

Former teacher paddles 250 miles of the Columbia River

By **MONIKA SPYKERMAN**
The Columbian

GOLDENDALE, Wash. — One woman in a kayak versus 250 miles of the mighty Columbia River — sometimes serene and breathtakingly beautiful, sometimes choppy and riddled with treacherous currents, and always buffeted by wind.

This isn't how most people envision the rest and relaxation of retirement. But after 35 years in classrooms, out on the water is exactly where Laurie Case Wilhite wanted to be.

Wilhite was 61 in the spring of 2016 when she began her arduous paddle from John Day Dam near her hometown of Goldendale, Washington, to Astoria, where the Columbia River meets the Pacific Ocean. She just retired from a long career in education that included a year at the International Air and Hospitality Academy and a decade at Woodland High School from 1983 to 1993, among other positions.

"When I retired from teaching, I wanted to slow down and see the Columbia River that I love so much from river level," Wilhite said. "It became the paddle to the Pacific as a journey of reflection, taking time to appreciate my home river."

Home river

"Home river" is a concept that's important to Wilhite, inspired by Paul Schullery's words from a 1991 anthology of fly-fishing essays: "A home river is that rarest of friends, the one who frequently surprises you with new elements of personality without ever seeming a stranger."

This excerpt graces the preface of Wilhite's recently published book, "Paddle



Laurie Case Wilhite in 2016 arrives at Drano Lake, Washington, to the tunes of a bagpiper, in honor of her Scottish heritage, as she completes a 250-mile kayaking journey on the Columbia River.

to the Pacific," a detailed account of her journey with 200 full-color photographs.

Each of the book's 26 chapters describes a different leg of her epic aquatic trek, which took her two-and-half years to complete. Wilhite was judicious about her timing, overwintering at home and paddling only in relatively good conditions. She didn't follow a straight east-to-west route but kayaked when and where co-paddlers could join her.

She rarely kayaked alone, she said, but teamed up with "a dozen people who paddled different stretches with me," such as Vancouver resident D'Ann Horrocks and Wilhite's adult sons, Fletcher and Casey. Her husband, Don, sometimes joined her on the water as well as providing logistical support from land.

Organizing a trip of this magnitude was a challenge all its own, Wilhite said. Accommodations needed to be arranged, campsites booked, schedules coordinated and river conditions double-checked. She writes that her gear included big plastic tubs of "straps, life jackets, bungsies, sunscreen, dry clothes, snacks, a safety throw bag, paddle gloves, multiple hats and much more." Everything was hauled from site to site in Wilhite's wine-colored Chevy truck, nicknamed "Vinny" and outfitted with a Thule Hullavator, a specialized piece of equipment allowing her to single-handedly load and unload her kayak from its rooftop perch. To Wilhite, it was all part of the fun.

"It was thrilling to be able to plan the next paddle and

always have something to look forward to. It became a grand adventure, but not something that was painful," Wilhite said. "Well, it was painful, but in a different way. I did get in better shape!"

Tenacity pays off

From her kayak, Wilhite beheld the Columbia's many facets, from the towering cliffs and wild waterfalls of the Gorge to busy industrial areas with bridges, barges and huge shipping vessels. She paddled "as close as safely possible" to the mammoth dams at John Day, The Dalles and Bonneville. She marveled at the array of avian life both on the water and overhead, writing of the "pelicans, gulls, ducks, geese, osprey and smaller songbirds" that she saw. In Washougal, she was greeted

by the whiskery face of a sea lion as it swam upriver looking for tasty salmon. When she grounded her kayak on sandy shores, she noted the fresh tracks of coyotes, bobcats and bears.

"From river level, it's different. It's intimate. And it changes," Wilhite said. "I refer sometimes to the Columbia as 'the beauty and the beast,' because from certain times of day and certain seasons and tides, it can change dramatically."

Every leg of the journey offered its own surprises, joys or obstacles. Paddles ranged from an easy, 5-mile trip between the Hammond area of Warrenton and Clatsop Spit, the westernmost point of the journey, to a grueling 17-mile stretch from Ridgefield to Kalama in which Wilhite, Horrocks and another friend, Carla Whitmire, battled harsh winds and the incoming Pacific tide, which pushes surprisingly far up the Columbia. But no matter what setbacks Wilhite encountered, it never occurred to her to just take her paddle out of the water and call it quits.

