Opinion

Offbeat Oregon History: 120 miles through a hurricane

By Finn JD John
For The Sentinel

From the mid-1800s through the runup to the Second World War, lumber schooners were a familiar sight in all Oregon seaports. These were small, simple cargo ships, with shallow drafts so that they could fit across small river bars and in and out of the "doghole" ports of northern California and southern Oregon.

In many of these ports, lumber from local sawmills was actually loaded onto the ships with a block and tackle, dangling from something like a zipline, while the crew fought to hold the ship steady in the swells and breakers. And the ships, when they headed out fully loaded on their way to San Francisco or San Diego, sometimes had so little freeboard and such a tall deck load that it looked like any little wave could just swamp them or roll them over.

Starting in the late 1880s, operators started putting steam engines in lumber schooners, which made the tall masts unnecessary; by the First World War nearly the entire fleet had converted to these "steam schooners." (Since a schooner is by definition a sailing ship, the later mast-free ones weren't really schooners; but the name stuck.)

Steam schooners were a big improvement, particularly with respect to safety. Winds in river bars and bays are notoriously fickle, and plenty of lumber schooners ended up on the rocks when the breeze died at the last minute, or blew onto the beach when caught in a gale. Sometimes, when that happened, the sailors got lucky; and sometimes they didn't.

All in all, it was a very dangerous way to make a living. But there was one key mitigating factor for sailors in lumber schooners: As long as they were carrying a load, they always knew their ships would never sink. The cargo would always keep them afloat.

Plenty of sailors ended up owing their lives to that fact, since one of the first things that always seemed to happen when the weather got really nasty was that the lifeboats would all get carried away by boarding seas.

Among those lucky survivors were most of the crew of the Frank W. Howe.

The Frank W. Howe, 159 feet long and displacing 573 tons, was one of the last unpowered lumber schooners, a fact that may also have saved the lives of most of its crew. That's because unlike steam engines, sails still work when the hull is full of water — a condition the Frank W. Howe found itself in just a few days after leaving Ballard (now part of Seattle) with a heavy cargo of railroad ties, headed for San Pedro.

The ship left Ballard on Feb. 12, 1904, and all was well at first; but soon the crew members found themselves beating into the teeth of a ferocious and seemingly unending gale.

Well, that was all in a day's work for a lumber coaster. The ship, only 13 years old, was still a sturdy one; and the storm, although on the strong side, was nothing out of the ordinary for February.

But then, five days into the voyage, off the Oregon Coast near the mouth of Yaquina Bay, something happened — probably a hull plank succumbed to the constant flexing of the seas and broke loose.

Whatever the cause, one minute the Frank W. Howe was beating valiantly into the howling wind, and the next she was wallowing in the water like a log, decks awash, hull completely filled with seawater, kept afloat only by the railroad ties in her cargo hold.

Yaquina Bay was a nix now — the ship would never make it through the channel, as low as she was riding in the water. Ditto for everything south of the Columbia River, and things would have to get a lot calmer for THAT to be an option. More likely, they'd have to go all the way back to where they came from — past Cape Flattery and into the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

It wasn't all bad news, though. If the Frank W. Howe had been a steam schooner, she'd be done; there would be nothing for it but to huddle there, rolling in the trough of the sea, and pray for someone to come along and rescue them. A steamship full of water can't make steam; but a sailing ship full of water still can make way, albeit very slowly. And the wind was coming, as usual, out of the southwest — so all the way home they would be on a broad reach, the easiest and most comfortable point of sail.

Ordering the sails trimmed for the journey, Captain A. Keegan and his men settled in as best they could for the slow northward journey.

And that's when the storm unleashed its full fury. What had started out as a heavy blustering gale now ripened into one of those temperate-zone hurricane monsters that occasionally hit the Oregon Coast, ripping roofs off of barns and knocking trees down on houses. No wooden ship in the open sea could sneeze at such a storm.

The exhausted crew had to climb up into the rigging to escape the relentless walls of green water that kept sweeping across the deck. One at a time, they undertook the heroic work of manning the wheel, keeping the ship pointed upwind enough to keep from being blown ashore and trying to keep from being swept overboard by the occasional massive combers that swept over the ship.

One great wave picked a Norwegian out of the rigging — he'd picked too low a perch and his hands were likely numb with cold — and carried him screaming away into the foamy night. Another time, a huge wave caused the ship's rudder to come clear out of the water, whereupon another wave slammed into the ship's rudder with so much force that the great spoked wheel was torn out of the hands of the man whose turn it was to hold it — and then the wheel sucked him in like a great sawblade, cutting him nearly in half.

This went on for five days.

Finally, the ship was off the Columbia River. By then the storm had abated to a standard-issue strong wind, but the bar was still impossible. The men were exhausted and famished; they couldn't hold out much longer; but there was no choice. The ship continued wallowing northward.

