

...Astoria: A look back

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were fewer and smaller than before, and canneries began to talk about starting hatcheries.

Shrinking salmon runs put pressure on the fishermen. In 1896, the Columbia River Fisherman's Protective Union led a strike against the packers. The strike was ended when cannery owners agreed to pay four-and-a-half cents per pound. But once the gill-netters were back to work, the cannery owners reneged on the deal, and offered just two cents per pound. In response, a group of about 200 fishermen pooled resources to form their own cannery: the Union Fishermen's Cooperative Packing Co. Formed in 1897, the co-op was highly successful, and led competing canneries to join together in the Columbia River Packers Association.

Of the immigrant communities of turn-of-the-century Astoria, Finns were the most numerous, and the most radical, says Liisa Penner, archivist at the Clatsop County Historical Society. Most lived in a neighborhood known as Uniontown, named after the short-lived Union Cannery, which had been founded by Finnish fishermen in 1882. In 1904, members of Astoria's Finnish community

founded the Astoria Finnish Socialist Club, which soon became an important economic and social institution locally. They also began a Finnish-language socialist newspaper, *Toveri*, in 1907, which peaked in 1916 at a daily circulation of 4,000, larger than any other Astoria newspaper. The jewel of the Astorian Finnish socialists was a magnificent four-story hall built in 1910. It included a clothing and tobacco store, a library, a labor office where people could go to find work, a space for meetings and performances, and a pool hall. The socialist club also set up sports groups, a choir and orchestra, and theater groups.

Astoria's socialist community was a part of a growing national socialist movement led by former railroad union leader Eugene V. Debs. The party called for publicly-sponsored unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, and compensation for injured workers; and a graduated income tax, public ownership of utilities, and women's right to vote. Most of those things are law today, but the Socialist Party that first proposed them was hounded and harassed into obscurity during and after World War I. The party opposed the war, and once the United States entered the war in April



Canneries once ran virtually the length of Astoria's waterfront. But salmon runs declined. Astoria's last cannery closed in 1980.

1917, socialists all across the country faced government repression and vigilante violence.

In Astoria, four employees of *Toveri* were arrested under the Espionage Act, accused of inciting rebellion among soldiers and sailors. Two were convicted in U.S. District Court in Portland, and served a year in Washington's McNeil Island Penitentiary until a pardon by President Woodrow Wilson. And the American Legion — formed by returning soldiers to target polit-



ical radicals who had protested the war — established a post in Astoria in 1919. Its first act was to wage a boycott of advertising in *Toveri*.

In the decades after the war, Chinese cannery workers, radical Finns, and people in general disappeared from Astoria — along with the salmon that brought them. Astoria's population peaked in 1920 at about 14,000. Since then, while Oregon's population has more than quadrupled, Astoria's has fallen steadily, and today it has fewer than 10,000 inhabitants.

The Astoria Finnish Socialist Club building was destroyed in 1923 by a fire, the cause of

which was never determined. Where it once stood today sits the Dunes Motel on Marine Drive.

A Labor Temple constructed in 1924 still provides office space to AFSCME Local 2746 and Teamsters Local 58, and meeting space for local members United Food and Commercial Workers Local 555 and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. But it's best known locally as a dive bar featuring video poker and karaoke.

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