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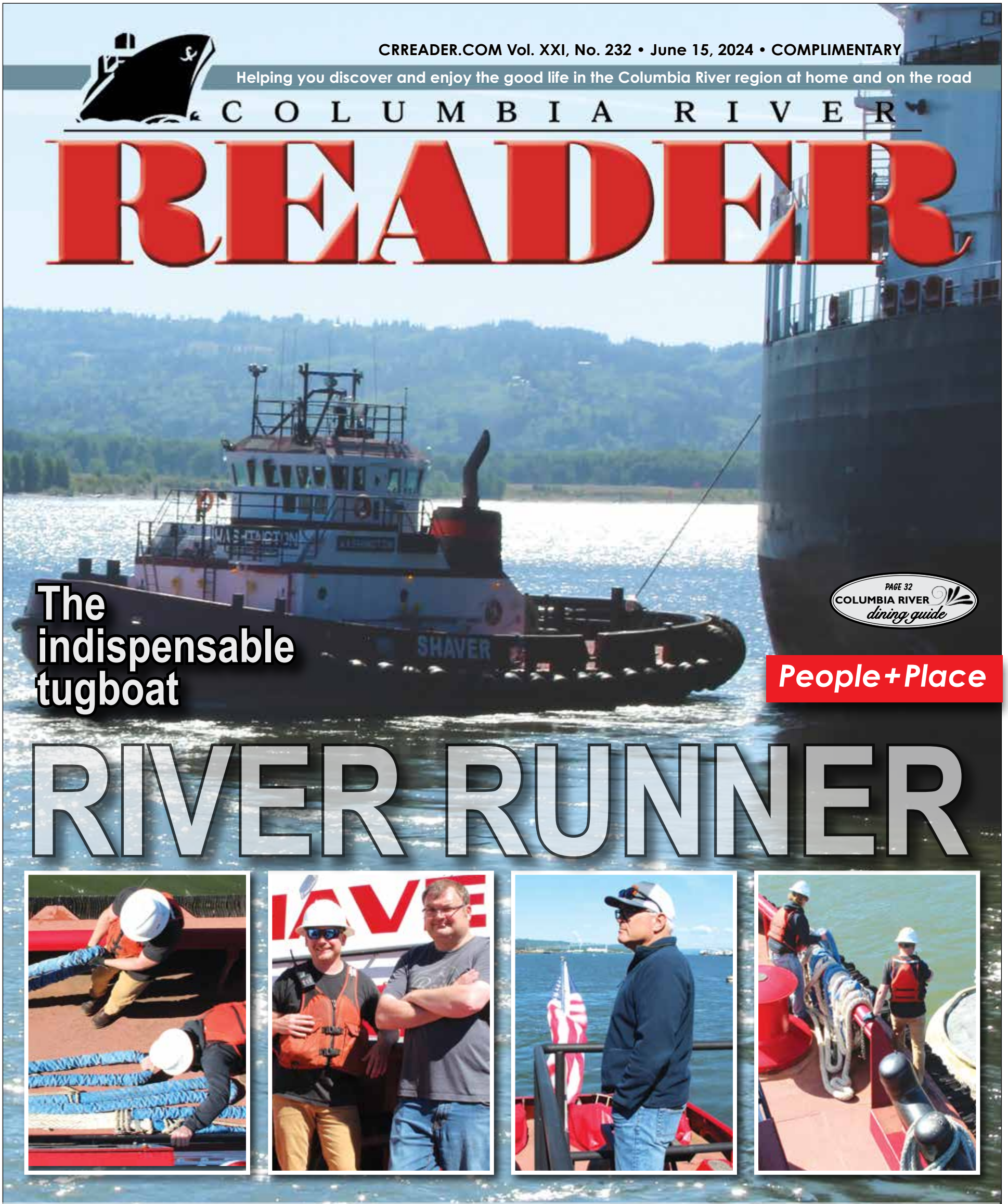
Helping you discover and enjoy the good life in the Columbia River region at home and on the road

COLUMBIA RIVER

READER



The indispensable tugboat

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COLUMBIA RIVER dining guide

People+Place

RIVER RUNNER

A GORGE HIKE WITH DOGS • MAKE YOUR OWN WINE • LEWIS & CLARK'S LOAD

Sue's Views

Roly-poly on the River

A longtime wish of mine for CRR has finally been fulfilled. Since the early days, I've always imagined a tugboat trip making a great story. But I never seemed to find the right connections to make it happen.