Then fate intervened again:

"About 10 a.m. on the morning of Feb. 22, the schooner's back broke clear across under the hatch," Capt. Keegan recounted, as quoted in Gibbs' book. "Finding the schooner would weather Cape Disappointment, I headed her for a sandy beach in order to save the lives of the balance of the crew."

The beach he picked was, of course, Long Beach Peninsula in southern Washington. Under the power supplied by the one remaining piece of sailcloth that hadn't been shredded by the wind, the Frank W. Howe made her laborious way toward the beach.

Meanwhile, the ship had been spotted, and help was on the way.

"The excellent service of the government to the maritime interests of the world was never better demonstrated than yesterday morning," the Morning Astorian's reporter wrote in the next day's paper. "As soon as the North Head lookout discovered the vessel on the horizon he placed himself in communication with the lifesaving crews at Long Beach, Fort Canby, Hammond and Point Adams."

Attempts to get rescue boats across the bar did not work out; the breakers were just too ferocious. Lyle guns were lined up on the beach and tried valiantly to shoot a line out to the ship, which by this time had struck and stuck; but because it was full, the ship was riding so low in the water that it was still far out to sea, out of range of the cannons.

Finally, after several attempts to get their surfboat through the breakers, the Ilwaco crew managed to battle their way to the doomed schooner, and one by one the exhausted crew members dropped out of the rigging and into the rescuers' boat.

"Our experience was a terrible one," Keegan told the Astorian's reporter after his rescue. "The death of the two poor fellows who were killed last Thursday was an awful calamity, but it was fortunate, indeed, that all of us were not killed or drowned. I never before experienced such terrible weather, and I thank God seven of us are alive to tell the tale."

Dr. Joel Fuhrman: Berries and their flavonoids protect the heart

Berries are one of my favorite super foods – the second B in G-BOMBS (my list of super foods: greens, beans, onions, mushrooms, berries seeds) – rich in fiber and phytochemicals and low in calories. Blueberries, raspberries, strawberries and blackberries are vibrantly colored with antioxidant phytochemicals, and they are some of the highest antioxidant foods in existence. The deep red, blue and purple pigments of berries are produced by flavonoid antioxidant molecules called anthocyanins, which are concentrated in the skins of the fruits. Flavonoids, including anthocyanins, are not merely antioxidants; they are thought to have a number of additional beneficial effects in the body that are unrelated to their antioxidant capacity. As such, several studies have shown that high flavonoid intake is associated with considerable risk reductions (up to 45 percent) for coronary heart disease.

Recent research highlights the cardioprotective properties of berries. A 2011 study investigated berry consumption in relation to risk for elevated blood pressure. Compared to eating no blueberries, just one serving per week decreased the risk of hypertension by 10 percent. New findings published in January 2013 from the Nurses' Health Study support these results with data in younger women (age 25-42 at the start) who were followed for 18 years. In these women, three or more weekly servings of blueberries or strawberries was linked to a 34 percent reduced risk of heart attack compared to lower intake of berries.

How do berries and their colorful anthocyanins protect the heart and blood vessels? Studies using berries or berry phytochemicals in human participants or on human cells have uncovered some of the possible protective actions of berries on the cardiovascular system. Berry flavonoids seem to act in several different ways to maintain heart health. In human subjects, researchers found that berries mitigated oxidative stress, decreased oxidation of LDL (which helps to prevent the production of atherosclerotic plaque), increased blood antioxidant capacity, and in some cases improved lipid levels, blood pressure or blood glucose. Higher anthocyanin and berry intake is associated with reduced C-reactive protein (CRP), suggesting that berries may curb inflammation; additional studies have confirmed that berries have anti-inflammatory properties. Berry phytochemicals also may enhance nitric oxide production in the blood vessels, which helps to properly regulate blood pressure.

Why not amplify these benefits by eating berries every day? If observational studies showed a 10 percent decrease in hypertension risk for one serving of blueberries per week and a 34 percent reduced risk of heart attack from three servings of berries per week, imagine the protection that is possible when you eat berries every day! Even during winter, we can get our daily dose of anthocyanins from frozen berries. Also remember that in addition to promoting heart health, berries also have anti-cancer effects and provide protection against diabetes and dementia.

Dr. Fuhrman is a #1 New York Times best-selling author and a board certified family physician specializing in lifestyle and nutritional medicine. Visit his informative website at DrFuhrman.com. Submit your questions and comments about this column directly to newsquestions@drfuhrman.com.

