

**Columbia River Kayak Trip**  
**An Account of a Six Day, 136 Mile Kayak Trip**  
**Down the Columbia River**  
**from Beacon Rock State Park to the Port of Chinook**  
**By Ken Karch and Bernie Gerkens**  
**August 24 through August 29, 2003**

## Introduction

This is an account of a six day, 136 mile sea kayak trip down the Columbia River, following the route of the Lewis & Clark expedition in 1805. Planned for over a year by Ken Karch and Paul Guy, Bernie Gerkens joined the trip when Paul was unable to do so due to a broken ankle. The intent was to create a personal experience resembling that of the L&C expedition, as well as to assess the suitability of the route for such trips in the future. Throughout the account, I've interspersed photos from our trip and comparative (and hopefully interesting) references to Clark's account of the 1805 expedition, as reported in Moulton's *The Journals of the Lewis & Clark Expedition*, Volume 6. References from Moulton are shown italicized. Bernie's kayak was a Prijon Kodiak; mine was a Folbot Kodiak. We carried supplies to be unsupported for up to two weeks, although we stopped for outside meals twice (see writeup)

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## August 23, 2003

At 10 am Ken & Erika picked up Bernie & Josephine at their home and loaded Bernie's kayak and gear. We drove Washington State 4 along the Columbia River through Rosberg, Skamokawa, Cathlamet, and Longview, stopping at several camping and boat launch spots scouted earlier by Ken; then headed south on I-5 to the I-205 cutoff to the Portland airport; then through Camas and Washougal to Beacon Rock State Park.



We contacted the Beacon Rock State Park ranger to determine where we could camp and launch our boats, and learned that the state park has four camp sites at the boat launch available for \$16 per night (no charge for simple launch), or one can leave a car there for \$10 per night.



We unloaded our kayaks and gear and took photos of the site and of Erika & Josephine, and took GPS readings of the boat launch; then said good-bye to Erika and Josephine, with thanks. We looked at our maps and tide tables and noted that high tide is about 6 hours later

here than Astoria, and low tide about 7.5 hours later.

We watched for a couple of hours three groups of rock climbers on the vertical face of Beacon Rock after Erika and Josephine left.

During the night, there was an almost continuous rumbling and whistle blowing from railroad trains passing by on both the Washington and Oregon shores; this disrupted our sleep throughout the night.

From our August 23 campsite at Beacon Rock State Park Boat Ramp, the river is an easy carry from the lower two camp sites, and there was plenty of room for camping and car parking.



### Day 1 on the Water (August 24, 2003)

This morning about 9:30 am we left Beacon Rock Boat Ramp campground after spending a couple of hours loading our kayaks for the first time and pulled out of a little cove we were tucked in behind Pierce Island. Bernie remembers how strange it felt to be fully loaded in a kayak as we pulled out. He'd remarked earlier that he wasn't sure that the thing would float with all the stuff that he had. I remembered all the other river trips I'd made with far too much food, water, clothing, and fuel in the baggage.



*Beacon Rock was noted by Clark in 1805 as "a remarkable high rock on Stard. Side about 800 feet high & 400 yds round, the Beaten Rock." His estimate of height was very close, according to Moulton. We were able to see Beacon Rock for at least nine miles downstream.*

We had modest breezes at first that morning and the current thru the first hour or so was 2-3 miles per hour, so we were able to make 5-6 miles per hour.

We went by Multnomah Falls, which is not nearly so impressive from the river as it is from the road. Across from Multnomah Falls is a small island, Skamania Island; we stopped at the eastern upstream end of that island. We noticed at that point that the wind was starting to come up, so we stayed to the south of the island and followed the main channel.



For the next few miles we had moderate winds in our face - wind speeds we estimated at 15-25 mph.

We stayed near the main channel, crossing over to the Washington side below Skamania Island, passed Phoca Rock, a pillar in mid-stream, and passed Bridal Veil Falls.

*Clark describes Phoca (which means “seal” in Greek) Rock: “at 17 miles passed a rock near the middle of the river, about 100 feet high and 80 feet Diameter.”*



We came to Cape Horn, quite an interesting rock formation, confused because of a long string of similar looking formations (looking like hoo-dads). What appears to be called Cape Horn on the map doesn't seem placed correctly in relation to the marking for Cape Horn Rock, which we couldn't readily identify. Clearly evident was the columnar basalt typical of basaltic rock.



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*Clark describes Cape Horn: “12 miles to a (Lard.) Stard. point of rocks of a high cliff of black rocks.” Moulton notes that the black rocks are basalts of the Miocene-age Columbia River Basalt Group.*

We stopped at Cape Horn, our second rest stop of the day, at the east end of the railroad tunnel.

After the rest stop and “photo op” at Cape Horn, we crossed the river to the Oregon side, traveling along the north side of Sand Island, and continued on to the Rooster Rock channel and went back up the Rooster Rock channel to a lagoon.



