

Columbia

by Ron McClure, Victoria, British Columbia

In Margaret Craven's classic novel, *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*, the protagonist is a young vicar who sets out from Alert Bay along the rugged British Columbia coastline to a remote native village called Kingcome. There, his life becomes analogous to the journey of the "swimmer" - the name given the salmon by the Kwagiuti people. It is a sorrowful story about months of isolation and dark winter skies. It's also about the vanishing customs, art, and culture of the "salmon people," whose only link to the rest of civilization is a few small wooden boats that became known as "God's Little Ships." For many decades, they were owned and operated by the Anglican Church as part of its Columbia Coast Mission fleet. Several of the boats still survive under private ownership, loosely scattered around the Pacific Northwest. A thoughtful mission boat owner sent me a video copy of a black-and-white film produced by the Canadian government in the 1950s, entitled *Mission Ships*. Filmed in the village of Kingcome, the setting for Craven's novel, it documents the remote destinations, logging camps, and Indian villages regularly visited by Columbia, one of the mission ships. Nowadays, the Columbia is used to ferry kayakers along the British Columbia coastline during the summer.



Columbia began her life in 1956 as a combination hospital, chapel, dental office, and floating movie theater. Built specifically for the Columbia Coast Mission fleet, she was one of "God's Little Ships" that served the remote camps and villages dotting 20,000 square miles of jagged British Columbia coastline. The task was simple: minister to the medical, dental, and spiritual needs of people at logging camps, native villages, and fishing camps 365 days a year in every type of weather and sea conditions.



Bill's system has clearly paid off, transforming what had once been a flophouse into one of the most elegantly decorated and refurbished historic vessels on the West Coast. From the gleaming exterior paint and brightwork to her immaculate engine room, Columbia is a tribute to one man's perseverance and reverence for historical and cultural treasures. The boat is filled with paintings, artifacts, and remembrances of her past and the places she served.



"I was actually present at her launching," says current owner, Bill McKechnie. "When I was fifteen, I worked as a volunteer one summer with the Columbia Coast Mission. That was back in 1956, and all of us got invited to watch the Columbia slide down the ways the day she was christened."

Bill notes with amusement that he never saw the boat again until thirty years later, when she came up for sale in 1986. "At the time, I was looking for a good-sized boat to restore," says Bill. "The Columbia was in very poor condition. She had deteriorated badly and was being used as a forest-service bunkhouse for seasonal workers."



Bill offered to buy her, but his bid was unsuccessful; a year and a half later, she was back on the market. "I had looked long and hard for a boat like her, with no success, so when my second chance came around, I didn't hesitate or quibble about the price."

This was the beginning of a six-year restoration project that has culminated in the boat the Columbia is today. "My system was to work on one section of the boat at a time, between the months of January and May. Then I would spend the summer and fall cruising before starting on the next section in January again."

"Parts of the chapel are still visible," notes Bill. "When I bought her, she'd been through some rather poor modifications, but I've tried to correct those and stay in keeping with the period when she was built."

Many wooden boats have followed a similar path of tears, and the Columbia is no exception. They were built for a specific purpose and faithfully served that purpose for decades, often under arduous conditions, until they became obsolete by virtue of progress. Float planes and high-speed inflatables, for example, replaced the old mission ships. When no longer needed, the old boats were discarded and allowed to sit and rot, their upkeep no longer economically sound.

"I tried to keep the restoration true to her era but, at the same time, incorporate the functionality a boat like this would have today," Bill says.

This approach produced excellent results. Columbia's large covered aft deck is ideal for lounging, sightseeing, and photographing the fiords and glaciers of the Pacific Northwest. Her huge saloon has full-sized windows all around, and is warmly enhanced by a large brass diesel stove. The galley is modern, attractive, and spacious enough for two people to work comfortably. Columbia's pilothouse is roomy, resplendent in both antiques and modern navigation instruments, and affords a marvelous view from behind the large front-to-side windows.

Below decks, the staterooms are modest, comfortable, and in perfect keeping with Columbia's character and history. The joinery work is of the finest quality, and the furnishings and artwork throughout honor the people and places she spent most of her life serving.

"We used the boat for pleasure until 1992," says Bill. "Then I started taking kayakers with me up through the Inside Passage and dropping them off. That eventually evolved into a full-time summer business."



Today, the Columbia plies the same waters for which she was originally designed, still calling on the same ports and meandering through the same inlets. Her configuration is exactly as shown in the government film made in the 1950s, and she's still powered by the same Gardner diesel. Columbia is still a mother ship, although now under circumstances of enjoyment rather than heartache.