Cathlamet

People and Place

Location

Cathlamet is on the north bank of Cathlamet Channel on the Columbia River in southwestern Washington. Situated in Wahkiakum County, the town encompasses 0.4 square miles of land. The nearest major U.S. city is Portland, Oregon, a 74-mile drive southeast. Cathlamet’s geographic coordinates are lat 46°12’12”N, long 123°22’55”W.

Demographic Profile

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Cathlamet’s population was 565, an increase of 11.2% from 508 in 1990. The gender composition was 55.2% female and 44.8% male. Women 75 years of age and older (52.1%) significantly outnumbered men (47.9%). Residents 75 years of age and older represented 18% of the population in Cathlamet, compared to 5% of the national population. The community’s skewed age structure may be related to the census count of individuals living in the Columbia View Nursing Home, an elder care facility with 53 beds. In 2000 the median age of 48.8 was almost 14 years older than the national median age of 35.3. Of the population 18 years of age and older, 83.5% had a high school education (including equivalency) or higher, 17.9% had earned a bachelor’s degree or higher, and 7.7% had attained a graduate or professional degree; the national averages were 79.7%, 22.3%, and 7.8% respectively. For 25.8% a high school degree was the highest level of education.

The vast majority of Cathlamet’s racial structure recorded by the 2000 U.S. Census was white (94.2%), followed by people who identified as two or more races (2.5%), American Indian or Alaskan Native (1.6%), Asian (0.9%), black (0.5%), and people who identified as another race (0.4%). Ethnicity data indicate 0.5% identified as Hispanic. In 2000 2.5% were foreign-born, with 78.6% from Europe (Great Britain, Ireland, and Austria) and 21.4% from Mexico.

In 2000 there were 236 households in Cathlamet, with 68% living in family households. Due to the Columbia View Nursing Home and another assisted living facility located within the community, 10.3% (57 residents) lived in institutionalized group quarters.
History

Cathlamet derives its name from a band of Chinook Indians living along the stretch of the Columbia River from Tongue Point to Puget Island. The Cathlamet band inhabited a large village in the vicinity of the modern town of Cathlamet and participated heavily in the salmon trade on the Columbia River. They spoke a distinct dialect of the Chinook language. When Lewis and Clark visited the area in 1806, they estimated the native population of Cathlamet at 300. As European exploration and settlement escalated, the Cathlamet band was largely displaced and incorporated into neighboring Chinook groups. Many descendants of these native groups remain in the region today.

In 1846 James Birnie, a Scottish immigrant and a member of the Hudson’s Bay Company, established a small trading post at the site of contemporary Cathlamet. He named the post Birnie’s Retreat and made his reputation facilitating trade between native residents, European settlers, and entrepreneurs traveling along the Columbia River. Birnie’s Retreat grew and was eventually renamed Cathlamet as settlers arrived in the region to take advantage of opportunities for logging, fishing, and farming. Cathlamet became the Wahkiakum county seat in 1854 and was officially incorporated in 1907.

Logging and fishing dominated the economic and social life of Cathlamet until the latter part of the twentieth century. Beginning in the 1840s a number of successful lumber mills in the Cathlamet vicinity harvested and processed softwoods (mainly cedar and fir) and furniture-grade maple and alder for export. Prominent lumber, pulp, and paper companies, such as Crown-Zellerbach and Weyerhaeuser, remained major employers within the region until the onset of the timber industry’s steep decline in the 1980s. At its Cathlamet mill, Crown-Zellerbach annually employed approximately 260 workers from 1961 until 1981, when it initiated its first substantial wave of layoffs. Today several smaller logging companies operate near Cathlamet and self-employed contractors continue to log on land owned by Weyerhaeuser and other major forest product manufacturers. Some neighboring communities still support paper and pulp mills, but the scale of these logging enterprises has diminished greatly.

