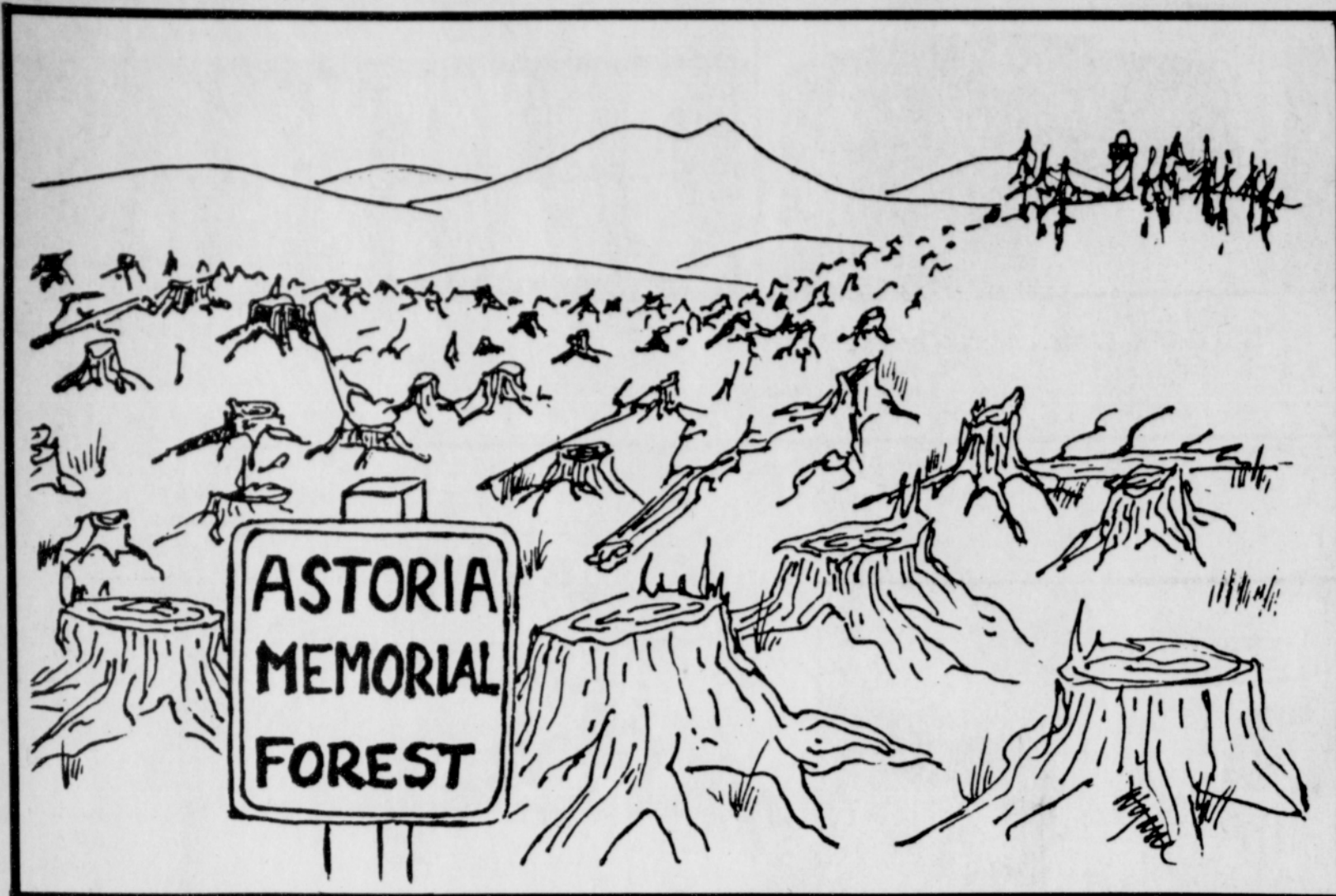




LISA WYNNE

The Alaskan hills seemed remote and visionary as the ferry rumbled north in July, 1974. A verdant forest rolled back into fjords and valleys toward unguessable wildness. My sister and I were on the last leg of a two-month bicycle trip that had taken us up the backbone of the Rocky Mountains. From Utah to Prince Rupert, British Columbia, and thence upon the sea to the lower tip of the southeast Alaskan panhandle. A quest into a fabled land searching for beasts and the wilds they thrive in. The mood amongst fellow travelers was jubilant, everyone anticipating an irreversible jump into new adventures. The captain announced our arrival at Ketchikan, first stop in Alaska.