Shortly after rounding Cape Horn and taking off across the river to Sand Island, the wind suddenly died, causing us to make comparisons to the original Cape Horn at the southern tip of South America that had stopped many a masted ship during the early days of sail exploration. For the rest of the day we had virtually no wind and very calm water – excellent kayaking.

We stopped at a small marina at the end of the Rooster Rock channel (Bernie had been here before), got out and relaxed in a grassy area with picnic tables, restrooms, boat launch, but no camping, our third rest stop of the day. It was quite warm.

Rooster Rock seems to resemble a rooster coming downstream to it, but takes on several other appearances as the aspect changes, including a view at mid-channel like that of the tyrannosaurus in Jurassic Park. It seemed as if we saw Rooster Rock from 17 different directions – it looks different from each one, and like a rooster from only one.



*Clark describes the Rooster Rock area: “we encamped under a high projecting rock on the Lard. side” which Moulton surmises is Crown Point in Rooster Rock State*

*Park. Clark recounts that they were visited by seven Indians in a canoe on a trading mission, and that the party “made 29 miles today from the Great Shute”.*

Paddling north from Rooster Rock we crossed back to the Washington side of the river near Point Vancouver. We wanted to follow the Washington shore along Reed Island, because it looked like there is a way through there (north around the island) to our proposed next night’s campsite at Cottonwood Point, but we were unable to find a way through as it was very shallow, requiring us to exit the kayaks and walk them back a couple of hundred yards into deeper water to the south of Reed Island.



We followed the south side of Reed Island to its western tip, and looked back eastward for the campsite we expected, but we saw nothing sandy, but all brush and greenery coming right down to the water along either shore (mainland and north side of Reed Island).



Straight north from the western tip of Reed Island, however, we saw a good-looking campsite; just to the east of a spot where several dozen young people were cavorting with powerboats, ski-boards, and jet-skis. We wanted to stay out of their way, so we paddled to the secluded site and set up camp, and brought our kayaks and gear up high enough to avoid the high tide, evidence of which was clear.



Total distance today was about 17 miles. On the trip today from Beacon Rock to Cape Horn there was a lot of fishing activity; from Rooster Rock to our first campsite was a lot of recreational boating (power) and almost constant noise from power boats and jet skis. This could be deeply disturbing to one seeking the quiet and solitude of a wilderness experience. The only big commercial ships we saw this day were two sets of barges being pushed upriver by tugs along Reed Island.

One can see the smokestacks of Camas from where we camped near Cottonwood Point (which turned out not to be Cottonwood Point). We had a beautiful sunset with the Camas mill stacks in the background – took another of the same scene in the morning.

During the night we suffered through an almost constant, but intermittent low-pitched throbbing or humming, that was very annoying, and in the evening and again in the early morning hours we heard many aircraft departing or approaching the Portland airport about 10 miles away.





At Cottonwood Point we used the cell phones and they seemed to work fine.

Movement today was from Mile Point 141 to about Mile Point 124, a distance of about 17 miles.

## **Day 2 on the Water (August 25, 2003)**

In the morning, as we were getting ready to leave, a ranger stopped and said we had camped in a wildlife refuge where there was no camping allowed. He explained that that particular point was not for camping, but 150 yards or so downstream one could camp and that there was a self-signup permit system. We told them there were kids playing in the site there and we had wanted to avoid them. He seemed very interested in our trip plans and wished us good luck.

We left our camp about 9:30 am and continued on past Washougal and Camas on Day 2, concerned about possible currents right at Camas, but the concerns were unfounded. We stayed in the main channel to the south of Lady Island, about a mile and a half long. Camas is where Sandy River comes in from the south bank, explored and described in some detail in the Lewis & Clark journals. About 3 miles up the Sandy River is the Lewis & Clark State Park boat ramp.

*Clark mentions that on November 3, 1805 the party "halted at the mouth of a large river on the Lard. Side. This river throws out emence quantity of (quick) Sand and is verry Shallow, the narrowest part 200 yards wide bold Current, much resembling the river Plat." Lewis and Clark walked up this river about 1.5 miles.*

*Moulton points out that, between the camp of November 2, 1805 (Rooster rock area) and the mouth of the Sandy River (Camus area), the party passed the highest point reached by Vancouver's expedition in 1792; that this was on a large sand island (today's Reed Island); and that by doing so the Lewis & Clark party had just re-entered country previously explored by whites.*

We passed the west end of Lady Island and cut across the channel to the passageway at the east end of Government Island and north of it, and between Government Island and a small island, and stopped on the north shore of Government Island (Lewis & Clark named the island "Dimond Island" for its general shape) near the east end for a rest break, the first of the day. I walked up into Government Island and found huge amounts of blackberries, which we didn't take time to pick; Bernie said cattle are allowed to graze on the island.



