This ca. 1915 photograph is from a large collection of glass plate negatives in the CCHS collection. Can anyone identify the type of fish caught?

Life on and in the waters of the Northwest Coast is the subject of this issue.
Contents:

2  SEINING ON THE RIVER
By Richard H. Portwood

26  BUBBLES FROM A SNAG DIVER
By Dr. Hannu Laukkanen

24  CENTERFOLD: Snag Hunting Scow

40  JACK BEADLE: A shipwreck survivor from the Galena
By Paul See

44  SEA SCOUTS’ REUNION

47  A PALACE FOR THE ELKS

48  SEINING CREW REVISITED

Front Cover: Snag diver Hannu Laukkanen on his way to work at the bottom of the Columbia River.
Photo by Wanda Laukkanen

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CUMTUX: Chinook jargon:
“To know...to inform”
Schoonie Johnson and the author, Richard Portwood, in the late 1940s.
Seining on the River

By Richard H. Portwood

Looking back from fifty years later, I think it may well have been the best job I ever had...

In the summer of 1946, I got a job working for Point Adams Packing Company, located in Hammond, fishing on the Columbia River seining grounds. At the time, I was a junior at U.S. Grant High School in Portland. I had spent time over the years with my aunt and uncle, Dorothy and Ed Beard, at their home, adjacent to the cannery. Once or twice I had ridden the “Astoria Bullet,” the S.P.&S. passenger train that ran between Astoria and Portland. Uncle Ed was a partner in the cannery with the Rogers family and was also the general manager.

I knew no one at the job or anything about it except that it involved boats, nets, and horses, was outdoors and that I would be paid and get free room and board. I earned $7 a day my first summer. I reported for work that June and found that I would live in the Point Adams Company’s bunkhouse in Astoria. This structure stood on the bank of the Columbia next to the tracks and upriver from the train depot, at about the foot of 23rd street (if it had gone through to the river’s edge). The bunkhouse had about fifteen steel beds with used mattresses, an attached dining and cooking area, a toilet and an area for washing and shaving. The dock was long enough to tie up powerboats and two skiffs used in the fishing. It had a winch and boom for hauling up the fish from the boats and also had space for net racks.

The boss was Pauly Theodus, who with his brother, Nic, ran the grounds. They were experienced seining ground operators. We fished the Van Dusen sands, downriver from the Port of Astoria docks. We went from the bunkhouse to the job by boat, so we went up and down the Astoria waterfront on the way to work. Our crew consisted of the bosses, two boat drivers, “skinners” who drove the six teams of horses, beachcombers who loaded the nets back onto the skiff, the cook at the bunkhouse and the “barn boss” who took the responsibility for the care and feeding of the horses. The total number of people involved was about twenty.

The horses

My introduction to the job was to go get the horse barn and twelve horses. The horse barn had been empty and moored up by Tongue Point for the win-
The Point Adams Packing Co. bunkhouse at the foot of 23rd Street in Astoria. The kitchen and dining area were on one end of the building and the remaining 2/3 was an open bunk room. Alongside the building is Dick Thomas’ V-8 automobile.
Skiffs with nets and the “slimey” at the foot of 23rd Street in Astoria in 1946.
ter. We took two boats to get to the horse barn. The horse barn was an enclosed barge which was large enough to contain six stalls for twelve horses, a feed room for bales of hay and grain, a small bedroom with a wood stove for heat and cooking and no toilet or shower facilities. One end of the barn had large doors and a ramp for loading and unloading the horses. The barn boss had to be pretty tough and resourceful, living in the barn in the middle of the river by himself. When we came out from the bunkhouse to fish, it was the only time he had any company to talk to. We pulled the horse barn away from the moorage and went up the John Day River to a pasture where the twelve horses were pastured. We nosed the barn up to the bank and rounded up the horses to start loading. All of this was exciting to a sixteen-year-old city kid. The contact with boats, barns, and horses was all new to me, and for the first time in my life, I was away from home, friends, and parents. I was on my own working with strangers. For this job there were just three or four of us. The horses loaded onto the barn surprisingly easily. We pulled the barn away from the shore, turned down the John Day into the Columbia and took the barge down to the Van Dusen sands, which had enough water over them to position the barge where the boss wanted it. We were holding against the ebb tide until it was grounded on the sand and the beach began to emerge as the tide went out. There were several large anchors onboard, with anchor cable attached to the barge. The horses pulled two large scoops (drag scrapers), the anchors, and chains out onto the beach. Using the drag scrapers with the horses, we dug out two pits and put the anchors in the pits in a “V” pattern and buried them. The cables were attached to one end of the barn so as the tide came and went, the barge would float and swing in the tide with the current, secured by the two anchors set about thirty yards apart. Later we returned with several loads of hay and feed for the horses, and supplies for the barn boss, who was now going to live aboard for three to four months by himself. The horses were now ready to start fishing.

**The crew**

The bosses had families and lived in town, as did the cook. Those of us who lived in the bunkhouse fell into two
groups, old and young. The old were mostly men of Scandinavian extraction who could mend nets, handle boats and horses, knew fish and fishing, and had spent most of their lives around the Columbia River and the Pacific Ocean. Some were frequent drinkers and had had scrapes with the law. I was mystified as to why several had yellow paint on their shoes till I was told that they had been in jail and were required to paint curbs and striping as part of their restitution to society. None of them was a problem to me or anyone else. They had colorful names like Jake, Ole, Schoonie, Wild Horse Johnson, and Outhouse Johnson. They were good guys and I respected their skills, especially net-mending, which I tried, but at which I never became proficient. The rest of us were unskilled young men who were there to do the harder work of loading the nets back onto the skiff, which just took strength, not skill.

**The bunkhouse**

The bunkhouse was pretty primitive. Everyone slept in bedrolls or sleeping bags and had a footlocker or duffel bag to store clothes and personal belongings. As the bunkhouse was located between the river and the railroad tracks, we were lulled by the river on one side and shaken by creaking trains being shunted around on the other. If a moving car was coupled with a stationary car, it was like an explosion and was startling if it was close by. The bunkhouse served as the mess hall. We ate with the tides, which dictated when we worked. The food was wonderful. We normally had large breakfasts of eggs, pancakes or muffins, cereal, milk, coffee, and pastries. Lunches, or “coffee an’s”, if we were in a hurry, were great: sandwiches, pastries, and soup. Dinner was substantial, occasionally fish, lots of chops and steaks with vegetables, various starches such as potatoes, and desserts. We worked hard and ate well.

The shower, washing and toilet facilities were primitive and with all of us sleeping in one big room, it was noisy with people snoring, talking, and others coming in at various times. This was a preview of my days in the U.S. Navy on a destroyer.

Laundry was a problem. We tried an old method of putting our clothes in a gunny sack and dragging it overboard on our way to work. It wasn’t as good as a washing machine, but it was better than nothing. Our work clothes included chest high rubber waders. We always heard about the hazards of trying to swim in them, or having them fill up with water and taking a person down like a stone. I tied a string around my waist to keep water out and a sheath knife handy to cut the string. If I had fallen overboard, my feet probably would have popped to the surface from the air inside and forced my head underwater. Fortunately I never had occasion to find out. I was always careful in water over my head.

**How it worked**

We fished during daylight hours and had to quit at noon on Saturday and could not fish on Sunday until after 6 p.m. We were dependent on the tides. We could start fishing on the ebb tide when the water was shallow enough, about four feet deep, for the men and horses to be able to walk on the sand.
Follow numbers 1 through 4 for each stage of the seining process.
A two-horse team used on the Columbia River seining grounds.
In back, left to right: Richard Portwood, Schoonie Johnson, and Herb Black. In front: unknown skinners.

We continued working through slack water and then the flood tide until the water got too deep for the horses and men. Sometimes we fished at dawn and occasionally there was a double tide where we could work an early morning tide and again in the late afternoon.

