

RUNNING FOR OFFICE:

AN INCOMPLETE RUMINATION

BY DOUG SWEET

Astoria politics, 1990, might have been the year of the beards. There were beards in every local race this year, but so far, only one has won. Grizzled Bob Ellsberg outpaced Daymon Edwards in the Ward 1 city council race to remain in his seat. Hirsute Doug Thompson polled the most votes in a three-way race for Ward 3, but still faces a run-off in the fall. I, of course, with only a goatee and mustache to my countenance, lost to our current mayor by a two to one margin.

I've been unable to detect a pattern in this in spite of several evenings spent poring over the precinct totals. My advisors, some of whom sport their own facial hair, are mostly mute on the subject although one of my best friends described the mayor's race as "the grandmother versus the Devil himself", when referring to our respective appearances. An early financial contributor who was an adult before I was born, delicately suggested I shave for the race. I just as delicately declined, citing the shock that would have raced through my already declared backers at seeing such a capitulation to the status quo — not to mention my naked face for the first time.

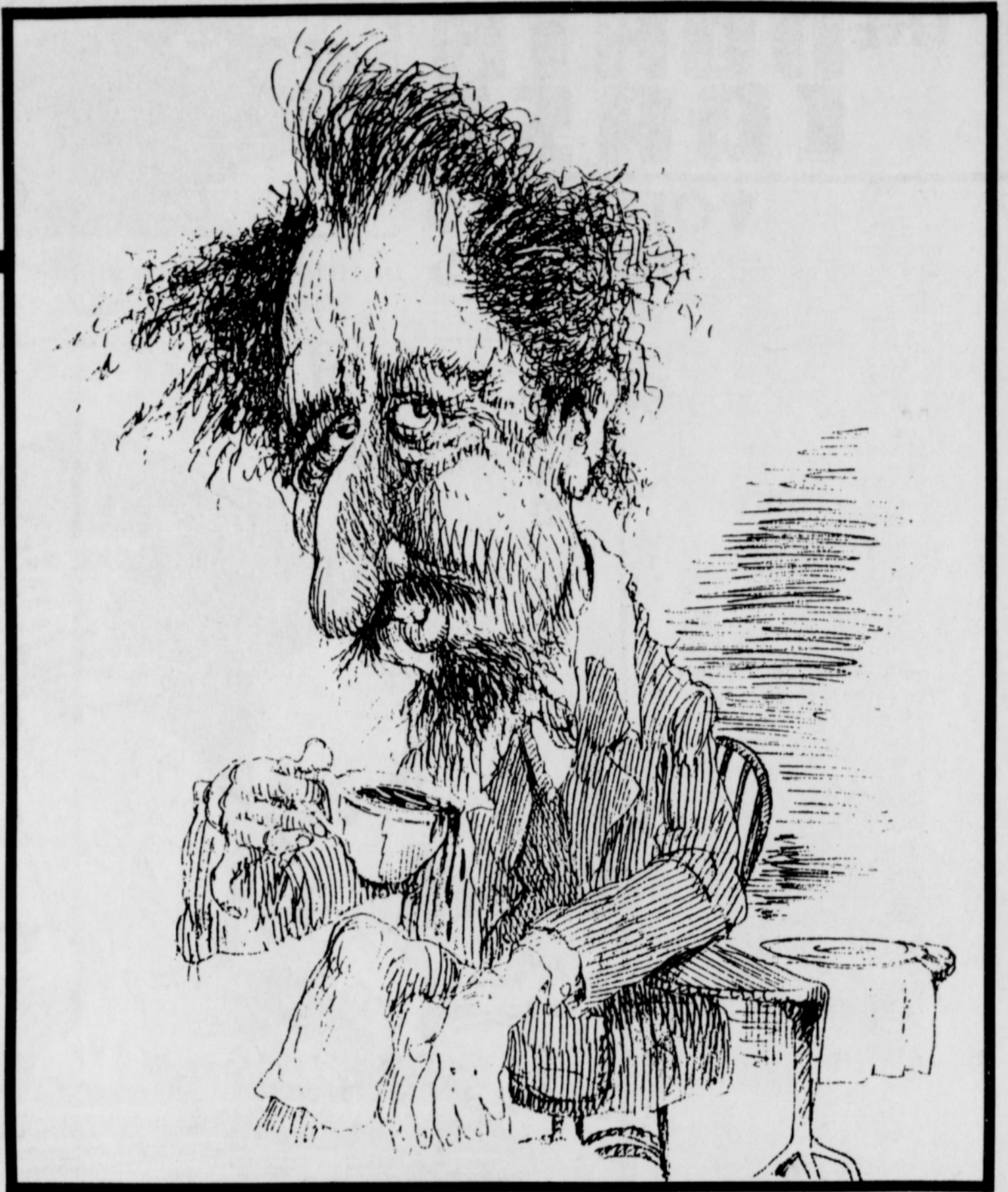
We can only speculate what the reaction would have been from the press and general public, had all the beards won outright and been seated simultaneously, joining the hairy-faced Loren Matthews on the council bench. Think what tremendous pressure that would have put on the shaving habits of poor Willis Van Dusen, not to mention our clean-cut city manager, Bob deLong.

