

Maritime Heritage Festival in St.Helens drew thousands to Columbia County

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The Maritime Heritage Festival, formally in Portland, celebrated its first event in St. Helens this year, July 13-15, 2012. The 3-day event brought thousands of visitors to Columbia View Park, the riverfront park in St. Helens' Downtown Historic District. The event went so well that the organizers, vendors, visitors, and locals want to have the event in St.Helens again next year.

The Maritime Heritage Festival celebrated the Columbia River's maritime and Native American history and traditional activities. The event featured a vintage watercraft show, Native American technologies, an art market, a waterskiing exhibition, antique cars, live music, and children's activities. The event started off with a parade of boats and tribal canoes from the Multnomah Channel to the St Helens dock. Then came a cannon salute and tribal blessing by the Confederated Tribes of Grande Ronde. Over 5,000 spectators came to see the fireworks, the final event of the opening day.

With this year's unusually high water and strong current, docking vessels was very challenging. While trying to dock, the Sternwheeler Portland bumped into the Portland Pirate's ship. Although no one was injured, the mishap caused the organizers anguish. However news of the accident, covered by local and national news agencies, unexpectedly drew more visitors.

The event received great report cards from local residents as well as the police department. Restaurants were full. Retailers had peak sales. Residents said traffic and parking were well-managed. Nevertheless, the organizers and volunteers compiled lists of things that can be improved next year.

Whether or not you are a boat enthusiast, one thing all of us can definitely agree on is that St.Helens and Columbia County need more of this type of event; an event that is fun, cultural, educational, supports local businesses and shows visitors this area's many hidden assets.

The Maritime Heritage Festival was organized by the Maritime Heritage Coalition, a non-profit organization, with its goal to build a regional maritime center that aspires to be the "Mystic Seaport" of the West.