



A family photo of young Lyle Gold, at about the time he built and raced his first Milk Carton Boat in Westmoreland Park – and was the youngest racer there that year. (Photo courtesy of Lyle Gold)



Lyle Gold, with longtime friends Mike Woods and John Horse, gathered for a reunion in 2025. This is how they all look today! (Photo courtesy of Lyle Gold)

May 1, 2026 edition **SOUTHEAST HISTORY**

A life-changing Milk Carton Boat Race in Westmoreland in 1973

By DANA BECK
Special to *THE BEE*

There comes a time in everyone's life when there is an opportunity to make a decision that may alter the course of one's life path. For Lyle Gold, his opportunity arrived when he decided to build a boat to race, in the Westmoreland "Milk Carton Boat Races" in 1973.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, so let's start from the beginning.

Growing up in the Milwaukie neighborhood near S.E. 77th and King Road, Lyle enjoyed a variety of adventures, as most other boys did during the 1960s and 1970s. As Lyle told me during a phone interview, "We had one of the first homes in the area." This portion of Milwaukie had a scattering of a few small farms and cottages, and Portland's spreading housing developments had not yet reached it. The Horace family lived across the street from the Gold; the Woods household was opposite and one house up; and the Spinass family lived next door.

The steep hill they all lived on often turned into a sledding slope during the winter, as did 74th and 78th. Thousands of young people carted their sleds, flat cardboard pieces, and homemade devices, to ride down the slippery hill – spending the whole day outdoors. And, at dusk, moms would call from their front porches that it was "time to come in for

the evening”. Hot Chocolate and fresh-baked cookies usually awaited the boys after a cold day outdoors.

Lyle Gold’s dad, Alan E. Gold, worked as a mechanical engineer at the Thomas F. Taylor architectural firm in the old Simpson Building in Northwest Portland. On many occasions, when he had to work on Saturdays, he took his two boys, Lyle and Lloyd, with him. Although most of the time, the boys were confined to activities inside the office, Lyle does remember the thrill of riding the elevator up and down, and the fun of having lunch at one of the many big restaurants in downtown Portland.

It certainly didn’t take much to entertain the Gold Boys, which was fortunate – not only did their dad work long hours, but so did their mom, Alice, waitressing at an Elmer’s Pancake House.

So it was there, on the big hill near his house, that Lyle – along with his best buddies Larry, John, and Mike, and his brother Lloyd – would spend weekends scouring for crawdads in the river, playing on the nearby Pee Wee baseball team, or cruising down the hill on their bikes.

In 1973, at just eleven years old, Lyle embarked on a new adventure and a new responsibility when he came across an advertisement for a “boat race”. Lyle now isn’t sure if he saw the application to enter the contest in a newspaper, or if it came in the mail, but he knew this was something he could do on his own: Build a boat out of empty milk cartons and paddle it across a pond to the finish line. It was the first annual Milk Carton Boat Race at Westmoreland Park, then sponsored by the Dairy Farmers of Oregon, and he wanted to be a part of it.

This boat race was special to Lyle, in that he would have the responsibility of building a boat from scratch, all by himself, and then he would pilot it across the historic Casting Pond in the park, all without relying on his parents for help. This was Lyle’s own idea, but all his friends were excited to assist by gathering milk cartons throughout the neighborhood for him, and even to help put the watercraft together.

What started out as an adventure for Lyle soon involved the whole neighborhood. All the ladies in the community helped save up milk cartons for when the boys would come around asking for them. Lyle explained, “A platform was built with a hole in the middle, and the milk cartons had to be glued together.” When they found out the glue they were using wouldn’t hold the cartons together, someone suggested stapling the cartons together. With no instructions included on the race application back then, and few rules, Lyle said, “I was smart enough to know I had to seal the milk cartons up, to keep the raft afloat – and staples would puncture them and let out the air so they wouldn’t float.”

It was hard to know how many milk cartons would be needed for what Lyle estimated would build a 6-by-6-foot boat, so the gang continued collecting empty milk cartons until the last day and were still gluing them together late in the night before the start of the races.

This boat project took a six-week chunk out of the boys' summer that year. On the morning of the races, another problem cropped up. The boys weren't sure if the boat would fit into the back of Lyle's mother's VW microbus! But, with effort, they slid the wobbly boat into the back of the vehicle.

As they arrived at Westmoreland Park, they found it filled with people, and alive with an electric atmosphere of excitement. Hundreds of people had turned out for the races; vendors were selling hot dogs, hamburgers, and serving ice cream. The "Gold Team" boys paraded about, all dressed in matching white USA tank tops, decorated with stars and stripes, for a show of team unity.

When Lyle took a good look at the other contestants' boats, it was clear to him right away that the other milk carton boats were probably built by the contestants' parents.

By the start of the race Lyle was anxious and ready. "It was empowering to be competing against other boys older than me. I was the youngest one in the race!"

Once the starting pistol was fired, and the race began, everyone in it vigorously paddled. "I started rowing across the pond, and then I noticed my boat was falling apart," he said. Some of the lashing holding it together had come undone – but, not panicking, Lyle worked to pull the strings back together – "while I used my feet and arms to paddle the boat across the pond."

The boat was in pieces by the time he crossed the finish line, and he got so engrossed in the process that he wasn't even sure if he had even finished the race or not. But it was the excitement of the competition that carried him through to the end of the race.

At the finish line, a television crew chose to interview Lyle, and the next day an article about eleven-year-old Lyle – the youngest in the race – appeared in "The Oregonian". He was even able to see himself on television during his interview that evening. There was no other boat that looked like Lyle's, and it attracted all of the attention of the spectators that day.

As Lyle reflected on that special day, he commented, "I didn't win the boat race, but I got the biggest prize – I received all of the attention!"

When I asked Lyle what happened to that milk carton boat after the race, he said, "I think it ended up in the disposal bin." But Lyle Gold credits that day with inspiring him to always reach beyond his comfort zone: He earned a degree in Physics at UCLA, and since then has traded his milk carton boat for kayaking on the lakes of British Columbia in Canada.

Lyle Gold and some of his former classmates plan on attending this year's Milk Carton Boat Races at Westmoreland Park – as spectators, this time – on Sunday, June 28, midday at the Casting Pond. That's where it is still presented these days, but now by the

Royal Rosarians – and it's the last official event of each year's Rose Festival. It's free to enter, and free to attend. And even now, as this article appears, it's definitely NOT too late to register and participate.

Lyle is hoping to support some of the younger racers who will be entering for the very first time and cheer them on. And maybe you'd like to be there too? It makes for a great family afternoon of fun!

Connie Shipley, the 2026 2026 Royal Rosarian Milk Carton Boat Race Co-Chair, is encouraging everyone of any age to go online and find out more at – <https://royalrosarians.com/page/milk-carton-boat-race>