetter, a sailboat of the sort built for Bristol Bay's sockeye fishery, where, until the '50s, motors were prohibited. BB 47, like scores of others, was converted to power for the Columbia River fishery where sailing gillnetters disappeared a hundred years ago.

Next to BB 47, on its flat, unfinished bottom sits a husky open boat, cedar planks on fir, every board clear, tight-grained, its rails and hull made of flawless lumber 32 feet long. Begun in Ilwaco, work on this net tender stopped abruptly in 1934 when traps were outlawed on the river. At the Hanthorn

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The James O. Hanthorn Cannery, constructed in 1875, is reached by a 500-foot long pier.



FILE PHOTO

Cannery Museum, the boat is suspended in time, still new, still waiting for that guy to finish fastening the rail at the stem before they roll the boat over and plank the bottom. Run your hand over the gunwale, and wonder when they'll be back.

Before you wander into the exhibits, stroll around a couple of veteran Columbia River gillnetters of the distinctive design that followed the early Bristol Bay boats, square-sterned bow pickers with their spartan cabins aft. Crane your neck for a peek inside. Looks like someone might have left the CB on.

Relics line the cold storage walls: a century of outboards, wooden net floats, early canning machinery with eccentric wheels, exposed belts and toothed gears enough to make you cringe.

The museum gives its visitors credit for imagination and curiosity enough to rummage through both its memory and their own. Insightful information is plentiful, but it might be in an old industry magazine

article thumb-tacked to the cold storage wall or in text glued to a dusty piece of cardboard propped up in old machinery.

"There's no tour," says Holcom. "Just walk around. 'It's free?' people ask. 'Well,' I say, 'you can always make a donation.'"

"Work is Our Joy: the Story of the Columbia River Gillnetter" plays in one room; an episode featuring the Astoria plant from the 1961 television series "Success Story" plays in another. Bundle up, have a seat and watch, surrounded by the souvenirs of Bumble Bee Seafoods: a net hanging bench, a safe, a typewriter, a ledger, a paycheck. Along one wall, a dozen of Bill Wagner's black and white photos record an opener on the river aboard a classic bow picker. The lines of local boats fill another wall, reproduced in drawings with help from the Smithsonian Museum.

And here's Wilho Korpela's wooden gear box sitting open, like he's just emptied it. On it, with black felt pen, or orange spray or blue brushed paint, he's left a virtual almanac: *Sept 5, 83 degrees hottest day in years and 11/20/74 2.20 inches rain 24 hrs and most dates from April 25 to May 30 rain, rain, rain.*

Chilly? It's a former cold storage, for crying out loud. Enjoy a coffee break, mug up, at Coffee Girl overlooking the water or a beer at Rogue Ales, where June hogs, those enormous Columbia River Chinook, were once filleted. You'll pass between walls covered in the signatures of hundreds of souls who've worked at Bumble Bee Seafoods.

See how many names you recognize.