Thanks to a tip from Dan Polacek at the Port of Kalama, however, and the generosity of Rob Rich of Shaver Marine, the tugboat adventure has finally occurred!

Join Hal Calbom in this month's People+Place feature *(page 19)*, aboard a small-but-mighty tugboat on the even mightier Columbia River. I tagged along and enjoyed the experience immensely. Rob is also a Woodland Port Commissioner with a wealth of insight and experience on everything to do with the river.

I was especially enchanted by the barking sea lions lounging on the dock in Rainier as we headed out *(see photo)*, as if wishing us a good day. I must say I thought Hal was a tad mean in his story to refer to the sea lions as "obese." I would say they are pleasantly plump. Or pudgy. And I think they're cute, though I realize not everyone agrees.

Political ads

The 2024 political season is underway and you may notice our first political ad in this issue. I'd like to remind readers that while Columbia River Reader's editorial content is strictly non-partisan, we do welcome and appreciate all kinds of ads. Ad revenue helps make it possible for us to continue providing CRR for free to the community.

We encourage all readers to vote, and for all voters to become informed. The first step is to know who is running; candidates' ads give basic information for readers to consider and follow up on, in order to make a thoughtful choice.

Political ads do not necessarily reflect my or CRR staff members' preferences, views, or opinions, and should not be interpreted as implied endorsements by CRR.

Thanks for reading CRR, thanks for advertising (those who do), and thanks for voting when the time comes.

Sue Piper

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ON THE COVER

A Shaver tugboat assists the *Texas* enroute from Kalama to a buoy in the Columbia River near Rainier, Ore. *See story, page 19.*

PHOTO BY HAL CALBOM

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A monthly feature written and photographed by Southwest Washington native and Emmy Award-winning journalist
Hal Calbom

Production Notes

Big Ships
Big River
Big Business

After my day on the big river, some reflections:

We're exporters
The Columbia River ports are mainly export ports. Most vessels heading up the river ride high, empty or in ballast, and pick up goods for export to the rest of the world. We are outbounders.

We're cargo-diverse
Of the four principal ports on the lower Columbia — Longview, Kalama, Vancouver and Portland — only Portland is a container port. The rest handle a wide and sometimes wild diversity of cargoes. A recent listing of five ships ready to depart the Port of Longview showed two carrying wheat and one each carrying urea — a chemical used in fertilizers — bulk salt, and Hyundais.

We're systemic
The maritime cargo system is interdependent with roads and rails. Ships, railroads and highways are the friendliest of competitors. Port lobbyists in Olympia seek ground transportation improvements and re-tunneling through the Cascades to accommodate bigger rail cars, most likely Seattle- and Tacoma-bound containers.

We ship other states' stuff
Although a lot of the wheat that goes out is ours, most of our export shipments originate somewhere else. Why else would the Columbia be second in the nation in corn and soy exports? And where are these Hyundais coming from? And where are they going? Our "footprint" of where our cargos originate is staggering and virtually "everyplace."

We're an expensive parking lot
Time is money in shipping, and only delicate coordination gets products to pier to ship to sea. A lot of ships are simply waiting their turn, parked mid-river, including those 5,6,8,10 ships usually anchored at Astoria waiting for their trip upriver.

More than 1,300 big ships plied the river last year, around 450 each using Portland and Vancouver. The remaining divided between our Lower Columbia ports, Longview and Kalama.

•••

Columbia River Reader

people+place

River Runner

The Indispensable Tugboat

Dead in the water.

It's not just a dread metaphor. For the pilots, crews and owners of commercial cargo ships, it's an occupational hazard.

