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Not only were these state-of-the-art vessels considered a more luxurious form of travel for up to 800 passengers and 200 crew members. But at 23 knots, the Great Northern and Northern Pacific could cover the approximately 575 miles between Astoria and San Francisco in 25 hours — faster than the overland travel offered by the competing Southern Pacific train, according to Palmgren.

“They were the two fastest ships of their size in the world at the time,” he said. “They would actually beat the train that left from Portland.”

They consumed a notable 1,800 to 2,000 barrels of oil per day but unlike other large ships that could achieve such high speed at the time, they offered a smooth ride, free of vibrations.

Crowds of thousands from Astoria and the surrounding area gathered to welcome the arrival of the ships at the Flavel port on the Columbia River in 1914. As a token of appreciation for the economic boost expected from the cruise line service, Astoria citizens gifted each ship an opulent clock that stood about 3 feet tall. Some of the tallest clocks were created by the renowned Chelsea Clock Co. and were presented to commemorate the ships’ inaugural voyages, Smith said.

Life after luxury

The Great Northern and Northern Pacific only participated in the luxury cruise line service for two years before World War I. At that time, both were commandeered by the U.S. Army and repurposed as troop transports for the war.

After a short stint as a flagship of the U.S. Navy at Guantanamo Bay, the Great Northern was purchased in 1922 by Seattle’s H.F. Alexander to head his fleet of ocean liners. He renamed the ship after himself. The Great Northern carried out a majority of her life as the H.F. Alexander. She had one final military assignment in World War II before being scrapped in 1948 after 34 years of service.

The Northern Pacific was not so fortunate. The vessel was originally going to be purchased by Alexander but in 1922, she wrecked and burned in Delaware Bay off the Atlantic Coast.

Unlike the Great Northern, Palmgren said, the Northern Pacific was considered a cursed ship by some sailors because of its many mishaps.

Ongoing exhibit

The Columbia River Maritime Museum’s exhibit includes biographical panels about Hill and the Great Northern Pacific S.S. Co., as well numerous vintage photographs that depict the ship-building process and passen-



Katherine Lacaze

If You Go

‘Twin Palaces of the Pacific’

Columbia River Maritime Museum, 1792 Marine Drive, Astoria

Open from 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily

Admission is free for active military and ages 5 and younger; \$5 for ages 6 to 17; \$16 for ages 18 to 64; and \$13 for ages 65 and older

ger life aboard the ship.

Other artifacts include a complimentary toiletry kit given to a passenger during a voyage; a pennant issued on the day of the first voyage; an antique can with the Great Northern on the label; and a model of the Great Northern — although the two ships were identical in size and stature.

The James J. Hill Center in St. Paul also shared materials for the exhibit, including the two commemorative clocks. One is currently on display. The other is being restored by Frank Van Winkle at Loop-Jacobsen Inc.

Smith said the museum hopes to hold a reception at some point to thank the supporters and individuals who contributed to the exhibit. The museum plans to keep the “Twin Palaces of the Pacific” display up for about a year.

“It’s one we’re happy to share,” Smith said.

A glimpse of Columbia River Maritime Museum’s newest exhibit.

First Baptist Church

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