Like the logging industry, commercial and recreational fishing in Cathlamet have undergone dramatic transformations over the past 100 years. Native populations and early European settlers depended heavily on the abundance of salmon in the Columbia River. The early salmon trade in Cathlamet focused on salting and exporting fish purchased from native fishermen. In the 1860s entrepreneurs constructed numerous salmon canning facilities throughout the region. These canneries quickly became significant employers. Operations such as the Warren and Waterford canneries in Cathlamet initially owned boats and equipment and employed fisherman to harvest salmon. As the cost of fishing technology rose, canneries began contracting with self-employed fisherman but continued to advance fisherman the cost of gear until the 1970s. Area fishermen mainly harvested salmon via gillnetting, but traps and seines also were popular technologies. During the height of the salmon boom, Wahkiakum County canneries processed 85% of the salmon pack on the Columbia River.

The salmon industry crashed throughout the Cathlamet region in the latter part of the twentieth century, and the last cannery operating in Wahkiakum County closed in 1994. Despite the decline of the salmon industry, commercial fishing remains an important industry in Cathlamet. Salmon gill-net fishing continues, but decreased fishing effort in the area has made it more difficult to fund channel maintenance necessary to prevent damage to nets. To supplement income earned by fishing on the Columbia River, some commercial fishermen based in Cathlamet travel to Alaska seasonally or fish in nearby Willapa Bay, Grays Harbor, or Puget Sound. Some also engage in albacore tuna trolling on the coast. In 1971 the Town of Cathlamet constructed the Elochoman Slough Marina, which is used heavily by sport fishermen seeking sturgeon on the Elochoman River or salmon on the Columbia River. Sportfishing plays an increasing role as a revenue generator for the town. The Cathlamet Town Council also constructed a public dock on the Columbia River in the 1980s to attract fishermen, kayakers, and other river travelers.

Today Cathlamet maintains a working commercial waterfront and symbolic links to its history as a logging community, but the town also is increasingly reliant on its status as a destination for tourists and other
recreational visitors. Many homes and public buildings in Cathlamet are more than a century old, making the town a popular site for film crews; the community has been featured in at least two major motion pictures. Several events are held throughout the year, including Bald Eagle Days, celebrating local history and honoring the contributions of groups and individuals to community service. The Cathlamet Wooden Boat Festival & Salmon Barbeque, held each year at the Elochoman Marina, celebrates the community’s economic and cultural dependence on the Columbia River and the Pacific Ocean. Educational and entertaining festival activities include a wooden boat-building contest, a U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) fly-over and mock water rescue, a nautical swap meet, and blindfolded dinghy races.

Infrastructure

Current Economy

At the time of the 2000 U.S. Census, 43.6% of Cathlamet’s potential labor force 16 years of age and older were employed, 4.7% were unemployed, and the unemployment rate was 9.7% (calculated by dividing the unemployed population by the labor force). In addition, 51.7% were not in the labor force, compared to the national average of 36.1%. The major employment sectors were education health, and social services (29.7%, with the majority [77.6%] in health care and social assistance), local, state, and federal governments (24.4%), public administration (11.3%), manufacturing (10.8%), and arts, entertainment, and food services (10.3%). Natural resource jobs, including agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting employed 11.3%, but this number may be artificially low because it does not include fisherman, loggers, and other contractors classified as self-employed.

The contemporary economy in Cathlamet relies heavily on jobs in health care, education, public administration, and businesses related to the longtime regional staples of tourism, fishing, and logging. Major employers include the Columbia View Nursing Home, regional hospitals in Longview (25 miles southeast) and Astoria, Oregon (31 miles west), the Cathlamet Town and Wahkiakum County governments, Wahkiakum School District 200, the nearby Judith Butler Hansen National Wildlife Refuge, and the Elochoman Slough Marina. Some Cathlamet residents work for local logging contractors and others commute to manufacturing jobs in nearby communities, such as the Longview Fiber Company’s pulp and paper mill. Although its importance has decreased some over the years, the Columbia River still generates considerable economic activity. Brusco Tug & Barge, a tow outfit based in Longview, operates a maintenance facility in Cathlamet, and local commercial fishermen seine, trap, and engage in gill netting for salmon and other marketable species in the area. A substantial number of Cathlamet fishermen now fish seasonally in Alaska, where they may be able to earn more income than by fishing regionally.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the per capita income in 1999 was $18,588 and the median household income was $33,409. In 1999 15.1% lived below the poverty level, slightly higher than the national average of 12.4%. There were 278 housing units in 2000, with 56.9% owner occupied and 43.1% renter occupied. The housing unit vacancy rate was 11.5%, with 34.3% due to seasonal, recreational, or occasional use.

