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Tugboat Skipper Relates His Adventures On Skagit River

By AL ARNST

For forty years a tugboat skipper on the boisterous Skagit river, Captain F. M. Elwell drew upon his rich background of experiences to give Rotarians, on March 30, a colorful flashback to the county's pioneer days, when Sauk was the upriver terminus for daily tugboat service between it and Seattle.

Captain Elwell, an active member of the Skagit county water resources committee which is considering the Skagit river as one of its major problems, contrasted the tugboat skipper's job to that of a Puget Sound captain, with a regular, permanent run. Even though the Sound pilot cannot use the instruments and calculations employed by deep sea navigators, he has an unfailing ally in echo, his greatest aid outside of lighthouses. Echo or the bouncing back of sound from wooded slopes, banks and other physical objects, helps Puget Sound captains keep their boats within their narrow channel runs. But the tugboat skipper has a less prosaic run, for he must nose into the nooks and inlets of the endless Sound, handling both his boat and the wandering tow, with dexterous hand. Echo here cannot be used constantly as a steering guide.

Tugboating on the Skagit began when log towing was started, after the daily freight run between Seattle and Sauk ended. Sauk, jumping off place for pack string trains to the upper valley's mining centers, was then a busy terminal, boasting a newspaper, The Sauk Journal. Some ten tugs were required to maintain the daily freight schedule. All this was in the early 1870's when George Hill, a strict boat master, put his son "ashore" on a stump in the middle of the river near Sedro-Woolley for disobeying an order. Captain Elwell for a brief period operated a boat

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TUGBOAT SKIPPER TELLS ADVENTURES

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with Hill on the upper Columbia, one of the state's worst river stretches to navigate.

Elwell started by towing logs for Frank Bradsbury, about whom anecdotes are folklore in this territory. Bradsbury, one of the Paul Bunyan's early loggers on The Nookachamps, produced countless logs and sometimes kept on writing checks on an overdrawn account, by mutual arrangement with his banker, until the logs were raffled out.

The Skagit has changed considerably during Elwells' tugboating career. Sternwheelers formerly required three hours to make the run from Mount Vernon to Sedro-Woolley. Present day tugs can make the trip in an hour and a half, because of shortened distances caused by the river straightening out ox bow bends, principally at Sterling. Other river stretches where channel changes have cut out ox bows are at Lyman, where elimination of three bends reduced nine miles of water to three, and between Marblemount and Rockport, where twelve miles have been dropped to four. The shortened channel, with increased gradient, makes for faster river velocities, according to Elwell.

Upper river dams have little to do with flood control on the Skagit, according to Elwell. A bad flood year can occur again if winter conditions are right, such as a heavy snowfall with continued rains or a thawing Chinook. If such a flood should occur, the Skagit flats are in for trouble because the present channel of the South Fork is silted up to the level of the surrounding land. An inadequate dike system, not designed for a prolonged flood, is the only bulwark against flood waters and would not last long. The South Fork should be dredged or a head opened up to allow water to scour out some of the silt, according to Elwell.

Millard Splane announced a bowling team contest between the Lions and Rotary clubs on April 6. Harold Lemley reported favorably on the swimming beach survey. An international service committee program was announced for the April 6 meeting. On April 26, the Sedro-Woolley Rotary club will be host to the Anacortes club in that city, with a special program planned.