

When Manila Galleons ruled the Seven Seas

Decades of researchers have called the ship the “wreck of the Beeswax,” because of the characteristic 17th-century cargo found off the Oregon Coast, beeswax, used for candles and illumination.

But which boat was the “Beeswax” — the Santa Cristo de Burgos, a Manila galleon that sailed in 1693, or the Xavier San Francisco, a galleon that launched more than a decade later and has never been accounted for since?

“When the wreck occurred, where the unfortunate ship sailed from, where it was going, what happened to its crew and how the wreck affected coastal native communities have been questions of a Oregon mystery tale for 200 years,” write the authors of this special issue of the Oregon Historical Quarterly, “Oregon’s Manila Galleon.”

The telling reads like a combination of Robert Lewis Stevenson and Gabriel Marquez, with pirates, untold riches and drunken galleon captains.

North Coast author and historian Cameron La Follette presented her team’s findings — a result of three years of research — at the Oregon Historical Society in Portland. To research the galleon itself, the team used resources in Manila, Mexico City and Seville, Spain. For the subsequent history of the treasure hunt, authors focused on treasure trove records stored within our state.

A fatal trip

Researchers know that the Santo Cristo de Burgos launched from Manila in 1693.

The ship was a Manila Galleon, with an international crew of seaman, gunners and officers entrusted with the transported millions in gold, silk and commodities in the midst of a burgeoning global world trade between Asia and Europe.

The largest ships of their day, a galleon’s value could build an economy or sink it; navigation took extraordinary courage.

“The ships were laden with massive

CANNON SHOTS

R.J. MARX



amounts of luxury goods and then it was a life or death enterprise to cross the Pacific for six or nine months and risk death by starvation or worse, scurvy,” La Follette said in a phone interview. “But if you made it to Acapulco, the return on profits was so great that you would be wealthy beyond your dreams.”

Based on historical records, a fierce storm is the most likely culprit for the wreck of the Santo Cristo de Burgos.

A hasty departure from port, a shortage of crew and construction vulnerabilities may have also played a role.

One portion of the crew seem to have survived, La Follette said. “Some versions say around 30, some say most of the crew,” she said.

Stories, including fictional accounts and Native American lore, “get more fractured.”

Survivors may have provided members of the Tillamook tribe with their first contact with non-native people.

“Because it was the first, it inaugurated the native peoples of the area in a worldwide commerce that they had not been involved in and maybe would not have wanted to be involved in,” La Follette said.

Some reports say survivors tried to leave the area and others report they may have settled in within the community.

No report of any survivor reaching safety was ever received.

Cargo

Over the next 300 years, flotsam that matches what was determined to be documented cargo on the Santo Cristo de Burgos appeared on the beaches of the Oregon Coast, along with reports seeing portions of the “gigantic old wreck” near the water line.

Because beeswax with a marking consistent with those catalogued in the Philippines was found east of Nehalem Bay, researchers believe that the tsunami of 1700 may have lifted or transported debris or cargo from the Santo Cristo de Burgos, which would have crashed seven years earlier. “How did it get there? It didn’t walk,” La Follette said. “The tsunami may have rolled around even though it was underground already.”

To positively identify the Santo Cristo de Burgos as the source of the beeswax — along with pieces of blue porcelain — authors examined other potential shipwrecks that might have left such cargo in their wake.

The San Francisco Xavier of 1705, is also a candidate. But since its disappearance occurred after the 1700 tsunami, it is considered unlikely that wreckage from the boat could have been found where it has.

“It seems the evidence is compelling it would be very unlikely that it is the San Francisco,” La Follette said.

Both blue porcelain of the type found in Nehalem and now stored in the Tillamook Museum are listed as items on the Santo Cristo de Burgos’ manifest.

“It’s relatively clear that the heavier part of the ship is offshore and underwater somewhere,” La Follette said. “It probably moved just because of time and sand covering it. The tsunami may have rolled it around even though it was underground already. Some of the upper parts may have come off.”

If the cargo did come from the Santo Cristo de Burgos, other clues could be waiting underneath the sand: teak, used in the ship’s construction, and some of the 2½ tons of mercury

shipped from China and headed to Mexico for the processing of silver.

