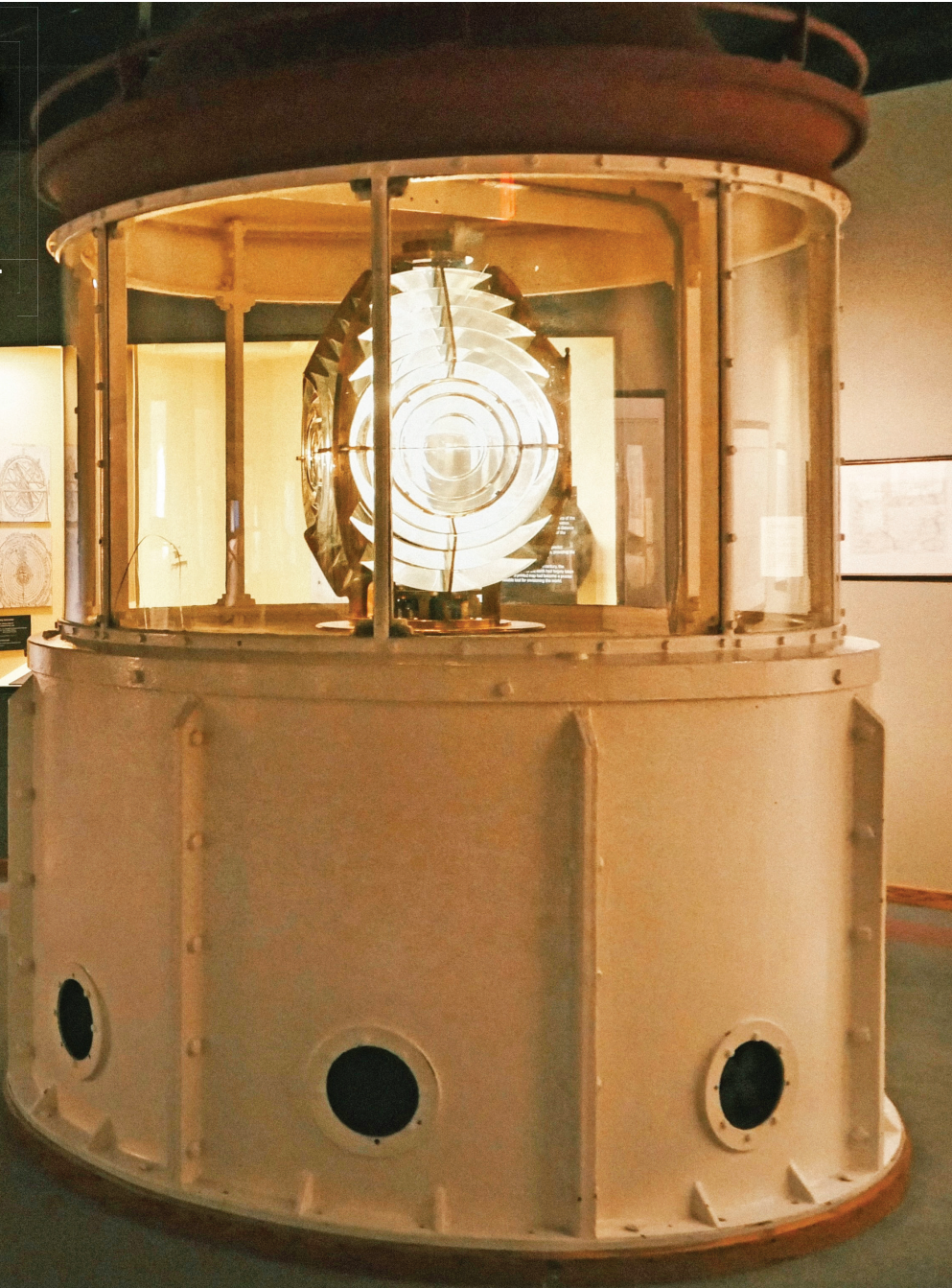


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WEEKEND BREAK

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'SHIPWRECKS!'

Maritime Museum charts legacy of Columbia River's 'Graveyard of the Pacific'

By LISSA BREWER
The Astorian

From one corner of the Columbia River Maritime Museum, a beacon of light sweeps across a series of maps and constellations, emanating from the shell of a lighthouse. A rotating Fresnel lens directs visitors as it once guided ships, illuminating a sign for the museum's newest exhibit, "Shipwrecks!" "Shipwrecks are windows to the past," it reads, "come and discover their secrets."

Harrowing encounters with the sea take shape in the display, brought to life through firsthand accounts, historical images, archival footage, news clips and artifacts.

Jeff Smith, the museum's curator, points to one central piece, a steel fragment from the ill-fated Exxon Valdez.

"That hull fragment represents the state of shipbuilding for tankers before the wreck and oil spill up in Alaska," Smith said. "After the wreck of the Exxon Valdez, tankers were required to have double hulls," he added.