The nets were tanned in tanks to darken the color so it would lead the fish to the center, as opposed to gillnets, which were light-colored and caught the fish by the gills, so they couldn’t free themselves after swimming into the net at night. The two nets we used were about 1500 feet long and had a towing bridle on each end, a “cork line” which had wooden floats spaced about every three feet, and floated on the surface. The “lead line” was similar to the cork line but had lead weights that pulled the web down. The web stretched vertically for thirty feet between the floating cork line and the lead line on the bottom. The mesh was about four inches across, except at the “bunt” or center of the net, where the mesh was much tighter. When we prepared for the season, we took the nets from the tanning tanks, strung them out on the dock on net racks to dry, and then loaded each net onto its own skiff. The two skiffs were like oversize row boats, 20 feet long, 12 feet
Bob Shields, Dick Thomas, Bill Vranizan, Bob Coughlin, rest unknown. Horse barn in background.

wide with a large flat table on the stern half to hold the nets. We had one other oversize rowboat called the “slimey” into which the fish were thrown at the end of each haul or “drift.” We had two powerboats that towed the two skiffs and the slimey from the dock to the sands and back each day after the flood tide drove us off the sands. One boat was called the “head launch” because it towed the net out into the river and the other the “tail launch” because it pulled the tail of the net down river and into the sands. When we went out to work, the head launch dropped the crew off at the barn to get the horses out. The barn boss had already harnessed the horses, and the six “skinners” took their teams of horses from the barn and attached their doubletrees.

At the back of each doubletree was a three-foot chain with a short metal hook at the end. While the horses were being readied and the tide was receding
The Nancy R, head launch, tows the net skiff and the net. See page 8.
enough for horses and men to walk on the sand bar, the head launch would tow a skiff upriver with the tail launch following. The skiff had one man on it, the "skiff captain." When the head launch was far enough upstream from the grounds, the skiff captain would pass the tail of the net to the tail launch, which would start towing that end toward the beach. The head launch would start towards the deeper water, towing the skiff behind. As the two boats pulled away from each other, the net paid out off the stern of the skiff. The net had been loaded in layers, accordion-like, so they fell into the water without tangling. The cork line floated, the lead line sank, the net was stretched across the river current, and the two boats began to tow the net downstream. One of the horse teams on the beach would wade upstream to meet the tail launch, and when it could get close enough in to shore, it would hand off the tail of the net to the skinner, who would hook the double tree to the net and the horses would head downstream. After about 45 minutes, the head launch would turn in to the beach to bring the head of the net to shore. The head "hooker" with several "beachcombers" would wade out to take the empty skiff and towing line from the boat. At this point the four or five horse teams began to wade out in intervals to the hooker, who would bunch the lead and cork line and the web together at his waist, take the chain attached to the doubletree from the skinner, wrap it around the net, hook it to itself, and the team would begin to put a strain on the net and haul it into the beach. The other teams followed out in a clockwise rotation in turn taking a bight on the net. As this was happening, the tail of the net was coming down the beach to catch up with the head of the net. Another team usually joined the one team on the tail end of the net to help. As a skinner got into very shallow water or on the sand, he stopped, unhooked, and circled back out to the hooker to take another bight in rotation. Once the net was released by the skinners, the beachcombers reloaded the net onto the skiff. There were three people standing on the skiff deck now: the skiff captain, pulling and stacking the cork line on one side, the lead line-puller stacking the lead line on the other, and the web-scratcher stacking web in between them.

The circle of the net grew smaller as the horses pulled it onto the beach and it was reloaded onto the skiff. When the center of the net was close in, everyone gathered to pull the lead line in to form a large basket from which the fish could not escape. The cork line floated in a circle and the web was underneath the fish so they were trapped. It was always exciting to see what the haul brought in. Usually lots of salmon were there, depending on the tide and month—steelhead, graylings, sturgeon, shad and, once in a while, a seal. The marketable fish were thrown into the slimey. After the head launch passed the net to the beach, it picked up the other skiff and made another set with the other net. And the cycle repeated itself through low water, slack water, and flood tide, until the rising water forced the horses back to the barn and the crew off the beach. The head launch
then towed the two skiffs and slimey back to the bunkhouse docks where the fish were off-loaded from the slimey, boxed, and iced for delivery to the Hammond Cannery. When fishing was really good, a tender, the Papeo or the Altoona, would come out to the grounds to pick up the fish to take to the cannery so our slimey and other boats weren't overwhelmed with fish.

**Life other than fishing**

Since we worked with the tides, time between tides we were free to do other things. I read a lot, lay in the sun on the dock, or walked into town. When I first started work, I soon got to know the other workers. Occasionally jobs would open up and I began to recruit my school buddies to fill in. Over the years that I was there, a lot of my friends came to work: Kenny Van Dyke, Larry and Herb Black, Butch Boucher, Bob Shields, Bill Vranizan, Bob Coughlin, Dick Thomas, Al Kailes, Nic Munley, Jerry Monroe, and Saul Zaik.

Other than my relatives in Hammond, the only person I knew in Astoria was Marilyn Morse. We had gone to the same grade and high school before she moved to Astoria when her father, Clay-
ton, bought Builders' Supply. Having Marilyn there was a godsend because of two things: she would let me do my laundry at her house and she could introduce me to the Astoria girls. Through her, I got to know her friends: Trudy Van Dusen, Barbara Leicht, Carol Johnson, Barbara Williams, Jeannie Calkins, Joyce Wyman, Mary Sandoz, Lora Jean Seeborg, Paula Byer, Laverne Kelly, Ginnie Swart, Joyce Welch, Gwynn Calkins, and Joanne Abel. Some of these girls had jobs at the CRPA cannery and, tides permitting, I would walk down to their cafeteria at their break. How they could drink a cup of scalding coffee during that short break was beyond me. Also the first time I saw Coffenberry Lake was one summer night after carrying a case of beer in over sand dunes. It was a wonderful time. Some of us had an affinity for the Gearhart Hotel. One summer, during a fishing strike, I slept in the old barbershop in the basement. In exchange, I was a quasi-bellhop, helping tend bar, running the elevators for guests, and leading the Friday night bingo games on the poolside porch. Somehow John and Elaine Osborn, the hotel owners, tolerated a couple of us around the hotel, never on the payroll, living on tips and food from the dining room. Several of us stayed with a friend who was the Gearhart lifeguard and lived above the City Hall/Fire Station. We were vagabonds off the job, as much as you could be at that age. Another friend in Astoria was Bob Hawkins, who had gone to school at Central Catholic in Portland. His father ran the Plymouth-DeSoto agency in Astoria.

Bob and his brother, Paul, later were ATO fraternity brothers of mine at the University of Oregon.

**Conclusion**

After I had worked two years at Van Dusen sands and lived in the 23rd street bunkhouse, the operation moved to Meehan Sands which was upriver a couple miles above Tongue Point. The boss was Henry Coles. There we lived in a bunkhouse built on pilings. We went out to Meehan Sands on Sunday nights from the old bunkhouse and came back into Astoria on Saturday afternoons. The method of fishing was exactly the same, but our access to Astoria between tides and in the evenings was over, except on weekends. The last fishing season was the summer of 1950, after which horse-seining was outlawed by the state legislature.

We were the last of a long line of fishermen from all walks of life on the seining grounds. The bunkhouses and docks are long gone, but I have fond memories of my old friends and the way we lived.

The Astoria, Hammond, and Gearhart area was always a second home for me. I still see friends from Astoria: Bob Hawkins, Barbara Williams Thompson, and Marilyn Morse Kessler. My cousin Barbara Beard married a Navy PBY pilot, stationed at Tongue Point. She was a Navy wife for a number of years. She remarried and lives in the San Diego area. My uncle, Ed Beard, and aunt, Dorothy Portwood Beard, died years ago. My job with the telephone company took me to Astoria once a month for fourteen years. It was always my favorite business trip.
Mark Laukkanen, ca. 1960, feeding a pet crow at the family’s Brownsmead home.
At the bottom of the Columbia River

Bubbles From A Snag Diver

By Dr. Hannu Laukkanen

Forward
The following is dedicated to my late brother, Mark. I am fairly certain that in his over thirty years of snag diving, he logged more snag diving days than any other diver on the Columbia River.

Mark was tragically killed at his home November 11th, 2002 when he was crushed by a falling forklift. Mark was a multifaceted fellow with many talents and responsibilities including: forester, log-buyer, gillnetter, fish-buyer, snag diver, firefighter, and port commissioner, just to name a few. He was a loving husband, father, and brother who will be sorely missed for a very long time. Mark was very proud of his four children, three of whom graduated as valedictorians and one as salutatorian. Of his many, many, accomplishments, I hope that Mark will be remembered for his humility, his integrity, his generosity, his common touch, and for being a mensch. It was an honor to be able to call him my brother.