*Moulton recounts that archaeological work on Lady Island has discovered prehistoric ceramic artifacts approximately 2000-2500 years old. The party camped on the north shore of Government (Dimond) Island the night of November 3, 1805 and were in-*

*formed by a party of 15 indians in 2 canoes of three vessels (presumably British or American boats far down the river). The Indians had various items indicating that they regularly traded with whites. Clark notes that the tidal effect is about 18 inches in this area. He also indicates that “those people men & women (flatten the) heads (village) are flat.” Clark states that “we landed at a village 200 men of Flatheads of 25 houses 50 canoes built of Straw, we were treated very kindly by them”.*



We followed the north shore of Government Island, coming to the Interstate 205 bridge at about Mile Point 113. Along the Washington shore were a number of expensive homes lining the banks of the river. Just after the bridge are Tri-Club Island, Lemon Island, and the Portland airport – we saw many aircraft taking off, include a number of military aircraft.



We came around the end of Lemon Island and stayed near the Washington shore. We debated whether to go around the south end of Hayden Island, and decided to keep to the northern (main) channel, because it was a perfectly calm day, we'd had little boat traffic, were making good time, were going with the tide, and had experienced little wind. We decided to go right through to our campsite for the night – the confluence of the Willamette River and Columbia River. We passed by the



eastern end of Hayden Island (called Tomahawk Island), under the I-5 bridge at about Mile Point 106 and under a Burlington Northern Railroad swing bridge at about Mile Point 105. There were a variety of grain elevators, other industrial establishments, and ocean-going ships parked along the way. We passed the west end of Hayden Island and stopped at the Willamette River confluence on the Washington shore, looking straight up the Willamette River channel, across from Bellevue Point and Kelly Point, about Mile Point 101. We watched some switching of barges right in front of the campsite that evening. I took a picture looking downstream (almost a wilderness view), turned 180 degrees and took another picture of a heavily industrialized area tugs, barges, cargo ships, with bright lights and hustle and bustle.

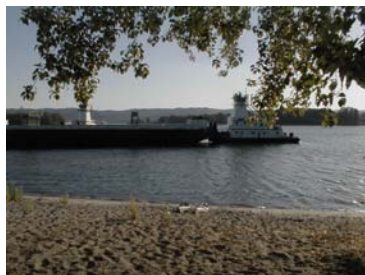


*Clark says “during the time we were at dinner those fellows Stold my pipe Tomahawk which They were Smoking with”, apparently the source of the name of the island – Tomahawk Island – just east of the current I-5 bridge. Clark indicates the party made 29 miles that day, and encamped at a place that Moul-*

ton says is probably present-day Salmon Creek. Clark indicates the noise of the waterfowl were such that sleep was impossible. Clark described a pond (probably present Vancouver Lake). Moulton comments that this area of Sauvie Island and Vancouver Lake are very rich and important archaeologically, but neither has been intensively studied. He states that at the time of historical contact, this area had one of the densest Indian populations in western North America.



The second day had been very warm and I was exhausted by the end of the day. The



Willamette campsite required us to walk up a slight hill with all our gear (requiring about six round trips) and drag our kayak out of the tidal reach, on a sandy south-facing slope with the temperature in the 90s – it was like a reflector oven! It took several hours to cool



off, even jumping into the river for a swim and rudimentary clothes cleaning. We had the first quiet night in 3 nights, though, except for the aircraft that began leaving early in the morning.

On this second day (Monday) the recreational boaters were largely off the river, as one would expect. Our cell phones worked at the Willamette campsite.



Movement today was from Mile Point 124 to about Mile Point 101, a distance of about 23 miles.

### Day 3 on the Water (August 26, 2003)



We left the Willamette camp about 9:30 am, and proceeded along the east shore of Sauvie Island. It was remarkable for not having many recreational boaters or fisherman – a few here and there, but nothing like Sunday. Sauvie Island is largely a wildlife refuge.

The water was extremely calm in the early part of the day. We had awakened to fog and mist over the water, although we had some drizzle and light mist in our face later in the day and some intermittent winds on two occasions during the day. We were finding that it took a full two hours to awake, dress, have breakfast, pack our gear, and load our kayaks.



The third day started off to be a perfect paddling day – over-



cast, no sunshine, no wind, moving with the tide, and cool, and we made 13 miles in about 3.5 hours to St. Helens, where we had a wonderful lunch, provided by Bernie's daughter, Sonja, who lives in Scappoose.

We passed Hewlett Point (MP 100), Reeder Point (MP 98), Willow Point (MP 94), and Bachelor Point (MP 92). We passed Bachelor Island, 3 miles long.