Governance

Because its population falls well under the 1,500 needed to incorporate as a city under Washington State law, Cathlamet is designated as a town. The Town of Cathlamet was incorporated in 1907 and is governed by a mayor and a five-member town council. As the Wahkiakum County seat, Cathlamet houses the main office and services associated with the county government. Wahkiakum County and the Town of Cathlamet levy a 7.5% sales tax and no additional lodging tax. See the Governance subsection (page 43) in the Overview section for a more detailed discussion of taxes affecting fisherman and processors in Washington.

The nearest National Marine Fisheries Service Northwest Regional Office is in Seattle. The nearest U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services District Office and the nearest meetings of the Pacific Fishery Management and North Pacific Fishery Management councils are in Portland. The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) Southwest Regional Office is in Vancouver (65 miles). The nearest USCG Group/Air Station Astoria is in Warrenton, Oregon (37 miles west), and the USCG operates the National Motor Lifeboat School in Ilwaco (51 miles west).

Facilities

Cathlamet is accessible by land and water. Washington Highway 20, the Ocean Beach Highway, is on the north edge of town and runs east-west along the Columbia River. Cathlamet residents must use it to reach the nearest airports, hospitals, and other amenities. Interstate 5 is the nearest major highway north-south and is reachable via Washington Highway 20 through Longview. Portland International Airport is the nearest major airport. The Kelso-Longview Regional Airport (26 miles) in Kelso provides an unattended paved runway.
that is open to the public. The Astoria Regional Airport provides certified carrier operations.

The Wahkiakum School District 200 serves all residents countywide. Both of the schools—Wahkiakum High School and J. Wendt Elementary/Wahkiakum Middle School, a combined K-8 facility—are in Cathlamet. The Wahkiakum Public Utilities District, headquartered in Cathlamet, administers electric services. The Cathlamet Water and Sewer Plants provide drinking water and sewer services. The Wahkiakum County Sheriff’s Office and the Cathlamet Fire Department administer public safety. The Hospice Care Center Hospital and Peacehealth St. John Medical Center in Longview and Columbia Memorial Hospital in Astoria are the nearest medical facilities.

The Elochoman Slough Marina is located within walking distance of downtown Cathlamet at the mouth of the Elochoman River. The marina is in a secluded, protected harbor and features a boat launch, spaces for yachts and fishing boats to moor overnight, and sites for recreational vehicles and tent camping. The marina charges $5 per boat for use of the launch and $10 per night for overnight mooring. The marina is used heavily during salmon and sturgeon seasons on the Elochoman and the lower Columbia rivers. The town also maintains a public dock and float on the Columbia River that draws fisherman and river tourists businesses. There are several bed and breakfasts located in Cathlamet, but the nearest major chain hotels are in Longview.

Involvement in West Coast Fisheries

Commercial Fishing

Landings data for Cathlamet were recorded as part of the Other Columbia River Port Group that includes the Washington communities of Altoona, Brookfield, Camas, Carrolls, Kalama, Longview, Pillar Rock, Skamania, Washougal, Vancouver, Stella, Ridgefield, Puget Island, Megler, Kelso and Frankfort, and the Oregon communities of Gray’s Bay, Woody Island, and The Dalles. Reported landings for this port group in 2000 were in the following West Coast fisheries (data shown represent landings in metric tons/value of said landings/number of vessels landing) was: salmon 354 t/ $481,947/355; shellfish confidential/confidential/1; and other species 34 t/$127,830/119. Commercial fishing remains a lucrative sector of Cathlamet’s economy, but the community’s involvement in local West Coast fisheries has waned since the crash of the area’s salmon industry. Because there are no longer any processors or canneries located in the community, fish caught by fishermen living in Cathlamet are most likely landed and processed elsewhere.

