

# Columbia III - 50 Years on the BC Coast

While the headlines of Campbell River newspapers fumed over the millions of public dollars recently allocated for a consolidated mid-Vancouver Island hospital, a small crowd gathered at the city's Discovery Harbour Pier for a tea celebrating the 50th anniversary of the launch of the hospital ship Columbia III. She was one of the last in a long line of vessels operated by the Anglican Church's Columbia Coast Mission. The Mission provided medical, non-sectarian religious and social services to remote settlements, logging camps and First Nations villages along BC's inside coast from 1905 to the late 1960s.



The launch of Columbia III on October 13, 1956, took place at Star Shipyards (Mercer's) in New Westminster, just 100 feet from where the second Columbia had been built by the Dawes Shipyard in 1910. Robert Allan and his son Robert F. (Bob) Allan were in partnership as Vancouver naval architects when Columbia III was designed. Propulsion was a 182-hp Gardner 8L3 (still powering the vessel). Diesel generating and heating units were installed, as well as a propane sterilizer in the hospital cabin, x-ray machine, propane range and refrigerator in the galley and a Spillsbury & Tindall radio-telephone.

The coast has changed radically in the half century since the Columbia III glided down the launch-ways at Star Shipyard (Mercer's) in New Westminster on October 13, 1956. That year a new hospital was in the

centres, began to depopulate the coast. By the early 1960s only a hardy few still lived in isolation. Even the chaplains from the Mission took to the air in a Cessna floatplane, a practice which continued through the 1970s.



A gathering on the foredeck of the Columbia III, Kingcome Inlet in the 1960s. Judging by the finery and the babe in mother's arms and the Columbia Coast Mission chaplain to right in photo, this was probably a christening ceremony.

The last sea-going chaplain with the Columbia Coast Mission, Rev Ivan Putter, arrived in 1965. He had a Decca radar installed so, while the Columbia III was by then serving as mobile aviation fuel rendezvous and a base of operation for the plane which could branch out to isolated pockets of the coast, the vessel continued to help the sick and injured and save lives when the plane was fogbound. However in 1967 the Columbia III was put up for sale. By 1982 the Mission had ceased operation.

Columbia III then passed into the hands of a string of owners and was a liveaboard in False Creek in Vancouver and in a pretty run-down condition when acquired by Bill McKechnie of Victoria in 1990. He worked with shipwright Paul Heron and several Victoria craftspeople on a well-thought-out and classy refurbishment. Original areas such as the doctor's office and galley were reconfigured and, below decks, the chapel, chaplain's stateroom and infirmary were converted to cabins and



A group of people, all with an association with the mission ships, revisited some of the old haunts between Port McNeill and Campbell River in early October, 2006. Here they are seated in Columbia III's main saloon, the former hospital cabin. The large bright windows and mahogany cabinetry and furnishings were part of the extensive 1990s refurbishment overseen by owner Bill McKechnie in Victoria. The inset photos show the wheelhouse and the engine room with the 8L3 Gardner that was in Columbia when launched 50 years ago.



offing for Campbell River and there were small hospitals established in Alert Bay and Powell River, but there were still hundreds of people living on the isolated coast between Sechart and Seymour Inlet with little or no access to medical care or regular social contacts. No matter what the religious convictions of these people, the arrival of the Columbia was a welcome sight.

The Columbia Coast Mission saved hundreds of lives when its vessels hastened to 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," remarked one of the attendees at the 50th anniversary tea held onboard Columbia III. In those days the Columbia's staff brought books, showed movies and hosted Christmas pageants, complete with a portly Santa Claus.

Mothership Adventures, which offers eco and cultural tours in inside waters with the Columbia III, has had new owners since 2005, Ross Campbell and Fern Kornelsen of Sonora Island, and they welcomed the idea of the 50th celebration. The vessel's aft double doors, designed originally to provide access for stretchers, were opened wide to a crowd which filled the saloon and aft deck to reminisce about the Columbia Coast Mission. The Campbell River stop came at the end of a 50th anniversary voyage which originated in Port McNeill and threaded its way south with an enthusiastic group on board, all the members of which had past associations with the coastal 'mission ships'. Along the way they revisited many homesteads, settlements and villages which had been regular stops during the Columbia's service.

Well aware of the Mission's historic service Campbell and Kornelsen were pleased to return Columbia III to this part of the coast. But they weren't prepared for the depth of feeling many still hold for the Mission and its ships. Wherever they tie up people have memories to share. On the recent anniversary cruise a young man asked the Columbia's skipper to give a blast on the ship's distinctive whistle as they passed the Alert Bay home of his 90-year-old grandmother, "for old time's sake." At the Whaletown wharf on Cortes Island, once frequented by the Coast Mission vessels, a small crowd gathered to watch Columbia III pull alongside. "I got a call from a neighbour," said Jan Boas. "She said, 'The Columbia is coming!'"

This summoning call was heard frequently on this coast in days gone by. Prior to the advent of the Columbia Coast Mission in 1905 there were more than 100 isolated logging camps and settlements scattered along the coast and accidents were alarmingly common. The only hope, in the case of serious injury, was to row out into one of the main passages in an often futile search for a passing freight or passenger steamer. A lucky few survived under these circumstances. The arrival of four dead loggers in Vancouver on a steamer 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.

By the time the Columbia III was launched in 1956, the coast was undergoing rapid change. Timber licences were being awarded almost exclusively to large companies, cutting out the smaller operators. This, and greater utilization of float planes over sea-going vessels and the establishment of highways and ferry connections between coastal

accommodation for 10 berthed passengers and crew members. McKechnie also started Mothership Adventures, a successful ecotourism venture which enabled Columbia III's guests to explore wilderness areas of the mainland around the Broughton Archipelago and the Central Coast through a combination of cruising and kayaking.

Mothership Adventures and Columbia III were sold in the early 2000s to a Seattle owner who intended continuing the business in BC waters. However, he couldn't make his way around the Canadian 60-ton master's ticket requirement for Columbia III. Meanwhile Ross Campbell and Fern Kornelsen, who had fallen short in their attempts to buy Mothership Adventures from Bill McKechnie, continued to make it abundantly clear to the US owner that, if he wanted to sell, they would buy. They became owners in early 2005.



The Columbia III in her role as a 'sea kayaking mothership'.

"The Columbia is always welcome wherever we pull in," says Ross Campbell. "We feel we are custodians of a significant vessel in BC's maritime heritage and we try to live up to her good name."

In that spirit Campbell and his family have agreed to make the ship available for weddings and memorial services for the many people who hold the Columbia's memory dear. And, Ross adds, "We'll be working to give her another 50 years on the coast."

*Jeanette Taylor is a Quadra Island-based writer and interpreter of BC coastal history and heritage. She has worked with the BC Archives aural history division and held curatorial and programming positions with the Campbell River Museum. She is the author of River City: A History of Campbell River and the Discovery Islands (1999, Harbour) and Exploring Quadra Island: Heritage Sites and Hiking Trails (2001, Harbour) and is writing a history of the Discovery Islands and adjacent inlets.*