"I'm tenacious. I never thought of giving up, because once I start something, I am driven to finish it. If I say I'm going to do something, I do my utmost to do it," Wilhite said. "But I couldn't have done it without help from my friends. It was not a solo journey. It was a whole team of people. I didn't have to give up because I had so much help."

After she finished each leg of her journey, she'd return home to her writers' group, The Goldendale Writers' Bloc, and craft an account of her experiences. The book became a memoir of sorts, brimming with recollections of her life near the Columbia River, including many cher-

ished memories of kayaking on the Lewis River, Lake Merwin, Yale Lake and Vancouver Lake. Wilhite said she's especially fond of Lake River and the Ridgefield Wildlife Refuge.

Ending with a nod to heritage

She joked that maybe she's spent so much time on lakes and rivers because she's a Pisces — the astrological sign of the fish — and water is her element. However, she seems fueled as much by curiosity as an affinity for water. She said perhaps that's the teacher in her.

"One of my favorite quotes is by Eleanor Roosevelt: 'Do one thing every day that scares you.' What that means to me is not just paddling in huge waves and taking on surf. It can mean saying hello to someone you don't know. It can mean looking up an old friend to repair a rift," Wilhite said. "It's what keeps me going. I like the concept that we can always grow and learn new things."

The journey's final leg wasn't in Astoria, but closer to Wilhite's home waters. She took her last paddle strokes on a very windy day at Drano Lake, Washington, where the Little White Salmon River empties into the Columbia. In honor of her Scottish heritage, she engaged a bagpiper to pipe her to the shore. Later, she celebrated with friends and family in Stevenson.

"On the drive home, I found myself looking at the river from the car and having this whole deeper connection, looking at where I had paddled," Wilhite said. "I can't not look at myself through my mind's eye, being on the river and how I was feeling. The journey will always be with me. It's a grand memory."

Oregonians support Black Lives Matter, but less than half think it has helped

By **COURTNEY VAUGHN**
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — A majority of Oregonians polled say they support the Black Lives Matter movement, but residents are split on whether society is in a better place because of it.

Results of an Oregon Values & Beliefs Center survey conducted in February show about six in 10 Oregon residents polled (59%) support the Black Lives Matter movement. Among them, 36% showed strong support. Three in 10 said they oppose the movement and about one in 10, or 9%, were unsure.

According to the Oregon Values & Beliefs Center, support for the movement is higher among those with more education and income, with support being highest among Multnomah County residents.

Still, surveyors noted a lingering political divide among Oregonians on the perceptions of the social justice movement, with 87% of Democrats in support and 69% of Republicans opposed.

In 2020, the deaths of three Black individuals — two at the hands of police — catapulted the social justice movement into prominence. In February 2020, Ahmaud Arbery was murdered by three white men in Georgia who mistook him for a burglar while he jogged. The following month, Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old EMT, was shot and killed by police in Kentucky while sleeping in her home. In May 2020, the murder of George Floyd by Derek Chauvin, a former Minneapolis police officer who knelt on Floyd's neck until he died, catalyzed the public into action. The high-profile cases forced a spotlight on policing, racism and implicit bias in America, sparking nationwide protests and marches.

While Black Lives



Jane Pierie of Bend displays a sign June 7, 2021, during a Black Lives Matter protest in Drake Park in Bend.

Matter marches and demonstrations took place in major cities. Portland saw sustained protests in 2020 that garnered international media attention and defined the city for much of that time. Downtown Portland saw sometimes violent clashes between protesters and local and federal police. Police drew scrutiny from the public and lawmakers for their repeated use of tear gas, pepper spray and munitions that left one man with a fractured skull.

Antifascist protesters drew strong criticism for demonstrations that ended in repeated damage to downtown businesses. Some Oregonians say that drowned out the overall message and overshadowed the need for police reform.

Robert Williams, who lives in Multnomah County, told the Oregon Values and Beliefs Center the ongoing protests may have hurt the message.

"Getting awareness of the issue is necessary. I believe the extended violence that accompanied actions was instigated by non-BLM agency," Williams said.

While a majority of those polled support Black Lives

Matter, Oregonians are torn on the social impact of the justice movement.

OVBC polling shows 36% of Oregon residents think society is in a better place as a result of the social justice movement that followed Floyd's death. Survey results show 38% think the country is worse off and 19% of those polled said we're in the same place as before Floyd's death and the ensuing calls for reform.

