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Summer 2005

# River of no Return: The Willamette Regenerates

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## Citation Details

Boehmer, Gabriel, "River of no Return: The Willamette Regenerates" (2005 MetroScape, Institute for Portland Metropolitan Studies, Portland State University)

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From the Cascades' frozen gorges,  
Leaping like a child at play,  
Winding, widening through the valley,  
Bright Willamette glides away;  
Onward ever,  
Lovely River,  
Softly calling to the sea,  
Time, that scars us,  
Maims and mars us,  
Leaves no track or trench on thee.

From "Beautiful Willamette"  
by Samuel L. Simpson



## River of ~~No~~ Return: The Willamette Regenerates

Text and photographs by Gabriel Boehmer

Time tracked down Sam Simpson's "Lovely River" in a hurry. In fact, the river that inspired Oregon's first Poet Laureate to write "Beautiful Willamette" in 1868 had already lost its innocence at least two decades earlier, an unwitting agent in the spread of white explorers' diseases that killed nearly all the Indians of the valley. The Willamette's scars multiplied quickly with years of unregulated use and commercial development. By the early 20th century, the river of Simpson's poem was unfit for fishing, swimming and boating. There was no mistaking to whom the tracks belonged.

"Lumbermen used the waterway to float logs to downstream mills, and the growing cities and towns that lined its banks emptied untreated sewage directly into the river," wrote William G. Robbins, a distinguished professor emeritus of history at Oregon State University, in the Summer 1998 issue of *Oregon Historical Quarterly*. "To make matters worse, an increasing number of sawmills, pulp and paper plants, and canneries cycled water through their manufacturing processes and returned it directly to the river. Those conditions prompted Oregon's newly created board of health to declare in 1907 that the Willamette was an open sewer."

Things actually got worse. Florence Riddle, a retired Reed College professor who contributed an article about the lower Willamette River to the 2000 book *Wild in the City: A Guide to Portland's Natural*

*Areas*, reported: "A study of the river in 1934 revealed that in a three-mile stretch through the city center there was not enough oxygen to support a single gasping fish. The river whose name once meant 'green water' had turned a murky brown. At sewer outfalls, sludge banks formed and solid debris floated on the surface of the river. In spite of such dire need for pollution control, it was six years before sludge treatment began and 10 more before the city's present interceptor sewer system was installed."

Yet the 1930s also sewed the first stitches of a silver lining. Public awareness of the Willamette's plight increased and led to passage of some of the nation's first anti-pollution laws. Then in 1962, a journalist named Tom McCall produced a documentary called "Pollution in Paradise" that called for measures to clean up the Willamette River. Just one decade later, in June 1972, National Geographic magazine crowned Governor McCall's water quality restoration initiative with a cover story: "A River Restored: Oregon's Willamette." For the first time in a half century, the Lovely River was safe enough for fishing, boating and swimming.

### Paradise restored? Temporarily

In December 2000, *The Register-Guard* of Eugene published a three-part series on the Willamette River called "Troubled Waters," asserting that a burgeon-

ing population coupled with an increase in pollution posed threats to the river's survival. The river's current problems, according to the nonprofit river watchdog group Willamette Riverkeeper, include a six-mile stretch in Portland that is a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Superfund site; spring Chinook and steelhead, the Willamette's native salmonids, that are listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act; and violations of temperature, bacteria and mercury standards under the Clean Water Act.

### What accounted for the reversal of fortune?

Sophistication of pollution detection and measurement improved, according to Steve Greenwood,



On the river with Travis Williams, executive director of Willamette Riverkeeper.

an Oregon Environmental Council board member and former Department of Environmental Quality deputy director. "The short answer may be that we simply broke out the champagne too early," Greenwood wrote in *Restoration*, a publication of Oregon Sea Grant. "The more complete story is that many of the problems

that plague the Willamette today weren't even on our radar screen 30 years ago.

"This does not mean that the problems are necessarily worse than they were in the 1970s," added Greenwood, who is now a Eugene-based environmental and public policy consultant. "Our understanding of river ecology, our ability to detect pollutants, and our standards for what constitutes a healthy river have improved significantly over the past three decades. In 1972 we weren't even able to measure some of the pollutants that today cause the greatest concern."

The clean-up effort of the Sixties and Seventies primarily tried to boost the Willamette's levels of dissolved oxygen, which fish need to survive. "Now we understand that the battle to fully restore the health of the Willamette must go beyond oxygen and bacteria levels caused by inadequately treated sewage," Greenwood wrote. "High stream temperatures and toxic pollutants will be the new battlefronts for cleaning up the Willamette. And these are likely to be much more complex, difficult, and expensive to address than the previous efforts, which focused primarily on a relatively few easily identifiable pipes discharging wastes into the river."

Willamette River advocates recognize the progress of current initiatives such as the "Big Pipe" project, which will reduce combined sewer overflows and riverbank improvements that are connecting many communities in the metropolitan region with the Willamette once again. David Primozich, interim director of the Willamette Restoration Initiative, points to Portland's Eastbank Esplanade as well as riverside projects in Salem, Independence, Corvallis, Newberg, Dundee and Kaiser. "The transition of the Salem waterfront is shocking," Primozich said. "The Willamette is not an Eden lost. It's a community asset that's being reinterpreted with modern values."

The priority for the Willamette River, Primozich said, should be to improve ecological processes, function and dynamics that have been lost. Three important objectives are enabling the river to connect with the flood plain in targeted areas, finding ways to remove revetment, and improving wetland aquifers.

Travis Williams, executive director of Willamette Riverkeeper, observed that challenges such as the Superfund cleanup of Portland Harbor come with an upside, as well. Included in the restoration work will be riparian restoration and mitigation opportunities. In addition, the City of Portland's responsibilities under the Endangered Species Act will include wetland improvements.

The best way to restore the Willamette to the Lovely River of Sam Simpson might be to heed the words of environmentalist Mel Jackson in that June 1972 issue of *National Geographic*: "Sure, we've made progress," Jackson said, "but the old abuses will come creeping back if we don't keep a careful, constant watch over these waters." **M**

*Gabriel Boehmer is a Portland area writer.*

#### WILLAMETTE RIVER PROFILE:

Name: **Walla Mutte**, Indian word for a place on west bank near Oregon City

Origin: **High Cascades**, where Middle Fork leaves Timpanogas Lake

Coast Range Tributaries: **Long Tom, Mary's, Luckiamute, Yamhill, Tualatin**

Cascade Mountains Tributaries: **Coast Fork, McKenzie, Calapooia, Santiam, Molalla, Clackamas**

Length: **261 miles**, longest river entirely within Oregon

Navigable Length: **203 miles**, beginning below Dexter Reservoir

Beginning: **Eugene**, where Coast Fork joins Middle Fork at River Mile 187

Lewis & Clark: **Entered April 2, 1806**, by Clark, who called it the Multnomah

Width: **900 feet at Portland**

Watershed: **11,400 square miles** or 12 percent of state's area

Average Annual Volume: **22,730,000 acre feet**