

After nearly succumbing to the scrap pile, the steamship *Portland* is once again gracing the sea wall of her namesake city. The Oregon Maritime Museum showcases several *Str. Portland* artifacts, like this life ring.

Full Steam Ahead

An icon of the Portland waterfront returns.
And she's giving rides.

By | **Harriet Baskas**

The scuttlebutt on the Portland waterfront these days is that, after years of blood, sweat and tears, more than half a million dollars, thousands of hours of in-kind labor and a brush with Hollywood, the Oregon Maritime Museum's largest and most important artifact is returning to the waters of the Columbia and Willamette Rivers. And when it does, a vital link to Oregon's maritime history will be restored.

From the 1850s until well into the 1920s, hundreds of Oregon-built steamboats, mostly sternwheelers, worked the Northwest waters carrying wheat, flour and lumber to the port in Portland. Modern shipping vessels replaced the steamboats, but a few powerful sternwheelers continued to serve as ship-assist tugs.

Chief among them was the historic steamer *Portland*, which was built locally and launched in the summer of 1947 to serve the Port of Portland. Back then the boat was outfitted with powerful engines, a king-sized wooden sternwheel 25' in diameter and a distinctive operating system with seven rudders. "From the 1860s until 1980, this was a state of the art vessel in terms of maneuvering with its massive rudder system," says former *Portland* deckhand and retired U.S. Navy Capt. Peter Patterson.

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Top: The *Portland* helps a ship from the Louis Dreyfuss grain elevator navigate the Willamette River. This picture was taken in 1978, three years before the *Portland*'s retirement as the last remaining steam-operated sternwheeler in any major U.S. port.

Above: When he's not at the helm of the *Portland*, Chuck Patching is a Columbia River pilot.

Far right: A fire ax is always available in the pilothouse.

Right: A telegraph sends directions to the engine room.

"When people think of tug boats they usually think of something smaller. But the *Portland* is much larger than the tugboats of today. This one took a crew of seven to operate."

For 31 years, the 219' steam-operated tug helped large ships dock, undock and safely negotiate the Portland harbor. At times, she helped rescue ships in distress out on the river.

Upon her retirement in 1981, the *Portland* was the last remaining steam-operated sternwheeler in any major U.S. port.

IDLE AND RUSTING

If this were a movie, this would be the part where the *Portland* would set off into the sunset. Pure white plumes of steam would pour out of her tall black stack against a clear blue sky. A grizzled old river pilot might reach up and pull the cord to blow the whistle one last time. A shiny, spunky, diesel-powered tug would be idling off to the side, anxious to take over. And the slightly battered but still-proud *Portland* would perhaps end her days as a floating restaurant or maybe even a bunk-and-breakfast.

Instead, the *Portland* fell on hard times. Some businessmen hatched a plan to turn the steamer into a snazzy tour boat, but



the project fell apart. And for a few years after that, the tug just sat around doing nothing more strenuous than rusting. In the late 1980s, the Port of Portland announced a plan to dismantle the boat and sell it for scrap.

Then, at the very last minute, help arrived. The Oregon Maritime Museum stepped up, armed with grant funds and community donations. The organization, which works to encourage interest in the past, present and future maritime heritage of Oregon and the Columbia Basin, made a deal with the Port to rescue the steamer. Then a rag-tag team of volunteer carpenters, engineers, machinists, retired river pilots and what Pete Patterson, now the *Portland's* operations director, calls "assorted old sea dogs," set about feverishly rebuilding, restoring and refurbishing the boat.

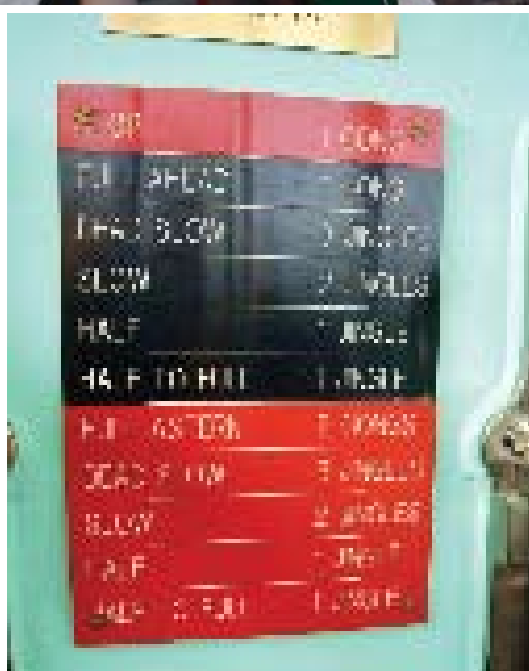
Using the original plans and drawings, says Patterson, the volunteers "built a new wooden deckhouse and fixed the boiler, the engines and every last piece of machinery. We painted. We lubricated. And we had a machinist fabricate new parts when we couldn't find or fix old ones."

And, he says, they replaced all the rotted wood in the oversized stern wheel.

HELLO HOLLYWOOD

On a recent tour of the *Portland*, Patterson points out the new water lines, the new communication systems and the new electric cables. "We also had to put the wheelhouse and the Texas deck back on. They'd been removed for that failed tour boat project, but luckily we found them intact and just sitting on a dock." Everything, says Patterson, is as close to the original as possible. "The steering is original. The propulsion system is original. And the hull of the boat is original. Think about it: If you were going to spend the time and energy to restore a Model 'A' Roadster you wouldn't put a 1960s engine in it, now would you? You'd want the original engine. That's what it's all about here."