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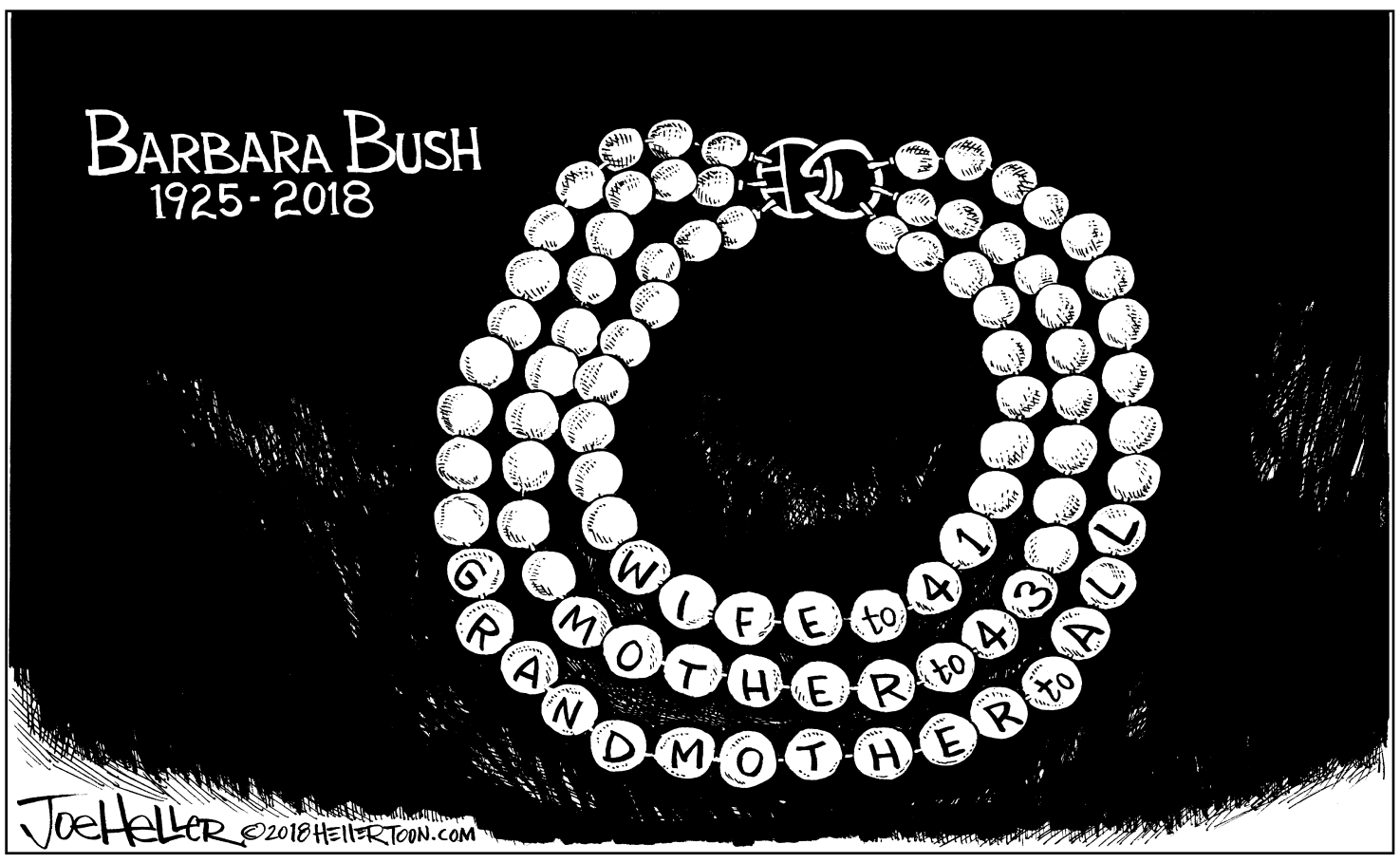

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In order to ensure that your letter will be printed, letters must be under 300 words and submitted by Friday at 5 p.m. Letters must be signed and must include an address, city and phone number or e-mail address for verification purposes. No anonymous letters will be printed. Letters must be of interest to local readers. Personal attacks and name calling in response to letters are uncalled for and unnecessary. To avoid transcription errors, the Sentinel would prefer editorial and news content be sent electronically via email or electronic media. Hand written submissions will be accepted, but we may need to call to verify spelling, which could delay the publishing of the submission.
The Sentinel reserves the right not to print letters that may contain libelous content.

IN BRIEF APRIL 25-MAY 10

The Lion Pride Pageant is this Saturday, April 28 at Cottage Grove High School beginning at 7 p.m. Tickets are $10 at the school office or $12 at the door the night of the event. The fundraising effort benefits the local Children's Miracle Network.

The Gathering Place owners celebrate the grand opening of their new venue for performance, art and events in the historic Veatch home in the Northwest Neighborhood at 119 North L Street. They invite you to visit and enjoy light appetizers and wine tasting, live music by Resonance, history, a rock painting work station and local art by CK Night Photography. The open house coincides with the Art Walk. (Information from Around the Grove).

Art Walk starts on Friday in downtown Cottage Grove from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.