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■ TILIKUM now sits in Maritime Museum. Liz Webster is writing a paper on boat's historic voyage.

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Tilikum's famous captain died 70 years ago today

By Patrick Murphy

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Today marks the 70th anniversary of the death of one of Victoria's most famed adventurers, who sailed a native whaling canoe more than halfway around the world only to die an unknown as a jitney operator in a small California town.

The saga of Captain John Voss started in 1901 in his waterfront hotel at the foot of Johnson Street. He was challenged by newspaperman Norman Luxton to better the 1898 feat of Captain Joshua Slocum, who sailed his 12-ton Spray around the world single-handed.

Voss was to take the 11½-metre Tilikum 65,000 kilometres from Victoria through three oceans. Three years, three months and 10 days later he would land at Margate, England to confound the experts who doubted such a voyage was possible.

The same Tilikum, once battered and broken, is now restored and is the main display at the Maritime Museum of B.C., said museum education director Liz Webster in an interview Wednesday.

Webster is writing a paper on the Voss voyage based on the adventurer's own journals and published works by the master mariner and his mates.

The museum, in conjunction with the Fannin Foundation of the Royal B.C. Museum, puts on a special program March 19 to 22 about Voss, native canoe builders and navigation.

"This commemorates the amazing voyage of the Tilikum," said Webster.

"He sailed 40,000 miles in a dug-out."

Webster said Voss had 12 different mates with him at different times in the voyage. One fell overboard and another jumped ship after just leaving the harbor.

The mariner documented seeing sharks, dolphins, sea snakes, flying fish, sea monsters and mermaids on the voyage.

"After the mate was lost overboard with the compass in his hands, Voss proceeded to sail 1,200 miles alone and with no compass," said Webster. "During that stretch, his foremast broke. He was losing hope, but realized he was the only one who could right the situation. He took one of the oars and made it into a new mast."

The Tilikum was a Nuu-Chah-Nulth whaling canoe built by Old Moses in Kelsemat about 1895.

Voss had it refitted on Galiano Island with a keel, oak frames and

a small cabin and a mast to carry a sail.

The gunwales were built up for the open sea and all running gear led to the cockpit for central control.

Yet despite the custom work and the fame of the day, Voss remains somewhat of a mystery and his feat all but unknown in Victoria.

This 45-year-old, German hotel keeper who sailed the world is barely remembered.

Voss went to Ecuador for a business venture, but civil war drove him back to Victoria in 1905 where he bought the Francis Hotel on Yates Street and became coxswain of the first lifeboat on the Canadian west coast.

Three years later he left for Japan as captain of a sealer until 1911.

In 1913 he left for the south seas, but was never heard from and presumed to be lost at sea.

It was in 1922 that Victorians got word he had died in Tracy, Calif., where he drove the town jitney.

Voss was belittled for his claims of daily voyages of 200 to 240 kilometres. One day, he said he travelled 285 kilometres.

Webster said the logs appear accurate.

The first mate — Luxton the newspaperman and promoter — quit the voyage in the South Pacific and tried to convince Voss to give it up.

Voss got another mate and carried on. Luxton caught up to him in New Zealand and again tried to dissuade him from the trip with a warning from a fortune teller, but Voss ignored him and continued on to England.

The captain raised funds at his ports of call by displaying the Tilikum and giving lectures.

On arrival in England on Sept. 4, 1904, he was hailed as a hero. The Tilikum was put on display in Earl's Court and Voss was made a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society.

Voss had not made it around the world, but he had made a considerable voyage in a tiny vessel.

The Tilikum was sold and an engine installed, but the boat was later abandoned on a mud flat.

It was shipped to Victoria on the deck of a Furness-Withny passenger freighter in 1930. Thirty years later, it was restored and displayed in the museum.