

THE ONCE & FUTURE ASTORIA



DRAWINGS BY ROLF KLEP

BY MICHAEL McCUSKER

"Astoria is the Paris of the Columbia River."

~EGIL UNANDER

Before anything else you must remember that when the American ship *Columbus Reborn* entered the river that bears its name in the robust spring of 1792, a culture that had vibrantly dwelled on both shores for maybe 20,000 years at that moment began to become extinct.

The history we celebrate is our own cultural history — that which we supplanted has generally been ignored as insufficient and not worth popular study. Until recently. Now, a few generations removed from their obliteration as hemispheric monarchs, we are interested in them. So new are we that we might be regarded as an alien pustule growing from the skin of a leathery twenty millennia culture that was decimated by its parasitic guests. We know little of their history, assorted myths and a few bones to fill in the vast gaps of time in broadly general rather than individual narrative.

An example of this is reflected in the tattooed cartoons that swirl around the Astoria Column like stripes on a barber pole. Of all this fresco history (an art from the Renaissance which seems to have perished with the death of Column artist Attilio Perstula), only one panel predates Western discovery — *Before The White Man Came*. The Clatsop tribe whom the county is named after were gone long before Scandinavians got here in the late 19th century. By the 1840s they were virtually extinct as a people by smallpox and whiskey, traditionally weapons of colonization more ruinous than rifles. A few years ago an Astoria mayor criticized a chainsaw sculpture of a Clatsop chief. Her criticism was not justly artistic. She said it diminished Astoria's Scandinavian heritage and had to be reminded that the Chinook peoples (*Tshinuk* is an early attempt to phoneticize the name into European spelling) had residence along the lower Columbia for tens of millennia.

The mountainous surroundings of Astoria are a complicated geology of 200 million years of collision between the Pacific Ocean tectonic plate and the North American Continent. It is a volcanic and earthquake structured erosion of a once extensive formation of sharp peaks and rift valleys inundated by ocean and ice. Through all of this geology flows the second mightiest river of the continent, beginning in a glacier far up in Canada and ending its 1200 mile surge at the Pacific Ocean. That is the second thing to remember: that the river has always been Astoria's lifeblood. It was late for exploration by whites though used by natives for thousands of years. The Boston Captain Robert Gray sailed his ship into the river in May 1792 when everyone else of his contemporaries was certain or afraid the wild surf they saw breaking on shifting sandbars at its entrance was on a beach instead. Gray gave the river its current name (from his ship *Columbia Rediviva*), itself named after the Great Navigator who discovered the Western Hemisphere in his way of reaching India 300 years earlier; the Great River of the West (a variation of *Oregon* was a name for it) was almost immediately a gateway to Asia.

The European exploration and exploitation of the Pacific Northwest — Russians, English, Spanish and Americans newly

free from *insidious Albion* — is a microcosm of the immense forces of emigration and conquest set loose 300 years earlier when Columbus bumped into the western hemisphere on his way to India. Some celebrate, others bitterly denounce the intrusion of Europe into the Americas, which had existed comfortably apart from the rest of humanity for 20 millennia or so. Overcrowded and money hungry Europe poured into the newly "discovered" half of the world as if it were an empty plain and overran the native cultures as if they were not there or not worth consideration (as well as obliterating a large number of native species, which continues).

The Pacific Northwest has been a last small corner for Western exploration, with the exception of the Poles and Antarctica. The present tenants of the Columbia River inherit a legacy of raw exploitation and waste. The riches once so abundant have been despoiled, virtually all used up in a dozen generations. The great wild river has itself been tamed with dams, drained by irrigation and polluted as well as irradiated, the massive forests on both sides of its banks logged and supplanted with cities and farms, and the millions of salmon so numerous our descendants claimed they could cross the river on their backs have dwindled to only an endangered few.

Astoria is the oldest city of the American West. It started as a frontier fort in 1811 on a bump of hill above the wide river, the strategic port John Jacob Astor and his friend Thomas Jefferson thought might dominate the Pacific fur trade that the empires of Russia, Spain and England fought over. Astor, who desired to be the Fur King of the West, lost his pelt on the Astoria venture. He had not anticipated either the War of

1812 (when to avoid capture and pillage his employees sold Fort Astor to the British who renamed it Fort George after their king) or consolidation of the bitter rivals of Northwest Company (which had purchased Fort Astor) and Hudson's Bay, the premier capitalist empire in the "New World" for a couple of centuries, its fur hunters the great explorers of the Northwest. The combination forced Astor, the USA's first millionaire and slum lord, to sell his Pacific Fur Company (once again to the British) and concentrate on charging high rents for substandard dwellings to immigrants settling on the East Coast, principally Manhattan Island.

There was about a twenty year transition between the failure of the pelt market in Europe and China and the beginning of a century long prosperity of Astoria in the twin resource extraction industries of timber and fishing. The major transformation which has since defined Astoria was the beginning of fishing, initially in the river for the plentiful and sumptuous salmon. The city was the first downriver interception of the spawning salmon, and with the surge of fisherfolk from Scandinavia much of boomtown Astoria was built on pilings over the river because of the steep hills that rose from the river like cake layers. The immense Pacific Coast forest was beyond measure then, the ages of trees commensurate with their dimensions; thousands year old giants were decimated for an immediate human need for wood to build cities like Astoria. After nearly two centuries of unrelenting despoliation, the forest and the fish are just about gone.

The animal-skin clad frontiersmen we engage in loving myth of the frontier West did not last long in the Northwest. Not only were they victims of a market change of styles in Europe and Asia, they were engulfed by wagon train emigrants who left their dead on the prairies, deserts and mountains they voyaged across, and who brought the plow, the book and the bank.

