

Remembering Columbia's Glory Days

by Jeanette Taylor

While the headlines of Campbell River newspapers fumed over the millions of public dollars recently allocated for a consolidated mid Vancouver Island hospital, a crowd gathered at the Discovery Harbour Pier to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the launch of the hospital ship Columbia III.

She was one of the last in a long line of ships maintained by the Anglican Church's Columbia Coast Mission. The mission provided medical, religious and social services to remote settlements, logging camps and First Nations villages along the inner coast from 1905 to the late 1960s.

Things have changed radically in the half century since the Columbia III was launched in Vancouver on Oct. 13, 1956. A new hospital was in the offing for Campbell River that year and there were small hospitals in Alert Bay and Powell River, but the hundreds of people living in isolation between Sechelt and Seymour Inlet found it hard to access medical care. No matter the religious convictions of these people, the arrival of the Columbia was a welcome sight.

The Columbia Coast Mission saved hundreds of lives by being on the spot at logging camp accidents. The mission also provided a cherished social outlet.

"It was very exciting when the Columbia came because there was very little entertainment for us," said one of the woman present for the tea. The Columbia's staff brought books, showed movies and hosted Christmas pageants.

It was Phyllis Harding who got the idea for a tea aboard the Columbia, when she saw an ad for the ship's current business, Mothership Adventures, which offers eco and cultural tours of the inner coast. The relatively new owners, the Campbell and Kornelsen family of Sonora Island, welcomed the idea. The ship's double doors, built to admit stretchers, were flung wide for a crowd who filled the ships salon and aft deck to reminisce about the Columbia Coast Mission.

"We feel like custodians of a piece of EC's history," said Ross Campbell, one of the ship's skippers.

Ross and his family were aware of the ship's past service and were pleased to return her to this part of the coast 18 months ago, but they weren't prepared for the depth of feeling many still hold for the mission and its ships. Wherever they dock people have memories to share. On a recent tour, a young man asked the Columbia's skipper to cruise past his 90-year-old grandmother's home in Alert Bay and give a blast on the ship's distinctive whistle, for old time's sake. At a dock on Cortes Island, a small crowd gathered to watch the ship pull into a dock once frequented by mission ships.

"I got a call from a neighbour," said Jan Boas of Whaletown. "She said, 'The Columbia is coming!'"

That was a frequent cry in days gone by. Prior to the advent of the Columbia Coast Mission in 1905 there was no medical service anywhere on the mid-coast. There were over a 100 logging camps and settlements scattered along the coast and accidents were alarmingly common. The only hope in case of serious injuries was to row out into one of the main passages in an often futile search for a passing freight boat. Only a lucky few survived under these circumstances.

The arrival of four dead loggers in Vancouver on board one of these freight ships galvanized the mission's founder, Reverend John Antle, into action. He persuaded his church to launch the first Columbia and later raised funds for four hospitals throughout the region.

The memories shared at the Columbia III's birthday tea stretched back multiple generations. Win (Robertson) Gushing grew up in Ocean Falls but she often visited her grandparents on their homestead at Whaletown on Cortes Island.



Phyllis Harding organized a 50th anniversary tea aboard the Columbia III, gathering friends to reminisce about the Anglican Church's Columbia Coast Mission.

She has especially fond recollections of one of the mission's long-serving ministers, Reverend Alan Greene. His lively sense of humour and his love of his parishioners made him a constant favourite.

"In summer Reverend Greene brought Mrs Greene with him," recalled Cynthia (Culbard) Jones, who also attended the tea. "Reverend Greene would bring his portable organ to the schoolhouse [on Read Island] for a service, where Mrs. Greene sang to his accompaniment."

Cynthia and her husband were married by Reverend Greene on board one of the mission ships, after a preparatory lecture. "People who marry stay together," Greene told the 19 and 17-year-old couple, who were just shy of their 63rd anniversary, when her husband passed away.

Times were changing when the Columbia III was launched in 1956. Timber licences were being awarded almost exclusively to large companies, cutting out the smaller operators. This, and a switch to plane traffic, began to depopulate the coast.

By the early '60s, only a hardy few still lived in isolation and the Columbia Coast Mission was dropped. The Columbia III went into private service with a string of changing owners.

She had deteriorated badly when Bill McKechnie of Point Hope Shipyards in Victoria bought the Columbia III.

She was impeccably restored and sold to a Seattleite before being purchased by the Campbell/ Kornelsen family.

The Columbia III now hosts cruises through the Broughton Archipelago and the Great Bear Rainforest out of Bella Bella, taking people into wilderness areas to explore in a combination of cruising and kayaking.

They also offer historical, natural history and other special interest tours.

"The ship is always welcome wherever we pull in," says Ross Campbell. "We try to live up to her good name."

For more information on Mothership Adventures and the history of the Columbia III check www.mothershipadventures.com or call 1-888-833-8887.