Treasure hunters

So many people have scavenged on Neahkahnie Mountain looking for clues to the wreck of the Beeswax that it is referred to as “The Mountain of 1,000 Holes.”

Treasure hunters like Pat Smith, Charlie Pike and Dean Grimes started what became something of a craze.

Early 20th-century developer Sam Reed even offered prospective home-buyers a chance to search for treasure.



Beachcombers have long found marked blocks of beeswax, like this piece found in 1915, that the investigators with the Beeswax Wreck Project believe are from the Santo Cristo de Burgos, a Spanish galleon coming back with commodities from Manila, Philippines, when it sank in the late-17th century.

SUBMITTED PHOTO

Officials became so alarmed at the environmental impacts of amateur searchers that they passed a “treasure hunting law” in 1967, requiring a permit for digging. This backfired, as more sophisticated and more invasive equipment was utilized by professionals. The law was repealed in the 1990s.

Treasure hunting is no longer permitted on state lands, but the search for clues continues.

Finding the wreck of Santo Cristo de Burgos is probably a matter precise technology, money and good weather conditions. “The sands are always uncovering something,” La Follette said. “It’s a matter of time and persistence.”

Manila Galleon in harbor, being loaded by Chinese vessels.

COURTESY OF ROGER D. MORRIS

A sampling of deliciousness at city’s newest eatery

We were in the Osprey Café in Seaside, one of our favorite daylight haunts. There are a lot of tempting items on the menu, but I’m pretty down with the avocado toast and the house made granola with fresh fruit and yogurt, or, as was true today, a cup of their outrageously thick and delicious Hungarian mushroom soup. We discovered the Osprey several years ago and have been semi-regulars ever since.

Josh Bokish, the owner/chef was in the house today and he stopped by our table for a chat. We joked we were taking a break from our patronage at Surfbird, his new(ish) restaurant located at 231 N. Hemlock St. in Cannon Beach.

We’ve been to Surfbird twice since it opened early this summer in the space that used to be occupied by Bella Espresso. The room, which

VIEW FROM THE PORCH

EVE MARX



always felt to me dark and hemmed in, is now a beautiful, naturally lit, modern space. Josh and Jasmine, his romantic partner, said as soon as they saw the space they began imagining. What they imagined seems almost Swedish in design, at least to me. You order at the counter from an abbreviated but excellent menu that has a lot in common with the menu at the Osprey and then your food is brought out. This is only a sampling, but they have biscuits and gravy; avocado toast; bacon and brioche egg sandwiches; gabon and go sandwiches; Caesar salad. There’s always clam chowder and a soup of



EVE MARX

Chicken and waffles at Surfbird. Yum!

the day. Hours of operation are 7:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., just like the Osprey.

The first time we went to Surfbird, Mr. Sax as I call him, had the chicken and waffles. It was the best rendition of the classic pairing I’ve seen in ages, a beautiful filet of free-range organic chicken sat on top of an artisanal yeast waffle. It

was neither too large, too small, or overwhelming. Mr. Sax devoured it in about two minutes. I had the granola parfait which I was a little disappointed was served in a plastic cup and not an old-fashioned parfait glass, but what the heck. In the cup it’s a healthy, easy thing to take on the run if you’re headed to the beach or the office.

On our second trip, we both had the baked french toast, which was also perfect and delicious and served with real maple syrup. I ate mine in about two minutes, which gave me plenty of time to survey the pretty room and gorgeous light fixture hanging from the high-ceilinged part of the dining area where they put in a terrific skylight. It was a weekday morning just before Labor Day and Surfbird was filled to capacity with attractive couples and their beautiful children. Surfbird

does not have a specific children’s menu although for smaller appetites they do have fresh fruit and some baked goods and handmade biscuits and butter.

My husband asked Josh how it was going running two restaurants. He said he’d had a busy summer and that he was glad to see he was getting lots of thumbs up from Cannon Beach locals who are enjoying Surfbird. He said he’d moved one of his cooks from the Osprey full time to Surfbird, and that just this week he was starting winter hours for both places, which means closed Tuesday and Wednesday.

I’m pretty sure Surfbird will become one of our favorite places to enjoy breakfast and lunch. Of course I’ll have to divide my time there with the Osprey. It’s really a glut of good fortune to have amazing breakfast places in two towns.

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