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If you overhear Joe Bernert talking about one of his family's old tugboats, you might first assume he is referring to a child, or maybe a beloved pet.

Take the "Lady B," for instance — a smaller tugboat which has been owned by the Bernerts since the 1940s. In July, Bernert, a lifelong West Linn resident, brought the boat to the city's Old Time Fair parade as part of the "A River Runs Through It" theme celebrating the Willamette Falls. Though the boat proved to be too large for a parade float, Bernert and other family members parked off to the side of the road and held court with anyone who was interested in learning more. When the parade was over, Bernert returned "Lady B" to a pond in St. Paul, Oregon, where it now resides permanently.

"She's happier in this pond," Bernert said. "She looked happy when we saw her there — if a boat can look happy."

A long maritime history

The boat ramp at Willamette Park is named after the Bernert family, and with good reason. The family's ties to West Linn stretch back through five generations, with tug boat operations at the center of the family business for many of those years. It all began with Joe Bernert's great grandfather, Josef, who emigrated from Germany to West Linn in 1860.

Josef Bernert eventually had six children and enlisted their help as he built a boating business on the Willamette River.

"They actually originally were all row boats, and then they had little tugboats," Joe Bernert said. "His three oldest boys all ran boats, too. It was kind of a family thing."

In 1907, Josef Bernert built a powered tug boat with 4.5 horse power, the first of its kind. By the 1920s, the Bernerts had established the Joe Bernert Towing Company, utilizing tugboats that pulled logs to the paper mills located down river. "People who brought logs into the mill were a major source of economy," Bernert said. Those early tugboats were made of wood and still a generation removed from Joe Bernert's era. Indeed, by the time Joe came around, the Bernerts had a fleet of tugboats that lined the docks on the Willamette River and some of his earliest memories took place on the water.

"My family, we grew up on the river," Bernert said. "My mom has a picture of me, I'm probably about 7 with my dad ... we'd go out on the boats, and (my dad) would have us scrape paint, do manual chores.

"It's something about growing up (with it), kind of like farming."

Luxury yachts these boats were not, but they were perfectly accommodating for the workers who spent many days and nights on them.

"Honestly, they used to live on these things," Bernert said. "Even the little ones, they used to live on those. They'd take them up to Albany and come down and tie up their log rafts at night, and go down and sleep in the engine rooms. Most boats have cots that were hanging right above the engines."

Standing on a dock near the Bernert-owned Wilsonville Concrete Products headquarters, Joe Bernert gazed at an old boat named "Rainbow B."

"I can remember sleeping on that boat when I was a kid," he said. "And I remember sleeping on littler boats than that."

A new generation of boats

More than 150 years since Josef Bernert first stepped foot on the shores of the Willamette River, the family business has diversified significantly. Joe Bernert Towing expanded into river dredging projects in 1958 and the Wilsonville Concrete company was formed shortly thereafter in 1962. Eventually, in 2006, Joe Bernert Towing and Wilsonville Concrete merged to form Wilsonville Concrete Products.

As the family businesses evolved, so too did the usage of the tugboats. The smaller boats were used for dredging projects, while larger ones pushed aggregate barges along the river. The company halted dredging projects on the river in 2008, further limiting the utility of smaller boats like "Rainbow B" and "Lady B."

"I think we're the only ones who have these little boats left," Bernert said. "We're sentimental."

It was sentimentality that led the Bernerts to the Old Time Fair in July and Joe Bernert relished the chance to bring different generations of the family together around one boat.

"The best part of the parade is getting the previous generation together, because they all get to talk and stuff like that," Bernert said. So, when Bernert remarks that boats like "Lady B" appear to be "happy," it comes from a place of love and nostalgia.

"The old log-time boats do mean something to me, because it's something I grew up with that's not coming back," Bernert said. "When I was a kid, I remember looking at the river and log rafts were on both sides of the river, 200 feet out. We'd go down and play on the log rafts; we could walk from West Linn to the mill on those rafts.

"Now, you're lucky if you see a log raft."

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