Hannu Laukkanen

Slack water snag story
How much water?” I asked the skipper. From the stern he poked his head into the cabin of the square ended bowpicker and glanced at the fathometer. “A little under thirty feet” he barked back. I checked the pressure gauge on my dive tank, 700 pounds of pressure. Should I switch to a fresh tank with four times more air and a greater safety margin before diving on the next snag? Naw, it was fairly shallow with little current. My tender hoisted the mostly depleted tank to the ready position. I turned my back to him and put my arms through the straps. I strapped on my weight belt and pulled on my rocket fins while the skipper nudged our boat parallel and next to the boat hanging on the snag. With one hand on the snag net hanging over his bow reel, the fisherman in the locator boat gave me a nod. He was ready for me to jump in and pull myself down his net to the snag. I inserted the air pressure regulator into my mouth, locked my jaws on the rubber mouthpiece, and drew a test breath. Nice smooth airflow, with no resistance: good. I felt and heard the carabiner click into the grommet on my weight belt as the tender attached the end of quarter inch steel cable to my waist.

My job was to take the cable to the bottom of the Columbia River and attach it to the snag. Then I would free the snagged net from its grip so it could go on and catch another snag that interfered with commercial fishing. I would signal the tender with two jerks that I had cabled the embedded snag, then the ten-
der would tie his end of the cable to the bow cleat. I would surface, we would pull the snag loose with the boat, tow the snag, and deposit it in a place where it would no longer interfere with gillnets trying to catch salmon.

I stepped off the fish locker into the river and enjoyed the cool waters swirling and rushing over my head. Excellent. My neoprene-gloved right hand had a good grip on the cork line of the snag net. I pointed my head into the current, rolled over on my side, grabbed the net with both hands, and headed for the bottom by reaching overhead and pulling the net hand-over-hand. The eerie but familiar darkness immediately enveloped me. Three feet below the surface my eyes were useless, the turbid waters prevented me from even seeing my hands. This should be a relatively easy dive, in spite of the complete darkness. Even though the tide book had predicted a strong minus run out tide today, the strong ebb current had not started smoking yet. As I pulled myself down, I noticed that the net was at a very shallow angle relative to the bottom. The fisherman in the locator boat must not have picked up a lot of net after he hooked the snag. I knew he was worried that in this weak current his net would slip off the snag if he tried to retrieve too much net into his boat. That meant there was a long run of net ahead of me and I would have to burn way more air than I anticipated to reach the snag. I repeated to myself: “nice steady pulls on the net, nice steady breathing; go easy on the air, you’ll find the snag soon.” Unexpectedly my arm jabbed something hard. “What’s this, I’m not on bottom?” I was surprised that my gloved hand bumped the snag before I kicked the sandy river bottom with my fins. Normally the web was taut, almost rope-like near the snag and I would have bumped the bottom first. Through my insulated hand I could feel many different roots poking out in several directions. The roots were jutting from a three or four foot tall sand ridge. It was probably the root wad of a sunken and sanded in cottonwood tree. I thought. In the quiet stillness, I pulled on the web. The snag net behaved as though it was attached in many places. Most likely the net had grabbed more than a few of the gnarly root appendages. I knew that I would have to explore the different roots and find a good solid place on the snag not covered by net. Only then could I choker the snag with my cable, and go about the business freeing the net. I could sense that net was everywhere around me but I found a small open place by lying on my side near the stem of the tree in the sand bank. Good, it was less than a couple of feet in diameter and there was a small space under it so I could thread the cable around the main stem. The snag crew topside would be so happy when I could tell them what a good cable hold we had. Reaching down to my waist with my left hand I unsnapped the cable and threaded it to my right hand under the log. In the velvety blackness I reached over the log with my left arm, groped until I found the end of the cable, then pulled it over, unscrewed the shackle pin and reattached the shackle over the cable on my side of the tree ensnaring the snag. Now at last the cable was
on and the snag was lassoed. Still on my side, I jerked twice on the cable and felt it come tight. In response to my signal, the tender had hauled in the slack and tied his end of the cable to the boat’s bow cleat. At the same time, the skipper had turned off the boat’s motor allowing the top current to draw the cable even tighter. I was now incommunicado and could send no more signals topside with the cable because it was now too taut.

Without warning, the weak bottom current did a strange thing. It changed direction. Not only was I almost out of air, but I was also surrounded by web with no way out. I couldn’t swim upwards because the snag net that was ensnaring me was still attached to the snag somewhere beyond my reach. As I struggled to free myself from the net, I could feel the backpressure steadily increase from my regulator. This indicated that my life-giving air cylinder was about to expire. Panic gripped me. There wasn’t much time. Like a rabbit fleeing a predator, I tried to escape willy-nilly. My arms and legs were flailing uncontrollably. I was becoming more and more hopelessly entangled in the net. I was on fire. Dreadful thoughts, images, and feelings were igniting and vanishing like exploding sparks in my brain. Only a breath or two from drowning, a voice deep inside said: “You are going to drown, you’re out of control.” “No, dammit. I am not going to die this way!” I opened my jaw and bit the inside of my cheek, violently. Warm salty blood flowed into my mouth and regulator, but it was the pain from the bite that I wanted. “Focus on the pain, focus on the pain....” Little by little, my legs and arms were coming back under my conscious control, but my air supply was spent. I was now holding my breath. “THINK! Find the dive knife strapped to your right calf. Bend over slowly; don’t let the web rip the mask off. Unsnap the catch to the knife. Carefully pull the knife from its sheath. Grip it firmly. Don’t drop it. Don’t drop it. Do not slash at the web with the blade. That’s it; grab a handful of web with the left hand. Saw steadily with the right hand. Saw with the serrated edge at the base of the blade. Not too fast or the knife will be pulled out of the thick neoprene glove and tumble into the darkness. Good; both arms are free. Next, cut the legs loose from the web. Yes, you can: yes, you can. You can hold your breath just a bit longer. Reach way, way, back. Behind the neck and shoulders, grab the web attached to the tank valve. That’s right. Saw the web carefully.... I got it cut! I’M LOOSE! Get to the surface NOW, before you lose consciousness. Kick the legs hard. No embolism, remember to exhale going up, no embolism, remember to exhale....”

When I broke the surface, the tender took one look and knew this had been a close call. I was gasping like he had never heard before. The whites of my eyes were hemorrhaged and bulging out of my head. I had no strength. I couldn’t get into the boat. The tender and skipper teamed up and grabbed my arms. They dragged me aboard more like a jellyfish rather than a human. I kept gasping. I couldn’t speak. I lay quivering on the fish locker for quite some time because I couldn’t sit up or stand. I remained in that state for maybe half-an-hour; perhaps it was only fifteen minutes because
I lost sense of time. When I could finally speak, I had no wish to recount what I had just experienced.

A bit later the skipper came round and put his face directly in front of mine. "One of the other locator boats is snagged up, what do you want to do?"

The most terrifying thing that I could possibly imagine at that point was getting back in the water and diving again. However, in my heart I knew that if I didn't dive now, I would never dive again. I would end up like Ray, an exceptionally bright and talented fellow, who, following a similar experience, never again dove on a snag. When asked why he quit, he simply said: "Because I am the 'Chicken of the Sea.'" I unfastened my regulator from the empty tank and mounted it on my fresh untapped tank. My actions wordlessly communicated to the skipper and tender that I would resume.

This event I described happened nearly thirty years ago during my second year of snag diving. I learned several lessons. The first lesson was that the velocity and direction of the top current doesn't always predict the bottom current. Nets can behave unpredictably when the tide is changing. Diving on slack water snags requires extra caution to avoid entanglement. Air is inexpensive. I vowed that in the future, if I had any doubt, I would not go overboard without surplus air in the tank for unexpected adversities. Always carry more than one knife when diving around nets. Most importantly, I learned that I harbored within me a feral and potentially lethal panic response. Implicit in that understanding was that if I intended to continue with snag diving, I would need to maintain a high level of mental discipline and rigid control to avoid another such frenzied panic.

Columbia River drift nets & snagging: a primer

Unlike Alaska where set nets are allowed in some areas, Columbia River gillnetting is not permitted with a net that has one or both ends anchored. Excluding long since banned fish traps, traditional netting on the Columbia River has involved the use of drift nets, or nets that move with the tide. Moving nets hook or snag objects protruding from the river bottom in shallow water. When a net catches a non-moving object on the bottom, the snag acts as a hinge point while the ends of the net swing together in the current. The result is that the net is much less likely to catch salmon. In addition, the net may tear itself in a heavy current or sustain significant damage when it is retrieved from the snag by picking, winching, or reeling. For a gillnetter, a snag symbolizes aggravation, lost time, and lost revenue.

