

Ep. 1: Oh Captain, My Captain

ADAM

In 1927, Norman Hamburg started working on the snag boat, Swinomish, as a cabin boy.

NORMAN HAMBURG

(Hamburg_01.pdf, page 1)

I guess the reason I took such a liking and wanted to get on the first snag boat, the Swinomish was because my father started there in 1901 and worked on the Preston, then retired from there in 1942.

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I started as a cabin boy.

ADAM

Norman began to work his way up the ranks.

NORMAN HAMBURG

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I was cabin boy for 2 years, then I went down on the deck and was a deckhand for 3 years, then I transferred into the engine room as a fireman and fired down there for about 3 years. I didn't like the 7 day a week work, so I went back on deck again.

In 1961, Captain Murch took sick leave to have his eyes operated on, so I was a relief Captain then- in 1961.

(Hamburg_01.pdf, page 5, edit of original quote)

I had put in 23 years as First Mate on there before becoming Captain. In 1962, I became Captain of the Preston.

ADAM

The Captain's ultimately had responsibility for the crew's safety.

NORMAN HAMBURG

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It was up to the decision of the Skipper or Captain on saving life and property. We did quite a bit of work on Sundays and evenings.

At anytime a tugboat would come along side

and say to the Captain, "I got a propeller that's got a rope hauled in it or a cable. I wonder if you could give me a hand." So, we would- whether it was day or night, we would go to work and pick up the stern of the tug and relieve whatever was fouled up in there and make a happy Skipper and good name for the U.S. Engineer department at that time. Same on Sundays. Most of the crew were there on Sundays.

We thought nothing of it, because it was just part of the job.

ADAM

But, that didn't mean the captain would put his men in jeopardy.

NORMAN HAMBURG

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A captain would never jeopardize his own vessel to go out in stormy weather, because the Preston was a bad boat in windy weather. We'd draw in 3 feet of water and we had a lot of respect for the weather- wind.

ADAM

Though, no matter how much care you'd take sometimes running into trouble was unavoidable.

NORMAN HAMBURG

(Hamburg_01.pdf, page 5)

There were times that all of us would get into predicament, you know. When you got to be captain, you thought, "Oh boy. I'm not going to get into predicaments like some of those other fellows did," but you found you were doing the same thing.

ADAM

Yes, unfortunately, the W. T. Preston had it's shares of mishaps.

NORMAN HAMBURG

(Hamburg_01.pdf, page 1)

In 1917, [EDIT] the Swinomish hit the bridge pier

at riverside in the Skagit River and she was down for two months before they raised her. She had a hole there, 40 feet long on the side. Then in 1928, one mile above Milltown in the South Park River, the Swinomish got a hole there and she sunk there. She was just down for 2 days.

ADAM

Two days? Can you imagine? Norm says that the boat was in twenty feet of water when it sunk, but then the tide began to come in...

NORMAN HAMBURG

(Hamburg_01.pdf, page 1)

...which made about 5 feet more. So, the crew moved up topside in the bunks up there and it was just down for a couple days and we got her back up again. Put a patch over the hole and ran her down to Seattle to dry-dock.

ADAM

Now, by a patch, I was thinking some sort of official hole-be-gone patch kit from Sears and Roebuck, but no, they plugged the hole with...
NORMAN HAMBURG

(Hamburg_01.pdf, page 1)

Canvas and mattresses.

ADAM

Wait, as in canvas: the non-water proof fabric, and mattresses, the thing on your beds? You gotta walk me through this one.

NORMAN HAMBURG

(Hamburg_01.pdf, page 1)

We found where the hole was and that hole was only about two feet square. [EDIT] We ran a canvas underneath the hull to plug the hole from the outside. Then, we cut a hole through the deck and took the mattresses and 2 x 4s and plugged the hole from the top. Then, we had the E.G. English Sternwheeler, which came up to help us pump the hull out and we ran down to the mouth of the river and put her on the tide flats during low tide. We plugged the hole permanently until we could get to Seattle and dry- dock.

ADAM

This actually was fairly common, if they got

a hole in the hull, the crew would patch it up enough to get them to the mouth of the river, get to the shallows, wait for the tide to go out, a settle on the tide flats. They also would preform some maintenance this way.

