

Voices of the Lower Columbia

Tom Hilton captures bygone language in terse verse

By **PATRICK WEBB**
FOR COAST WEEKEND

Tom Hilton is a smooth-talking encyclopedia of the Lower Columbia River. One look at his worn hands confirms this commercial fisherman has walked the walk.

Hilton, 54, is among high-profile speakers appearing at this year's 22nd annual FisherPoets Gathering.

And the Uniontown man's efforts to preserve the language of fishers will be on display in its raw, plaid-shirted best.

"I was inspired by a lot of friends of mine," he said. "I have met some wonderful poets ... When we get together we all tease each other. It's not just beer and camaraderie, but that feeling of belonging to something that is greater than ourselves — and that's the freedom of the open sea."

When Hilton joined the Gathering 10 years ago, he wanted to establish a style different from admired regulars Geno Leach of Chinook, Wash., and Dave Densmore of Astoria.

"It took me a little while to find my identity as a fisherpoet," he said. "With friends, it's easy to be yourself, but to go in front of 300 people who don't know you ..."

Jon Broderick, guiding light for the FisherPoets Gathering, said Hilton is a confident performer. "Tom's poetry really brings it all to life, just like a song," he said. "He is quite a talker.

"He's got the cred, he's local and he's got creativity and good performing energy. He works the waterfront. He could be the mascot for the FisherPoets!" Broderick said.

Son of 'Skip'

Today, Hilton runs Hanthorn Crab Co. and Pier 39 Seafood, close by Floyd Holcom who has fished with him for eons, seeking to promote crab and oysters.

A career on the water was inevitable. "I am the last one — the last generation of kids that grew up when there were still canneries up and down the river," Hilton said.

All his aunts and cousins worked at the Bumble Bee cannery. Hilton's grandfather, William, was a longshoreman and gillnetter, and so was his father, Finnish immi-



Patrick Webb photos

Fisherpoet Tom Hilton points to a familiar name on the Astoria Maritime Memorial. He says preserving the voices of the Lower Columbia River is about 'the power of our language, tradition and history. For some people, it's walking back in time.'



LEFT: Astoria's Maritime Memorial Park preserves the names of Tom Hilton's parents, employers and fishing buddies who together tell the history of the Lower River. This commemorates his late father, A.V. 'Skip' Hilton. RIGHT: Tom Hilton's hands attest to decades working on the water.



grant Art Hilton, known as "Skip" or by his initials A.V.

"I started fishing with my Dad in 1970 when I was 6 years old. My dad was the greatest fisherman the Union Cannery had," Hilton said. "Then we went to Alaska in 1977 when I was 13."

"Skip" was one of four members of the "Bunkhouse Gang" whose exploits wrote West Coast folklore. Another was his best friend Bill Gunderson — called "The Swede." The two died within 24 hours of each other in 2012.

Tom Hilton said they and Wally Nelson — "The King" — were his mentors. "I fished with him when I was 18," he said. "'The King' taught me everything. He

knew every grain of sand on that river out there."

'Time Bomb'

Hilton sailed back and forth between the Lower Columbia and Alaska, fishing for salmon in Cook Inlet and the Kenai Peninsula, earning the nickname "Time Bomb," the title of a song by punk rock band Rancid. He also fished for herring near San Francisco.

His one break was earning a bachelor's degree in speech communication at Portland State University in the early 1990s.

He credits Columbia River writer-historian Irene Martin for paving his way. "She's the one who preserved the language.

ONLINE ONLY

Check out two examples of FisherPoet Tom Hilton's poetry at coastweekend.com

'I WILL TAKE A PHRASE... THEN I DANCE AROUND WITH IT AND SEE WHAT FITS.'

Tom Hilton, fisherpoet

She did an amazing job."

Like her, Hilton cherishes the voices of the Lower River.

"That's how I started. I was pushed by my friends to do it, and I wanted to carry on the language. I started with open mic and my buddies challenged me to do it."

One poem was written on a boat grounded for two days. Mostly, however, he taps ideas into the notes section of his teal cellphone, then lets them gel.

"It takes long time to write. I get inspiration driving down the highway," he said. "I take phrases and mix them around.

"My poetry isn't like Walt Whitman or Coleridge. Mine is more like prose.

"I will take a phrase, note it on the phone, then I dance around with it and see what fits. They all come from what I have experienced, all with the language of the Lower River."

End of a dynasty

Much of his best writing is done at the Cannery Pier Hotel, a waterfront site rich in cannery tradition across from the Astoria Maritime Memorial Park, where his late parents, mentors and neighbors are commemorated.

During a brief tour, his fingers poke certain names with a casual reverence. "All that's left is legend, names etched in a granite wall," he said, a line from one of his poems. He is especially proud that the outline of his family's boat, the Thunderbolt, adorns multiple listings.

His son is a professional actor, so the dynasty ends with him.

"There's a lot of guys who fish that could have Ph.D.s., but fishing allows them to have freedom that nothing else in the world allows them to have," Hilton said.

"It could be called one-ness, with the tide, everything. It connects us with our past, our present, and with the food that we eat." 