On the third day we saw quite a bit of commercial river traffic – we were passed by several large ships, and passed the confluence of



the Lewis River (MP 86), where a number of fisherman were anchored, taking advantage of good fishing. The same was true for the other rivers that came in from the Washington side. It brought to mind Garret Hardin's *Tragedy of the Commons*, in which users of common resources are attracted to, and use up, such resources when they are free and unregulated.

We passed by Warrior Rock (MP 86) with its lighthouse (or more correctly "soundhouse"). When Cape Disappointment was built, the light was imported from the east coast. About the same time, a fog bell was also installed, but during foggy times, (normally about 260 days per year at Cape Disappointment) the light was not visible, and because of the heavy breakers from the ocean at the Columbia River, the fog bell was inaudible. So the fog bell was transferred to Warrior Rock, and a fog horn was installed at Cape Disappointment. Because Cape Disappointment light was not visible from the north, the North

We passed by Warrior Rock (MP 86) with its lighthouse (or more correctly "soundhouse"). When Cape Disap-



Head lighthouse was built and the Cape Disappointment light was moved to North Head.



*Clark reported passing "a point of two rocks" early November 5, 1805, as well as "a large village of ¼ a mile in extent. I counted 14 large houses in front next the slew 7 canoes loaded with Indians Came up to See us." Moulton indicates the area is probably present-day Bachelor Island, near the confluence of the Lewis River. Clark mentions several landmarks and rivers, including present-day Multnomah Channel*

*(along the west side of Sauvie Island); Burke, Martin, and Deer Islands, and the Kalama River. He mentions the area as "certainly a fertill and a handsom valley, at this time Crouded with Indians." Clark estimated they made 32 miles on November 5, 1805.*



The Multnomah Channel also came in from the Oregon side about a mile above St. Helens.

Once we left St. Helens (MP 85), the wind came up and we had an difficult time making progress. We had wanted to make some time in the good weather, but only made about 3.5 miles in about 3 hours and ended up camped on the Oregon Shore near a wood processing



facility, just downstream from Columbia City. As soon as we took our kayaks out of the water and got unpacked, of course, the wind went down.



Movement today was from Mile Point 101 to about Mile Point 82, a distance of about 19 miles. Our cell phones worked at the St. Helens camp-site.

#### Day 4 on the Water (August 27, 2003)

We got an earlier start (about 9 am) this day, wishing to take advantage of the tides. Again we had overcast skies, calm water, and no wind.



By now we had begun to understand the difficulties of dealing with the tides. On the one hand, the farther upstream one goes, the later the tidal effect occurs. At Bonneville, for example, the high tides occur about 6 hours after Astoria, while low tides occur about 7.5 hours later. Thus, as we moved downstream about 20-30 miles a day, the tides got earlier by 45 minutes to an hour per day. Countering this phenomenon is another in which tides generally come about an hour later each day, due

to the normal lunar cycle of about 25 hours. The net effect was that, as we moved downstream, we were caught in a tidal time warp, in which the tidal effects remained much the same during the whole trip. At the time of our trip, local (where we happened to be on any particular day) high tides came about 4 am and 4 pm, forcing us to either get up about 2 am to pack and get on the water in the dark (which we didn't do), or only get about 4 hours of good paddling in the morning (say 9 am to 1 pm), and wait out the period from about 1 pm to 4 pm, until we could catch the afternoon high tide. Confounding this was the fact that afternoon favorable tidal currents were typically accompanied by high winds and waves caused by opposing currents and winds. Paddling against the tides was highly unprofitable, as a combination of wind (generally in the afternoon) and opposing tidal currents would use up over half of the 3 miles per hour that we were generally able to sustain by paddling, making our



progress against the tide and wind about 1 to 1.5 miles per hour. Conversely, running with the current and no wind (as typically happened in the morning hours) allowed us to move along at a relative speed of about 4.5 – 5 miles per hour. Thus, we put out about 3-4 times as much energy paddling against the tide and



wind to move the same distance as would use if we waited and moved with the tide. It was a no-brainer to simply wait out the tide.



The tidal situation would be quite different at other times of the year, and certain periods of the year would provide ideal high tides throughout the trip around 9 am and 9 pm, allowing a long stretch of 4.5 – 5 mile per hour progress downstream from 9 am to 2 pm, and al-

lowing daily mileage rates in the 25-30 mile range with 5-6 hours of paddling per day. Our trip's tidal circumstance required 7-8 hours of paddling per day to get the same daily mileage.

We progressed down the river to Kalama, stopped on 1.5 mile long Sandy Island (about MP 75) for our first rest stop. We passed the mothballed Trojan Nuclear Power plant and the Kalama River at about MP 73, and Carroll's Channel going off to the right around Cottonwood Island (about 3 miles long, from about MP 68.5 to MP 71.5). We passed the Cowlitz River coming in from the Washington side at about MP 68. From about MP 70 we could see the Lewis & Clark (Longview) Bridge at about MP 66.5. We passed Rainier on the left bank, across from the Cowlitz River confluence, crowded with fishing boats.



We passed under the Lewis & Clark Bridge at Longview and stopped for our second rest about a half mile further on the Oregon side. We noticed the tide coming in, and knew we'd have a hard paddle trying to get any further, but struck out and made it just past a set of four high tension power lines crossing the river at about MP 62, finally giving up and stopping for the night at our camp on Lord Island. We took another swim and washed our clothes. This site was the only really trashy campsite of the trip.



Movement today was from Mile Point 82 to about Mile Point 61, a distance of about 21 miles.

*Clark describes a number of landmarks, islands, and streams, including the Cowlitz River, and comments that there was “no place for Several Miles sufficiently large and leavil for our camp we at length Landed at a place which by moveing the Stones we made a place Suffi- ciently large for the party to lie leavil on the Smaller Stones Clear of the Tide.” He also said they “had large fires made on the Stone and dried our bedding and Kill the flees, which collected in our blankets at every old village we encamped near.”*



*He also describes “a verry remarkable Knob riseing from the edge of the water to about 80 feet high and about 200 paces around at its base.” – Mt. Coffin – named by Vancouver in 1792 because of several In- dians being buried in canoes in the vicinity. Moulton says Clark substantially underestimated the height of Mt. Coffin, which was really between 225 and 240 feet high, and which was located just downstream from the mouth of the Cowlitz River, in the vicinity of*

*the industrial area adjacent to the Lewis & Clark bridge over the Columbia. Mt. Cof- fins has since been quarried and leveled. Clark’s notes indicate the party made 29 miles on the river on November 6, 1805.*

### **Day 5 on the Water (August 28, 2003)**

We arose early and got on the water by 8:30 am. We passed 1 mile long Walker Island (MP 61); 1.5 mile long Fisher Island (MP 59 – 60.5); and 3 mile long Willow Grove Island (MP 57 – 60), arriving at Stella (MP 57). We went around a long bend where the Columbia returns to its westerly trend and stopped for our first rest of the day at Abernathy Point (MP 54.5).

We continued on past 2 mile long Crims Island (MP 55 – 57); Oak Point (MP 54), Eagle Cliff (MP 50.5); Cooper Point (MP 49.5); Waterford (MP 49), and a second Cape Horn (MP 48). We also passed 2.5 mile long Wallace Island on the left (about MP 48 – 50.5).

We arrived at the upstream end of Puget Island (about MP 46), and turned into the Cathlamet Channel toward Cathlamet, passing Nassa Point (about MP 46), and the Cathlamet Bridge at about MP 40. About halfway up the Cathlamet Channel, the tide began to change, our speed diminished to about 2 miles per hour, and we decided to pull out and await the next tide change in Cathlamet (about MP 40).







We pulled into the Port of Cathlamet marina and parked our boats, while we went to lunch at the Ranch House Restaurant. We met the first destination kayakers we had seen on the entire trip here – a group of 5 boats with the Skamokawa Kayak Center out for a day trip (we had also seen a single kayaker out for exercise or play in the Longview area).

Our intent was to wait until the tide changed again about 4 pm, and follow the Elochomon Slough toward Skamokawa, come out briefly into the Columbia, then duck back into the Steamboat Slough. That way we would be largely protected from the high winds we expected on the Columbia in the afternoon. About 4 pm we left, and had a pleasant paddle on Elochoman Slough, until coming out into the short stretch of the Columbia, where the 25-35 mph wind had kicked up high waves and spume in our faces. We struggled through this for about an hour before making our way back into the Steamboat Slough and relative calm.

We continued down Steamboat Slough and came out into the Columbia at the site of the Skamokawa Kayak Center, though we missed the convenient way to get to it, the tide being quite high, winds again fierce, and confused waves of 2-3 feet to negotiate. Our goal here was to round the bend at Skamokawa and land at the Port of Skamokawa camp site that we had scouted out earlier (about MP 33.5). With considerable difficulty, we rounded the bend and



beached on a flat sandy beach just to the east of the Port's campground. We were glad to be off the river this day, and welcomed our cozy campsite tucked up next to the main campground, where we were able to use real restrooms, replenish our water supply, and dump our trash. Unfortunately, what we had most looked forward to was missing – their showers were not working. But this turned out to be the least of our troubles.



We pulled our kayaks up to the apparent high water mark on the sand, unloaded our gear, and settled in for a well-needed rest.

Movement today was from Mile Point 61 to about Mile Point 34, a distance of about 27 miles.

