



DRAWING BY ROSY REALTY

## RAINFOREST REALITY

Earlier this year President Bill Clinton flew over dead cows, flooded farms, mudslid houses and muddy river flood plains in Oregon and Washington. Did he remember his forest plan to curb clearcutting? (Or his serious error of not vetoing a Congressional bill that allows timber companies to destroy the last old growth forests?) Although a lot of other factors play into the disaster (torrential rains and early melting snow), the February floods cannot correctly be called a natural catastrophe (or "the hands of God" as a Daily Astorian article later said) because of the incessant clearcutting of our forests and intense urbanization of farmlands, in each case eliminating vegetation that used to soak up rainwater. Clearcutting and building on farmland are changing the hydraulics of the Pacific Northwest.

Runoff from four days of heavy rain combined with melting snow in the mountains created the worst flood conditions in at least three decades, since the infamous 1964 flood. Rainwater ran off bare slopes and stripped off their topsoil. Rivers rose over their banks and covered farms, towns and suburbs. Highways were flooded, landslides blocked roads and buried houses; hundreds were forced to leave their homes because of floods and slides. People were killed, including a 9 year old girl who fell down a culvert and drowned while getting her family's mail and an elderly woman who died when her house was swept into a river by floodwater. Oregon and Washington were declared disaster areas.

Logging roads and clearcuts were responsible for much of the flooding on the Oregon coast. Some of the logged over lots that spewed floodwaters had been sold for cutting by some of the people flooded out. (The artist of the cartoon at the top of this page lives on the north coast. She knows a few people whose homes and property were damaged had sold off timber and the subsequent runoff flooded them. She has mixed feelings for the plight of these folks, less sympathetic at their loss.)

Astoria escaped the worst of the flood, though a few of its houses started to slide down the city's spongy mud/clay hills, and debris from upriver flowed downriver past the city rendering navigation hazardous (more than a dozen ships stayed anchored in the river in front of the city rather than risk a gantlet of floating houses and trees attempting to reach upriver ports). All of Astoria is a slide area, a lump of mud falling into the Columbia River.

The Upper Left Edge, published in Cannon Beach, made an eloquently cogent point:

*The rivers run through us... One thing that worries us is that we are downstream from everyone. The barrels they didn't catch on Sauvie's Island, the Round Up (pesticide) and anti-freeze stored in garages and barns that has washed downstream along with countless gallons of raw sewage; all this is bound to show up sooner or later. So along with free lumber and beach firewood there's a lot of nasty stuff out there. Be careful if you find some, and let folks know.*

The ground is drying despite newer rain. Tillamook dairy farmers are literally digging out while feeding their herds with donated hay from eastern Oregon and Texas. Mud and sludge continue to drain into the Columbia River and huge trees wash ashore on the ocean beaches. Yet people know the worst is over (for this year?). They wash the mud out of their homes and stores and think of Spring. Perhaps they also wonder if this year begins a two decade cycle of increasingly wet weather, the way it was on the Oregon coast when first settled by our predecessors. Or they might worry about the big earthquake predicted soon for the Pacific Northwest. Possibly the most ironic image of the "Great Flood of 1996" is that of a Nehalem River Valley farmer and his family who sat on piled haystacks in their barn attempting to escape rising water which leveled off just before it reached them.

### ASTORIA'S BIRTHDAY

Astoria, Oregon is 185 years old this year. The city is built on hills above the Columbia River a few miles inland from the Pacific Ocean. It expanded from a fort named after a New York fur baron, John Jacob Astor. He sent two teams of colonists (one by land, one by sea) to a hilly junction of the Columbia River and one of its aneurysms, Young's Bay. Lewis & Clark visited the area five years earlier. Astor's friend Thomas Jefferson gave the pelt czar a charter to establish an American outpost, which his exploring employees named Fort Astor in his honor. The date was April 12, 1811. The original settlers sold the fort to a Canadian fur company the following year rather than be captured by British arms during the War of 1812. Astoria was restored to its original name (the Canadians renamed it Fort George after the English king) and nationality after the war and Britain peacefully withdrew its claims to the Columbia River. The city's Chamber of Commerce claims in tourist literature that Astoria is the oldest U.S. city west of the Rocky Mountains. With the exception of a couple of older Spanish/Mexican towns expropriated as spoils of the 1846 war with Mexico, Astoria is actually the oldest city west of the Mississippi River that U.S. citizens founded.

