

WEEKEND BREAK

Natalie St. John/Chinook Observer
The R/V Hero sank near Willapa Bay.

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Ghost ships

The troubled tales of wrecked and derelict vessels

By **RON BALDWIN**
For *The Astorian*

History is strewn with accounts of those who have squandered their labor, fortune, and yes, even their lives to the dream of owning a beautiful boat. Sometimes, that dream has a way of becoming a nightmare.

Many of those with high hopes have underestimated the time, labor, and financial resources required to maintain those boats, especially historic vessels.

I discovered just such a craft on a dank, foggy night, moored on the south fork of the Palix River as it enters Willapa Bay near Bay Center, Washington.

That vessel turned out to be the R/V Hero, a 125-foot research and supply ship that was once a floating laboratory for the Palmer Research Station at the edge of Antarctica.

The Hero's mission demanded a heavy-framed ship that could break ice and operate in the severe condition of the continent's inshore waters. At 125 feet in length and 30 feet in width, Hero filled the bill. "She was hell for stout," a former crew member commented.

Rigged as a motor ketch, the ship could run silent for sensitive research missions. The Hero served from 1968 to 1984 and was sold at auction for a mere \$5,000 in 1985. From there, its story twists with more dreams and aspirations.

Two harbors on the Oregon Coast, first Reedsport, then Newport, saw efforts to use the Hero as a tourist attraction. Both ended in the ship floating at the dock, rusting and rotting away. Another owner operated the ship for a time as a tourist attraction, but he too disappeared. The craft was soon abandoned in Yaquina Bay, a ghost ship without a home.

After some legal dust settled, the Hero became the property of yet another dreaming owner, a resident of Bay Center, Washington, and was towed to its final berth on the south fork of the Palix River in 2003. Even then, local oyster growers were wary of the risks the ship posed to the oyster industry in Willapa Bay.

Plans for the future of the vessel were murky at best, and the Hero continued to languish at the dock. As years passed, the ship's story was repeated, and it sat still as the channel gradually filled in.

Then, in 2017, the unthinkable hap-



Lissa Brewer/The Astorian

ABOVE: The Tourist No. 2 sits in the Columbia River after capsizing in late July.
BELOW: The sunken Hero poses a mess for crews.



Ron Baldwin

pened: The Hero sank at its mooring. Multiple agencies were on-site quickly, notifying the U.S. Coast Guard of the sinking.

At first, the Coast Guard and the Washington Department of Ecology discounted the ship's pollution risk, but a salvage company soon moved to the site, pumping the ship out and removing fuel and lubricants.

Still, the vessel remained on the bottom for the next five years, as ownership conflicts stalled cleanup efforts. In late July of this year, the Washington Department of Natural Resources, which ultimately became responsible for the wreck, directed crews from Ballard Marine Construction to begin a removal effort under their Derelict Vessel Removal Program. A barge began a removal process that will see pieces shipped to a waste site.

The Hero story is not an unusual one. Every maritime state has problems with derelict vessels, and the Northwest region certainly has its share.

Though both Oregon and Washington states have publicly-funded programs for abandoned and derelict vessels, the astounding costs of one project often take an entire year's budget.

"She's down," read a text from a colleague weeks ago. "The Tourist No. 2 went down!" I could only hear the collective chorus of my fellow marine enthusiasts.

The echoes of other failed recovery projects for large historic vessels that I have followed over the years echoed along: "it'll make a great tourist attraction" and "we don't own it," to name a few. With few exceptions, a restoration project for a historic vessel, especially a wooden ship, is doomed to failure without extensive funding.

Even with significant fundraising, maintenance and operation costs are astonishing. Ultimately, the public often ends up funding cleanup efforts, as in the case of the Hero. The \$2.5 million removal project used up practically all of Washington's two-year removal budget. Tourist No. 2 is already coming in at over \$1 million.

With more old, wooden-hulled vessels disappearing, dreamers have shifted their sights to iron, fiberglass, aluminum and even cement vessels, each continuing on with the life cycle of a ship, some bound to drift toward trouble.

Ron Baldwin is a musician, photographer and writer living in Chinook, Washington.