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Editorials & Opinion: Wednesday, November 05, 2003

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Beneath the bridge, traders of the Pacific

HEALTH

A reminder of the age of whaling, of steam and sail and of the incredibly hard work of old, maritime Seattle rests in the depths below the Evergreen Point Floating Bridge.

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What's left of the vessel Fresno, remnant of a very different time, has apparently been identified by divers and archeologists. The ship was docked in Bellevue, caught fire, burned rapidly down to its oil-soaked decks and was towed from shore to finally sink into the bottom of **Lake Washington**.

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Imagine, for a moment, Bellevue as a port supporting the whaling industry: The shores of Meydenbauer Bay are cluttered with ships' goods and men of a robust, Pacific whaling fleet. Ships steam across **Lake Washington** and haul supplies to Alaska and whale oil back.

The village of Bellevue provides compasses and other specialized equipment to a thriving maritime life. The economy is booming in the postwar years of the early 1920s and jobs pay well for hard and often dangerous work. The time is just at the edge of the age of commercial flight, and ships form the only reliable link to Alaska.

The Fresno's final days were not particularly grand. In 1923, after the fire, the vessel sat at water level, was sold for \$1, abandoned again and finally sent to the bottom of the **lake** out of the way of commercial shipping.

But not out of the way of a new Highway 520 bridge 80 years later.

Among the wrecks at the bottom of **Lake Washington**, perhaps three may be in the way of an expanded bridge. The \$1.5 billion to \$3.4 billion rebuild of the current floating bridge may require cables just where the Fresno lies in 200 feet of water.

The Fresno is a reminder of the temporary nature of each commercial age. It is also another episode in the maritime history of the region — a history rich in success, tragedy and irony as the Fresno came to rest just at the place where it would interfere with traffic again.

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