Although greatly oversimplified, the following are the basic elements of the gillnet: cork line, lead line, and web. The cork line is a rope that is strung with floats whose purpose is to keep the top of the net on the surface. The lead line is a smaller diameter rope that is strung with weights that pull the web downward. The cork line forms the net's upper boundary, whereas the lead line forms the bottom boundary; they are separated by the business part of the net, the fish-catch web. Although typically over a thousand feet long,
most river gillnets fish down to only a depth of about 20-40 feet. Gillnets can be categorized into two basic types: floater nets and diver nets. A floater net skims the surface and is better for catching salmon on the flood, or incoming tide when salmon are migrating nearer to the surface. In contrast, a diver net skims the river bottom and is more effective for catching salmon that are migrating upriver during the ebb, or outgoing tide. A diver net is much more likely to encounter and be hindered by snags because, regardless of river depth, it always travels on the river bottom in deep water and in shallow water. Anything immobile on the bottom that stops a net is generically referred to as a “snag” by Columbia River fishermen. River snags include but are not limited to: sunken stumps, trees, sinker logs, anchors, remnants of boats, barges, and even sticks, rocks, and natural mud banks.

Columbia River fishermen have always competed with one another, but they have always had a common enemy: snags and “outsiders” who wanted to crowd in and fish their favorite part of the river. To tackle both problems, individual fishermen naturally aggregated into loose groups or “drift right associations.” Although the river and its bottom can not be owned by an individual, drift right organizations enabled sufficient cooperative effort amongst its members to be able to clear a specific area of the river bottom from snags. Once they had invested the time and resources to clear their drift, these individual members of a drift would behave more or less like de facto owners making it more difficult for non-members to fish on their turf with diver gillnets. Most drifts are between a half mile and five miles long. Interestingly, drift rights are not only inherited but are also bought and sold for a market price. This is the case, despite the fact that the drift rights themselves have questionable validity from a legal perspective.

An old-timer from Puget Island recounted a tale to me about Jon Ostervold, a reluctant drift right pioneer. Old Jon had by his own efforts cleared an area of river bottom where he fished on the lower end of Puget Island. A committee of local Norwegian gillnetters confronted Jon and informed him that they were incorporating his grounds into a larger drift, of which, they said, he was welcome to become a member. Late the next night, neighbors heard the labored putt-putt of Jon’s gillnet boat towing big snags back out onto the new drift. Legend has it that he deposited them in locations where everyone would hook them but himself.

Early snagging was a slow, labor-intensive process. Many drifts tried to catch and pull snags by dragging a cable on the bottom behind two boats. Drift fishermen who had taken part in earlier cable dragging ventures often grumbled to me that it had been a very inefficient process, and the results were mediocre at best. A more effective method was to use nets that were specialized to catch snags. On occasion, snag nets by themselves were used to catch and pull snags, particularly smaller snags. Trying to clear the bottom using a snag net alone without a diver was frequently a “catch and release without getting it off
the drift program.” The bonus was that more often than not, you had to go back to the net rack and mend the snag net afterwards.

Hardhat divers were the first snag divers on the Columbia. Hardhat gear included a very heavy dive suit, helmet, and leaden boots. The hardhat diver got his air from an air pump at the surface via hoses. The first pumps were hand-operated, requiring two men on the surface to continually work the pump in order to force air down to the diver. The hardhat diver descended to the bottom using a ladder or rope, then walked to the snag, being wary to keep the trailing air hoses from getting pinched in the net. After the snag was found and choked, the hardhat diver had to be hauled by hand back up to the surface. I have been told by many who still remember the hardhat era, that snag diving was very slow and productivity very low. During that earlier era, a productive day meant removing two to three snags out of the drift.

The advent of the self-contained underwater breathing apparatus (SCUBA) greatly increased the speed and productivity of snagging on the river. My personal productivity record was set on a drift near Puget Island. We yanked and cleared 23 snags out of the bottom during a single ebb tide. You can imagine how very tired I felt at the end of that noteworthy day.

**How I got into snag diving**

How did I get into snag diving? It seems a bit of a stretch for a boy who grew up on a small dairy farm in Brownsmead. My parents, sister, and two brothers emigrated from Finland to the U.S. via Ellis Island in 1948, four years before I was born. My parents had earned a good living farming their relatively large tract of ancestral lands in Karelia (the Eastern most part of Finland) prior to the Second World War. Like several hundred thousand other Finns, my family was first displaced by the Russo-Finnish hostilities in 1939, then again in 1944 by the imposed peace that required the cession of nearly ten percent of Finland’s land area to the Soviet Union as a buffer. Unlike the others, we were fortunate enough to have relatives in the U.S. and were able to obtain permission to immigrate here. My family moved to Brownsmead after working for a year on a farm in Wyoming to earn a small grubstake. With the help of relatives and lots of borrowed money, they were able to buy a small farm on Davis Bottom Road. The biggest new world “surprise” for the family was my arrival in 1952; both of my parents were in their forties when I was born. Life on a small dairy farm was hardscrabble in the 1950s but it helped nurture our respect for both education and well paid employment. My brother Mark, six years my senior, was the best job hustler in the family. He was a hard worker, industrious to a fault, and he always found outside jobs in addition to our never-ending unpaid farm chores. Mark learned about commercial fishing from our neighbor up the valley.

**Jaffet**

Jaffet was an old gillnetter who lived alone in the former Sylvandale schoolhouse at the top of Davis Bottom. When he wasn’t mending his nets in his erstwhile gymnasium, Jaffet liked to spend
a lot of time in one unkempt and overcrowded room of his otherwise ample dwelling. He would sit in his beat-up lounge chair, parked right next to the noisy oil heater. Jaffet explained that he liked the temperature to be “nice and hot” in the cramped room because he had spent so much of his life in the cold. From inside the room you couldn’t see out the windows because it was so hot the windows were usually steamy—that and the fact they hadn’t been washed in decades. Jaffet was one of the first in our valley to buy a television. Mark and I regularly hiked over to watch T.V., even after we got one in our home. Jaffet’s schoolhouse was on a hill and his reception was much clearer.
Two snags pulled up from the river's bottom are attached to the Union the Brownsport diver gillnet drift in the Columbia River ten miles above unknown object. Others are, from left to right: John Estoos, Wayne Laukkanen, and Cliff Lampi.
snag scow in this photo from February 1968 taken at Kaboth Sands on 
Tongue Point. The diver, Ross Lindstrom, lower left, points to some 
Rautio, Ed Erickson, Alan Takalo, Jay Westerholm, Roy Takalo, Mark
than ours on the valley floor. We spent many hours squished together in that hot stuffy room on his scruffy red velour couch staring at an old black and white set that had poor vertical hold control. When his old T.V. got so bad that even he couldn’t tolerate the rolling images, Jaffet didn’t throw the defective console out but put another T.V. on top of the old one in the corner.

When we weren’t watching T.V., we would be perusing Jaffet’s magazine collection. Jaffet’s policy was to save all his magazines, so his living quarters were crowded with tall stacks of Argosy, Field & Stream, Out-Door Life, and True Detective. Those were not our preferred periodicals, however. Sunshine and Health was the publication that held the most fascination for us neighborhood boys. This wonderful journal celebrated the nudist lifestyle. It was chock full of pictures of naked people frolicking, playing volleyball, and the like. Sunshine and Health was entirely more informative than those coy girlie magazines other fishermen hid under their boat bunks and pickup seats. In addition, most of those folks cavorting in Sunshine and Health sported candid sincere smiles that attested to the genuine fun that could be had while buff in the great outdoors!

When Mark reached his teens, Jaffet would take him gillnetting. He first employed Mark as a gofer, then later as a boat-puller to haul the heavy net back into the boat. I would tag along with Jaffet too, whenever I could sneak away from my farm chores. Jaffet would “hire” us for a dime or a tasty snack from the Knappa Market to help pull a net from his bowpicker onto his net rack so he could change or mend tears in his nets.
My favorite job was skippering Jaffet's boat when he needed to put it on the hoist at the warehouse along lower Gnat Creek. First, Jaffet would drop Mark or me off at Laurila's dock five miles away on Blind Slough in his emerald green Nash or powder blue Chevy Cheyenne pick-up. Although I don't ever recall getting any boat piloting lessons from Jaffet, he would let us run his 28-foot gillnet boat up Blind Slough and the narrow Gnat Creek channel to the Warehouse, unsupervised and alone, while he drove his vehicle back to the rendezvous point at the warehouse. I do recall one instance of getting royally chewed out by Jaffet when I was about ten or eleven years old. It was the first time I piloted his boat back to Laurila's dock. I came into the dock too fast because I was completely naive about the complementary inertial effects of wind and current as related to docking a boat. Although I had kicked the boat transmission into reverse, it wasn't soon enough. As I approached the dock, it just didn't occur to me, or was counter-intuitive, that I could more quickly decelerate the boat if I gunned the throttle while it was in
The Brownsmead warehouse near Davis Bottom Road.

reverse. The expression of utter horror on Jaffet’s face is indelibly etched in my memory as he stood on the dock while I steamed in with plank-busting velocity. Luckily, he was able to deflect my trajectory enough with his arms and body to avoid my damaging his bowpicker’s dark green painted spruce planks.