Astoria is the end of the Oregon Trail and also a few transcontinental bicycle routes (or their beginning). It is also at the terminus of the Columbia River, named by its first white explorer, the Boston sailor/merchant Robert Gray after his ship *Columbia Rediviva*, Columbus Revived on the far end of the huge continent he accidentally bumped into on his way to India.

Astoria might have been a major sea/riverport if not for circumstances and a few bad calls. Its best years were *fin de siècle* last time. Salmon and timber were mainstay resources which for almost a century supported an extractive society

permeated with the odor of fish. In its most prosperous period a saloon was said to be situated every 13 steps with a brothel inbetween to handle rowdy thousands of loggers, seaman and farmers from small coastal valleys, many of whom were shanghaied to outbound ships by an army of crimps, madams and saloonkeepers. (The legendary Kewpie Ziak used to claim that Astoria "started going downhill when the red lights were taken off the whore houses and put on traffic signals.")

Astoria is a seacoast town which sends citizens onto the river and ocean and a number regularly disappear. For nearly a century most Astoria men were fishermen or worked with hundreds of women in dozens of fish canneries on the riverfront. Not many go near the water any more. Most of the fishing is gone and the forests are heavily logged. Tourism is replacing the depleted resource based economy by marketing Astoria's history, which is prettified for commercial consumption.

A century of rapacious logging and overfishing, the building of upriver dams and the Hanford Nuclear Reservation (which provided the plutonium for the second atomic bomb) killed the big salmon runs. The railroads went to Portland and Longview and the big ships followed, which killed Astoria as a major sea/riverport. Astoria has survived many disasters, including a fire in December 1922 that burned the heart out of its downtown. For locals it was as bad a fire as the more famous conflagrations in Rome, Chicago and San Francisco. (An earlier fire also ravaged the city's downtown core.)

Astoria is an unpolished city attempting to recover from hard times. Most of the timber industry is gone and fishing along the lower river has dwindled almost to vanishing. The canneries that bought the fish are gone. The waterfront that used to be so busy is virtually abandoned. Its cannery buildings are wrecked and falling apart, a forest of broken pilings eats into the river like bad teeth. Schemes to capture industry to revive the city's economy die in labor. Great plans are drawn up to transfigure the riverfront that are almost Athenian (but plagued with cost overruns and lack of outside interest). Having profited and

decayed from the ruination of its resources the city puts its money on tourism, thrusting forward as its lure for tourists its colorful but failed history.

Prosperity has several definitions but its usual meaning is material wealth. A city is prosperous if its industries and businesses are perking, most of its citizens are employed and living in sound houses in good health with good schools, libraries and entertainment, and are putting money into the city treasury. Astoria has no industry and a limited appeal to men and women of skills or business. Astoria possesses the moxie that built industrial America but the nation is painfully converting from production to services. Its purpose is to administrate the growing world economy and import its basic needs from the industrializing third world. Astoria is appendaged to a culture that is passing into a deflated middle age after two centuries of vigorous rise to the world's only superpower. What it has been is not only lost, it is unnecessary.

The momentum of history has two sides, such as being propelled to greater achievements as a result of the past, or its downside, history as a coffin with each passing moment or incident another nail hammering it shut. Prosperity and decline are temporary, a slipping from here to there. The millennium looms and this crowding earth is pushing into sparsely populated areas; halfway through the 21st century (if the human race has not imploded or poisoned itself off the planet) the population will exceed 6 billion. It should be expected that the moribund towns along the lower Columbia River will be repopulated and doubled or tripled in size and that an entirely new and incredibly larger than ever commerce will take place based on population needs instead of extracted resources. Only a catastrophe that eliminates civilization in the Pacific Northwest will prevent this region from filling up. The human flood wave that receded briefly in the economic downturn of the early '80s is sweeping upon us again, and Astoria might not be any place familiar to us before very long.

-MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER