

Covid hits home for English expatriate



WEBB FAMILY PHOTO

During the early 1960s, Patrick Webb's career dream was a cowboy. The journalism idea came later.

Long Beach man mourns after 'The Virus' takes his Mum

By PATRICK WEBB
For the Observer

Mum is dead.
Because of *The Virus*.
And because of *The Virus*, I will not be there to say goodbye.
I will not be there to thank her for the gift of life.
I will not be there to hug my family as we grieve her loss.
I will not be there.
Coronavirus takes no prisoners.
Like pirates who raise the black

flag, it descends on lungs and rips them through with its cutlass.

She was diagnosed on a Sunday, and dead by Wednesday.

She died just before this nation hit the 100,000 mark; Great Britain has about 60,000.

But she is not a statistic. She was my Mum.

Grim news from abroad

My brother's first report from England pinged into my email at 5 a.m. on a Sunday. Residents at her residential care home were checked for covid-19. "Guess who tested positive?"

The following day, his update arrived at 4 a.m. "She's stopped

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PATRICK WEBB

May Webb, Patrick Webb's mother, photographed for her handicapped parking pass, before deterioration in her mobility and health meant she had to move from assisted living to a residential care home.

WHERE THE GEESE GATHER

WITNESSING THE EVOLUTION OF THE RIEKKOLA UNIT



DAVID CAMPICHE

Storm clouds gather over Willapa Bay. This dike and others used to curve around most of the bay's southern shore. Now, the southern tideflats are returning a more natural condition.

Visit to Willapa National Wildlife Refuge reveals a treasure getting even better

By DAVID CAMPICHE
For the Observer

As a young man, I hunted the south tide-lands of Willapa Bay, an area known today as the Riekkola Unit or the South Bay Unit of the Willapa National Wildlife Refuge. My mission was to shoot the majestic Canada goose — the Tavenger honker, or to be more specific, the largest and most majestic of the geese that feed on the rich green grasses that grace this estuary. At the time, the alluvial fields lay behind man-made dikes that snaked beside the bay and restricted the natural flow of bay waters surging off the Pacific Ocean and into the Willapa. Though I seldom fire my old double-barrel shotgun anymore, happy memories linger of my hunting excursions.

In the last decade, the landscape has changed dramatically. Gone are several miles of dikes. Those have been replaced by thousands of acres of tidal flats and the return of the natural ebb and flow of the saltwater. Along with the reappearance of indigenous habitat — fish, plants and an unobstructed view that extends this exquisite panorama for miles and miles — is now an offering akin to the gift of a basketful of fresh wild mushrooms.

This project is the culmination of a decade of hard labor by many U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employees, but particularly, this dream was spearheaded by a determined and vigilant woman by the name of Jackie Ferrier, the project manager of this wildlife refuge. Another organization, the Friends of Willapa National Wildlife Refuge (let's call them The Friends) chipped in mightily.

The mission is simple: Wildlife first. Every national refuge is established in law for the conservation of a particular species (the Columbian white-tailed deer in Cathlamet, for example) or a suite of species. The Willapa unit's mandate is the conservation of migrating birds. Stand on the tideflats or beside one of the hundreds of sloughs that inundate this estuary and one quickly reaches the conclusion that, indeed, the confluence of waterfowl, and their swelling numbers (a quarter of a million a year), is dramatic and generally in synch with the rapid beating of a heart. The area is vast — and so is the array of waterfowl, songbirds and raptors. Otters swim their enchanting way up and down the sloughs, deer and elk roam, and bear maraud. This land is their land!

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DAVID CAMPICHE

Removing old dikes has begun returning the south end of Willapa Bay to more natural conditions.

North Cove community steps up to aid stranded mariner

By MELISSA VERGARA
For Grays Harbor News
Group

NORTH COVE — William “Road Dirt” Flower is in a predicament in North Cove at the north side of the mouth of Willapa Bay.

His sailboat, the *Crown Royale*, ran ashore on Washaway Beach May 19 as he was heading up the coast to Alaska. The self-proclaimed “tramp” has been stranded since then, digging around the boat each day and trying to pull it a little farther back toward the sea.