Another favorite outing with Jaffet was snag pulling. There was much to see and do, because snagging happened during daylight hours. Being an overactive youngster, I learned that the best time to be out snagging was when the drift was using the snag scow. The Union scow was a veritable playground of old cables, tools, motors, pipes, a pot bellied stove, a ladder to the roof, and more. Fun was contingent, of course, on not getting in the way of the snag crew. Getting in the way during “busy time” was usually rewarded with a sharp rebuke or cuff behind the ear for repeat offenders.

Brother Mark was the first in our family to be SCUBA certified. Although he was a big outdoor sports enthusiast, I recall that a big motivating factor for his learning to dive was the possibility of supplementing his future income by becoming a snag diver eventually. In the meantime, he could add another enjoyable hobby to his repertoire of outdoor activities that included water skiing, snow skiing, parachuting, hunting, trapping, and others.

Brotherly advice from Mark

Another Brownsmead boy, Jim Beckwith, taught Mark the basic protocol of snag diving. Mark, in turn, taught
me what he had learned on the job and what Jim had shared with him. The prime directive was: "don't get tangled in the net." When pulling yourself down to a snag, stay out of the bight of the net. This may sound like advice for the mentally challenged, but it should be every novice diver’s mantra. In the beginning, I found myself inadvertently in the bight a few times because of inexperience. It is all too easy to make navigational errors when you are crawling around a snagged net in the dark looking for a good cable hold. Experience teaches you to unconsciously and continuously monitor the direction of the current like a migrating fish using the earth’s magnetic field. You learn how to “see” the net underwater with your hands even when your eyes can’t see it. A net sensing safety technique that I learned from Mark was reaching ahead and sweeping the free hand in front of me when pulling myself forward. I disciplined myself to use it every time I went down on a net; I ingrained the habit to my benefit.

Be as slick as a seal

A snag diver needs to be as “slick as a seal,” is another lesson that I gained from Mark. During training, all divers learn the gospel of always diving with certain requisite safety equipment. The first piece of “indispensable” dive gear Mark and I jettisoned was the buoyancy compensator. Because a diver’s buoyancy varies with depth, the purpose of the compensator is to allow the diver to easily adjust whether he or she floats or sinks by adding or releasing air from a bladder worn around the neck. The bladder can be inflated to function like a life preserver in order to keep the diver and all his heavy equipment floating on the surface.

Snag diving differs from sport diving in that the snag diver carries extra lead in the weight belt. The experienced snag diver wants to get to the bottom as quickly as possible. Through trial and error, we learned that the bulky bladder with its many protruding valves and hoses is a net magnet when snag diving. Another important reason why the snag diver tries to mimic being slick as a seal, is to conserve strength. The snag diver is always fighting the current. Anything that enlarges the hydrodynamic profile (like a bulky buoyancy compensator) progressively saps the diver’s strength on each dive against the current. By the end of the day, the busy diver is completely exhausted.

My strategy was to buy the best dry suit available and to trust it for buoyancy compensation in potential emergencies. Sport divers are also taught that they must dive only if they have an extra second stage regulator, a pressure gauge, depth gauge, compass, bottom timer/calculator, etc. I fastidiously avoided carrying anything extra that could potentially catch the net, except for a single pressure gauge. Mark would rely upon the low air alarm of his regulator to let him know when he needed to change his air tank. I didn’t have a low air alarm, but even if I had, I would not have stripped my regulator of one extra hose and pressure gauge, because I had learned to be compulsive about checking my air pressure before and after each dive.

Mark gave me useful advice from a
customer relations and business perspective that helped my own snag diving business to become successful. “Don’t snag dive for chicken scratch. If you do it for (poor) wages it will not serve the diver, and ultimately will not serve the fishermen well either.” I took Mark’s statement to mean that snag diving involves some very easy enjoyable days and some very, very difficult days when you come close to losing it all. In time, the easy days will no longer make up for the difficult days, so, without adequate compensation, you will lose interest in snag diving. Rather than continuing to snag dive, you will seek a safer, drier, and easier job that pays a commensurate wage. The result is that a drift will be forced constantly to churn through new divers for snagging. “An inexperienced diver is an enormous liability for our drift,” is a quote that I heard even from penny-pinching fishermen more than once.

“Never insult a fisherman’s vessel, no matter how humble or rundown it may be. It’s better to insult his home, his wife, or his kids.” Mark used to tell a story about himself going snagging on a dilapidated weather beaten bowpicker that had seen better days. Walking to the bow, he stepped off the fish locker and crashed through the rotten floorboards into the bilge. This was only shortly after Mark had teased skipper Tony about the general condition (lack of) of his vessel. For the remainder of that particular day when he wasn’t diving, Mark mended broken boards under the angry tyrannical eye of the skipper. Not only did Tony oversee the hammering of each nail, but he also offered constructive criticism about Mark’s excessive weight and lack of carpentry skills.

True to his hardworking nature, Mark liked to offer me advice about non-diving related work: “Always keep yourself busy on the boat; your job is far from being over once you finish the dive. There is tons of work do on a bowpicker when snagging.” I always tried to take Mark’s advice to heart. After finishing a dive and surfacing, I would first hand my gear piece-by-piece to the dive tender; then I would pull myself aboard. Next, the tender and I would begin the process of getting the snag off the bottom and away from the drift. The first step for me would be to describe the snag to the skipper, how securely I had the snag choked, and how hard and in what direction the skipper should first pull on the snag.

On smaller snags, we would usually pull from the bow cleat first. With the cable attached to the bow of the boat it is easier to control the direction of the pull and apply the force so the cable bites into the snag and the choker doesn’t slip off the end. If a snag didn’t budge, as was often the case, I would have the tender untie the cable from the bow cleat. Next, the skipper would gently nudge the boat ahead, and I would walk the cable from the bow to the stern, keeping the cable as taut as possible to prevent it from slipping off the snag.

A bowpicker can exert considerably more pulling force on a snag when the cable is attached to the stern cleat. After a preliminary pull to ‘set’ the cable into the snag, the skipper would kick the boat transmission into neutral, and the tender and I would haul slack out of the
cable so we could get more up-and-down leverage on the snag. Once the snag broke loose from the bottom, the skipper would throttle back and we would “test” whether the group of us could heave-ho the snag closer to the boat from the stern. With many snags it was pure folly to try to get such a huge mass to move with only human muscle. With smaller snags, the tender and I pulling together could usually drag the snag close to the boat.

**Chain lines and pickeroons**

It was hard to get loose of and dispose of snags tied off on the stern of the boat, so I would have to walk the cable back to the bow cleat and tie off there. Most drifts would dump their snags behind a jetty or onto a beach where they would be unlikely to wash back on to their drift following a big high tide. Getting loose of the snag and getting the cable back had traditionally been an inefficient process. After a hard pull, the cable would usually bite so deeply into the wood that it might take as much time to get the cable off as it had originally taken to pull the snag off the bottom and tow it to the beach. Mark innovated upon the time-honored process by employing a short chain line, which I also adopted. If the snag surfaced during towing, we would attach the hook of the chain line into the shackle on the noose of the snag cable. We would snug the chain line to another cleat and gently loosen the main cable when approaching the beach. The effect was that the cable would “un-bite” the snag. Thus, getting the cable back from the snag was greatly simplified and much time was saved. Using a pickeroon was another one of Mark’s clever ideas. Most drifts used a pike pole when trying to disengage and get the cable off the snag. Both Mark and I learned to use pickeroons while working in sawmills, so we always carried one for snagging. A pickeroon was much handier than a pike pole for grabbing and holding smaller snags near the boat and getting the cable off.