"Very few big ships can land themselves, or even steer well at low speed," said Rob Rich of Shaver Marine, our guide for a morning on the Columbia River. "That's why we need — we *have* to have — tugboats."

Because their steering is based on water flowing forcefully past a rudder influencing their forward motion, big cargo ships lose steering as they decrease speed. Despite their size, their inertia, their tons of bulk, commercial ships share an extreme vulnerability: When not under power — slowing down, or still in the water — they're virtually helpless.

Ship Assistants
On rivers and oceans this is hardly a problem. But, ironically, during their most delicate and deliberate maneuvers — near ports, infrastructure, and people — they grow impotent.

"There are over a thousand ships visiting the Columbia River system every year," said Rich, "and every one of them is using a ship assist, at the very least. A tugboat."

Both homely and heroic, magnificent and indispensable, tugboats assist in docking and anchoring, maintenance, fire prevention, personnel transfers, and "whatever comes up," according to those who make their living on the river.

BIG CARGO SHIPS LOSE STEERING AS THEY DECREASE SPEED

A Change of Plans
Commercial ships visiting the Columbia River will have at least three required guests during their transit. Off the river mouth, a bar pilot will board and guide the ship over "The Graveyard of the Pacific," the notorious Columbia Bar. At Astoria, a river pilot takes over and navigates the ship to its upriver destination. And, when the metal monster anchors mid-river or at a port dock, and slows its speed accordingly, a nimble tug or two provides "ship assist."

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Top photo: Tug assist eases the cargo ship Texas *downstream. Bottom photo: Shaver Marine tug* Washington.

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Rob takes us aboard the *Portland*, one of 16 tugs owned and operated by Shaver Marine, a company family owned since its founding in 1880. "We're the second-biggest tug and barge company on the river," he told us, "with 22 operating barges, too." Shaver operates from the mouth of the river up past its eight dams and locks, ultimately to the barge port at Lewiston, Idaho.

We meet Captain John Haglund and Mate Clark Rintala, who'll spend this pristine morning introducing us to tug boating on the river.

The weather and conditions are perfect. As we clamber over the gunwale and the familiar row of rubber truck tires tugs wear as a protective skirt, our hosts interrupt this congenial meet and greet.

"Seems to be a change of plans," say John and Rob, phones glued to their ears, in constant contact with Shaver's dispatchers at Portland headquarters.

"Looks like you're going to get some real work this morning, not just pretty pictures."

We couldn't be happier.

Tackling the *Texas*

Portland quickly leaves the Shaver dock in Rainier and heads upriver. Barking sea lions loll on an adjacent dock and mock our industriousness. "We've been asked to help Foss out with a job they couldn't crew," says Rob, Shaver's vice president of marine services and

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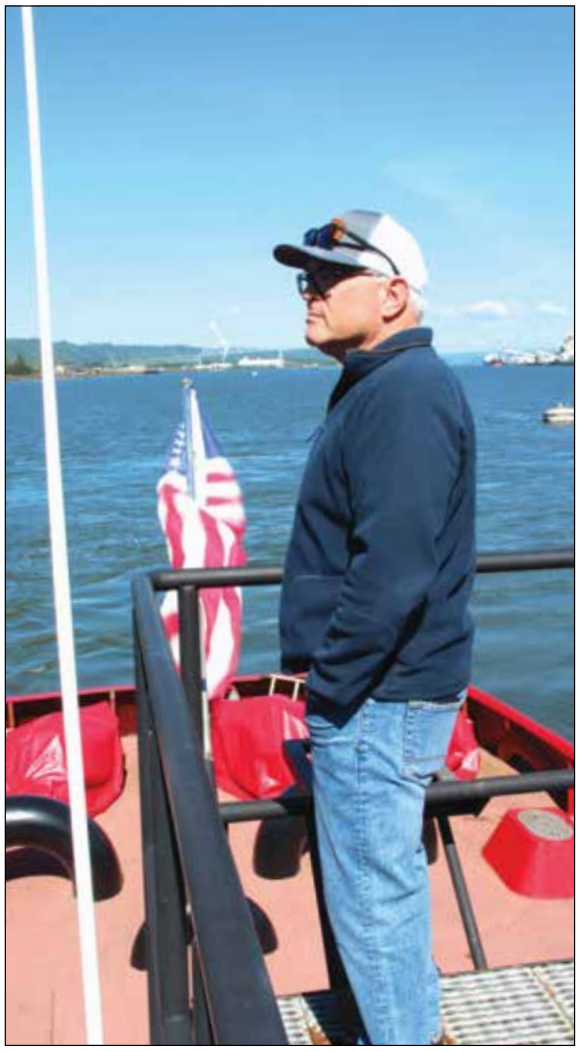

