

Chinook fisherman views life afloat as public service

Wisdom from a gillnetter

By **PATRICK WEBB**
Chinook Observer

CHINOOK, Wash. — Fishermen make good philosophers.

Les Clark is no exception. “I have had a fantastic life,” said Clark, who turned 90 in December. “I had a lot of scrapes, but I survived all of them. All my buddies are gone. I wonder why I am still here. Maybe the good Lord needs me here to fight for the fish?”

The concept of giving up his 32-foot F/V St. Frances II and not fishing solo doesn’t arise. “I am one of the older guys still on the river,” he said. His father Gene and Anna Clark, of Chinook, set the bar. “Dad fished till he was 90 and died at 98, and mom went to 97,” he smiled.

He recently lost his long-time fishing and hunting partner Ken Greenfield. Their 15- and 20-year terms in the Port of Chinook Commission overlapped and he enjoys reminiscing about their adventures together on the Columbia River, at Salmon Creek near Vancouver, and in Alaska.

Clark grew up in Washougal, fishing with his father and the school superintendent across the river in Corbett. “I was a kid working on my school summer vacations. I used to fish with my father part time, then got my own outfit.”

He married his sweetheart, Frances, in 1955, bought a plywood skiff and spent a lucrative three weeks. “Bumble Bee Seafoods was paying 25 cents a pound for top-grade spring Chinook. I made \$5,500 — that was a lot of money in those days!”

Northwest fishing dynamics changed when the completion of The Dalles Dam flooded the Indian dip-



Patrick Webb/Chinook Observer

Les Clark’s life as a commercial fisherman spans decades.

net grounds at Celilo Falls in 1957; Clark has fond memories of bird hunting with Native Americans during that era, plus early efforts to preserve tribal and commercial fishing amid changing conditions.

In the early 1960s, the Clarks moved from Washougal to Chinook, where he and Frances raised four children. He operated his commercial fishing vessel and she worked as secretary-bookkeeper for the family business. Together they founded the Northwest Gillnetters Association in 1977 to help preserve the livelihoods of commercial fishermen on the Columbia; he served as president for more than a dozen years with Frances as secretary.

Clark’s calendar showed a pattern. “I put 54 seasons in Cook Inlet. In July, I went to Alaska. I spent spring and fall here, crab for 20 years, troll for 20 years, and gillnetting since 1944.”

Several life-threatening scrapes afloat have been the subject of prior newspaper articles that fill Clark family scrapbooks. In one,

he was trapped in his own net, wrapped around a giant reel, and had to be cut out by a passing fisherman who heard his cries for help. In another, he had to swim to safety when a shrimper ran over his boat and caused it to sink.

‘Safeguards’

He has testified before state commissions about fishing policy, working with the late Sen. Sid Snyder, who served with distinction in the Washington Legislature. “I keep up with politics and the fishing business. Our coastal economy depends a large part on fishing — it is very important,” he said. “Our ‘savior’ used to be Sid Snyder. He did his very best to keep things working. He was a prince of a man. He knew what everybody needed.”

The 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill, which devastated habitat in Alaska’s Prince William Sound, is an ugly memory. Recalling the drunken captain who ran the giant vessel aground makes Clark’s always-cheerful face turn briefly into an uncharacteristic scowl.

“We need oil, but we need better safeguards protecting the environment,” he said, noting that there are similar fears for proposals for expanded coal and oil transportation on the Columbia. “These people are ‘big-money people.’ We need the industry, but we need safeguards.”

As a gillnetter, he is delighted at the latest headlines about rights to fish being restored after a period of severe restrictions. He is a strong supporter of hatcheries and the use of scientific methods to help preserve salmon.

To rebuild diminished runs, gillnetters must be allowed to return, he said. “Gillnetters are the only ones that have the capacity to harvest the largest number of fish, the size of nets, to target the fish, and separate the listed stock,” he said. “They are a very important tool on the river.”

Life afloat as a fourth-generation fisherman is satisfying, Clark said.

“You live with fishermen on the river. You get to know them. You’re not working at

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Les Clark

the mill, you are your own boss and you work extra hard.

“But in between runs you have time to do other things. You wouldn’t work that hard for someone else!”

A hip replacement five years ago barely slowed him. “My doctor did not want me to continue, but fishing has been my life and I told him, ‘One way or another I am going to go back on the boat,’” he said.

The doctor acquiesced, but reportedly warned him not to jump off the vessel. “I have excellent mobility and heal fast. I was ready to climb the walls — and three weeks later I was on a boat fishing.” His swift recovery in his mid-80s surprised his medical team. “The doctor said, ‘You’re going to be the poster child!’”

That quick-healing physique has some additional help, of course.