**Untangling snags on the surface**

Another time-consuming task where my help was appreciated was untangling snags that had been pulled to the surface by the net. If the snag had an opportunity to bounce around in the net on the bottom before surfacing, the result was a snag wrapped in a ball of net. In many of those circumstances another locator boat was called in to pick the other end of net until the two locator boats came together and both ends of the snag could be brought near the surface. I would then jump in and attach lines near the ends of the snag so the snag could be supported on the surface while the net was slackened. I would usually stay in the water to help untangle the net. Untangling was much easier if both boats could be navigated to shallower water where the fishermen could get out of their boats and help me with the untangling process. There were a number of occasions when we spent the entire tide disentangling a single snag from the snag net. On one interesting encounter in St. Helens, a law enforcement boat arrived and demanded to see our required state issued snag permit just as a balled up snag was hoisted near the surface with the net. As was usually the case in that
part of the river, a concerned citizen had probably reported that a group of gill-netters was brazenly catching salmon out-of-season in broad daylight. Fishermen on this particular drift were more than a little familiar with this drill. Most were not sympathetic to law enforcement’s regular need to repeatedly verify the snag permit. The sheriff’s boat pulled to within a few feet of our boat and the officer yelled to no one in particular to go fetch the snag permit. After an uncomfortable pause the snag boss yelled: “Can’t you see we are working here? You will have to wait.” The sheriff’s boat stayed quite near as we navigated the locator boats to the beach near the town of St Helens. Instead of finding the permit for the police immediately after we got to the beach, the fisherman climbed into the water and began the process of disentangling the net from the snag. We unraveled for over an hour while the cops stewed. I knew there would be consequences. After the net was untangled, the requisite snag permit was finally produced. Although the permit was in order, the still stewing cops began a very thorough inspection of each boat. Sure enough, minor violations such as worn life preservers were found, and fines to the individual skippers were levied.

**My first snag diving experience**

A year after obtaining my basic SCUBA certification I was eager to try my hand at snag diving and to earn some big money. Mark helped me secure my first booking, diving for the local Brownsport Drift. Experienced
Hannu takes a last warming cup of coffee before the dive.

snag divers who were available during the big run-out tides were not in abundant supply at the time. The drift elected to take a chance on hiring me in the hope that I could put a cable around a snag, would not drown, and would be available to them for future snag diving.

I was somewhat nervous about diving but it proved to be a slow day. Near the end of the tide a locator boat finally hooked a snag in the Pole Hole. [The Pole Hole is one of the arms of the “Y” shaped Brownsport Drift.] As we maneuvered next to the snagged locator boat, I went through my mental diving checklist and reviewed key advice I had received from Mark about diving on snags. Perfect. The snag was at a depth of only twenty feet. I confidently jumped over-board, grabbed the snag net and began my descent. I was grateful that the basic SCUBA certification course I had taken had been surprisingly rigorous, both the didactic portion as well as the hands-on underwater training. My course instructor had great credentials, was highly trained, and certified me with both the PADI and NAUI diving organizations [Professional Association of Diving Instructors and National Association of Underwater Instructors]. He had simulated all kinds of emergencies underwater. I had finished at the top of my class. What could there possibly be to worry about on this shallow water snag?

None of that training or open water diving experience in clear water had prepared me for this kind of Columbia River underwater darkness. As a youngster, I had experienced being lost in the forest by myself after dark. Yeah,
that had been a dark and scary experience, but it had been nowhere nearly as dark and scary as going down this snag net for the very first time.

Since that time, I have come to realize that each one of us harbors primal fears within. I have come to understand that nearly everyone has a fear of complete darkness, of being lost, and of being utterly and completely alone. Fortunately, most folks rarely have to face the kind of primitive fear that arises from darkness, being alone and being unable to communicate. In our culture, blindness is our biggest fear after cancer. I suspect, our fear of darkness may in part be why we fear blindness so.

I found the snag on the bottom quickly and explored it with my hands. Both ends were cleanly sawed off, so it was undoubtedly a hemlock sinker that had fallen out of a log raft that had been towed overhead across the Brownsport Drift through the Pole Hole. It was easy getting the net off and choking the snag. I straddled the sinker between my thighs, bent down and threaded the cable from one hand to the other and shackled the cable. After jerking on the cable to signal that the snag was secure, I surfaced. Easy as pie. Back in the boat I checked my pressure gauge. How could this be? Three-fourths of my air tank was depleted. I had been underwater only five to ten minutes and it had been shallow water. On previous open water sport dives, this volume of air had lasted nearly 45 minutes at even greater depths. I asked the tender if I had produced an abnormal amount of bubbles during my dive. Both he and skipper Orville broke out laughing: “The water all around the boat boiled. We have never ever seen so many bubbles coming out of a diver.” “Well, I have a pretty big tidal volume” I sheepishly offered. “Then you better bring a lot of tanks with you in the future” was Orville’s suggestion.

When we were back at Westerholm’s dock near the mouth of Blind Slough, and unloading my gear, Alan, the drift paymaster, approached me with the drift’s checkbook and a pen. He asked me, “What does a junior diver charge?” Convinced that I was not going to get the standard $75 diver pay. I responded, “What do you pay a commercial snag diver for a tide?” Alan, who had a reputation as being very tight fisted with a buck, reminded me again that I was a greenhorn apprentice diver. Orville, the cranky old snag boss who was monitoring our negotiations, opened his mouth to speak. My heart sank; I knew that Orville would back some low-ball salary amount that Alan suggested. I would be stuck for years as an apprentice diver with this drift. “Pay the man $75, the full amount!” Orville croaked. What a happy, proud day it turned out to be for me! Not only was I getting paid what an experienced commercial snag diver would earn, but Orville, the curmudgeon, had called me a man. This was even after he witnessed me make the surface of the river boil with my fear-laced bubbles.

I would characterize my early snag diving performance as slow, sequential, and very methodical. When it was time for me to go overboard after a snag, I was not always completely geared up and ready. I would wait while the locator verified that his boat was not mov-
Hannu surfaces and grabs on to a rope as bubbles rise around him.

ing and slowly dragging the snag in the current. I would double-check all my gear and then ask my skipper to position our dive boat flawlessly before I would go overboard. I liked to have both boats parallel with exactly eight feet of separation between the dive boat and the snag net. Sometimes this would require more than one approach. No one ever complained until Clarence, a.k.a. “Snookie,” took it upon himself to school me one day.

Snookie was a moonlighter. He not only gillnetted, but he ran his own gyppo logging outfit. Other fishermen on the drift were amused by the fact that Snookie’s boat with the big Chrysler V-8 had only two speeds. They were layout-the-net-speed, and go-home-speed. He was impatient with slow men in the woods—and with slow divers. My lesson began one evening when he looked up from his drink and said: “You are a good diver, but…” I took his advice to
heart, I always tried to be geared up and ready before the locator had picked up to the snag. I learned to be a quicker diver underwater too. I was later grateful for Snookie's coaching, it helped me to become a more professional diver.

**Tough snags that required more than one boat**

In my years of snag diving, I found many tough snags that resisted relocation.

In bygone days when men were made of iron and wooden boats had very little horsepower, a float log was towed to the unyielding snag during the lowest part of the tide. The float log was then tightly cabled directly above the snag. The fishermen went home leaving high tide and current to gradually work the snag loose. In recent years, this method has been used very sparingly because the Coast Guard frowns upon anyone but the Coast Guard putting navigational hazards in the river. Colossal fines usually accompany Coast Guard frowns.

A Columbia River bowpicker powered by a six-cylinder Crown or eight-cylinder Chrysler can tow pretty hard on a snag, but often it wasn't enough. We would always start by pulling in the direction I prescribed. If that was not successful, the skipper would turn the rudder so the boat would make a slow 360° arc while tugging on the snag.

If the snag didn’t budge after about 15 minutes of full-throttle pulling, heavy-duty measures were called for. The stern line of a second boat would be lashed to the bow cleat of the first boat. After the first gradually throttled up to full power, the leading boat would then do the same. In addition to the increased horsepower brought to bear by the second boat, this method helped to maximize the power of the boat closest to the snag by keeping its bow from lifting under full power. An ever-present danger was that if the cable suddenly snapped, the first boat could rear-end the lead boat.

If this method was not successful, two and even three boats were lashed together in parallel. I learned from many broken cables that my quarter inch steel line would not bear the strain of three boats, so I would have to dive down to the snag beforehand with a heavier cable.

