

**A deep dive into the history of Westmoreland Park, the casting pond the Milk Carton Boat Race
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SOUTHEAST HISTORY

Westmoreland Park, the Casting Pond, and those whimsical Milk Carton Boats

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Special to *THE BEE*

A recent edition of “Family Handyman” magazine revealed to readers 32 ways to reuse an empty plastic milk carton.

You could make a painter’s tray, or a wasp trap. Or you could configure it into a pet scoop, or drill holes in the cap and use it as a watering can. The ideas went further – from using them to pot plants, build a greenhouse, create your own sculpture, to even (somehow) make a “fashionable dress”. That last one is rather improbable, and the piece may show vividly that it was written by a handyman, rather than a fashion consultant!

But, they overlooked a really good use of milk cartons: You could design your own boat out of milk cartons and jugs, and enter it in the annual Milk Carton Boat Races to be held once again this month at Westmoreland Park – it’s one of Southeast Portland’s few official Rose Festival events.

Sunday, June 26th, is the date for the 2022 Westmoreland Park Milk Carton Races, and the public is invited to see one of Portland’s classic events starting promptly at 11 a.m. But the question is, when and how did this popular competition begin...?

Oregonians in the 1930’s were trying to survive some of state’s bleakest years. It was the Great Depression; many banks had closed their doors, since there was – as yet – no federal deposit insurance. Many of Portland’s top lumber mills had financially collapsed because of the decline in construction nationwide, and thousands of men and women were left jobless.

Once he was elected President of the United States in 1933, one of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s most important acts to reinvigorate the nation was to create the “WPA” – the Works Progress Administration – and the Civilian Conservation Corps. These programs put unemployed workers to work – while creating a vast network of public works projects around the nation. Hundreds of public buildings and structures were constructed in Oregon, as part of what President Roosevelt called the New Deal.

One such project was the construction of Timberline Lodge; another was the creation of Westmoreland Park in Southeast Portland. In the late 1920’s, the Portland Bureau of Planning,

the Westmoreland Community Club, and even members of the Flycasters Association began embarking on a mission to develop a new city park. The plan was finally realized in 1935, when the city acquired forty-two acres south of Bybee Boulevard and east of 22nd Avenue, bordering Crystal Springs Creek. Eight lots were seized for non-payment of taxes, while the remaining acreage was accumulated from the Oregon Iron and Steel Company, to create a public park between the Westmoreland and Eastmoreland communities.

Long before the City of Portland acquired this 45-acre parcel of land, William Ladd had established his “Crystal Springs Farms” in 1869 on 721 acres he had bought from early Donation Land Claim pioneers William Meek and Alfred Luelling. Meek and Luelling were so busy operating their fruit orchard on the east bank of the Willamette River, just north of the town of Milwaukie, that they didn’t have time to farm any of the water-logged fields between Eastmoreland and Westmoreland.

Ladd, intent on breeding Jersey cows, established “Crystal Springs Farms”, and for the next third of a century the cows and their offspring were happy, grazing on the grass, drinking from the cool waters of Crystal Springs Creek, standing around in the fertile fields, and chewing their cuds.

In the early 1900s, a large vacant field at the east end of Nehalem Street – pretty much where Westmoreland Park is now – was used by pilots as a landing field for pioneering aircraft. The airfield was named for First Lt. Hugh Broomfield, a young Reed College student who had died while flying on a scouting mission near France in World War I. He lost his life when the plane he was flying was shot down.

So, as a result of President Roosevelt’s new programs, in 1935 the Portland Bureau of Planning and workers from the WPA began preparing that vacant field – minus any cows and planes – for a new public park.

Francis B. Jacobberger of the “Jacobberger and Smith” architectural firm was hired and given the task of creating a “study sketch and preliminary layout” for this new Westmoreland Recreational Park. Jacobberger’s plan was quite extensive; it included a park office, public restrooms, outdoor handball courts, basketball courts, 12 tennis courts, an open-air roller-skating rink, two children’s play areas, two football fields, a lacrosse playing field, picnic facilities, horseshoe pits, a model yacht basin, baseball diamonds, and a soccer field. It was a mighty ambitious plan!

A native of Portland, Francis Jacobberger had graduated from the University of Oregon, and in 1921 he was hired as draftsman in his father’s firm. He went on to design numerous Catholic Churches, schools, hospitals, and other buildings, and was involved with the rebuilding of the St. Francis of Assisi Church in 1938, and the Providence Portland Hospital.

Flycasting was a particularly popular sport during the Great Depression and Portland Parks officials planned on focusing the first phase of construction on crafting a flycasting pond, along with a clubhouse for the fishermen to use. The City of Portland and the WPA both stressed the importance of having the work on the park performed by manual labor and hand tools, so that

more unemployed men could be hired to complete it and the rest of the park projects. City officials envisioned the employment of 750 men for this. Work was completed on the Casting Pond before the start of the International Casting Tournament in August of 1936.