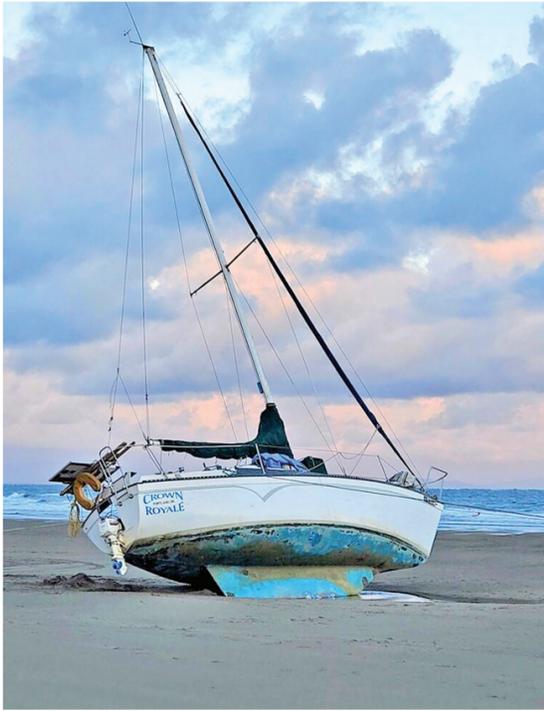
His travails have not gone unnoticed by the community.

The tiller was broken when the boat washed up on the beach; a local man fixed it for him. Other beachside residents have brought him food and other supplies, and helped him dig.

“If you see someone in distress, you need to help them,” said Danny Hahn, one of the North Cove denizens who took Flower some food.

Every night during the high tide, he can be seen digging out his boat and pulling it toward the water. Others occasionally show up to help him, for which he is very grateful.

On May 24 the boat sat at a 45-degree angle, and Flower was frightened that it might tip over. But he said someone dug around it while he slept that night, and by morning the boat was up to a much less precarious 25-degree angle.



LEFT: A broken tiller and the area’s notorious breakers landed *Crown Royale* on Washaway Beach in north Pacific County. RIGHT: William “Road Dirt” Flower’s sailboat, the *Crown Royale*, ran ashore on Washaway Beach May 19 as he was heading up the coast to Alaska.



PHOTOS BY JAENETTE HUDSON

“I can’t believe there are that many nice people left in the world,” he said. “I thought there were a few, but ... it is way more than I expected it to be.”

Coast Guard notice

On May 26, Flower’s journey took a new twist as he received an order from the U.S. Coast Guard Sector Columbia River. It stated that, based on a “ cursory visual inspection,” authorities had determined the *Crown Royale* needed rudder repairs and a follow-up

inspection.

“The Coast Guard has an obligation to respect the rights of maritime industry organization, but we also have an obligation to protect the environment and do our utmost to ensure the safety of mariners,” said Petty Officer 3rd Class Michael Clark, public affairs specialist for the Coast Guard in Seattle.

The order allows Flower to make the repairs himself, but the quality of repair must meet maritime standards, Clark added. “If the ves-

sel poses a threat to mariner safety or the environment, the Coast Guard would then intervene.”

As of this writing, Flower was making the repairs and had scheduled an official inspection.

He’s growing increasingly frustrated at his inability to reach the water. Still, he’s optimistic that he will be able to get underway again. It just seems to be a matter of how long it will take.

“I’m playing it by ear, second by second,” he said.

Next steps

Once his boat passes inspection and he gets it close enough to the water, he said, it will take about 2,000 feet of rope, two personal watercraft and a vessel on the water to pull him off the beach. He’s hoping some folks might be willing to help him with that when the time comes, as he can’t afford to pay for such services.

Once a professional welder, Flower suffered life-changing injuries in a 1981 car crash. He has been

living on disability since then. But he has found solace on the water; he acquired the *Crown Royale* through bartering and trade.

Early this year, he was camping on an island in St. Helens, Oregon, on the Columbia River. When spring came along, he decided to head for Alaska to pan for gold.