One of my most treasured reading experiences in my formative and educational twenties was to read "Don Quixote," (I think it was assigned reading in high school but was mercifully blotted from my mind by the grading system.) Never let it be said that our personalities and basic tendencies are formed before we are six years old. Most of my adult characteristics, philosophy and politics were formed well after I served in the armed forces and I reached the legal age to both drink and vote. Ah, but Senor Quixote has stayed with me through the years with the result that I voted for Carter, Mondale and Dukakis and ran against Edith Henningsgaard for mayor of Astoria.

I had not intended to run for any public office, feeling that my credentials as a journalist and working skeptic would be greatly compromised by being actually elected to office. I was not wrong and it created the first crisis of confidence in the ability of my underlying philosophy to answer all questions of proper behavior. But in the manner of all public people, I forged ahead, picking up the forms and passing them around to the general public to see what would happen. (It takes a percentage of people voting in the last election to nominate someone to run for city office. In my case I needed about fifty-eight of my fellow citizens.) The petitions were soon complete, and the decision had to be made... to run or not to run? I took the time to invite our current mayor out for coffee and assure her this would be a race on the issues, not on mudslinging or personalities, and then I filed.

It is curious how when you are the loyal opposition, no matter how difficult the question an opinion can be formulated. I ran for mayor of Astoria because of some disagreements with the methods of decision making by the council and some of the, what I consider wrong-headed, decisions by the city council as a whole. But as the enormity of the decision to actually get out there and put myself and ideas to the test hit me, it became crashingly evident that some real thinking was needed to be done to prevent total humiliation at the hands of gimlet-eyed reporters of the press, or by the honest questions of the citizen-at-large. In other words, I found very quickly that it is not enough to be against something... one must also be ready to look into the future and formulate plans... and to be able to talk glibly about how to make things happen and above all, how to pay for those plans.

So I spent the first precious weeks of the campaign writing down everything I have ever known, studied, commented on, or criticized in city government. Then I walked around talking to just about anyone who would talk to me about their ideas about what was going on in city life, in government, and life in general.



DRAWING BY ROBERT BARRIOS

What an experience that is... you should try it sometime. What I came away with, and it became lesson number one — a candidate does not have to know all the answers him(or her)self. There are plenty of real thinkers out there from whom perfectly good answers may be shamelessly borrowed.

My next shock was the extent to which an outpouring of support and offers to help would inundate the telephone and mailbox. Checks came in the mail. Offers to help with telephoning, with canvassing (walking from door to door), with mailings came pouring in. (I even got a check from an old friend who lives in Australia... Tony Knight... who claims to never to have known a candidate for mayor in real life before.) So, in addition to having to think up a complete philosophy of city operations, there was the problem of putting twenty or thirty people to work on meaningful tasks before their patience and goodwill was exhausted.

Well, we did it. With the help of a good campaign manager, Robert Stevens, and a whole group of thinkers, writers, envelope stuffers and telephone callers, a campaign took shape by about the first week in April for the short, sharp run to the May 15 primary.

We put together a textbook campaign. We produced a brochure, secured the voter registration "walking list" (a list of registered voters by street address) and we divided up the city into sectors to be canvassed (by the end of the campaign we had knocked on about 90% of the doors in Astoria). We devised an advertising plan and a caller network to help get out the vote. And we went to meetings at all hours of the morning and night to get our message out to the waiting voters.

Perhaps the most curious thing about running for office is the experience of actually putting oneself out there to be poked, prodded and discussed. I found myself scratching my head about reports of what I was supposed to have said about some obscure point about trees or sewers (or was it building heights?) before some audience of promising voters. It isn't a matter of being misquoted as it is that the memory of what is said in the sweaty, damp-palmed center stage can often not be remembered precisely the next morning. (Next time I will tape all my speeches with a tiny, unobtrusive recorder.)

The most gratifying experience of the whole race was the genuine fun of walking through neighborhoods and talking with people out doing their yardwork or bantering with kids playing on the sidewalks, or being regaled with tales of past politics and glory by someone who has been around since Lewis and Clarke passed through. My knock on a door would often be answered by a homeowner with a look of suspicion or doubt, but almost always on finding a real live candidate on their doorstep, the

people would respond with a smile, a good luck or at least "I'll read your material"...

Well, I lost. No doubt about that. All those stories I've been reading about incumbents having the upper hand must be true... but I'll say this in all seriousness: I think Astoria is a much better place for having some real races for public office this year. And to all those who came out to help the candidates or who simply took the time to vote... and for all those who were vocal and took pen in hand to write a letter to the editor... and for all those who came out to coffees to talk for hours to a lonely candidate (and those who put on the coffees and invited dialogue)... my hat is off to you. Events in Eastern Europe and Asia have shown that representative democracy is where it's at... we can hardly do less here in America.

Doug Sweet is manager of the eclectic, community oriented and sponsored radio station, KMUN-FM, Radio Free Columbia/Pacific, which broadcasts from the Tillicum House in Astoria. The caricature of him by Robert Barrios was made in 1986.

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