Bait fishermen and flycasters from around the world came to Portland's first-ever casting exhibition, hosted by the Portland Casting Club. Westmoreland residents heard the whizzing sound of flying fishing lines as contestants vigorously whipped their casting rods starting as early as 4 a.m., and continuing into all day into the evening hours.

Because almost all of the work on Westmoreland Park was performed manually, the time needed to finish the park took considerably longer than expected, and soon the project ran out of money to complete the final layout. It wasn't until July of 1939 that WPA workers were able to pave the bottom of the Casting Pond with concrete – then finish grading the baseball fields and install rustic bridges across Crystal Springs Creek in the park, for strolling visitors to use.

Another pool was added nearby to be used as a “model yacht lagoon”, an endearing feature added for young wanna-be sailors to practice their sailing skills in the summer and fall. Youngsters spent endless hours of enjoyment at this lagoon with their handmade miniature ships and boats. The waters of the lagoon also provided an excellent opportunity for students who were enrolled in the Manual Training Class offered at Sellwood School to showcase their newly-constructed model power boats and sailing vessels.

During frigid winter weekends, over the years and even fairly recently, young and old alike gathered to skate on the occasions that the waters of the Casting Pond froze. In summer and winter months alike, many social events centered around Westmoreland Park – and it was also a favorite gathering place for teenage boys and girls to meet on a first date, in the Great Depression and afterward. Also, families gathered during the summers to roast crawdads caught in Crystal Springs Creek over a makeshift open fire or “burn barrel” that was hauled down to vacant parts of the park by neighbors.

When the 1950s and 1960s arrived, Westmoreland Park supported many new summer activities introduced by the Portland Parks Bureau. Archery tournaments, lawn bowling, and semi-pro baseball drew large crowds each year, as flycasting declined as a major attraction – and, soon, seasonal geese, ducks, and other waterfowl began calling the old Casting Pond home.

Looking for a new program for youngsters to help celebrate the 65th anniversary of Portland's Rose Festival in 1973, the Royal Rosarians ([Rose Festival Association](#)) introduced a boat race geared toward young people – and the Casting Pond in Westmoreland proved to be the ideal place for this whimsical competition. The Oregon Dairy Farmers Association quickly agreed to sponsor the inaugural Milk Carton Boat Races.

To make these races more thrilling, and to include young folks who weren't familiar with ship-building – and of course to promote the original dairy sponsor of the event – all boats had to be constructed from milk cartons. This not only made building a boat cheaper, as children would only have to scour the neighborhood for discarded milk cartons – but it proved to be an engineering challenge, too, since the resulting boat had to stay afloat with an occupant or two

riding inside.

With over \$450 in cash prizes offered to winners, the first boat races were divided into four divisions, with \$50 awarded to the winner in each category. Second and third place winners were awarded \$25 and \$15, respectively -- and a whopping \$75 prize was set aside to award the boat judged to be the most outstanding in design and originality.

Each year thereafter, the Rose Festival Milk Carton Boat Races attracted more and more contestants, and hundreds of people crowded the banks of the Casting Pond in Westmoreland to watch the creative and eccentric handcrafted boats, and to cheer on their favorites. Various sponsors throughout the years backed the races, including Alpenrose Dairy and Skipper's Fish and Chips Restaurants. At least once, the Rose Festival itself was the sponsor.

As in many newly created events, the rules for racing were tweaked each year to make competition fair and more interesting for all ages. Racing boats could only be propelled by oars or paddles -- and a separate category lumped all ages and crafts, either sailboats or those manned by paddles, into a sailboat category in which boats could carry one or two persons.

One colorful craft in 1975 included a replica of a miniature paddle wheeler, complete with a smokestack. Young steersman Mike McParland was the Sweepstakes winner that year, and he also won the sailboat class for the third straight year.

The Milk Carton Boat Race became a favorite annual event for children and families, and sometimes boys and girls spent the entire year designing and building their makeshift watercraft. The interest in building and racing a Milk Carton boat increased in the mid-1980s, when over 150 boats were regularly entered. A few years later, it was recorded that 236 entrants had signed up to participate in this annual Rose Festival event!

As the years progressed, the boats tended to be built for speed -- but the Showcase division still contained some of the most whimsical and creative boats each year. Racers also began to follow a historical theme; spectators might see everything in the pond from a replica of the Coast Guard training ship "Eagle" to a miniature version of the "Tillamook Morning Star". Other historic milk carton boats included a Spanish Galleon, a ferocious Viking dragon boat, and a model sternwheeler.

Of particular historical note -- in 1989, one contestant created a look-alike Exxon Valdez oil tanker made from Alpenrose milk cartons, complete with an "oil slick" towed behind. (For those unfamiliar with the Valdez, on March 24th, 1989, this Exxon oil tanker ran aground in Prince William Sound off the coast of Alaska. The disaster spilled over 11 million gallons of oil into the Pacific Ocean -- one of the largest environmental disasters in American History. The replica had an oil slick too -- but it was one which could be folded and washed, and there was no impact on the wildlife in Westmoreland Park.

