

New Lock Slated for April Debut

From the Oregon Journal of January 1, 1957

By Walter Matilla

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The greatest marine celebration ever held in the Columbia basin began the morning of May 3, 1915, in Lewiston on the Snake River and ended late May 8, at Warrenton, Or., the last port before the great river rolls into the Pacific.

Portland's contribution to the festivities at The Dalles on May 5, 1915, was a marine parade more than a mile long, headed by the steamer Undine which had aboard governors, U. S. senators and representatives, many admirals and "lady admirals" and such lesser mortals as mayors, legislators, port commissioners and civic leaders.

FROM ASTORIA chugged the steamer Georgiana with fish cannery, saw-mill and logging notables among the representatives of civic, social and patriotic groups.

There were sponsors--the queens of the day--from every river town. On the special train from Portland were sponsors Jane Brock of Washougal, Wash., Beulah Williams of Albany, Lydia LaRue of Woodland, Wash., Gladys Wilkins of Eugene, Margaret Beardon of LaCenter, Wash., and Roma Huntington of Kelso.

From governors to the deckhands, they were celebrating for six full days the opening of the Celilo canal--a 10-mile bypass around Celilo falls which had cost the United States \$4,850,000.

THIS CANAL which aroused the greatest celebration in the waters of the Columbia and on May 6, 1915, the biggest street parade ever held in Portland up to that time, will be closed to shipping today and will be replaced April 1 by the new lock in The Dalles dam.

This last chapter in the varied life of Celilo canal--it experienced neglect for years--is arousing no public attention.

But the canal had its glamor on the dedication. Even the sinking of the British liner Lusitania by the German submarine on the fifth day of the celebration--the Portland day--did not stop the show.

ON THE DAY before the May 3rd celebration at Lewiston, an editorial in The Journal, which had fought for the canal against formidable enemies, stated what was in many hearts.

"The Pacific Northwest never faced a rosier future. Tomorrow a steamboat fleet begins a triumphal journey from Lewiston to the sea... The steamboat fleet that leaves Lewiston tomorrow augurs rehabilitation

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of steamboating in the Northwest. It is made possible by the cut and canal at Celilo which adds 500 miles at one bound to the navigable Columbia and opens to the Columbia Country for the first time a means of transportation that is unmanipulatable, unmonopolizable and unaproximatable in the possibilities of low cost haul."

First sternwheeler to pass through the new canal at its gay dedication was the Inland Empire. W. P. Gray, the celebration admiral and a distinguished figure in Columbia river navigation, was on the bridge.

ONE AFTER another, governors, senators and congressmen, joined the refrain that the golden wheat, rich minerals, fruits and vegetables would flow down the now unobstructed Columbia and the goods of Portland and other downriver communities would come chugging upstream in stern-wheelers.

Ever since the Civil war the river people had urged the canal. A railroad had come down the south bank but still the canal cry prevailed. And it did not die with a second railroad, the north bank line, serving the Inland Empire. The plea was for cheap transportation and it was voiced by the farmer and the merchant.

Sternwheelers ran between the foot of Celilo falls and Portland and between the upper end of the falls and distant Lewiston. A portage railroad connected these two services even after the present Union Pacific tracks were put in.

IN THE BLARE of bands, roar of whistles and flow of dedication oratory, a doubtful note crept into the story that The Journal's star reporter was writing out in long hand at the telegraph office in The Dalles.

Some paragraphs down from his spirited opening sentence, Marshall N. Dana wrote: "Once upon a time man built a beautiful house and only the rats lived in it . . ." It might so happen that the costly canal would not be used if people did not work together in a common cause, the next paragraph went on.

One or more of the congressmen, who spoke after the glamor wore off a bit, reminded the audience of celebrators that future appropriations for river and harbor improvements of the Columbia basin were at stake in the canal project. If the canal did not result in a vast increase in upper Columbia shipping congress would be cool toward tossing more money this way.

LONG BEFORE Reporter Dana had the flowing white hair of a sage his doubts had come to roost on the idle banks of the canal. Navigation upstream from The Dalles suffered from several wrecks in the difficult waters beyond Celilo falls. But the hardest blow came from another source. Railroads reduced rates and soon no sternwheelers tooted their whistles in the canal in whose placid waters henceforth freight trains loaded with wheat were reflected in the last days of the freighting sternwheeler.

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Years went by without a single ton of freight passing through the canal which the people of the Inland Empire had pleaded for so long.

IT SEEMED that the sternwheeler could not be profitably operated in the swift currents and torturous channels above Celilo. A few experiments were conducted but they ended in failure. Some traffic did, however, pass through the Cascades canal which was more than three miles downstream from the town of Cascade Locks.

In 1931, however, 987 tons were locked through the Celilo canal and in two years the volume was 15,640. Before the canal could pick up much more commerce, it ran dry. A serious break occurred which had to be repaired at considerable cost.

THE TOTAL for 1937 was only 5626 tons. In 1939, the first full year of the Bonneville dam lock operation, the volume leaped to 139,542 tons.

This resulted in part from pioneering in upstream towing by powerful new tugs which had to be designed for the tough job of tugging against Columbia torrents. The sternwheeler had disappeared above Celilo falls.

Ten years later the traffic total for 1949 was 900,246 tons.

And the past year's total established an all-time record of more than 1,100,000 tons--a volume which the celebrators of Lewiston on May 3, 1915, expected much, much sooner.

All the area on which the celebrators at The Dalles stood on May 5, 1915, will be deep under water when the dam pool fills but there will be boats whistling with payloads.

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