If the snag wouldn’t stir, the next escalation in the war of snaggers versus snag was to exploit the advantages of a snag scow. Prior to the era of boats with big engines, scows were the contraptions of choice with reluctant snags. Snag scows are rigged with slow but powerful logging winches and heavy cables. Tremendous lift can be wielded on a snag when the decks are winched down to water level, given the huge water displacement of the scow. Most snag scows also had pumps and fire hoses. Many a time, I took the fire hose down to the snag and used high pressure water to try and jet out sand from under and around the snag. If the scow couldn’t first pull the snag out of the bottom, my jetting excavation work rarely contributed to later success.

There were few snag scows on the river, so most drifts didn’t have access to one when they needed one. The have-not drifts would usually rely upon the kindness of passing towboat cap-
tains. Quite a number of tugboat captains had either gillnetted in an earlier life, had family who were gillnetters, or were just plain friendly towards commercial fishermen. Most drift fishermen knew the friendly captains, so they would call for help on the VHF radio when they encountered an entrenched snag. If a tugboat was running through the area without a tow or a push, the boat and crew would usually lend a hand when OK’d by the skipper. Many of these Columbia River towboats were relatively massive and had in excess of a thousand diesel horsepower. With such a vessel there is no such thing as gradually coming tight on the cable. Even the one-inch diameter cables attached to a snag snapped as if they had been made of string. Although there were exceptions, most of the big tugboat encounters that I witnessed usually resulted in busted cables and a snag that stayed put.

Interesting snag removal solutions sometimes emerged. The Cathlamet Drift was cursed with a snag that was in the worst possible location on their drift. Multiple fish-boat, and tow boat pulls had all been unsuccessful, so the drift hired a digger barge. Using a big crane and clamshell bucket, the digger barge dug out and removed the troublesome snag. It was an expensive but successful solution for the drift.

Fellow snag diver, Jim Beckwith, shared some the novel solutions he had employed with snags that wouldn’t come out by conventional means. On one of the Rainier drifts, he found a big buried tree with branches that stuck out of the bottom and habitually snagged any net that happened to pass by. It was in the prime fishing area of the drift. It wouldn’t move, so he revisited the snag with his crosscut hand-saw. Jim cut off all the branches that were sticking up. The fishermen were subsequently able to drift their nets over the remainder without snagging up. Jim came up with a different nifty solution for another huge immovable snag by building a metal net ramp over the part jutting out of the sand. He pounded several metal pipes into the sand upriver from the snag and oriented them in such a way as to create a ramp over the snag. This ramp allowed nets to travel downriver and up and over the snag without hooking up. A clever solution for a part of the river where there was little if any incoming tide.

**Blowing snags with explosives**

Years ago, terrorists were few and so were regulations for obtaining and using explosives. Some of my most unforgettable snag diving escapades involved dynamite. An observation of mine is that most boys never outgrow their fascination for high-quality fireworks—even when they are discharged underwater. Rigging dynamite always created a more festive mood aboard the boat. My job was to take the rigged explosives down to the bottom and place them carefully around the immovable snag. A snag could be cut off right at sand level with an appropriate sized explosive charge that was correctly placed. Those are not the results we got, however. Powder monkeys (experienced with explosives and rigging charges) with whom I worked lacked experience using dynamite.
underwater and had to rely on my description of the snag. Their experience was usually limited to blowing farmers’ stumps into the air. We would typically start with a medium sized charge, after which I would visit the bottom to see how much of a dent we had made in the snag. Next I would go down with an even bigger payload and we would repeat the process. My biggest payload was putting 48 sticks of dynamite on one snag in Skamokowa. The resulting explosion created a lot of little pieces of wood floating down the river. The mother snag remained intact, still rooted in the same spot, but it was a lot gnarlier to the touch afterwards.

There is an often-told snag-dynamite story that I heard several times on the river. It involved accidentally detonating a big charge with the bowpicker still directly above the exploding dynamite. The resulting concussion expelled caulking from in-between the boat’s wooded planks and water started pouring into the bowpicker. The boat had to be run at full speed to the nearest shore where it was beached to prevent its sinking. I can testify to the attention grabbing effect of being in a boat when dynamite explodes directly underneath. We were snugged up tight above a big snag, one time, and before we had a chance to scope out the cable and electrical wire, the powder monkey accidentally brushed the wire ends against the battery. Good thing it was a metal-hulled boat because the entire tug rose out of the water by about a foot. The concussion through the soles of my dive boots felt like somebody had hit my heels with a steel hammer.

What I learned from my demolition experiences is that placing blasting caps into sticks of dynamite in small confined spaces can produce dizziness and the mother of all headaches. After providing some minor assistance in helping rig the 48-stick charge in Skamokowa, I had to deliver the explosives. My cable was winched as tight as a piano wire and it pointed nearly straight down at the snag. The current was running so hard that when I went overboard I could hear my cable audibly vibrating in the swift water. Before I was half way down, my inner ear began telling me that I was spinning around in circles as if I were in a washing machine. I knew that I wasn’t spinning, because the cable that I was pulling myself down with was still humming. It was all I could do not to vomit. I was able to complete the dive successfully. That was my first experience with underwater nausea and dizziness. I attributed it to the fumes from the dynamite. Nitrogen compounds in dynamite can dilate the body’s blood vessels (and cause headaches) not unlike a sublingual nitroglycerine pill taken for angina.

**The Author**

Hannu Laukkanen was born at Astoria, Oregon on July 21, 1952. He attended school at Hilda Lahti Elementary and graduated from Knappa-Svensen High School in 1970. He received his B.S. from the University of Oregon in 1974 in General Science, and did graduate studies at the Department of Neurosciences, also at the U. of O. He received his B.S. at Pacific University in 1983 in Visual Science, and the Doctor of Optometry degree at Pacific University in 1984.
Dr. Hannu Laukkanen

He was a Teaching Fellow at Pacific University, 1984-86 and received his M.Ed [Master of Education] degree at Pacific University, 1994.

Dr. Laukkanen has been a Clinical Professor of Optometry at Pacific University since 1986, and is a full-time faculty member.

His hobbies include: travel, skiing, clamming, gardening, cooking, film, rooting for the Ducks and son Eric’s premier soccer team. He has traveled to Europe (most of), Asia (Thailand, Japan, China), Central America, (Honduras, Mexico), and East Africa (Kenya & Tanzania: climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro).

His wife, Wanda Erickson Laukkanen, is an interlibrary loan technician at Pacific University. They have three children: Katri at Pacific University, Carl at College of Santa Fe, and Eric at Forest Grove.

His sister, Lea Falter, lives in Castle Rock, Washington and a brother, Mikko Laukkanen, lives in Brownsmead on the homeplace.

Notes

More snag diving adventures will follow in another issue. Hannu Laukkanen’s story will also appear in the Columbia River Gillnetter, a publication of the Columbia River Fishermen’s Protective Union.

Our thanks to Jon Westerholm for his generous help.

For more on snag diving see Irene Martin’s book Legacy and Testament, 1994, Washington State University, Pullman, WA

The four photos of Hannu snag diving in this article were taken by Wanda Laukkanen on assignment for the Lake Oswego Review. The newspaper gave its permission for the use of the photographs here.

Definitions

bight = the part of the rope or line between the ends.

bow cleat = an anvil-shaped fitting to which lines are made fast.

bowpicker = a type of gillnet boat that has low sides to enable a diver to get in and out of the water easier.

bow reel = a reel on the bow of a boat.

carabineer = an oblong metal ring with a spring clip.

choker the snag = put a cable in a tight loop around a snag in order to move it.

dive tender = the person on the deck who helps the diver get ready to dive, holds the cable attached to the snag diver, receives/interprets signals sent by the diver during the dive, and communicates those messages to the boat operator. The dive tender affixes the cable to the boat after the appropriate signal from the diver. After the diver surfaces near the boat, the tender takes the diver’s gear piece by piece (mask, weight belt, dive tank and regulator) into the boat. Dive tenders usually help with other duties as needed on the boat.

gillnet = fishing with a net that snare the fish by the gills.

rocket fins = pliable rubber fins worn on the feet that enable the diver to swim through water faster.

snag = anything that catches a fish net, usually some part of a tree.

snag net = like a diver net with a large mesh size to allow fish to escape, but catch snags.
The 1906 wreck of the *Peter Iredale* on the sands of Fort Stevens State park is well-known to most local residents and visitors. But 20 days after the *Iredale* disaster, a lesser known four-masted British barque hit the beach in what is now the community of Surf Pines. The 2169 ton *Galena* had been heading for the Columbia River in ballast from Chile, intending to pick up grain for Europe. In the early morning of November 13, 1906, heavy winds carried her into the surf. Recognizing the inevitable, Captain Howles decided to direct the vessel straight onto the beach, hoping to avoid heavy impact and possible destruction of her masts. The 38-member crew made it safely ashore by dawn, and after trudging inland for another day and finding evening shelter in an isolated shed, they eventually found their way to the home of my grandparents, Josiah and Lamira West, where they were welcomed and accommodated.

