

Woman crisscrosses West to fulfill a last wish

An unlikely executor takes a long road trip

By PHUONG LE
Associated Press

SEATTLE — Nancy Zingheim barely knew Rita Poe when Poe approached her office at a Washington state RV park. Poe, a shy registered nurse, had a request for the RV park business manager: Could Zingheim help her with her will?

Weeks later, the 66-year-old Poe died of colorectal cancer. In her will, she left nearly \$800,000 to a dozen national wildlife refuges and parks, mostly in the West. She named Zingheim the executor.

Zingheim knew little about Poe, who had moved to the Evergreen Coho SKP RV Park in the small town of Chimacum just five months earlier. She knew even less about national wildlife refuges.

That was in 2015. This year, Zingheim embarked on a 4,000-mile road trip to learn more about the woman who lived in an Airstream trailer with her dog and cat — and the wild places that captivated her.

“I wanted to see what they were,” said Zingheim, 62. “I decided that I wasn’t going to suddenly write checks to places at face value. I wanted to do my due diligence and find out what they needed.”

Wildlife refuges

Over nine days, she drove Poe’s Ford pickup truck in a loop of the West. She visited six national wildlife refuges in California, Idaho, Oregon and Washington state — part of a vast network of reserves across the United States where wild lands are protected for wildlife.

President Theodore Roosevelt established the first refuge in 1903 at Florida’s Pelican Island. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages more than 560 such refuges. From wetlands in Florida to tropical forests in Hawaii, the lands are set aside for migratory birds,



AP Photo/Elaine Thompson

Nancy Zingheim smiles as she sits in a truck given to her in Chimacum, Wash., earlier this month. Zingheim barely knew Rita Poe when Poe approached her office at the RV park in Washington state, asking for help with her will. Zingheim, the executor of Poe’s estate, went on a 4,000-mile road trip to learn more about the woman who lived in a 27-foot Airstream trailer with her dog and cat, and the wild places that captivated her.



Left: This 2013 photo shows Rita Poe’s dog Iggy and cat Sunshine, her traveling companions.

Right: When Poe died of cancer, she left nearly \$800,000 to a dozen national wildlife refuges and parks, mostly in the American West. She also put a woman she barely knew, Nancy Zingheim, in charge of carrying out her wishes.



Rita Poe

State of California DMV

Zingheim also fulfilled one of Poe’s wishes: She scattered the nature lover’s ashes in a wooded area surrounded by Washington’s snow-capped Olympic Mountains.

alligators, bears and countless other creatures. There’s at least one in each state, and a majority are open to the public for free.

At each stop, Zingheim asked around: Do you know Rita? No one did. One person recalled Poe’s 27-foot Airstream trailer but little else.

“To this day, I don’t think any of us knew a lot about her,” Zingheim said.

Zingheim also took a tour of each refuge. She asked refuge managers what they needed

and wanted. And she tried to imagine how Poe connected to these places.

“The reserves, they’re quiet places. I could see Rita there,” she said.

Poe’s life

In time, bits of Poe emerged. Poe grew up in Southern California, worked as a nurse at a suburban Los Angeles hospital and spent time in Texas.

Terry Poe said he last saw his sister in 2007. After their parents died, leaving them

money, he said, she bought a trailer and traveled around the Western U.S. to various refuges and national parks.

“She enjoyed nature and being out in nature,” he said in a telephone interview from Southern California.

Rita Poe owned several high-end cameras. She was a birder. On her computer, Zingheim found stunning photographs of birds, bears, ocelots and bobcats. There were trips to New Mexico, Arizona and Canada.

Zingheim said that in the process of carrying out Poe’s wishes, she felt she’d been granted her own bequest. And she’s grateful for it.

“I saw things that I would never have seen,” Zingheim said. “I didn’t know a national wildlife reserve even existed. I don’t think a lot of people out there know about them. They should. They’re wonderful places.”