In 2000 Cathlamet fisherman involved in the West Coast fisheries owned 37 vessels, including 15 that participated in the federally managed groundfish fishery. The number that participated in each said fishery by state (WA/OR/CA) was: crab 2/2/0, groundfish 0/0/NA, highly migratory species NA/0/NA, salmon 12/14/1, shellfish NA/0/NA, shrimp NA/0/0, and other species 6/0/0. No individuals living in Cathlamet in 2000 held federal groundfish fishery permits. The number in each said fishery by state (WA/OR/CA) was: crab 4/1/0, highly migratory species NA/0/0, other species 7/0/0, salmon 25/14/1, shellfish 6/0/NA, and shrimp 2/0/0. Available data indicate 47 state permits were registered to Cathlamet residents in 2000. The number in each said fishery by state (WA/OR/CA) was: crab 5/0/0, highly migratory species NA/0/0, salmon 32/0/2, shellfish 0/0/NA, and other species 8/0/0.

Sportfishing

Cathlamet is a popular destination for sport fishermen because of its proximity to the Elochoman and Columbia rivers. According to the WDFW, there are two official sport license vendors in Cathlamet. In 2000 no Cathlamet residents owned or operated charter boats in Washington State.

A number of Cathlamet residents engage in sportfishing along the Columbia River and the nearby Pacific Coast. Numerous charter vessels operate out of the Port of Cathlamet, such as motor vessel Lucky Dog, owned by Sea Breeze Charters in Ilwaco. Cathlamet is also a popular boat-launching site for local anglers fishing for trout, salmon, and steelhead on the Columbia River.

The closest Catch Record Card areas to Cathlamet are Area 1 (Ilwaco) and 1A (Ilwaco–Buoy 10). Area 1 includes the marine zone west of the Buoy 10 line at the mouth of the Columbia River, extending north to Leadbetter Point. Area 1 is subdivided and includes Area 1A. Area 1A is the freshwater region east of Buoy 10, continuing west along the Columbia River to the Rocky Point-Tongue Point line. The 2000–2001 sport catch, based on creel survey estimates in these areas, was 27,889 (1) and 16,335 (1A). This data (1/1A) include Chinook salmon (1,630/2,972) and coho salmon (26,259/13,363). Marine anglers made 16,243 trips in Area 1 and 42,061 trips in Area 1A. Sport fishermen caught 106 steelhead in Area 1A. The coastal bottomfish catch was 8,388 for Area 1 and 631 for the Ilwaco Jetty.
Subsistence

Subsistence hunting, fishing, and gathering activities are fundamental to the way of life of some coastal community members. Tribal and nontribal individuals participate in subsistence fishing. Today members of the Chinook Tribe and other nontribal subsistence fishermen may obtain fishery resources from waters of the Columbia and nearby tributaries near Cathlamet. However, subsistence fishing is not discussed in great detail in this community profile due to the lack of available data.

Involvement in North Pacific Fisheries

Commercial Fishing

Since the crash of the local salmon fishery, many commercial fishermen based in Cathlamet have become increasingly involved in North Pacific fisheries. In 2000 Cathlamet fishermen owned 38 vessels active in North Pacific fisheries. In the same year community members landed fish in the following North Pacific fisheries (data shown represent landings in metric tons/value of said landings/number of vessels landing): crab confidential/confidential/1; finfish confidential/confidential/1; Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands (BSAI) groundfish confidential/confidential/1; Gulf of Alaska (GOA) groundfish 49.5 t/$479,390/4; halibut confidential/confidential/1; herring confidential/confidential/2; and salmon 725.7 t/$784,650/26.

In 2000 65 Cathlamet residents held state and federal permits, with 10 individuals holding federal permits and 47 holding state permits (note: it is possible for individuals to hold more than one permit at a time). Community members held 2 crab and 2 groundfish License Limitation program permits and 3 crab, 6 BSAI groundfish, 2 halibut, 3 herring, and 44 salmon Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission permits. Cathlamet residents held 1,644,188 halibut and 1,952,810 sablefish individual fishing quota shares.

In 2000 55 Cathlamet residents held crew member licenses for North Pacific fisheries.

Sportfishing

Cathlamet residents purchased 53 Alaska sportfishing licenses in 2000.

Notes

2. See note 1.
3. See note 1.
4. See note 1.
11. NA refers to data that were not available, for example, due to few or no recorded permit numbers, or the partially permitted nature of a fishery in 2000.
12. See note 11.
13. See note 11.