Rob Rich, Vice President for Maritime Operations, Shaver Marine.

SHAVER OPERATES FROM THE MOUTH OF THE RIVER TO THE BARGE PORT OF LEWISTON

Olivia Thomas
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a veteran of decades on the Columbia. "Pretty common practice, something comes up, one company can't commit, they look for help from the others. It's a family on the river."

The *Portland* is tasked to escort the tanker *Texas*, which has slipped its moorings in Kalama and will need ship assist to anchor mid-river at Longview. "No idea what they're up to," says Rob, "We're on three-hour notice and our job is to assist where and when we can."

The infinitely-complex ocean shipping system is an interplay of local, regional, national and international players, millions of tons and dollars crisscrossing the waterways in real time. *Texas* is in the charge of a regional ship's agent while on the river, but her cargo, crewing, schedule and routing are most likely dictated and monitored from halfway around the world.

The tugs have specific instructions but little sense of the larger forces in play. "This could be a repair or some extra stores or anything, really, "said Rob, "our job is just to show up."

YOU PICKED THE RIGHT TIME TO BE OUT ON THE RIVER!

Above: Portland *Captain. John Haglund; Mate Clark Rintala. Top right:* Portland *and* Washington *assisting the* Texas. *Bottom right: 2,000 horses, half the* Portland's diesel *power plant.*

We climb a steep ladder to the wheelhouse, where John, the Captain, scans upstream for the crawling tanker, just rounding the bend in the river. He makes radio contact with the river pilot on board *Texas*, and the choreography begins. We'll be tying onto the ship, then guiding her to anchor in mid-river at one of two buoys fixed there for just that purpose.

Magnificent Midgets

The *Texas* looms ever larger, gigantic despite being termed a "moderate- sized" tanker. Meanwhile *Portland's* sister tug, the *Washington*, is steaming up from Rainier to join the maneuver. Below, on deck, Clark lays out the eight-inch lines.

Rob Rich is clearly enjoying it all.

"I take hundreds of people out on tours every year and they beg for some action like this," he beams. "You picked the right time to be on the river!" Again, we couldn't be happier.

The movement among the three ships is deliberate and calm, with an almost balletic grace. Beneath the hatch covers, two huge diesel engines provide the tug's staggering power-to-weight ratio and the thrust needed to keep these big boys in line. The *Washington* ties on at the stern as *Portland* increases her leverage on the massive bow, John's hands on the dual thrusters maintaining a steady distance between the *Portland* and *Texas.*

"*Portland's* a day boat," Rob tells us, "Mostly on call. The *Washington* is equipped for overnight and can spend a couple of weeks on the water if necessary."

As our three boats move downstream in concert, we climb another steep ladder down to the engine room, at Rob's bidding, fortified with ear plugs and shouting to be heard.

Horses for Courses

All the humble accouterments of a working tug — the old tires, the scratched paint, the ungainly shape, compared often to a floating bathtub — are suddenly insignificant once you descend into the heart of its power, the throbbing engine room. "Behemoth" doesn't begin to do justice to the magnificent diesel power plants.

"Tugs are incredibly expensive to build and maintain," says Rob, "so we're always upgrading the engines, keeping

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We appreciate your leadership, friendship, and dedicated service as Longview School District Superintendent since 2015, and wish you a Happy Retirement.

Meet, greet, and thank Dr. Zorn at a public Reception on Monday, June 17, 4–5:30pm, R.A.Long High School Cafeteria

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the same boat but building its power." The boat we're on, the *Portland*, is over 40 years old but sports two mammoth diesel engines installed in 2020, a total of more than 4,000 horsepower.

