

# Author brings to life the action/adventure of bar pilots in 'World's Most Dangerous'

By LINDA LeBRUN

The Daily Astorian | Posted: Tuesday, December 27, 2011 10:58 am

The place where the Columbia River meets the Pacific Ocean is known as the "Graveyard of the Pacific" for the number of shipwrecks strewn along the coast from Tillamook to Vancouver Island, British Columbia.

The Columbia River is neither the longest nor the most voluminous major river in the world, but its topography and hydrography cause it to enter the ocean with a sometimes lethal exuberance, especially in winter when the Pacific is anything but peaceful. Winter rains raise the river level, winter winds raise the incoming waves, and the meeting is not cordial. And then there are those sand bars.

There are several major ports on the Columbia River, with large cargo ships entering and leaving the river constantly. How they do it safely is the subject of a new book by Portland attorney Michael E. Haglund, who has represented the Columbia River Bar Pilots.

According to the Bar Pilots, the mouth of the Columbia River is "recognized as one of the most dangerous and challenging navigated stretches of water in the world." Haglund asserts it is "the most dangerous" bar crossing in the world.

That's a bold statement, but "World's Most Dangerous: A history of the Columbia River Bar, its pilots and their equipment," makes a pretty good case to back it up.

"World's Most Dangerous" is divided into three parts: geologic history of the bar, history of the bar pilots and history of bar pilot delivery technology. The book actually reads more like one part geologic cataclysm with exciting floods, one part high-stakes action/adventure to make Hollywood green with envy and one part boats, fast boats, faster boats and helicopters. It's full of information based on extensive research and scientific data, and an edge-of-the-seat thriller.

Haglund digs into historic geology to explain why the river has so much force as it exits the land, with a channel shaped by the recurring Missoula Floods of the most recent Ice Age. He answers the question of why there is no delta at the river mouth, a common feature of large rivers, and compares it to several of the other major navigable rivers of the world. He then chronicles the building of the jetties - North, South and A - which subsequently changed the river channel, and for a time at least, made it easier for large ships to navigate.

The second part deals with the history of the Columbia River Bar Pilots over the past 200 years. From the first bar pilot, Chinook Chief Concomly, to those men and women serving today, their story is one of incredible courage, daring and expertise. As well as the personal histories of such legends as Capt.

George Flavel, there are stories of tragic losses and miraculous saves that keep what could have been a dry history moving along at a rapid pace. The shipwrecks profiled whet the appetite for a deeper delving into the many maritime tragedies that led to the name "Graveyard of the Pacific."

Even more tragic for those who live on the lower Columbia are the losses of bar pilots in the line of duty. The men and women who serve with the Columbia River Bar Pilots risk their lives to bring the cargo ships into the relative calm of the river. Sadly, they themselves don't always make it back to port.

The efforts to make sure the pilots do make it safely to the ships and back to land after doing their job is the subject of the third part. This is a history of the vehicles that take the pilots out to the big ships and then bring them back to shore, from native canoes to helicopters. The boats are explored, including the revolutionary design of Pilot Boat Peacock, and the decision to convert to helicopter and fast boat is explained.

The book is illustrated with modern and historical photographs and delightful illustrations by Eric Baker, showing everything from an Ice Age flood roaring down the Columbia Gorge to how the spits have changed over time to a frame-worthy depiction of the Peacock, complete with accompanying seagull. The illustrations are a valuable addition to the book, especially in showing comparisons that photographs would not be able to show, such as the differences in size in oceangoing vessels over the centuries and how far out a ladder swings on a 15-degree roll in various sized cargo ships.

"World's Most Dangerous" was published by the Columbia River Maritime Museum, 1792 Marine Drive, and is available for \$45 (\$40.50 for museum members).

— *Linda LeBrun is editorial assistant for Coast Weekend*