The excited hum of talk faltered and died as we rounded a peninsula and got our first look at the city. Ketchikan is built on a hill very similar to Astoria. But the hillside above and behind the town was very different from Astoria's forested heights. Everyone stood in shock looking at the moonscape clearcut that came right down the hill to the edge of the city. A long moment of doubt passed through me as I considered having to spend time in a city of people who had done that to their home. My sister and I had seen many a clearcut on the journey north, but never one so indecently close to daily human contact. We didn't stay long in that town, for indeed the frontier mentality was greased and honed with public apathy and alcohol.

Recently Astoria came uncomfortably close to joining Ketchikan as a town with no aesthetic or biologic sensibilities. The urban forest which caps our hills with an emerald crown was threatened by a sizable clearcut. A big infusion of one-time cash had the city government actually laying plans to violate the integrity of our unique skyline. In the flurry of effort to educate the public as to the ultimate result of logging an acknowledged slide area it came to light that these groves included an old growth Sitka Spruce/Western Hemlock remnant, a now rare example of the major plant community originally covering these coastal mountains. Somehow, close to miraculously, this swale of ancientness survived at least two thorough cuttings of the hillsides, back when Astoria vied with Ketchikan for title of "City Where Money is Boss."

This astounding discovery was met with denial and apathy by members of the local timber industry. The city's forest consultant, who I assume came up with the original ill-conceived proposal to log, had actually cruised the tract and professed ignorance of the existence of any old growth. To top it off one gypo got up in the public meeting called to assess public sentiment and claimed that all clearcuts were beautiful.

Dismay grew towards anger as it became clear that this is one industry in need of some vigorous slaps of reality. One slap to awaken these individuals and agencies to the mandate of Multiple Use. Another to make said entities cognizant of harvest alternatives, less reliance on devastating clearcutting which would result in less habitat destruction and less impact on critical adjacent resources like water and slopes. The result would optimistically supplant the timber industry as the guiding voice in our public agencies (state, federal) that administer the public lands — supplant the voice of an industry that is like a fat spoiled child, as evidenced by the arrogance and ignorance of those representative loggers at the public meeting. These slaps might help put the industry back in its proper role as a few profiteers capitalizing on a public resource and might help to release the death grip that these individuals and corporations have on our natural heritage. As human members of the life zone of earth we are all stewards of the land, plants, animals, air and water. To have so few overwhelmingly impact the health of one of the most extensive and productive forests on earth (northwest coniferous) has got to change. If we as the public, the ultimate consumers of the wood products these forests supply, demand a new set of management priorities — these loggers had better heed the call.

As our knowledge of the natural systems that fuel the biodiversity of this planet grows and deepens, our sight begins to clear and we can just make out the precarious position that we as reapers and disrupters find ourselves in. A position that shows it is time to reevaluate our relationship with the earth and all other forms of life sharing it with us. The Astoria situation is indicative of the problem everywhere else in the Northwest. How will we resolve the seemingly conflicting needs of an intact viable ecosystem and the ravaged debauchery that is left when we harvest wood?

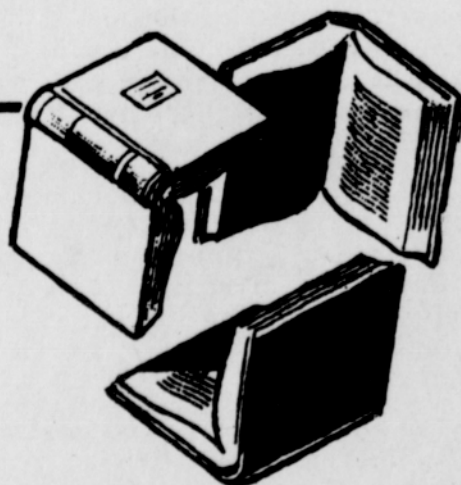
In the past few years a conviction has sprouted, grown and flowered in me. A knowledge that one of the major criteria for our success as the pinnacle species on this earth is acceptance of our role as the ultimate stewards of the universe. As we degrade or enhance other life forms' existence so goes our own. Allowing the nonmanipulated evolution of communities like our old growth coniferous woods is more than insuring biodiversity and resilience, it is the symbiotic growth of human and non towards acceptance. Acceptance of the universal scheme of things and our place in it, a realization that will lead to enlightenment.

Howard Bruner lives in Astoria.



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