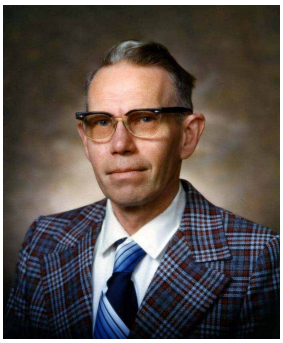
Victor Charles West (1921-2002)



Victor Charles West was a lifelong collector of maritime subject matter, with a focus on Oregon maritime history from the mid-nineteenth century through the twentieth century. With the exception of brief periods away to serve in the military during World War II and to attend college, he lived on the southern Oregon coast.

Beginning in early adolescence, West avidly collected every piece of information he could find that was relevant to the maritime history of southern Oregon. His devotion to that history was inspired by his mother, Vera West, who began taking daily photographs of ships visiting the Coos Bay area before his birth.

As a young adult, the crippling onset of arthritis forced West to leave his job in the timber industry. From that time on, the Collection, as it came to be known, became the focus of his life. He continued to add material to the Collection well into his seventies.

West developed a series of slide show lectures that became popular throughout the state of Oregon. He wrote one book on local history, *Southern Oregon Mosquito Fleet: Stories about Coos County Boats 1853 to 1948* (1986) and co-authored two others, *A Guide To Shipwrecks Along the Oregon Coast* (1984), and *Men of Action: A History of the U.S. Life-Saving Service on the Pacific Coast* (1981). He was also a contributing editor to the *H.W. McCurdy Marine History of the Pacific Northwest* (1999).

At an early age, Victor West learned the importance of imagery as historical narrative. From an estimated 10,000 film negatives of various historic subjects, he created a library of albums that served as a reference to the contents of the Collection. Each album entry includes a narrative history of a vessel, as well as one or more images when they were available. Using photographic prints from his negatives and a two-fingered technique on a manual typewriter, West self-published more than thirty of these albums, which contain over 6,000 images. The Collection, in its entirety, is believed to hold nearly 30,000 pieces.

Over the years, the Collection and West's expertise became valuable resources, and he generously provided information and images whenever requested. The Collection expanded over the years to include articles, charts, blueprints, letters, logs, a reference library, and subjects such as the international maritime trade, overland transportation, and timber industries.

After more than a half-century as a maritime historian, lecturer, and author, West was recognized with awards from the Oregon Historical Society and the Historic Preservation League of Oregon. He received the first annual Coos County Historian Award and the 2004 City of North Bend Lifetime Achievement Award (posthumously).

Victor West died in North Bend on May 22, 2002, just short of his eightieth birthday. The ownership of the Collection passed to the Coos Art Museum in Coos Bay and then, in 2009, to its current home at the Coos Historical and Maritime Museum.

Written by Karen Hammer

Further Reading:

Coos Historical & Maritime Museum. http://www.cooshistory.org/index.htm

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