*Clark reports entering an area of complex islands and channels which required help from local Indians to navigate, and difficulty in finding suitable flat places to camp and stow their gear. He goes to great length in his journal about the dress of the Indians, both men and women, their housing, their language, and their habit of flatten-*

*ing their heads. He comments about landing at an Indian village at what is now Skamokawa.*

### **Day 6 on the Water (August 29, 2003)**

About 3 am we awoke to water breaking heavily just outside our tent, the effect of a large ship passing by our flat sand beach. The afternoon before, we were unable to see, with the relatively high water level, how flat was our beach. Jerking awake, we emerged from the tent to find Bernie's booties and Ken's kayak floating freely, and the upper limit of the waves on the beach just a few feet from the tent. We'd anticipated such a possibility and tied the kayak to a tree, so there was no fear of losing it, but it took several gallons of water over the side. We retrieved the booties and moved the kayak higher on the beach, and returned to sleep fitfully for another couple of hours until daylight, knowing the tide had almost peaked and would be receding.

By daylight, the high tide had receded almost 100 yards down the flat beach and we realized we would have to carry our gear (about 6 round trips to carry it all) out to the kayaks, after first carrying or dragging the kayaks out that far. We grabbed a few quick bites for breakfast. Meanwhile, we noted two large ships go by, sending large wakes on shore and threatening to swamp the kayaks unless we stood by to stabilize them. Thus, we were in a race to load our kayaks while watching for coming ships (fortunately only one came while we loaded). We hauled the kayaks out to water's edge, went back to get a load of gear, and returned to find the water line another 10 yards out, requiring us to re-position the kayaks once again. After 4 more repetitions of this "carry gear and move the kayaks", we carried the final set of gear 150 yards down the beach to the kayaks (I counted the steps), loaded ourselves in, and pushed off about 9 am. Whew!

We moved along the Washington shoreline, in or near the navigation channel, passing Three Tree Point (MP 30.5); Brookfield/Jim Crow Point (MP 28.5), Pillar Rock (MP 27.5), Elliot Point (MP 26), and Dahlia (MP 25.5). We passed by the islands along the Oregon shore – Grassy, Woody, Horseshoe, Brush, Marsh, as well as partially submerged sand islands closer to the Washington shore. It is in this stretch that the Oregon and Washington shores begin to diverge from one other, and the Columbia estuary widens. Just before reaching Altona/Harrington Point (about MP 23.5) the navigation channel veers toward the Oregon shore, and we were left with the open waters of Grays Bay to cross to Portuguese/Grays Point in the distance. We caught our first sight of the Astoria bridge from here.

*It was on November 7, 1805, at Pillar Rock, where Clark encamps "under a high hill on the Stard. Side*



*opposite to a rock Situated half a mile from the Shore, about 50 feet high and 20 feet diameter”, and announces “Great joy in camp we are in View of the Ocean,” having made 34 miles that day. Moulton points out that Clark’s enthusiasm was premature, as they had seen only the Columbia estuary, and not the Pacific Ocean. In fact, their greatest travails lay yet ahead.*

By now the wind had picked up somewhat and waves on Grays Bay were beginning to appear. We headed slightly to the north and skirted some shallow-lying sand islands, heading for Rocky Point, where we found an excellent small sandy beach, in bright sunshine. We decided to take a 3 hour rest, awaiting the after-



noon high tide to move us further. We had some lunch and moved the kayaks up the beach every half hour or so as the tide rose, finally beginning to recede. We jumped in and continued on to Frankfort and Portuguese/Grays Point. By this time the wind had come up (it was coming from two directions – up the Columbia, and across a low saddle of land just east of Portuguese/Grays Point, thereby creating



confused seas and gusting conditions in the 25-35 mile per hour range, and creating 2-3 foot waves. We stayed moderately close to the Washington shore and, as we neared Frankfort, the wind ceased as we were sheltered by the mainland.

As we rounded Portuguese Point/Grays Point, we were again buffeted by the strong winds (created by another saddle) and cut across a second small bay before arriving at Knappton, where the winds again died in the shelter of the mainland. We pulled into the Knappton boat launch area looking for a possible camp site, and found it essentially flooded. We were now on that stretch of the Washington shore where the highway runs along the shore, which is rip-rapped, and there is little in the way of camp sites available. We had realized that we were committed to go all the way to Chinook if we proceeded beyond Portuguese/Grays Point, but felt we could do it with the good tidal current and a little help from only modestly opposing winds.

*Clark mentioned on November 8, 1805 that the party hugged the Washington shore after leaving Pillar Rock, entering the eastern edge of Grays Bay, which he called Shallow Bay. He described it as “a nitch of about 6 miles wide and 5 miles deep with Several Creeks making into the Stard Hills” (among which are today’s Deep River and Grays River). They “took advantage of a returning tide and proceeded on to the Second point on the Std. here we found the Swells or waves so high that we thought it imprudent to proceed.” They camped near what is now called Portuguese Point on the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>, their camp at times under water, and some of the party ill due to drinking of salty water. On the 10<sup>th</sup> they were able to advance about 10 miles to the vicinity of Point Ellice, but were stopped there until November 15<sup>th</sup>.*



