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Guest column: From ferries to sneakers, crossing the Great Columbia River

By Suzie ZQ Taylor

For The Daily Astorian

The 27th annual Great Columbia Crossing foot race is fast approaching. As we ponder whether or not to give up a perfectly good morning to sleep in and commit our feet to blisters, I am also thinking about the Astoria-Megler Bridge—its beginnings and what life might have been like before it was built.

Astorians who have blown out more than 50 or so birthday candles probably have succinct memories of ferries traversing the mighty river. Perhaps you recall the swirl of debates in the 1960s over building a “bridge to nowhere.” But here we are nearly half a century later, with the longest continuous truss span bridge in North America (some say the world), her stalwart pose offering an ever-fixed landmark at the entrance to our beloved waterway.

Who is she really, this bridge built between a relatively empty shore and the small town of 1960’s Astoria? The Astoria-Megler Bridge was designed as the final link in an unbroken Mexico-to-Canada highway system. She is approximately 4.1 miles long (that’s 21,474 feet or strides if you’re training for this year’s race) and sweeps dramatically upward into an arch over 200 feet above the water, gracefully ushering in hundreds of cargo ships and fishing vessels. Her full pedigree is a three-span continuous cantilever, through-truss bridge, designed by Washington State bridge engineer William A. Burgee.

While the bridge offers a quick convenient mode of travel, hardworking ferries were responsible for carrying passengers between Astoria and Megler for many decades. From friends and neighbors, I have gleaned a modest inkling of the way things were before the bridge was even conceived. They regaled me with tales of romancing high school dates during ferry crossings and with woes of waiting in long lines to board cars between the river and Marine Drive east of the 14th Street landing. One neighbor told me she and her childhood girlfriends would take their bicycles on the ferry because the other side offered more level ground to ride. They also enjoyed going to the restaurant level of the ferry for ice cream. I heard stories of mischievous kids hiding in ferry stairwells, teenagers stealing first kisses, and adults just trying to get a little shuteye during the ride.

Ferry service didn’t run in bad weather and was limited in the number of vehicles each boat could load. Nonetheless, Astorians have fond memories of the ferry boats. From the Tourist #1 that inaugurated commercial service in 1921 to the M.R. Chessman that was

later sold to Vietnam as a ferry on the Mekong Delta, the ferries wove a rich tapestry of river service before acquiescing to a new alpha dog, the bridge.

Critics of the bridge were soon silenced as more than 200,000 vehicles traveled the shiny new link that first year, each paying a toll that helped pay the bond measure to build it. By 1993, over 1.6 million vehicles per year drove the bridge, exceeding state transportation projections, which helped to pay off the bond early and eliminate the toll.

I wish I had some of this knowledge when I joined about 2,000 others who walked, ran or hobbled last year's race. My focus then was on the brisk morning temperature, and a volunteer wearing a pith helmet as he guided us onto buses going to the starting line. I was completely enthralled with the propulsion of people collectively focused on the same end point. Together, we sneakered comrades trekked the road, inhaled the pungent aroma of river fish, and waved to boats passing by. More seasoned bridge crossers shared stories of previous races in horrendous weather, everything from gale force winds to pelting rain and hail. Could explain the pith helmet.

As we participate in this year's Great Columbia Crossing, be it on foot or in spirit, I hope you will join me in paying homage to the participants, our spectacular "bridge to the world" and the ghosts of ferries gone by.

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