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 Rebecca Sedlak | Weekend Editor
 rsedlak@dailyastorian.com

WEEKEND BREAK

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THIS NEST OF DANGERS

PITILESS PERILS PROWL OFF PACIFIC NORTHWEST COAST

Columbia bar nearly
springs a trap on
adventurous gillnetter

By NANCY LLOYD
 For The Daily Astorian

LONG BEACH, Wash. — In the winter of 1978-79 when I was new to the Long Beach Peninsula, friends told me how wild our weather could be and how rough the Columbia River sometimes was; how in winter the Washington state highway department sometimes parked a road-grader along Highway 101 near the Astoria-Megler Bridge to clear off storm-thrown driftwood; how one year the newspaper ran a photo of a 55-gallon drum perched in mid-highway courtesy of the river's wild waves; even how the Peninsula needed its own hospital because sometimes it became an island, cut off from the Astoria bridge by a fierce winter storm.

Wow ...

It wasn't until I moved to the north bank of the Columbia two blocks west of that bridge and experienced a roadside so flooded that at times I couldn't tell where driveway or ditch was, and was thrilled and stunned to have the tops of those wild winter waves soar over roadside boulders and slam my car windows, that I began to understand a little about this fierce and magnificent river near its mouth. As I drove to Chinook to pick up my mail, I sometimes watched the white line of breakers out there at the bar define the entire division between river and sky.

I began to read about the Columbia River bar and the northeastern Pacific Ocean near the Oregon and Washington coasts.

What it's like out there

In 1930, historian Frederick C. Matthews quoted a sailing ship captain about the chaos of the North Pacific Ocean: "In February 1902 Capt. Zaccheus Allen said that his passage of eight days [in a sailing ship] down the coast from British Columbia to San Francisco was the hardest he had ever experienced during his career of over a quarter of a century as a [ship's] master. Throughout the whole run very heavy gales were met with, the ship being flooded most of the time. Sails were blown away and most of the passage was made under lower topsails."

From the *Oregon Statesman* in 1949 I read, "The listing freighter *Calmar* limped into port here [Seattle, Washington] today [in 1949] with the body of her first mate, fatally injured during a North Pacific gale that swept another crewman overboard. The mate, Clarence Hutton, 50, Valley Stream, N.Y., [was crushed and] died a short time before the 3,586-ton freighter docked. ...

"The *Calmar's* master, Capt. Richard B. Hughes, Brooklyn, [NY] said a mountainous wave caused the death of the two men. They were attempting to secure a lifeboat that had broken loose after the big deck load of lumber shifted early Saturday in heavy seas 40 miles southwest of the Columbia river lightship [off the mouth of the Columbia River]. Movement of the 5,800,000 board feet of lumber tipped the freighter seven degrees to port.

"Roberts [the other crewmember] was washed overboard as the towering wave foamed across the slanting deck. Hutton was crushed between the lifeboat and the wheelhouse. The *Calmar* searched for the missing crewman 2-1/2 hours, aided by the Coast Guard cutter *Balsam*. Then Roberts was given up for dead.

"There is no question but that he drowned," Hughes said on his arrival here. "No one could have lived in that water. The waves were the worst I've ever seen in the Atlantic or Pacific, and I've been at sea since 1912." ...

'Neptune's Apprentice'

In 1980, as I was learning about the region, I read a book from the Ocean Park Timberland Library that spoke briefly of the fierceness of the Columbia River bar and its neighboring waters. Marie De Santis's "Neptune's Apprentice" showed readers how a good boat could save your life, why sixth sense at sea was so important, and how a mistake or poor judgment could be fatal.

By late spring 1969 University of Chicago chemistry major Marie De Santis had completed her course work and was looking forward to earning her doctorate. At the end of that term she decided to leave hot Chicago for the summer and sail to Mexico with a friend on his fishing boat. They left from San Francisco Bay, and by the time she returned she'd fallen in love with the sea. When she thought about returning to Chicago, it felt like going to jail.



Bud Cuffel/Submitted Photo

The mouth of the Columbia River looked beautiful at the end of January, but offshore conditions often challenge even the bravest of mariners. Accounts over the past two centuries tell of harrowing deaths and near-misses for sailors and fishermen in this vicinity. Cape Disappointment Lighthouse was built in 1856 in an effort to help ships find the Columbia River's entrance.



Marie De Santis/Submitted Photo

Small fishing boats are especially subject to the wild caprices of the Northeast Pacific, but also usually are tough little craft, well designed to survive the region's waves and weather.



Natalie St. John/EO Media Group

Debris-filled waves sometimes crash over the sea wall east of Chinook, covering Highway 101 with rocks and driftwood.