He spent time in Astoria before successfully battling the brutal Columbia River bar. From there, he got as far as North Cove before the sea tested him again. He said he saw the breakers, and the next thing he knew he was on the beach.

Flower hopes to complete his journey to Juneau, Alaska, where he intends to sell his sailboat and buy a vessel with a motor to explore the islands and pan for gold.

He said that if he had been able to rectify the situation quickly on his own, he would look back at Washaway Beach as just a trouble spot; however, with the kindness and caring he has received from this community, he feels he has been adopted. When he looks back at this experience, he said, he will see it as an extraordinary time in his life when his faith in humanity was restored and he did not feel alone in his struggle.

“This will be a spot I remember for sure,” he said, “and the people what’s done it.”

Melissa Vergara is a freelance writer based in Raymond. Reach her at publisherlv33@gmail.com.

Refuge

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Linking the refuge’s far corners are two new trails, each weaving through the Willapa Hills, through the tall evergreen and then alongside the borders of the refuge at tideland. Here are hundreds of acres of bird hunting from the eight waterfowl and goose blinds to further access of boundless acres that crisscross the march lands on the edge of the Willapa. Hunters are allowed to trek across this vast pristine landscape. Lo and behold: Fees have been dropped to encourage refuge use.

On the hillside overlooking the lovely visage is the refuge headquarters. A new office headquarters is nearly completed, and it’s a beauty. Its offerings and benefits will be many. A second project calls for an expanded visitor’s interpretation center. All this is attributable to Jackie, her dedicated staff and hundreds of supporters including The Friends.

The visitor’s center will

temporarily be housed in the new office building and later moved to its own facility. Refuge expansion will also include an expanded network of trails for visitation and exploration. School excursions are part of this plan.

Tarlett Slough extends easterly from Pioneer Road at 67th. Trails and viewing platforms punctuate this large slough and culminate on a ridge, perhaps a half-mile from trailhead. From this knoll, a spectacular view unfolds of the south end of Willapa Bay that can happily compete with many of the extraordinary vistas in Southwest Washington, and certainly with other National Parks that scatter across our country. A plan to enhance this vista is in the works with a viewing platform and indigenous plantings. If a person takes in the entirety of this project; takes in the miles of bay and shoreline and the perpetual dance of sky with the kaleidoscope of dynamic Pacific weather, then one can appreciate these efforts as the marriage of dedicated



DAVID CAMPICHE

Willapa National Wildlife Refuge’s new headquarters at the eastern end of 67th street east on Long Beach is well on its way to completion.

men and woman from our government, as well as an outpouring of energy from local participants.

On an afternoon when the weather was as changeable as a six-course feast, I visited with Ferrier. We walked along one of the recently developed trails

that exposes the full extent of this huge refuge. We were joined by a family of four. The father, Dustin Wanke, lingered and began to express his appreciation for the refuge and the sacrifices of so many who had offered the opportunities for him and his.

“Making nature user-friendly,” he explained. “That’s ultimately important.” Wanke described himself as a fan of conservancy, as well as a conservative. “Balance,” he stated. “A balance established between the needs of human beings and the importance of protecting our environment.” He essentially suggested that the Riekkola Unit achieves all that in spades. “Launch your kayak, pop in a slough and paddle to the bay — the opportunities are many.”

Ferrier was so pleased to hear kudos from one of the Peninsula’s faithful that her face lit up like the intermittent sun ball that briefly burst through the pewter-colored clouds.

“Connecting,” she said. “The project is reconnecting the natural evolution of plants, animals and the tidal water of a bay we think of as ours, as home.”

“I could have left (the Peninsula),” Wanke said. “There were opportunities. But I love it here.” Truth be told, you could not drag him away.

We stopped at Parker Slough and I marveled at its reincarnation. All around, the new landscape — just like the unspoiled bay of long ago — unfurled in the soft afternoon light. The edge of the bay had been resurrected and reborn to the eye’s delight.

“Our job is to reconnect nature, all its intricate offerings. At the same time, we seek to connect with our citizens. How can the project like this fail?” Ferrier asked.

