

PRESS RELEASES

The Complete Maritime Experience

by Jerry Ostermiller, Columbia River Maritime Museum director

The Columbia River Maritime Museum has completed its \$6 million expansion project and celebrates its 40th anniversary this weekend with a grand reopening

"The best exhibit as far as I'm concerned is this window," says Jerry Ostermiller, pointing out the new glass and steel opening on the north side of the Columbia River Maritime Museum.

Visitors to the newly remodeled and expanded museum would probably vote for one of the facility's other new features as their favorite. But windows are a notable addition to a facility that promised a "panoramic view of maritime history" but up until now only provided its visitors an actual view of the river through an old submarine periscope.

And windows are symbolic of the museum's goal to "break out of the box," in every sense, and embrace a dynamic, hands-on approach to sharing the history of the Great River of the West, said Ostermiller, CRMM director. Visitors will be able to hear, feel and even smell the power of the seas in a dramatic ocean rescue, take the helm of a barge tug and hear stories of life on the Columbia straight from the people who've lived them.

The museum celebrates its 40th anniversary and the completion of its 18-month, \$6 million expansion project Saturday, May 11 at 10 a.m. with an official "christening" ceremony complete with a traditional breaking of a bottle of champagne. The event includes tours of a U.S. Coast Guard 47-foot motor lifeboat beginning at 9 a.m., a sea rescue demonstration by a Coast Guard Jayhawk helicopter at noon, and afternoon demonstrations by the Astoria Fire Department fire boat.

Admission to the museum will be free Saturday and Sunday. Hours are 9:30a.m. to 5 p.m.

The Columbia River Maritime Museum was the brainchild of Rolf Klep, a noted New York commercial artist who returned to his native Astoria to found the museum in 1962. The current facility at 1792 Marine Drive was opened 20 years later.

The expansion added 6,200 square feet to the 38,000 square foot building, providing not only more exhibit space but also new offices, a conference room outfitted with a screen and DVD projector that will be made available to school groups and other users, plus a new library that will make the museum's 7,000 books and 37,000 photos and drawings available to researchers.

The facility's existing displays of ship models and maritime artifacts under glass remain an integral part of the museum experience, Ostermiller said. But now they're complemented with hands-on and "context-based" exhibits that give visitors, especially those with little knowledge of maritime traditions, a more immediate, visceral sense of what life on the water was like, he said.

"We put (display items) in a recreated environment so the texture and content of how things were used makes sense," he said.

For example, instead of the "used car lot" of empty boats that filled the museum's Great Hall, the vessels now on display, including two gillnetters and a troller, are outfitted exactly as they were in their working days and contain mannequins depicting the actual task of the salmon harvest. Under a thick glass floor, life-size models of fish pursued by those boats in the Columbia and offshore "swim" by. Nearby, a model fishing village depicts life in Astoria at the height of the salmon industry.

The hall also features a restored pilot house from a tug, outfitted with radar and video screens, that lets visitors take the controls and learn how to pilot a barge along the river.

Other exhibits include a personal touch, such as the videotaped stories of local boat owners, cannery workers and others who relate their experiences in the local fishing industry.

"If you're eight years old, or 18, or 48 or 88, there's something in here to attract you," Ostermiller said. "People will self-select the exhibits they like."

But the new centerpiece of the museum is without a doubt the Coast Guard rescue display, featuring a real 44-foot motor lifeboat riding up an enormous swell while its "crew" of lifelike mannequins toss a flotation ring to a struggling fisherman.

As visitors enter the display area, sensors activate speakers that surround them with the roar of crashing waves, while fans blow wind carrying the smell of salt spray. Then, as dramatic music swells, a 40-inch video screen displays footage of actual ocean rescues.

The drama and realism of the exhibit make it "the best Coast Guard display in the United States," Ostermiller said.

The boat in the exhibit, Number 44300, is a historical item itself — it's the first of the "forty-fours" put into service in the United States in the 1960s. "It took me three trips to Washington, D.C. to get that boat," Ostermiller said.

The museum had long hoped to exhibit the vessel in a glassed-in area on the building's south side, but wanted to avoid another static display like the old Great Hall exhibits. Then, during a visit to a Coast Guard station in Washington, Ostermiller saw a bronze monument to the crew of a lifeboat lost in a rescue effort that depicted a vessel scaling a huge wave, and the idea for the exhibit was born.

Three cranes were needed to hoist the boat into position, sitting at a 30-degree angle atop the 40-foot steel pilings. Coast Guard crews from the motor lifeboat school and the Tillamook Bay station helped set up the display, painting the boat, installing the gear and positioning the mannequins in as "absolutely accurate" a manner as possible, Ostermiller said.