

RIVER OF THE WEST

New book explores the history of the Columbia River

BY ZOË BUCHLI

Been wanting to brush up on your history of the Northwest United States' dominant river system?

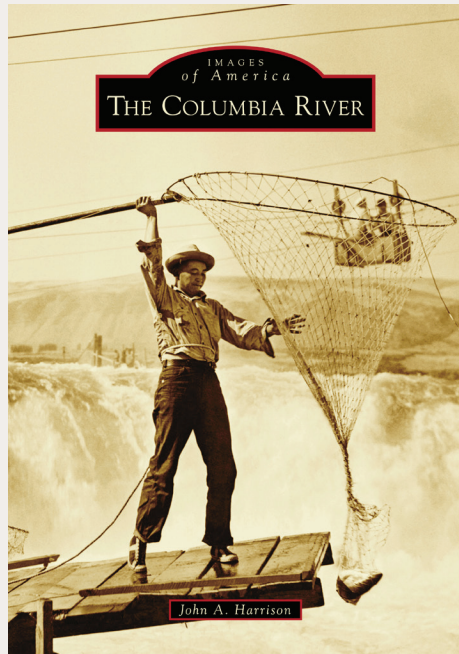
Arcadia Publishing recently released a new book titled "The Columbia River." The historic collection of 200 black and white photos is curated by author John Harrison, a Vancouver, Washington, based historian and writer. The book explores the river's rich history and many uses as a source of power, irrigation, recreation and food.

Harrison spent years compiling a written history of one of the country's largest rivers for the Northwest Power and Conservation Council, which served as the groundwork for Harrison's expansive knowledge of the Columbia. Harrison has worked at the council for more than three decades, serving as their information officer.

When Arcadia Publishing reached out to Harrison to contribute to their "Images of America" series, Harrison jumped at the opportunity to work on the book in his free time. That extra time is something he recently acquired through the time saved working from home and avoiding a lengthy commute.

Harrison's love and deep knowledge for the river is evident. Harrison recalled that when he first drafted the book, he wrote over the word limit.

"What that forced me to do was to think strategically about what are the important things to write about in the history of the river," Harrison said. He focuses on two prongs of the river's history — its geological history, and its



The book

'The Columbia River' by John A. Harrison
Arcadia Publishing — 128 pages — \$23.99
arcadiapublishing.com

tribal and cultural history.

"You just kind of build up," Harrison said. "You start at 64 million years ago and you go to the present day." He added that along the way several events umped out at him as being pivotal in the river's history.

Harrison was especially intrigued by the river's nexus of its natural and built environment.

"In essence, it's a machine on one



B.L. Singley (Keystone View Co.)

A man works on a wharf on the Columbia River in 1899.

hand and an organic thing on the other," he said, explaining that the river produces half the Northwest's electricity but also has free-flowing sections. It provides slack water for navigation and recreation but also irrigation.

"But what's interesting about the Columbia is how diligently people are working to preserve both aspects," Harrison said. "I've been exposed to this interplay of the environment. The built environment or natural environment; the fish and wildlife on one side and hydropower on the other, for most of my working career."

Harrison also wrote about many commercial industries that are associated with the river, including canning, fishing (namely salmon) and timber markets. The impacts these industries had on Indigenous people in North America is also addressed in Harrison's book.

Before joining the Northwest Power and Conservation Council, Harrison worked as a reporter at The Columbian newspaper covering environmental topics. Exploring the political side of the environment fascinated Harrison and set him on his path for exploring the Colum-

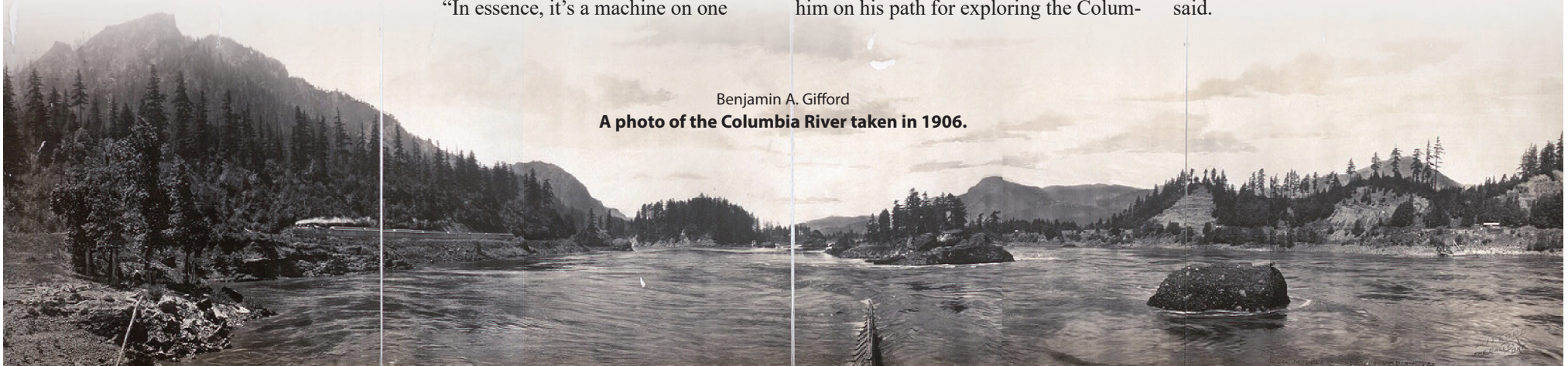
bia River in the future.

To gather images Harrison explored different organizations, including the Library of Congress, the Washington State Archives, the Columbia River Maritime Museum, Oregon and Washington historical societies and archives in British Columbia, Canada. Digging for photos and facts about the history of the river made compiling the book a fun project for Harrison.

He hopes readers will finish his book with a broader perspective of all that the river does, yet understand that it's not an endless resource. He pressed that he specifically wanted to focus on the fact that the river's power supply and resources are not unlimited.

Harrison feels that one of the key things that people don't realize is when they flip that switch in their house, approximately 50% of the electrons that make their lights come on originate from the Columbia River.

"I hope people come away with the understanding that the Columbia River gives us many things. It's a river of many uses or many voices, if you will," he said.



Benjamin A. Gifford

A photo of the Columbia River taken in 1906.