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# WEEKEND BREAK

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## Celebrate the pragmatic elegance of gasoline marine engines

By **MATT WINTERS**  
 EO Media Group

**G**asoline marine engines revolutionized working life on the Columbia River estuary the way cotton gins did in the South, but they don't get much respect.

In the course of a half a tide, the river can go from mirror-like lake to something resembling a Michael Bay disaster movie. It's a deceptive monster, one which generations of native and white fishermen were obliged to ride in little wooden boats. Until around 1900, the river's sailing gillnet boats were at the whim of the wind, relying on canvas and oars to navigate the wild waters of the estuary and ocean plume in pursuit of salmon.

### Writer's Notebook

Brave and courageous as they were, there wasn't much they could do when a typhoon blew itself out on this fatal shore, driving boats onto the rocks like jellyfish drifted up on the beach.

"On May 4, 1880, several dozen commercial fishermen, between 200 and 350 by some accounts, drowned in a gale off the mouth of the Columbia River. The small boats are from the Columbia River and Shoalwater (Willapa) Bay and are surprised by winds from the southwest," David Wilma wrote in a 2006 HistoryLink.org essay.

According to newspaper accounts at the time, this particular disaster wasn't directly storm-related, but arose from a massive snow melt swelling the river and shotgunning the fishing fleet into the breakers above the Columbia River bar.

"To pull their heavy 24-foot boats against such a current was a feat few of them were capable of, and the only course open to the majority was to face death with fortitude," the San Francisco Chronicle reported.

The death toll was always only a rough guess — most of the victims' names were known only to their bereaved families and few bodies washed ashore — but it seems likely that at least dozens died. Even the lofty New York Times considered it significant, at a time when the outside nation ignored the Pacific Northwest even more than now.

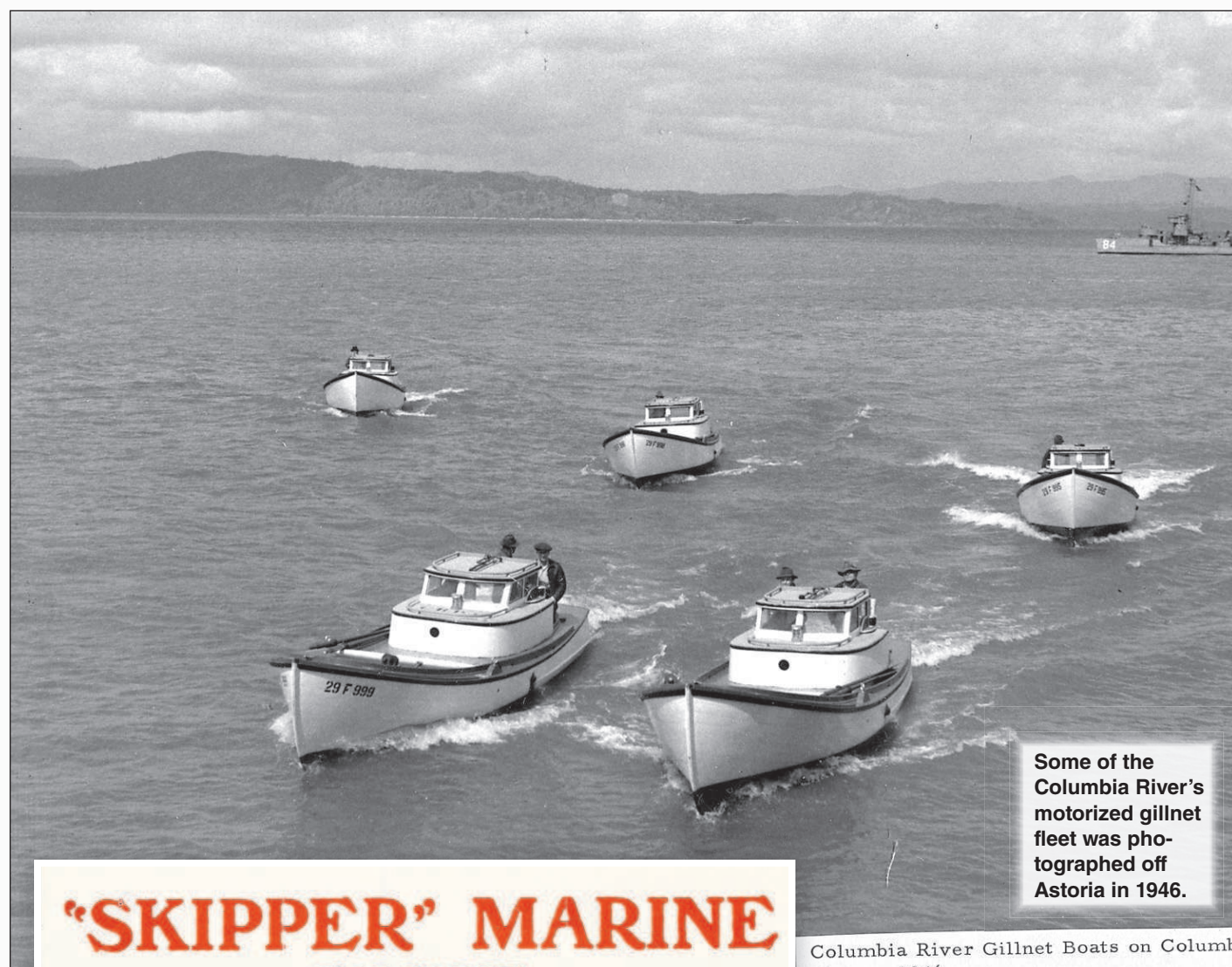
Putting yourself in harm's way to feed your kids: What a genuinely noble thing it was for these men to do night after night and year after year. Many of them first-generation Americans, they deserve to be honored and respected to this day.