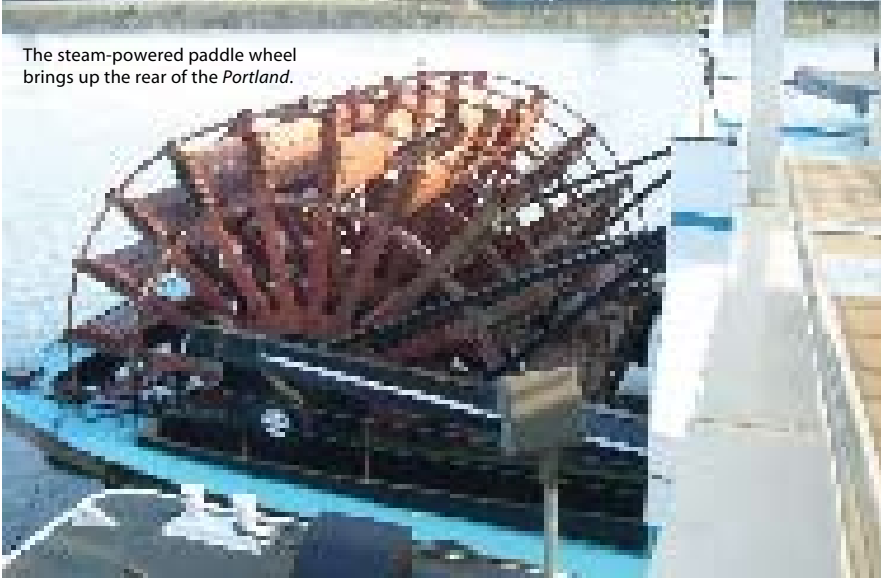
Of course, even though there are plenty of volunteer laborers who can



Top: The *Portland* runs on steam, but also the efforts of volunteers like chief engineers Durwin Hoskins, on the throttle, and Darren Henderson.

Above: A speed chart gives the codes for various speeds.

The steam-powered paddle wheel brings up the rear of the *Portland*.



seemingly find or fix anything, restoring a historic sternwheeler like the *Portland* takes a lot of money. Over the years, grants and donations certainly helped, and so did the paycheck the boat earned for the role it played in the film *Maverick*, which starred Mel Gibson, Jodie Foster and James Garner. Warner Bros. Studios had heard about the *Portland* restoration efforts and hired the vessel to play the role of a Mississippi-style gambling boat, the *Lauren Belle*, in the movie. During filming on the Columbia River, the *Portland* was gussied up with two dummy smoke-emitting stacks and plenty of gingerbread ornamentation.

In 1993, the Oregon Maritime Museum secured a permanent moorage for the steamer on the west-bank sea wall at the foot of SW Pine St. in downtown Portland. Soon after, the boat opened to the public as a floating museum, complete with a small exhibition area displaying assorted maritime memorabilia, including early photographs, models of merchant ships, military vessels and riverboats, and an impressive collection of ships in bottles. The museum also offered an irregular schedule of voyages.

REBORN, AGAIN

But in 2001, the *Portland* was effectively grounded when, after a trip to Cascade Locks, the U.S. Coast Guard announced that it had changed the boat's status from steam yacht to vessel for hire. The volunteers who had already spent years refurbishing and fixing the *Portland* would have to regroup and spend several more years upgrading and overhauling the vessel's mechanical systems to meet a more stringent set of standards.

So that's what they did. And now that the *Portland* has been certified by the Coast Guard to carry up to 100 passengers at a time, the sternwheeler is allowed back out on the Columbia and Willamette Rivers. The Oregon Maritime Museum is wasting no time. The public is invited to join several voyages planned for this summer, including trips to and from Cascade Locks on Friday, June 27 and Monday, June 30 for the annual Sternwheeler Days celebration. While in Cascade Locks, the *Portland* is signed up to compete in three races against the sternwheeler *Columbia Gorge*.

Not bad for a boat that came this close to becoming a giant pile of scrap metal. ⚓

IF YOU GO

Oregon Maritime Museum

198 SW Naito Parkway (At the Willamette River sea wall at the foot of SW Pine Street, between the Morrison and Burnside bridges)

Admission: Adults, \$5; Seniors (62+), \$4; Students (6 - 17), \$3; Kids under 6, free.

Hours: Wednesday - Sunday, 11 AM - 4 PM
503-224-7724

If you visit this summer, be sure to call ahead to find out if the steamer *Portland* will be in town or out on the river when you arrive.

www.oregonmaritimemuseum.org

Portland Specifications

Length (overall): 219'

Beam: 42'

Draft: 7'

Height (from waterline to top of stack): 56'

Registered Tonnage: 928 T gross, 733 T net

Hull: Steel

Engines: 2 x 900 hp horizontal steam reciprocating

Main Boiler: B&W water tube, 245 lbs steam working pressure

Fuel: Diesel, 100 to 150 gph

Sternwheel: 25' in diameter, 26' wide

Rudders: Four main rudders, three monkey rudders

Crew: Minimum of seven underway