In 2002 the boat races were canceled when a construction project along McLoughlin Boulevard severed the original water pipe that filled the Westmoreland Pond, and the city lacked funds to replace it. A solution was finally found in 2006, when PP&R realized they had unused water

rights from Crystal Springs Creak at Eastmoreland Golf Course, and transferred them to Westmoreland Park, allowing the Casting Pond to be filled from the creek for the first time – which led to the pond being re-piped to be a reservoir for the park’s watering system, saving a lot of water \bills, and keeping the water fresher than it had been in the Casting Pond.

But the Rose Festival Officials had not carried over funds reserved for the races to 2006, so the restart of this classic Rose Festival event was postponed an extra year.

In 2015, boat racers were encouraged to wear outrageous costumes, and the Showboat division turned out to be more of a parade of boats than a competition. There was no limit in the rules to the size and the length of Milk Carton Boats, but the rules required the boats built had to be carried to the starting line by hand, which did limit size and weight somewhat. (In 2016 the Rosarians were asked to put on the event by the RFF).

Some more notable entries in past years included one styled as a lily-pad, powered by two girls dressed as frog princesses; a submarine, with a toilet seat for a hatch, a pink Cadillac styles in milk cartons, a SpongeBob SquarePants entry – and, of course, various pirate ships. Arrrrr!

After a two-year hiatus in 2020 and 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Josh Reynolds, Vice President and General Manager for Alpenrose Dairy, announced that Alpenrose would be this year’s sponsor for Westmoreland’s Milk Carton races – together with the leadership of the Royal Rosarians. Alpenrose was the primary sponsor from 1992 until 2001, and they are back once again.

For any contestants in need of last-minute repairs or updates to their existing Milk Carton Boats, Mr. Reynolds suggests that milk cartons and milk jugs are available for pick-up at Moreland Presbyterian Church, at the Rockwood Boys and Girls Club, and at Alpenrose Dairy in Southwest Portland. These are free to all participants in the race.

So what does it take to be a champion Milk Carton Boat Racer? I interviewed Connor Schmidt, winner of the People’s Choice award in 2019, to learn the answer.

Like most first-time participants, Connor was inspired to build his own boat when he and his family viewed the race the year before and thought participating would be fun. With help from his dad and grandfather, the “Schmidt family Racing Team” began construction of a race boat designed and drawn out by Connor himself. According to Connor, his grandfather – whose hobby is woodworking – helped with the power tools and heavy lifting, while Connor advised the team on how he wanted it to look.

The resulting winning boat was a replica of Kyle Busch’s M&M’s NASCAR vehicle, which Connor saw in an auto race on television. When asked how many milk cartons and jugs it took to build his racing boat, Connor replied, “I used math to decide how many milk cartons I needed. I researched how much weight each jug could support, and did the math to see how many I needed, based on my weight,”

Then family and friends scoured the neighborhood for milk cartons and jugs for use in construction. Connor took his completed racing boat on a maiden voyage to make sure it wouldn't sink. "I had to practice paddling, since I was not very good at it," he said, but in the end he was excited when he won the Grand Prize. As for advice to future Milk Carton Boat contestants, Connor said, "Start collecting milk cartons and jugs early. Think about your design. And, most importantly, have fun."

If you're planning on attending the free festivities at Westmoreland Park this month, Alpenrose will have samples of their chocolate milk, and other goodies found in the Alpenrose Home Delivery Catalog – and a rock band will be present to highlight this afternoon's "Rocking and Racing on the Westmoreland Casting Pond". Some 50 Royal Rosarians are expected to attend the event this year, too.

Racing categories for this year's boating races include the Children's division, from age 7 to 12; Adult division, age 13 and up; the multi-family division, for two or more boaters age 7 and older; and a corporate team division. There's still time – the signup deadline for boat registration is not until June 19th; and the festivities begin at 11 a.m. on June 26th – at the very historic Casting Pond in Westmoreland Park.

I would like to give special thanks to the Chairwomen of the "Milk Carton Boat Races, 2022" – Connie Shipley, and Linda Riedman of Radiance Communications (actually PR contractor for Alpenrose) – for their unstinting support as I prepared this article.

PHOTOS:

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History Boat Races_001.jpg

City of Portland Archives

Although officially the first Westmoreland Milk Carton Races were in 1973, this photo of children racing small boats at the Westmoreland Park Casting Pond suggests that boating was going on years before the Rose Festival started its annual races there.

History Boat Races_002.jpg

City of Portland Archives

In this photo, taken in July of 1939, WPA workers were putting the finishing touches on the Westmoreland Park Casting Pond. The facility went on to become a favorite sporting stop for professional and amateur flycasting fishermen. Today, it is home to the Annual Westmoreland Milk Carton Boat Races, held annually in late June.

History Boat Races_003.jpg

Royal Rosarians Collection & Connie Shipley

This photo, taken at the Westmoreland Park Casting Pond's 2019 Milk Carton Boat Races, shows the promenade of contestants parading their handmade boats for the "Peoples' Choice Award". The winner was Connor Schmidt, here piloting his #18 race car showboat.