Brian Wehausen gave Zingheim a tour of the Camas National Wildlife Refuge’s

high desert landscape and wetlands when she showed up last spring. Poe had taken photographs of bald eagles and moose on a visit to the south-east Idaho refuge.

“Our refuge is fairly small. It would seem to fit a personality like Rita’s,” said Wehausen, refuge manager. “She could come out here, bird, photograph, and she doesn’t have to see a lot of other people.”

Writing the checks

Back on Washington’s Olympic Peninsula after her trip, Zingheim sat down last month and wrote checks. They included money to support Camas, the Merced National Wildlife Refuge in California, Little Pend Oreille National Wildlife Refuge in Washington, Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon and Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge in Utah.

She also sent money to Yellowstone National Park, two state parks and a Texas birding center.

“There’s a spiritual connection that people feel about these places. They have a lot of meaning to a lot of people,” Tracy Casselman, project leader for the wildlife refuge complex that includes Camas.

Casselmann said Poe’s gift will ensure more people enjoy such places.

With each check, Zingheim wrote a letter directing how some money should be used. “I think she would have agreed with me, I really do,” said Zingheim, who has since adopted Poe’s dog, Iggy.

Steve Gillard, the Washington attorney who handled Poe’s will, said it’s unusual for people to name someone they barely know to distribute their estate.

“But it’s very unusual for a person like Nancy to take on that responsibility. She’s a very good human being.”

Zingheim also fulfilled one of Poe’s wishes: She scattered the nature lover’s ashes in a wooded area surrounded by Washington’s snow-capped Olympic Mountains.

She added: “Every time I drive by, I say ‘Hi, Rita.’”

Military ship that sank century ago won’t be pulled from sea

By LINDA WANG
Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — A U.S. Coast Guard ship that first set out to sea during the Spanish-American War and sank off the coast of Southern California 100 years ago won’t be moved anytime soon.

Strong currents and an abundance of sediment would make moving the delicate vessel too difficult, officials said this week in detailing the discovery of the San Francisco-based cutter McCulloch. They also paid tribute to its crews, including two members who died in the line of duty.

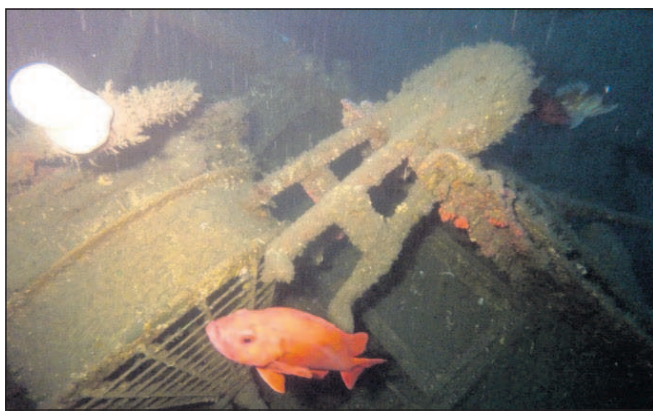
Researchers focused on the area of the shipwreck 3 miles northwest of Point Conception, California, after noticing a flurry of fish. Sunken ships offer a great place for fish to hide.

The archaeological remains, including a 15-inch torpedo tube molded into the bow stem and the top of a propeller blade, are draped with white anemones 300 feet below the surface, officials said. Fish swim lazily past a 6-pound gun mounted in a platform at the starboard bow.

The ship sank on June 13, 1917, after colliding with a civilian steamship. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Coast Guard discovered the wreck last fall during a routine survey.

The McCulloch began its career as part of Commodore George Dewey’s Asiatic Squadron in the Battle of Manila Bay during the Spanish-American War.

Cutters based in San Francisco in the late 1800s and early 1900s represented American interests throughout the Pacific. They also played important roles in the development of the Western U.S.



NOAA/USCG/Video Ray

A fish swims past a circular skylight collapsed inside the officer’s quarters in the stern of the shipwreck cutter McCulloch.

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