“I have more hydraulic power. That’s why I can fish alone!” he smiled, revealing one secret to his longevity. “All my equipment is all paid for, but if you can’t go fishing it’s not worth nothing.”

“We have had fights before — nothing stays the same. You have to be prepared. I bought gear when others were selling.”

Philosophy

He lost Frances to cancer in late 2016. Their family includes daughters, Karen

Gray and Cheryl Raisetakka, sons, Lee Clark and Steve Clark, plus grand and great-grandchildren.

Karen Gray acknowledged that her father attributes his longevity to genes, but his healthy lifestyle has helped considerably. “He was always very active his whole life, way before people touted the benefits of exercise and a good diet. He also sleeps very well.”

Growing up, Lee and Steve took to the water easily and learned the ropes from a skilled teacher. “They have fished a lot of the same places, and they are always in close proximity, in the Columbia River, here at the mouth, and up in Alaska,” Gray said.

“They watch him and always know where he is — they watch a little closer, check in with him and help load his fish.”

When not on his boat, Clark enjoys taking his shotgun to Chinook and Knappa gun clubs.

“I’m very lucky,” he said. “The neighbors all around me are gone. I am the last living there.”

Amid rugged work afloat, a lifetime fisherman has time to think. Clark’s philosophy connects dots to form a sincere conclusion.

“The public owns the whole resource — and the gillnetters harvest fish for the public,” he said, thoughtfully. “I suppose I am a ‘public servant.’”

Trump officials blamed for slowing down nuke site cleanup

By **NICHOLAS K. GERANIOS**
Associated Press

SPOKANE, Wash. — The slow pace of cleaning up the nation’s largest cache of radioactive waste left over from the production of nuclear weapons is frustrating Washington state officials from both major political parties, who blame the Trump administration for not doing more.

The U.S. Department of Energy recently proposed hundreds of millions of dollars in budget cuts for cleaning up the vast Hanford Nuclear Reservation in southeastern Washington, even though the estimated cost of the cleanup has at least tripled and could reach more than \$600 billion.

“That’s a huge, huge cost increase,” said Tom Carpenter, director of the watchdog group Hanford Challenge.

At a hearing in Washington, D.C., last week, U.S. Sen. Patty Murray questioned Energy Secretary Rick Perry’s assertion that his agency can still meet a legally-binding cleanup schedule despite the proposed budget cuts. Much of the site’s aging infrastructure is deteriorating, including underground waste storage tanks and tunnels.

The Energy Department issued a report in January that raised the remaining cost of Hanford’s environmental cleanup to between \$323 billion and \$677 billion, with the work lasting until 2079 or 2102, depending on which estimate proves true. That is much higher than the previous estimate of \$107 billion in costs to complete the cleanup by 2066.

That is “a pretty shocking number,” Perry told members of the House Appropriations Committee last month.

Shortly after the higher estimates were revealed, the

Trump administration proposed a \$416 million cut in its budget for Hanford that would reduce it from about \$2.5 billion for the fiscal year ending in September to \$2.1 billion for the next fiscal year that starts in October.

U.S. Rep. Dan Newhouse, whose district encompasses the site, said the administration’s “budget request numbers would fall short of fulfilling the federal government’s obligation to clean up the Hanford site.”

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, an Oregon Democrat, estimated it will take 300 years to clean up the site under the Trump administration’s proposed budget.

“Trump’s combination of bad math and shifty wordplay adds up to tragicomic incompetence,” said Wyden, a frequent critic of efforts to clean up the site.

Washington state officials have said previously — even before the cuts were announced — that the federal government has not provided enough funding to meet

annual cleanup costs. They have suggested that least \$3 billion annually is needed.

“We believe that the lack of adequate funding translates into a longer, more drawn-out cleanup, and that in turn is a significant factor in the increased cost of the total cleanup,” said Alex Smith, manager of nuclear waste programs for the Washington Department of Ecology.

Hanford was created by the Manhattan Project during World War II as the nation raced to build atomic bombs. The plutonium for the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki, Japan, at the end of the war was made at the site, which then produced about 70% of the plutonium for the U.S. Cold War arsenal.

That left the country’s largest volume of radioactive waste at the site about half the size of Rhode Island, where the most dangerous 56 million gallons of waste is stored in 177 giant underground tanks, some of which have leaked.

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Sancy Leachman, M.D., Ph.D., is a physician-scientist who chairs the Department of Dermatology at Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU) and is the director of the Melanoma Research Program at the OHSU Knight Cancer Institute, an NCI-designated Comprehensive Cancer Center. She is a dermatologist using basic science research and state-of-the-art technology to combat skin cancer.

When not working, Leachman spends time with her husband and two children in outdoor pursuits including hiking, skiing, backpacking and exploring the Pacific Northwest.



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