

# Editor's Notebook: Brix family stories are link to our great industrial heritage

**Matt Winters, Editor Chinook Observer**

This Friday from 3 to 5 p.m., Peter J. Brix is at the Columbia River Maritime Museum greeting old friends and signing copies of his latest book, “The Brix Maritime Story: A Century of Towboating and Barging.” Along with a companion volume, “The Brix Logging Story: In the Woods of Washington and Oregon,” it comprises a remarkable visual and verbal archive of a period when our ancestors created good, viable lives by working hard in local woods and waters. It is a period that will always be the foundation of how Northwesterners imagine ourselves — our origin as strong, smart, outdoor-oriented people.

As with the family’s enterprises on dry land, Brix achievements on the water started small — with the purchase in 1910 of the 75-foot, 100-horsepower “R. Miler,” built in the Leathers shipyard in Astoria in 1891. Bought to serve the needs of the Brix-owned Knappton sawmill across the river from Astoria, this little “pre-owned” steamer was to be the first of many vessels to come.

It was a marriage of diverse businesses including logging, lumber manufacturing, maritime transportation, railways, banking and others that allowed the Brix family to survive the horrible times of the Great Depression that drove many others to ruin. Being good businessmen didn’t just save the Brixes. It also kept hundreds of breadwinners employed in Clatsop and Pacific counties and elsewhere in the region.

P.J. Brix, the author’s grandfather, has a grin in old photos that makes him someone you’d like to have known. Well along in the logging book, this passage confirms our positive impression:

“Having worked his way up the logging hierarchy, P.J. was ever mindful of the inherent danger his employees faced and cared about their welfare. As far back as 1908, P.J., together with several other Astoria sawmill owners, organized the Lumberman’s Hospital Association. In 1922, as a New Year’s present, he gifted his workers at both Brix Brothers and Knappton Mills with group accident and death insurance policies. This was a very progressive notion for the times. Though he had taken to wearing tailored suits when he went afield, P.J. was a much-admired boss who treated every employee with the respect they deserved. ‘We often talk about the times we spent in your camp and of the wonderful way in which you treated your help,’ one employee later related to P.J.”

On the water side of the business, it would be hard to overstate how big a role Brix played in moving products up and down the Columbia, and elsewhere in the world. Although first-hand stories about the earliest days are hard to come by, its initial vessels were tightly woven into local life. They served as routine taxis and extensions of home for isolated hamlets. For one, the steamer “General Washington” maintained a scheduled circuit of runs from Astoria to Knappton, Deep River and other estuary towns.

“In those days, Knappton and the other north shore towns were like islands. All commerce, freight and people came by water, not land, and the pace of life revolved around the arrival and departure of riverboats.” Expectant mothers, newborn babies and injured loggers all owed their lives to this system of hardy steamers.

Again, the Brix story is fundamentally about getting things done — smartly and efficiently. Concerning one of the firm’s three boatyards, Knappton Towboat’s long-time chief operating officer, Ed Beall, recalled “The people in Rainier were capable of doing almost anything. With most shipyards, you had to wait for them to put together a sketch and a plan for how it could be done. Our response was often, ‘We need the boat tomorrow. Fix it now!’ With Rainier shipyard, they could take a piece of chalk, draw a picture on the floor and build it.”

Peter Brix's research discovered that his family's American story started inauspiciously, with a Chicago swindler absconding with their savings in 1881 on their way from Germany to become farmers on the banks of Grays River in Western Wahkiakum County, Washington Territory. I was surprised to learn that I drove by their family cemetery countless times on the way to my prized old home on Altoona Road. I, too, have rowed the deceptively swift waters of Devil's Elbow.

But where other farming settlers saw the big trees as little but annoying obstacles to plowing, the Brixes perceived an asset that sweaty work could turn into money. A Northwest commercial empire grew from this simple concept. It's a story still worth studying.