*On November 11, 1805, Clark described an encounter with a group of Indians in canoes: "the Indians left us and Crossed the river which is about 5 miles wide through the highest Sees I ever Saw a Small vestle ride, their Canoe is Small, maney times they were out of Sight before they were 2 miles off Certain it is they are the best canoe navigators I ever Saw."*

*Clark mentioned the "the great quantities of rain which has fallen losenes the Stones on the Side of the hill & the Small ones fall on us"*

*Clark described their method of protecting their canoes from being crushed by tides and drifting logs by "Sinking and wateing them down with Stones to prevent the emence waves dashing them to pieces against the rocks."*

*On November 13<sup>th</sup>, Clark described for the first time the Devil's Club, a bane of climbers in many parts of the Olympics and Cascades. He also mentioned several failed attempts to round the point, the fourth deemed successful, since the three men did not return. One of the men, Colter (of John Colter's Race for Life fame), returned the following day, reporting no whites as far as 10 miles down the shore, but having found a beautiful sand beach and good canoe harbor. Lewis and four men set out to advance the party around the point. Clark called present day Point Ellice "the blustering Point" and "Point Distress".*

*On the 15<sup>th</sup> Clark and the last of the party moved around the point and arrived at "a large village of 36 houses deserted by the Inds. & in full possession of the flees" and reported that all the men are soon "Comfortable in the (Huts) Camps they have made of the boards they found in the Town above." Also on the 15<sup>th</sup> Clark reported, upon reaching what is now called Station Camp, "this I could plainly see would be the extent of our journey by water, as the waves were too high at any Stage for our Canoes to proceed any further down...course to Point adams is S. 35 degrees W. about 8 miles To Cape Disappointment is S. 86 degrees W. about 14 miles" These bearings became the basis for the famous map that fixes the location of Station Camp.*

KMK Note: on rounding Harrington Point and entering Grays Bay, the silhouettes of three points are visible in the distance: the farthest left is Point Ellice, at the Astoria bridge; the second is Grays Point/Portuguese Point; the third, much fainter, is Rocky Point, about 2/3 of the way around Grays Bay.



*Moulton notes that archaeological work on Grays River recovered evidence of occupation dating between 2000 and 2700 years ago.*

We rounded Knappton Point, passed by Cliff Point and the highway rest stop, and shot past Point Ellice (and under the Astoria-Megler bridge) at 8-10 mile per hour amid 4-6 foot standing and confused waves and swells. Point Ellice held Lewis & Clark for five days in their passage here (and it is no wonder, given the open log canoes they had, which handle like barges). We were tossed around like leaves, and many times submerged the noses of our kayaks before they muscled their way to the surface. We slowed down about a half-mile further as we came up on the McGowan church and Lewis & Clark's Station Camp, where Lewis & Clark camped from November 16-25, 1805. While we would have liked to stop here, the shore is rip-rapped and dangerous to try to land (for fear of damaging the kayaks), and the time was drawing near for the final dash to a safe harbor before night.

We paddled past Station Camp and around Chinook Point (Fort Columbia State Park), where we found several beautiful little rock coves with sand beaches, but weren't ready to stop for the night (nor were we sure it would be legal to do so). At this point we saw the way ahead was covered with thousands of decaying wood pilings as far as the eye could see, the water levels had receded substantially and we were almost continuously hitting the sand bottom with our paddles. Bernie had kayaked this stretch once before and knew the serpentine way to the Port of Chinook navigation channel, so we followed his instincts, being now in a race between the falling water level; high, cold winds; a setting sun; and a dense fog bank coming on the western horizon which threatened to obscure the sun within an hour, and before it actually set. With 90 minutes of continuous, hard paddling, we finally reached the navigation channel and proceeded into the Port of Chinook marina, where we pulled our boats out, donned some dry clothes, checked out the overnight accommodations, and decided to call it a trip. Local queries indicated that weather was expected to be foggy and cold with high winds and seas the following day, and we were encouraged to stay off the water. We took the advice.

The 6th day's journey was from about Mile 34 to about Mile 6, a distance of about 28 miles.

We called Bernie's wife, Josephine, who drove down to meet us, and we loaded up the kayaks and gear and returned home, having completed a 135 mile, largely unsupported kayak trip over six days down the Columbia River from Beacon Rock State Park to the Port of Chinook.

## **Overall Impressions of the Trip**

### **General**

This late August lower Columbia River kayak trip was characterized by morning paddles on water like a sheet of glass, with occasional morning fog which typically burned off by 10 am, warm afternoons with rising winds, punctuated by periods of overcast skies. I paddled virtually the entire trip with an open cockpit, the sole ex-

ceptions being our exciting 6th day of afternoon winds and confused seas.

