

HISTORY AND HOPS

ONCE A WAY OF LIFE, NOW A DECLINING PROFESSION

For his lecture "Gillnetting: A Way of Life, All but Gone," presenter Robert Moberg brought several visual aids, including cork lines and vintage photos.

Katherine Lacaze



By KATHERINE LACAZE
For Seaside Signal

Gillnet fishing is part of a rich tradition and history in the Columbia River region, but has gradually declined as a profession and way of life for more than 50 years.

As the name implies, gillnets use a wall of netting that hangs down from a line on the surface of the water and entangles salmon — and other fish — by their gills.

Robert Moberg, a former Seaside municipal judge, shared stories from his own childhood and those passed down from community members during his May 30 presentation, titled "Gillnetting: A Way of Life — All but Gone," which closed out this season of the Seaside Museum and Historical Society's History and Hops lecture series.

"I wasn't a very good fisherman," Moberg confessed, adding it was his father Cecil and grandfather who passionately pursued the practice. From them, and his own adolescent experiences, however, he's collected a wealth of knowledge about the gillnetting tradition.

"A lot of wisdom was imparted by our elders," he said. "They taught us a lot about persistence and hard work."

His presentation included not only his own anecdotes and research but also a viewing of the documentary "Work is Our Joy: The Story of the Columbia River Gillnetters," produced in 1982 through the Columbia River Maritime Museum and the Oregon State University Extension Sea Grant. The documentary contains numerous oral history interviews with former Columbia River fishermen who characterized gillnetting as a "traditional way of life."

A booming industry

Drift gillnetting became popular along



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Robert Moberg, a former Seaside municipal judge, talks with patrons after his History and Hops presentation "Gillnetting: A Way of Life, All but Gone" at the Seaside Brewery.

the Columbia River during the early 1850s. The industry, at the time, was dominated by immigrants from Scandinavian and Slavic regions of Europe. Moberg's own grandfather came from Sweden in the late 1800s, unable "to speak a word of English," he said.

In general, different ethnic groups brought with them methods and traditions of their home countries. They also drew from the practices of the native Chinook tribe who had honed salmon fishing for hundreds of years.

In those days, salmon was salted and packed in barrels and sold with limited success to a small market, according to the documentary. Brothers William, George and John Hume opened the region's first salmon cannery in 1866. The first year, they packed 4,000 cases of salmon. Less than two decades later, there were more than 50 canneries on the

lower Columbia River and its tributaries, producing more than a half million cases of salmon annually.

Until 1889, the canneries only accepted premium spring and summer Chinook salmon. As demand grew, though, other types of salmon, including Coho and Sockeye, were used.

On the North Coast, most of the fishing was done below the Astoria-Megler Bridge at the mouth of the Columbia, according to Moberg. Cannery owners rented boats and nets to the fishermen to use during the season, which ran from May to August — in time for young people to return to school or college. During the offseason, Moberg worked at his father's mill, which created cedar corks for gillnets.

During the 1800s, fishermen used wooden, double-ended two-person boats that were powered by oar and sail. Around

the turn of the century, the one-person bowpicker — which featured a flared bow and square stern — was developed on the Columbia River. By World War I, the boats were powered by gasoline and had become the industry standard for salmon gillnet fishing.

A time of transition

In addition to enduring adverse weather conditions, gillnetters also had to contend with fish traps and wheels used by commercial fishermen. After that equipment was outlawed, gillnetters became the only remaining non-Native commercial fishermen on the Columbia River.

By the 1950s, however, dams, pollutions and some negative effects of fish hatcheries severely reduced returning salmon runs in the Columbia River. As the fishing industry declined in the region, many fishermen started commuting to Alaska, and some left the industry altogether, pursuing the crab or shrimp fisheries instead. Moberg's father traveled to Bristol Bay, Alaska, in the late 1950s as part of that transition.

"I have fond memories of Alaska," Moberg said, adding it was the place he met his wife about 50 years ago. He also recalled other cannery workers and fishers commuting to the northern state around the same time.

By the late 1960s, gillnetters were fighting for the survival of the industry, and "not much has changed in 50 years," Moberg said. Today, some gillnetters continue to fish on the Columbia River during the fall and early winter, and native fishermen also use gillnets upriver from Bonneville Dam.

The museum's local History and Hops discussions take place at Seaside Brewery on the last Thursday of each month from September to May. The presentations will resume Sept. 26.

In Oregon, it will be paper, not plastic as ban bill clears Senate

By MARK MILLER
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — When you get takeout food from your favorite restaurant, you might be handed a thin plastic bag, with foam containers inside containing your meal, plus a plastic straw or two if you ordered a drink.

Those straws? Gone.
The bag? History.
The foam containers?

Not going anywhere.

State lawmakers delivered a split verdict on bills cracking down on plastic wares that comes from retailers and vendors.

The state Senate on Tuesday approved House Bill 2509, which bans plastic checkout bags at stores and restaurants statewide starting next year.

Senators last week approved Senate Bill 90, prohibiting stores and

restaurants from giving out plastic straws to customers. Customers can still ask for one under the legislation, which takes effect next year.

A third bill, House Bill 2883, that would have prevented vendors from providing food to customers in polystyrene containers failed, 15-14. Three Democratic senators — including state Sen. Betsy Johnson, of Scappoose — joined all 11 Republicans in opposition.

It needed 16 votes to pass.

Most Republicans opposed all three bills. Some argued that paper alternatives to plastic straws and bags are inferior.

Notably, the bag bill requires grocers to sell checkout bags for a nickel each.

"The goal is to get people to ... bring their own bags," said state Sen. Michael Dembrow, D-Portland, who carried all three bills on the Senate floor.

Sen. Brian Boquist, R-Dallas, said banning single-use plastic bags is a good idea, but the fee will have "unintended consequences."

"We continue ... to think we cannot educate our people and we must punish them by fining them, punish them by raising costs, instead of actually talking to our citizens rationally," Boquist said, arguing that adding a mandatory fee on paper bags would reduce

their usage and hurt paper mills and recycling centers.

Since they were introduced into widespread use in the 1970s, plastic bags have risen in popularity at the expense of paper. One study suggested that Americans used more than 100 billion single-use plastic shopping bags in 2014.

"Single-use plastics, in general, are polluting our state and our planet," said Sen. Mark Hass, D-Beaverton.

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