Most of the crew found their way back to England within weeks, but several elected to stay in this new land, some for years. Among those remaining in Clatsop County were seamen Jack Beadle and his companion Billy Marshall. The first few weeks were somewhat tense, because many of the crew were indentured to the Galena Company, and a headhunter had been sent to assure their return to company service. Jack and several friends were escorted to a shelter in the foothills, with food and supplies provided by local farm families. The scheme worked, and the search was eventually abandoned, to the relief of the newcomers.

Jack Beadle remained in the employ of several rural families on the Plains, including the Wests, Wilkinson's, Adairs, Dawsons, and Bradens. His photographs and meticulous diary notes through those years remain as a valuable record of local farm life in the early 20th century. Jack returned to Great Britain at the onset of WWI, and fought in the battle of The Dardanelles. After the war, he continued to correspond with descendants of Clatsop Plains families, including my mother, Violet West See. Jack purchased the rather famous sailing barge *Lord Kitchener*, and operated it from 1918 to 1938.
Jack Beadle and his friend, Billy Marshall, in 1908.
As a youngster growing up on the Plains, I was fascinated by all the family yarns about the Galena and its crew, gathering and recording every fragment of the vessel I could find. Upon my mother’s passing in 1975, I inherited her many photographs of the Galena incident, and decorated a wall of our living room with much of the collection.

One day in late 2001, while relaxing in my easy chair and once again contemplating the history of the vessel and people in those pictures, our phone rang. The editor of Cumtux had received an inquiry from England and asked if I had ever heard of Jack Beadle. Obviously surprised, I replied, “Yes, I’m looking at his picture at this very moment!” We were both astounded, to say the least. That call resulted in a flurry of overseas correspondence with Jack’s elderly nephew, J. J. Jefferies, and his friend, Paul Grist. J. J. is a retired mariner and recognized recorder of maritime history, including all of the America’s Cup races. Grist has interpreted and relayed much of the Jefferies records relative to the Galena.

The flurry of overseas communication resulted in a 2002 visit by Paul Grist’s co-worker Caroline Brown and her husband, Robert. Caroline is a legal secretary in Essex, and they were excited to see first hand the site of the Galena stranding. But the vessel itself is not visible. Because of the ongoing sand accretion on Clatsop beach, the shoreline has moved westerly an average of ten feet each year, and a recent measurement placed the remains of the hull 1080 feet east of its likely impact site, were it to be cast ashore today. Indeed, while much of the vessel was dismantled, its steel hull lies almost directly beneath a dwelling in Surf Pines.

Ninety seven years ago, thanks to the vagaries of Mother Nature, a group of strangers found themselves stranded on a foreign shore. Within days, many had begun a lifelong association with the families occupying that sandy prairie, continuing to correspond throughout their lives. That saga has been resurrected now by a chance phone call, and new acquaintances have been established to carry on the memories of the Galena. It’s truly a small world!

The book, Oregon Boys in the War, compiled by Mrs. Frank Wilmot in 1918, describes Jack Beadle as the first Oregon man to enlist in the World War.

Jack Beadle in a British army uniform during WW1.
This photo of the Astoria Sea Scout Ship Flying Cloud was sent to CCHS by Captain Warren G. Leback in June. It was taken on a coed outing on Youngs Bay during the spring of 1941. Les Horton, the Mate, is at the tiller. On the right, with his back to the camera, is Skipper Bryson Lausch Sr. The woman in the light coat facing the camera may be Barbara Thorners. In the bow are Mike Leback, Dewey Merydeth and possibly Kenny Gin.

The Flying Cloud was a featured competitor in the Astoria Regattas of 1938, 1939, 1940, and 1941. She also was undefeated against the Sea Scout ships in her class on the Columbia River during those years. She was a 30-foot whaleboat donated by the U.S. Navy to the Sea Scouts. They rigged her as a ketch with a centerboard for stability.

Our thanks to Captain Leback for supplying this information.
The arrival of Don and Grace Grams Goodall to the county in September brought the opportunity for good friends to meet. Seated at the table are (l-r): Art Johanson, Clara Lum, Harold Nelson, Don Goodall, Ed Fearey and Dorothy Lund Riswick. Standing are Don Riswick, John Lum, and Grace Goodall. Several here were also involved with the Sea Scouts.
The impressive main staircase is flanked by photos of officials of the Elks.
A request for your help.

A Palace for the Elks

One of Astoria’s finest historic buildings is in a state of disrepair and deterioration. Built shortly after the 1922 Astoria fire, the Elks Building at 453-11th Street, is an impressive example of the American Renaissance style of architecture. Now, over eighty years old, the building is in need of restoration. Money and ideas are needed to help with the work.

The Elks Lodge was chartered in 1890. Since then, the lodge has become an integral part of this community. Not only have members sponsored cultural and historic events and helped the needy, but their building has served as a meeting place for many organizations.

The main meeting room is large, 70 x 55 feet with a 23 foot high ceiling, ornamented with rosettes and wonderful chandeliers. The south side of the room boasts of several stippled plaster columns. Surprises in this building include a bowling alley in the basement and an archery room. On the top floor are apartments once used as residences for elderly members.

Call the Lodge at (503) 325-2806 if you can help or contact board members Barbara Begleries, Lew Kinder, Terry Selven, Karen Martens and George McMurrick.

Below and at left is Barbara Begleries leading a tour through the Lodge building.
The photo above originally appeared in the Winter 1998 Cumtux and was given to us by Tom Crecraft. Only three people had been identified at the time. Ward Paldanius came to the rescue with these names: back row, l to r: George Robinson, Jalmar Johnson, Cecil Moberg, Fred (?), Bill Crecraft, Ward Paldanius, Baldy Peterson, Cy Robinson, Chris Jensen, Al Corland, Jay Jeffcott, Whitey (?) and (?) Hahn. Front row: Gilbert Marxen, Abby Paldanius, Elman Peterson. Of the two women sitting next to Henry Pice, one is his sister and one his wife. Next is Charlie Pice, Hannah (?) and Oscar Hendrickson. Taken at the Jim Crow Seining Grounds.
Scrapbooks

Many scrapbooks have been donated to CCHS over the years. Those compiled by Maude Barlow of Warrenton yield many surprises. Among them are the following items cut out of various newspapers, unfortunately without dates or source.

Early College Slips Away

While searching through the incorporation papers, Andrew Dalgity, county "photostater of records," as he is described in one article, discovered that six prominent Astorians had put up $8,000 for founding a college in Astoria in 1863. The incorporators were: Capt. George Flavel, his father-in-law Conrad Boelling, Capt. J. H. Hustler, Cyrus Olney, Adam Van Dusen and W.L. Adams. (From a 1947? Astorian Budget)

The incorporation papers somehow made their way to the basement of the Astoria Library, and remains one of its most important, under-utilized resources.

The History of the Dogpatch Community Church

Stanley R. Church, who wrote for Cumtux a few years ago and has since passed away, wrote a two-page article on the founding of a church in the Navy housing at the east end of Astoria. This area was known for many years as Dogpatch, but later renamed Blue Ridge. Chaplain Henry E. Austin, USN, who established the church, had earlier hit the beach at Iwo Jima on D-Day plus 2. He arrived at Dogpatch in 1946 and held the first services in the community building in March. The bell used to summon people to church services was captured from a Japanese naval vessel.

Rudyard Kipling’s Visit to Astoria

The famous British novelist, poet and story teller, Rudyard Kipling, came to Astoria sometime in the 1880s or 1890s. He arrived on a steamer from San Francisco, walked about the city, and had dinner at the Occident Hotel which stood on what is now the southeast corner of 10th and Marine Drive. According to Frank Spittle, a local lawyer, Kipling wrote about his impressions of the town:

“Astoria is a fishing village near the mouth of the Columbia river, holding to the bank with one hand while wading out into the stream. Its inhabitants live on salmon and great and increasing expectations.”

CCHS members can browse through the scrapbooks at the Heritage Museum for free. For nonmembers, there is a small fee.
Can anyone tell us what this model was built for? The elderly man at far left is Josiah West, a pioneer on Clatsop Plains and grandfather of Paul See. At left of the smokestack is Josiah’s son, Paul West.