She'd experienced wonders — the stunning beauty of sunrise at sea, the constant movement of the ocean, soft dark gentle nights with nothing in sight but stars, water softly sloughing against the hull, the diesel engine murmuring companionably. She learned about running a boat, and all of a sudden she desperately wanted to fish for a living. Chemistry faded away.

Back in San Francisco, De Santis looked for a fishing boat to lease. She found one and also found a fisherman who helped her in the beginning steps of a profession entirely unlike anything she'd ever have imagined. She met rowdy, humble, fearless, effervescent fishermen who took her in. She loved it.

Several years later, De Santis agreed to run a Canadian salmon gillnetter from Vancouver, B.C., back down to the bay for a man who would lease it to her to fish. De Santis and a friend, Molly, arrived in Vancouver to meet the *Golden Hawk*, a trim and ship-shape 36-foot gillnetter. On a lovely morning they set off into a glassy calm North Pacific Ocean.

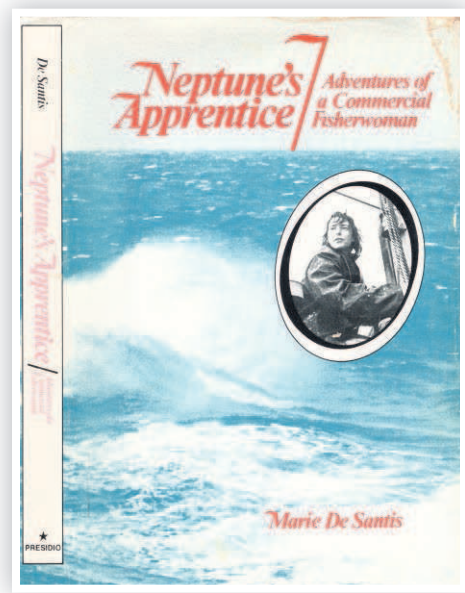
The women were charmed by the sea's beauty. All the while De Santis warned her greenhorn crew member about the truth of the

North Pacific: it was foggy, it stormed, it threw big ships hither and yon, it was merciless. But the surroundings were so stunning that her words rang hollow. They loafed along southward in this other-worldly scene. Several days later, they put up in Westport, Washington, for fuel and to pick up another crew member, Molly's fisherman friend David, down from Seattle for the weekend.

Swelling tide of unease

High tide slack water that evening was at midnight. The weather forecast was reasonable, and they set out, getting bounced around a bit on the Westport bar. *Golden Hawk* took the swells well, her stern perfectly shaped to deflect following seas — waves that came at the boat from behind.

The night was velvet black, no moon, no reflections, only the occasional star showing briefly. The swells were such that it was hard to see the buoy lights directing the way out of the channel. De Santis began to be uneasy. There was nothing alarming about the way the boat worked in the water, there was no wind, there was no noise, but she, Molly and David huddled in the flying bridge, alert, not talking much.



Marie De Santis/Submitted Photo

A memoir authored by former gillnetter Marie De Santis contains vivid descriptions of horrifying ocean conditions off the Columbia River's mouth.

MORE ABOUT MARIE DE SANTIS

Marie De Santis logged more than 50,000 hours as a commercial fishing captain between 1971 and 1980, later working on landside fisheries projects. In 1991, she became a victim advocate with Women Against Rape in Sonoma County, California. In 2012 she was honored as a California Woman of the Year in recognition of her directorship of the Women's Justice Center.

As *Golden Hawk* made her way south, De Santis's discomfort grew. This analytical student of science could determine no reason for her unease, but finally it overwhelmed her. "... No amount of determination on my part could repress that eerie something that was rising like a noxious vapor from the sea."

On a whim, she turned the vessel around and found herself and the bow of the *Golden Hawk* facing into an enormous wave — a wall of black water so tall that when De Santis threw her head all the way back to see the top of the wave, she only saw the mast light reflecting from the underside of the curl.

As the boat began to climb the wave, for a moment De Santis feared they would go over backward. Somehow, *Golden Hawk* rose to the wave, then dropped into the bottomless trough on the back side, landing on her side awkwardly, the kind of hard fall that in humans breaks ribs. The gillnetter righted herself, meeting two more terrible mountains of water, after which De Santis handed the wheel off to David and went below.

There she found the radio wrenched off its wall mounting and smashed on the floor. *Golden Hawk* fell into another trough. De Santis pulled herself together and tore up floorboards to look down into the engine compartment. Water seeped in between planks whose paint bond with their neighbors had been broken by the beating. The sump pump was working, and when De Santis supplemented it with another high volume pump the water level

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