Though the Alaskan incident affected commercial fishing across the Northwest, many shipwrecks featured in the exhibit occurred within just miles of Astoria. Thousands of vessels have met their end among the swells, currents and sandbars of the Columbia River Bar, where more than 1,200 miles of current flow into the Pacific Ocean.

"In the Graveyard of the Pacific, there's plenty to choose from," assistant curator Matthew Palmgren said, referencing the region's nickname. "We talk about the Admiral Benson, the Iowa, the Rosecrans, a bit on the Emily Reed. There's so many to count," he added. One display spotlights, with a series of images, local remains of the Peter Iredale, while another displays pieces of beeswax, cargo found after the wreck of a Spanish galleon near Nehalem.

Still another notable incident, the Mauna Ala, also known as the Christmas Ship, wrecked after turning back toward the Columbia during World War II. "It was carrying Christmas trees, turkeys and almond roca bound for Hawaii," Palmgren said.

'SHIPWRECKS!'

On view now at the Columbia River Maritime Museum, 1792 Marine Drive, Astoria

Open 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily
www.crrmm.org

As a wartime precaution, blackouts were in effect along the North Coast. With limited visibility, the Mauna Ala missed the entrance to the Columbia. "It ended up grounding, and when it grounded, there were turkeys washing ashore. Many people in the local area actually cooked up these turkeys for the holidays," he added.

Rescue operations are also woven into the exhibit, with diving gear and tools illustrating the work of lifesaving crews. One life-size display features a breeches buoy, a rope secured rescue device used for transport from vessels in peril.

"Before helicopters and other means of escape, that was a common way to get somebody from a shipwreck to shore," Palmgren said. A line throwing gun, used in these rescue efforts, is also on display. "That would shoot a line and they would hook another line up," Palmgren said. "What that's demonstrating is that process."

Most of these objects are secured by donation, some stored within museum collections for decades before public display. "The museum has been collecting these objects since 1962," Palmgren said.

He notes that the museum receives many requests from people in the community looking to donate items, some from personal collections and others passed along through family members. "The Columbia River Maritime Museum is a great place for that," he added, "they can count on that being well preserved."

Together, the artifacts make up a portrait that aims to chronicle both the stories and lessons that shipwrecks bring. "We hope that visitors will come to understand what causes shipwrecks, what we learn from them and how they can be prevented," Smith said. "I expect this exhibit will be enjoyed for a long time."

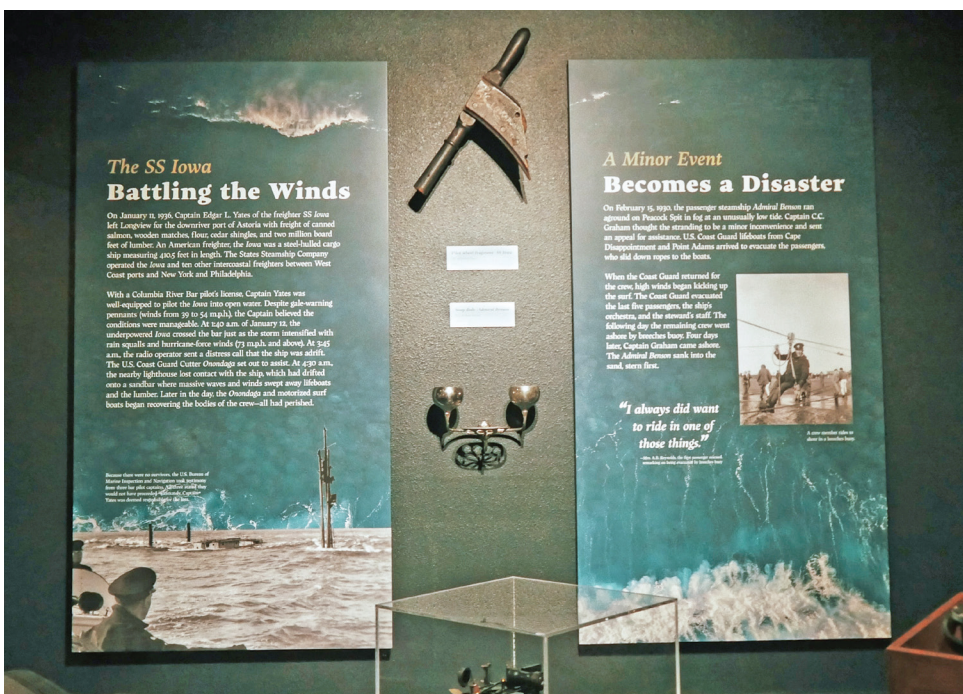


Photos by Lissa Brewer/The Astorian

TOP: A Fresnel lens rotates on display at the Columbia River Maritime Museum. ABOVE: Matthew Palmgren, assistant curator, stands beside a sign for 'Shipwrecks!'



From left, a map lists shipwreck sites along the Oregon Coast, a display spotlights rescue efforts and a steel piece from the Exxon Valdez.



Displays tell the stories of the Iowa and the Admiral Benson, two shipwrecks occurring in the 1930s.



Items from a Spanish galleon shipwreck near Nehalem, including pieces of beeswax and a display about the unique cargo.