The economic impact is clear to see. So is the physical and emotional. In an age when human beings congregate in massive numbers, and quarrel incessantly, here is an opportunity to explore a rare and pristine environment as well as a trumpeting of joy that can be shared by all. Here is Willapa Bay at its finest. Build it, and they will come. Or more aptly put: It’s happening here, and the benefits are as far reaching as the long tongue of tides, and the living, breathing entity we call Willapa Bay.

Mum

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taking antibiotics (not that they can help against the virus), stopped eating, stopped drinking, stopped any and all taking of any medication and apart from the fact that she’s currently hanging in there, is not responding to anyone or anything.”

I spent the following two days staring at my phone — something I ridicule in snarky Facebook posts.

She is 94. Our family has known death must be looming, just not the “how” or the “when.”

But this?

How does a “mummy’s boy” prepare for the dead of the woman who gave him life?

He doesn’t, of course.

I was pretty sure during my visit in February that I wouldn’t see Mum alive again. Oddly, though, when the pandemic hit, I had a notion that this elfin woman who had survived Hitler’s bombs, serious adult health scares, and nine decades worrying about everyone else, would survive.

No.

When I squeezed her

gnarled hand in our final goodbye, I noticed Mum had a red-bordered “Do Not Resuscitate!” order Scotch-taped to her bedside furniture. She repeatedly maintained she was “ready to pop off.”

During the wait, I kept myself busy updating letters I had written four years ago, ready for when needed. I changed my chatty, “see you soon” finale to, “No idea on any funeral yet because of the coronavirus restrictions.”

I have lived in the United States for 40 years. In the first decade, I welcomed Mum and Dad three times and shared pride in my new homeland. Since the 1990s, I have visited them every year, watching them age and Dad die, delighting in their retirement hobbies, allowing them to quiz me about American differences in language, food and beliefs.

I feel so far away from jolly olde England now.

What am I supposed to think or do?

Am I supposed to remember the good things about my life and Mum’s role in them? I was nearly born at 4 a.m. in an ambulance; Mum laughs at the



WEBB FAMILY PHOTO

May Webb has an encounter with wildlife. Birdwatching was one of Patrick Webb’s parents retirement hobbies when the aging process took away their ability to enjoy the sports that had kept them active for decades.

memory, which must have been painful. Boyhood summers were highlighted by

one-week seaside vacations. Faded black-and-white photos celebrate Webb fam-

ily adventures on pebbled beaches with grinning normalcy. Soon, they will be all that remain.

She taught me to read and to love to read. Words have been my entire life, and yet, as the cliché goes, I am lost for them now.

The next day’s report is grim. An early morning call from the care home signals Mum’s breathing was labored; staff invite one final visit. My brother reports that Mum, withered, rasping, didn’t seem aware he and his wife were there. They endure 20 minutes. After driving home, they work in their garden, therapy of a kind, awaiting the second call.

It did not take long. My notification, just before midnight U.S. time, was simple. “Your phone is not accepting calls. Mum passed away at 5 this morning.” My reply brings the first lump to my throat. “Take care, mate. Just you and me now.”

Going on, in these awful times

In “usual times,” I would have called United Airlines, wheedling for a ticket without paying the short-notice surcharge, grabbed my packed suitcase, and

trekked to PDX and Heathrow. Instead, I trot down the hall and plug in the kettle. That’s what British people do, unfailingly. A scalding cup of tea with milk and sugar has magical properties like hugging a favorite teddy bear.

After an oddly untroubled night’s sleep, I seal 27 pre-printed letters then phone my two cousins. No one is surprised; all are sad. They ask about a funeral, because they must, but they anticipate my answer. I wrote Mum’s funeral eulogy eight years ago, flying home from mourning Dad. Practicing alone in my car has reduced it to 11 minutes; I will never deliver it.

Covid-19 has another victim. Diagnosed on a Sunday, dead by Wednesday.

But this is not a statistic. My Mum is dead.

And I will not be there to say goodbye when her tiny coffin rolls up the conveyor belt at the crematorium to the music of Glenn Miller.

It will be watched by just five people. Socially distanced, of course. Because of *The Virus*.

Long Beach Peninsula resident Patrick Webb is the retired managing editor of The Astorian.