It would be a gross understatement to say mine is not a boating family, so I tread on slippery ground knowledge-wise whenever writing about maritime subjects so close to experienced local hearts.

The first "boat" I was ever on was my older brother Greg's inflatable yellow rubber dingy. No more than a high school freshman or sophomore, he sent much of one summer up in the mountains planting trees. I recall our parents being mystified about why he'd want to spend part of the proceeds from this sweaty toil on a little blow-up vessel, but I'm sure it sounded literally cool to him to be able to row out into Louis Lake and cast a fishing line. Or maybe Greg just felt the legendary lure of the water: He went onto a career in the U.S. Navy.

In contrast to the USS John F. Kennedy that he later sailed into New York Harbor, Greg's first vessel wasn't so much subject to the vagaries of the wind as to gravity: it wallowed in the lake with all the grace of deflated parachute.

Years later, my wife Donna and I spent a day in my rowboat on Grays River. Swept upriver by the tide at a fast walking pace, we foolishly decided not to wait for it to reverse



Some of the Columbia River's motorized gillnet fleet was photographed off Astoria in 1946.

Columbia River Gillnet Boats on Columbia River, 1946

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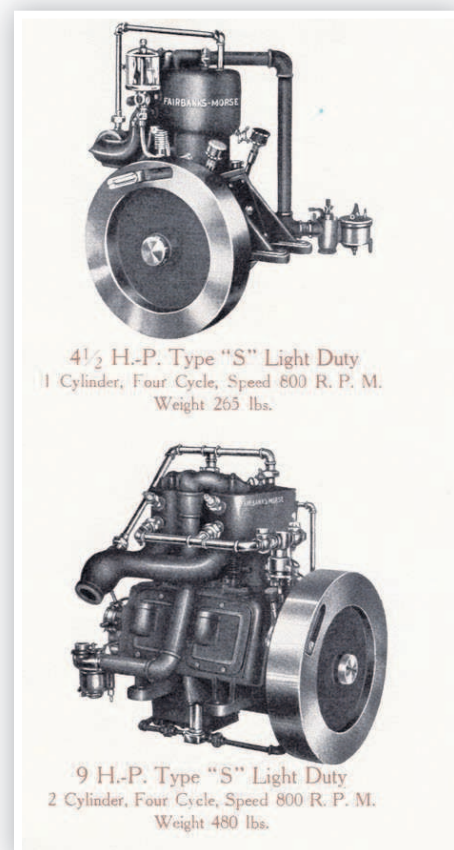
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Six horsepower one-cylinder Skipper Marine Engines like this one cost \$105.50 with salt water equipment in about 1905, weighing in at 145 pounds without accessories. They operated at 150 to 1,400 revolutions per minute.



Fairbanks-Morse gas motors were a fantasy for Astoria fisherman G. Marcelli in 1910.

course and flush us back out. Flailing away at the water with heavy wooden oars, I got a taste of the galley slave's life.

Critically, neither Greg's boat nor mine had an engine.

Imagine what it would have been like to learn in 1903 or 1910 or so that you no longer had to fight the water on your own? Instead, the advanced technology of a relatively portable gas engine could free you of drudgery and the life-endangering perils of a lee shore, driven by the wind into breakers or rocks. It would be like handing a rifle to a spear-carrying lion hunter.

This Feb. 10, 1910 letter to the Columbia River Packers Association is one of many examples how this technology transfixed the fishing community:

Dear Sir,  
 Will you please send me a 6 to 8 (horsepower) 2 cylinder outfit? If you are satisfy, I will installed this engine on one of your

boats for fishing the coming season. By having the gasoline motor, I could catch more fish. I got this book [a Fairbanks-Morse engine brochure] to buy the engine good and cheap, that's why I want you to look at it. If you will send for it, let me know. And I will come ashore and talk to you personally. I was for the last 3 or 4 years trying get one. But Willie Tallant was very hard to do anything for his fisherman. Now if you will make up you mind to get one please let me know.

I remain yours truly, G. Marcelli, SS Rose City, Astoria, Ore.

Mr. Marcelli's grammar might be a little rough, but lots of us today can easily empathize with his sentiments. I mean, who wouldn't love to have a shiny new marine motor? I dearly hope he got his wish.

Called hit-and-miss engines — Wikipedia has a good explanation at tinyurl.com/zqgkvw8 — this invention spread faster than an oil slick through the U.S. economy, being adapted to countless uses besides boat

motors. They made a "POP whoosh whoosh whoosh whoosh POP" noise that is slightly crazy-making after 10 minutes or so.

Less of a maintenance chore than older steam engines, they're fairly easy to understand and fix. This is in stark contrast to modern auto engines that scare all but seasoned professionals like my brother, Maybe it is a prototypical rural thing, but it'd be fun to know that you had the ability to repair a tool so essential to your life. Combining logical design with almost-sculptural curves, gasoline marine engines are elegant solutions to real needs.

I wonder if my wife would let me keep one in the living room.

— M.S.W.

Matt Winters is editor and publisher of the Chinook Observer and Coast River Business Journal. He lives in the beautiful fishing village of Ilwaco, Washington.

Sailing gillnet boats like these relies on canvas sails and wooden oars, leaving fishermen at the mercy of winds and rough waters.