NORMAN HAMBURG

(Hamburg_02.pdf, page 1)

We put her on the mudflats, let the tide go out, and the crew would go out there with big chisels and slicks and cut off all the slivers and let go of the iron net she had on her and get a quick coat of paint on her. Next time the tide came in, we were back on operation again.

ADAM

It wasn't just punching holes that the captain had to watch out for, the giant wheel on the stern could cause some headaches as well.

NORMAN HAMBURG

(Hamburg_02.pdf, page 2)

On time, I was backing out and a deadhead we didn't see got caught between the hull and the wheel and took out the whole center section of the paddle- all the way around. That was a major job- more than what we expected, because we didn't have quite enough paddles to complete the job, so we did what we could, then we ordered more lumber for her. That was really an extreme case.

ADAM

While there were all sorts of dangers, it wasn't all work.

NORMAN HAMBURG

(Hamburg_02.pdf, page 3)

It was pretty nice living on the vessel where everyone- 4:30 came, you were through, 5:00- we had our dinner. Then, you had the rest of the evening off. If you wanted to go uptown, if you could or you laid away from town- you want to go for a walk or if you were in town, you'd spend a lot of time at the zoos. Woodland Park, Point Defiance Park, and different parks in the towns. Go to shows, play cards.

ADAM

You know, that's fascinating, I don't know what I would have assumed crew members did, but visiting zoos wasn't it.

Working on the Preston also could be a lot of fun. The crew would participate in different types of races.

NORMAN HAMBURG

(Hamburg_01.pdf, page 3)

In 1950, we had the stern wheel boat race between the Skagit Belle and the Skagit Chief and the Preston.

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That was really a thrill. The Skagit Belle- Skagit Chief- they were a molded hull and they figured the Preston didn't have a chance in that race. In fact, they had the plaque all made out with one of the other vessel's names on it. They figured that we were just out of it, but when that race started- we'll have to give our old chief engineer, Chris Hansen a pat on the back. I tell you, he had that machinery tip-top shape and we had good firemen on there. We started on that race and the black smoke just poured out of the other two vessels and the Preston was just as clean as a whistle coming- no soot or smoke coming out of the stack. When we got to the end of the race, it was really a thrill to be in the race and win. Then, we had to wait about two weeks until they made up another plaque to put the Preston's name on.

ADAM

HA! That must have felt so good, to come from behind, with odds like that, and to win. It's a real testament to how well the crew worked together and how much they valued their job. Man, working on the Preston sounds pretty great.

NORMAN HAMBURG

(Hamburg_02.pdf, page 4)

Pretty nice to get up in the morning and roll out your bunk, have your breakfast at 7:00, go to work at 8:00. No transportation. You were right on the job all the time.

ADAM

In listening to these interviews, I kept thinking that these men must have been quite close to each other. The sheer amount of time that they spent in such close proximity, had to have some affect. So, when Ms. Negri asked Norman how he was adjusting to retirement, I was really happy to hear this little bit.

NORMAN HAMBURG

(Hamburg_02.pdf, page 5)

I tell you- at first, I sure missed the crew. After being amongst the crew, there all day long and the evenings. I missed the crew.

ADAM

Later, when asked about his feelings about the Preston being decommissioned, he said:

NORMAN HAMBURG

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I hate to see that. A person that's been on a vessel for a good many years- in fact, it was first home. After the later years, it was our second home and I kind of hate to see that happen. It's a good old vessel, I tell you. It's just one of those thing you have to live with.

ADAM

I found this really comforting, not the loss, obviously, but that Norman had seen the Preston as home. From all of these interviews, I get the sense that these men loved their work, they loved their jobs on the Preston.

This podcast was created by Adam Farnsworth and Sonic Bazaar, with sponsorship by the Anacortes Museum Foundation, in conjunction with the Anacortes Museum and The Maritime Heritage Center. Our theme song is Dill Pickles by Heftone Banjo Orchestra, and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Share Alike License. The W. T. Preston is an active museum boat and can be visited and toured. To find out more about the Preston, please visit: [www dot Anacortes W A dot gov slash 379 slash W T hyphen Preston hyphen Maritime hyphen Center](http://www.dot-anacortes.wa.gov/379/WThyphenPrestonhyphenMaritimehyphenCenter). Thank you.