

COASTAL LIFE

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CLOSE TO HOME

Aboard the Hawaiian Chieftain

A passenger sails the Columbia River — and Job Corps students sail into tomorrow

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FOR COAST WEEKEND

The Columbia River and dirty-gray rain clouds were bucking and swaying and gobbling up the distant horizon, the mastodon headlands ten miles downriver at Cape Disappointment.

A firm southwest wind spoke of late spring. Nine ocean-going ships lay at anchor, swinging like giant clock hands as the tide mimicked the pulse of the moon — a Kwagwalth moon, the Native moon of the peace dance. Sailing aboard the Hawaiian Chieftain, I felt strangely secure, and happy.

We were under sail. The good captain, Gary Heinrich, barked against the wind. His messages were piggy-backed by crew members from bow to stern. Up went a second sail, the mizzen. A crisp breeze cracked the linen, and the vessel came around into the wind. She raced against the tide like a strong young bull.

Two miles inland and along the Astoria shoreline, Rain City seemed to draw in a deep breath as the vessel sailed westerly. Folks stopped and watched. Certainly, they were stunned with awe.

The ship is a gallant vessel, and embodies a spirit that extends long past the age of wooden sailing ships. Built in Maui in 1988, she joined her sister ship, the Lady Washington, in 2006 as an educational and training venture through the Grays Harbor Historical Seaport Authority.

The 104-foot ship sails into our waters once or twice a year. Along with the Lady Washington, she shares a time and space that we somehow envy — though, in fairness, sailing under a national flag in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (be it French, En-



The Hawaiian Chieftain at sea

GLISH, Spanish or American) was an occupation fraught with danger.

The voyage was too short. The Chieftain circled the deep channel of the Lower Columbia and headed back to Tongue Point Job Corps. I would have loved to cross the river bar. “Never look a gift horse in the mouth,” my father used to say.

Dad was normally right. The voyage was a Disney moment, carefully scripted for the awe-inspired tourist, of which I was one. We shot the cannon and watched a young seaman furl the sails. The big engine kicked in, and we soon sidled into port at Tongue Point.

What do they produce? They concoct stocks, sauces, stir-fries and soups. Roasts. Pasta. Fish, meats and vegetables. They bake and roast and sauté. At some point, nine months or better up the road, they graduate with a tool kit and credentials that make opportunities possible.

The Job Corps helps the students find jobs. That is one of the missions. On this blustery day, the students cooked a three-course meal for the participants of this small conference. It was a fine achievement: a divine pasta salad, roasted chicken with a béchamel sauce and perfect vegetables, and a dessert the way grandmother prepared — she, in that modest farm house on the Clatsop Plains, back when there were sailing ships, not replicas.

Badger stood by proudly until the students scampered back into the kitchen and polished the splendid stainless-steel equipment to a luster. There is little slack in his kitchen.

Sail on


The voyage on the Hawaiian Chieftain was a highlight. I felt honored to be included. The ship offers a full glimpse of “Seven Years before the Mast” to grade school and high school students, and gawkers waiting on the docks at Westport, Astoria, Ilwaco and landing venues farther south.

The young crew, many of them working part-time, is enthusiastic, energized and capable. What are they offering us: a voyage into what was, and will not be again?

We know that the life of a seaman was hazardous, even when the enemy wasn’t shooting 25-pound iron balls in the short distances between stately vessels. Yet this is a glimpse into a slower way of life that dealt with the moods of nature, the storms and rages of winter at sea. The unpredictable gale of early spring or the hurricane in the Caribbean when the day started upon smooth blue water and even pearly skies. I venture that people lived differently then. And we feel that difference when the ship luffs out the sails and the proud vessel is moved by furtive winds.

Back in the classroom, Badger is preparing lessons, checking inventory and issuing grades. His day is long. That happens with dedication. The students feel it.

For many of these students, this educational opportunity provided by Job Corps is a launching pad for further education and, possibly, their careers. Like riding the spirit ship into the future, they, too, will come about. Before them is a great sea, and they travel together in a comparably small boat.

Grab the tiller and point true and straight into tomorrow. 

The Job Corps

The Tongue Point Job Corps is a treasure in our community, a hands-on opportunity for youth to gather skills and venture forth with a shiny new meal card.

Harley Badger guides students in his culinary program. I have served and prepared food for decades now. Badger’s dedication to food lore only enhanced my appreciation of the trials and aspirations of preparing a lovely plate of food. Badger is a conductor, his students the orchestra. His voice is kind, but the message is firm. Here, daily, the kids produce or fade away.