"I think that BLM educated so many white Americans, resulting in (two) major impacts," Susan Heath of the Willamette Valley said. "Some whites responded with compassion and concern (and may or may not still be involved in the movement), while others responded with fear and bigotry and joined the white nationalist backlash."

Marla Cox, of Marion County, said the uprising and protests in the name of the Black Lives Matter movement were harmful, leaving society more divided.

"Black Lives Matters burned cities, rioted, looted and no one did anything about it," Cox wrote in a survey response, saying the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Cap-

itol in 2021 "was nothing" compared to damage done in many American cities.

Cox later said the movement has sown racial division.

"It caused me to be aware of race all at once," Cox said. "It's damaged me. I don't like seeing color. I just want to see the person as the person. I want to go back to the way it was before. I'm Lakota and my uncle was Chickasaw. My mother was born on the reservation. My grandparents were born on the reservation. You look at what's inside people, that's what we should be looking at. Not the color of their skin."

Pollsters note a significant age gap in response to the question of societal impacts. Oregonians ages 75 and older are much more likely (48% versus 28%) than those ages 18 to 29 to think our culture is in a better place.

"Overall, Republicans tend to be more pessimistic on the issue, with 69% saying our culture is in a worse place, whereas 58% of Democrats think we're better off," OVBC noted in a summary of results, saying optimism on the issue tends to increase with higher income and education levels.

Feds pursue dozens of suspected fraud cases tied to pandemic business aid

By **JAMIE GOLDBERG**
The Oregonian

PORTLAND — A Lebanon man was sentenced to four years in prison for illegally obtaining more than \$4 million in coronavirus relief loans meant for struggling businesses and investing that money in rental properties and Tesla stock.

A Portland man pleaded guilty after fraudulently obtaining nearly \$900,000 in loan money from the federal Paycheck Protection Program and spending it on vacations, gambling and other personal expenses.

And a West Linn man is accused of obtaining nearly \$8 million after submitting dozens of fraudulent applications for Economic Injury Disaster Loans.

The cases represent just a small fraction of the suspected criminal activity that law enforcement believes took place in Oregon as the federal government raced to get money into the hands of businesses trying to weather the pandemic.

The U.S. Attorney's Office in Oregon has brought charges against 14 people accused of submitting fraudulent applications for coronavirus relief funds totaling more than \$183 million, leading to the federal government erroneously handing out nearly \$19 million.

Another two dozen cases have been resolved after suspects returned the money or reached settlements, and dozens more investigations remain open, said Ryan Bounds, the lead COVID-19 fraud prosecutor for the U.S. Attorney's Office in Oregon. And it's likely that many more have yet to be detected.

"We're very focused on this, and we're intent on vindicating the taxpayers' interest in ensuring that relief went to people who needed it and that people who abused the program will face consequences for doing so," Bounds said. "This is still

very much an ongoing and active effort."

In a race to rescue businesses and individuals from the pandemic's economic fallout, the federal government prioritized speed over stringent safeguards in its coronavirus relief programs. That enabled hundreds of billions of dollars to reach businesses quickly, but also created an opportunity for rampant fraud, especially through the Small Business Administration's Paycheck Protection Program and the Economic Injury Disaster Loans, which provided billions in potentially forgivable assistance.

The Justice Department reported in early March that its civil and criminal investigations had uncovered \$8 billion in attempted fraud through coronavirus relief programs. That may represent only a fraction of the fraud that occurred. Last year, Hannibal Ware, the inspector general for the U.S. Small Business Administration, said the agency had uncovered nearly \$80 billion in potential fraud through its Economic Injury Disaster Loan program alone.

To date, the Justice Department has brought criminal charges against more than 1,000 defendants nationwide with alleged losses exceeding \$1.1 billion, seized over \$1 billion in Economic Injury Disaster Loan proceeds and initiated civil investigations into more than 1,800 individuals and entities connected to pandemic relief loans totaling more than \$6 billion.

Representatives from roughly a dozen federal law enforcement agencies have been meeting biweekly in Oregon since September 2020 to review leads and coordinate investigations into potential coronavirus fraud. Among the agencies involved in the task force are the U.S. Attorney's Office in Oregon, the Small Business Administration's Office of Inspector General and the FBI.