## **Tides & Winds**

Tides and winds make this trip an unusual experience. Tidal currents have a substantial effect on downriver progress, are readily noticeable, and are predictable, though complex. High winds flowing upriver typically come in the afternoon (as is true on most big rivers), have several miles of fetch, and aggravate the size and complexity of waves during downstream tidal current. Choices must be made by the kayaker about how hard (s)he wants to work for the extra mile.

High tide lines were usually quite evident, and tide tables quite reliable and useful. Using tide tables, we could reliably predict when our downstream progress would suffer, and whether the next high tide line would be higher or lower on the beach, and by about how much. They are of little use, however, in predicting wave surges due to large ships passing by.

## **Commercial, Fishing, and Recreational Boating**

The size of a kayak puts it at a distinct disadvantage in dealing with these larger boats. Wakes, crossing of navigation lanes, insensitive (or outright aggressive) boaters, failure to pay attention, unpredictable behavior, noise, disgusting fumes from poorly tuned engines, and their inability to see the kayaker are all risks that must be dealt with on the Columbia.

## **Camping Sites**

Fully half, and perhaps as much as 3/4 of the shoreline of the Columbia from Beacon Rock to Chinook is undeveloped and potentially suitable for camping. Throughout the trip we found abundant sand beaches, with little mud. We did not explore the confluence of Sandy River, where Lewis and Clark reported quicksand. Many river islands have been "enhanced" with sandy spoils from dredging the navigation channel. There also are many new dredge spoil islands which make fine campsites, though with little shade.

There are a few developed campsites, but they tend not to be kayaker-friendly (campsites near the water; not rip-rapped or rock-strewn; moderate slopes (neither too flat or too steep); easy beaching; close restroom, water, trash, and shower facilities, etc.). There are very few "no trespassing" signs. Most of these areas are outside of the view of habitation on the opposite shore. It is almost impossible to determine ownership of particular shorelines to seek permission to camp. Most of the shoreline is clean, with little trash, with a number of notable exceptions.

## **Leave No Trace Camping**



Kayakers should always practice “leave to trace” camping, even though many others clearly don’t. We should also seek to obtain permission to camp beforehand, whenever possible. As riparian use increases, conflicts will inevitably occur. As kayakers becomes more numerous on the river, adjacent landowners whose lands are trashed will take it out on whoever is available, by getting legislation passed, posting property, or chasing people away. The small number of kayakers will be an easy target. We do not have the clout that industrial and commercial interests, fishing groups, or recreational boaters have.

## **Aspect**

Paddling in the afternoon means paddling into the sun on most of the westward-flowing river stretches — this can be tiring, can cause severe eye strain, and can cause intense sunburn of the lips, nose, ear lobes, etc. Bring a hat with a bill, sunglasses, and sunscreen. It also means paddling into the wind. Don’t unless you have to.

## **Marinas**

There are a number of marinas accessible by kayakers—depending on your desires, these may be friendly or not. For kayakers seeking a wilderness experience, stay away from the marinas, and their crowds, power boats, noise, fumes, etc. On the other hand, if you seek a safe respite from a storm, a possibility of getting lunch, an ice cream cone, or a cold beer; or a place to take out that’s accessible by automobile, they are useful.

A readily available fisher’s map of the lower Columbia lists 39 marinas and 49 boat ramps from Bonneville Dam to Astoria/Ilwaco.

## **Communications**

The entire trip from Beacon Rock to Chinook allowed use of our cell phones. We were rarely out of sight of at least one other boat, and flares and whistles have a good chance of being seen and heard in most places along the river.

## **Water Quality**

In general, the perceived water quality was excellent along the Columbia, with turbidity relatively low (one could clearly see kayak paddles to half their depth). The river in most places invited refreshing swims after a hot day. Below Portland, turbidity seemed somewhat worse, but only for a few miles. The river was not turbid as was the MacKenzie (Northwest Territories), algae loaded as was the Black/Chehalis and Willamette, or blessed with floating materials (as was the Yellowstone below Billings).

## **Excitement**

The Columbia is not an exciting river in the sense that the mile-long strings of standing waves of the Yellowstone are; or the several mile long runs at 12-15 miles per hour of the Mackenzie (Northwest Territories) are; or the huge boils and incipient whirlpools of the Mackenzie are; or the utter silence, extreme remoteness, and demanded self-sufficiency of the Mackenzie are. Nonetheless, the combination of tidal current, winds, boat traffic, beauty of the landscape, relatively undeveloped shores, and other factors described above make the lower Columbia River (below Bonneville Dam) a very attractive, and sometimes challenging, sea kayaking experience for the expedition-minded kayaker.

## **A Note on Photos**

As with any kayak trip, the photos accompanying this report understate the excitement of the trip. We take photos when we feel comfortable doing so, not when we're battling to maintain steerage and remain upright in heavily-loaded kayaks in confused seas and high winds. We experienced several hours of this kind of paddling on this trip and regret not being able to provide the reader visual examples.