"It doesn't pay to replace the engine in a 10-year-old truck. You just buy a new truck," says Rich. "We, on the other hand, continually retrofit these perfectly good boats." Our accompanying tug, the *Washington*, is due for re-powering next year.

Tugs are unassuming by nature. Their macho heart and soul reveal themselves in their power-to-weight ratio. To wit: Most of the cargo ships working here on the river boast a power-to-weight (tonnage) ratio around .35 to 1.20. Tugs sport a formidable ratio between 2 and 9.

Betting on barging

On deck, the delicate dance continues. John holds the line taut and keeps the hulls four feet apart. Giving way to the *Washington* once they're near the mid-river buoy, the mates connect umbilical lines to the big tanker, then moor them to the mid-river floating metal platform. The anchor drops, thanks are exchanged by radio, and the two tugs head back to dock in Rainier, the *Texas* safely at anchor.

Returning to Rainier, I ask Rob about the other major part of their business, barge trafficking.

"I'll tell you one thing, we're not in favor of removing four dams on the Snake," he tells me. "Forty percent of our country's wheat exports come down the Columbia on barges right here, and it's by far the cheapest and most efficient mode of transport from here to there."

He's right. A Texas A&M Transportation study researched the amount of cargo shippable with one gallon of fuel for one mile: Trucking moves 151 tons; rail a hefty 472 tons; and, sure enough, barging transports 675 tons one mile for every gallon of fuel expended.

At Home on the River

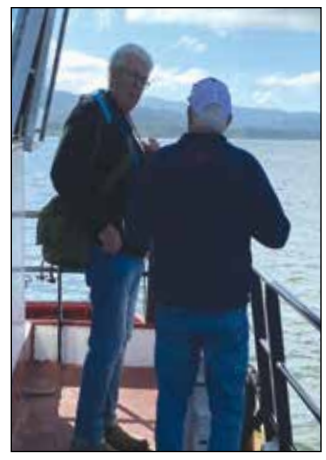
At dockside in Rainier, the obese sea lions remain unimpressed, barking and basking in the sun. We bid goodbye to Captain John Haglund and Mate Clark Rintala. Like their sturdy boats, they are versatile, strong and unassuming.

"The entire maritime industry would collapse without these boats,"says Rob Rich as we take our leave. "It's a pretty special part of this river, and this region."

•••

THEIR MACHO HEART AND SOUL REVEAL THEMSELVES IN THEIR POWER-TO-WEIGHT RATIO

Photos, from left: Mates attach 8-inch lines to floating mid-river buoy; Captain John Haglund feathers the Portland *into position; Tugboat* Washington *stands by as Texas secures lines to mooring buoy. Hal Calbom with Shaver Marine's Rob Rich oboard* Portland.



Hal Calbom, a third-generation Longview native and author of Empire of Trees: America's Planned City and the Last Frontier, *produces CRR's People+Place monthly feature, and is CRRPress associate publisher.*

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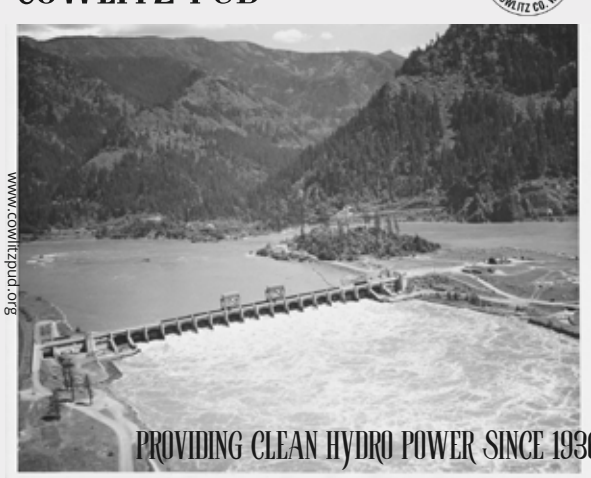

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