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Locks getting the attention they deserve

Wednesday, February 07, 2007

It's hard to know if the river runs through Tom Bernert or if Tom Bernert runs through the river. But he certainly understands the idea of blood on the water.



RICK BELLA

For four generations, the Bernert family has run towboats on the Willamette River, hauling log rafts and barges.

And one member in each of those generations has died while working on the river.

"You could say our family is connected to the river," said Bernert, 67, of Wilsonville. "I started working for my dad when I was 14, putting logs through the Willamette Falls Locks for the paper mill there. They'd push the logs in with a boat, and we'd winch them on through."

But times changed, and so did the towboat business.

Bernert's father, Joe, realized in the 1950s that Oregon's booming construction industry would need gravel and concrete. So he obtained permits and set up a gravel-extraction business along a 25-mile stretch of the river. The gravel was barged to a "batch plant," where it was mixed with cement and sand to make concrete.

Today, Joe Bernert Towing operates batch plants in Wilsonville, Beaverton and Carver, with concrete and gravel generating most of the family's business.

But Tom Bernert still keeps a keen eye on the Willamette Falls Locks, a multichamber liquid elevator that gives tugboats and barges a route around the falls at West Linn.

He also has followed the sharp decline in federal money to run the locks these past few years, echoing the drop in industrial river traffic. For a while, it looked as though the 1873-vintage locks would be closed.

"I'm glad to see they're working at keeping the locks open," Bernert said. "If we close the locks, it would cut the river in two."

CONTINUED 1 | 2 Next

INSIDE News

- » Today's Headlines
- » Today's Photos
- » NewsFlash
- » NoticiasFlash
- » Page One
- » Opinion
- » Columnists
- » Obituaries
- » Politics
- » Weather Center
- » Photo Galleries
- » Special Reports

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- Newsletters

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- U.S. at War
- Wild Talk

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