Astoria was the end of the Oregon Trail. Lewis & Clark ended their transcontinental trek here, though namesake Astor never visited. The city's most prosperous period was during the late years of the 19th century when tallmasted ships and stern-wheel riverboats crowded its wharves and the river swarmed with the winged sails of fish boats. Its dozens of canneries sent fish all over the world. Scores of trains hauled canned salmon into the interior and thousands of tourists to the coast. For nearly a century most Astoria men were fishermen or worked with hundreds of women in the canneries. Yet this prosperity was costly. The river and ocean claimed an astonishing toll of vessels and crews: at least 2000 ships and boats are believed to have sunk near the river's entrance and about 700 persons have perished. (There are no known figures for native vessels and crews that met a similar fate over the thousands of years they fished in the river and ocean.) Astoria's families have mourned a long succession of parents, spouses, lovers, children, neighbors and shipmates.

Astoria was infamous in those rowdy *fin de siècle* years for its sleazy waterfront saloons and brothels, and for its open practice of shanghaiing; loggers, mariners, farmers and tourists were drugged or beat up and kidnapped aboard China-bound ships by an army of crimps, saloonkeepers and brothel madams. Crime and potent drugs were rampant; brawling and murder were common. And, of course, there were epic struggles between fishermen and cannery packers over the price of fish.

For a brief time Astoria had a population of nearly 30,000 (in the 1920s) and anticipated a peak of 100,000 — unabashedly promoting itself as the New York City of the Pacific Northwest — but the fish and trees that were to last forever were decimated in only a few generations.

BURNING BUMBLE BEE

(Thursday, 28 January 1993)

I am drinking brandy in the Ship Inn, looking out through a large window at the desolation and smoking ruins of the Elmore/Bumble Bee cannery. I came up here my first season as an albacore puller on an old California fish boat and unloaded at Elmore. Fifteen years later I spent the first couple of years I lived in Astoria spelunking through Elmore and Union canneries, both of which were important icons in Astoria's history, each closed and abandoned years before I prowled through their dark spaces, now each destroyed — Union by wreckers a few years ago and Elmore yesterday by accidental or premeditated inflammation.

My partner in most explorations was Paula Piukkula, third generation Finn whose grandparents worked in both canneries. We explored Union before its demolition, and while it was being taken apart we rummaged through records left to blow away with the rubble and found a few of her grandmother's paycheck duplicates from the 1930s. My most vivid memory of the two canneries is the large beautiful polished wood floor in the Elmore cafeteria which was built atop the main cannery building, its walls gleaming with windows that made the floor glow in even dull light and presented an ample view of the river, though a friend who once worked on the Elmore fishline said that all anyone could see were cannery roofs filled with shrieking hungry seagulls.

Paula and I walked, climbed and crawled through all the spaces remotely accessible in both canneries. Old machinery remained silently in place; cookers, cutting tables, ancient exotic slabs of metal whose purposes I had no idea about. More than once police were called but none caught us trespassing. I took another friend, Rita Rupp, into the Elmore one afternoon so that she could shoot a good photo when a large squarerigged Japanese naval training ship sailed downriver from a Portland visit. We stood on the outermost pier and while she clicked her shutter as the ship slowly passed the city I bowed in formal Japanese fashion to the crew who waved and shouted like *nouveau* Yankees. As we left the cannery we saw a portly policeman who had obviously been sent to capture us trespassing but he was too large to squeeze through a narrow window opening in a door that was my usual entrance into the cannery (once inside I opened a side door for Paula and that day for Rita). Rita and I linked arms and brazenly danced past the suspicious cop as if we were actors in a musical.

I never worked in a cannery. My only experience was walking through when a fish boat I crewed aboard was

unloading. The noise and busyness involved in transposing full bodied fish into steam cooked little round cans impressed me greatly, which added a poignancy to my visits to the silent abandoned Astoria canneries, often in late afternoon when long shafts of rosy light filtered through rows of dusty western windows and for brief moments illuminated unmoving relics of a dead past. I heard voices and smelled rank odors of fish and sweat mingled with grease and oil each time I visited Union and Elmore, snapshots of old photos of people in aprons and head scarves working on the fish line in the late 19th century and most of seven decades in the 20th, mosaiced my imagination. I found a photograph of an albacore boat I later worked aboard after another sank (in the infamous Columbia River Bar) tied up to the Elmore when the Astoria bridge was under construction — *Pelican* in the early 1960s with the yet uncompleted bridge arcing high above it in the background, on display at the Columbia River Maritime Museum.

The records of Elmore, originally owned by Columbia River Packers Association and bought out by Bumble Bee Seafoods in the 1950s, are preserved by the Maritime Museum, which spent two years cataloguing them for archives. The records of Union, owned and operated by fishermen and cannery workers, were left to rot or blow away, though a few scavengers like Paula and me saved scraps; but instead of preserving them for history in organized files they are scattered among personal memorabilia.

Rain falls on the grotesque skeleton of Elmore which from my comfortable chair by a barside window resembles a war blasted ship pointing out into the river. Smoke from a dozen hotspots rises into restless wisps of fog that briefly obscure the ruins every few minutes, and I wish the cannery would be whole and unburned each time the mist contracts. People whose association with Elmore is more substantive than mine visit the ruin and stand in little knots oblivious of the rain. Virtually everyone I have talked with since yesterday's fire mention it and seem to feel that a tangible part of Astoria's history is lost.

I ask for a second brandy. Wendy Wolfe brings it to my table. She looks out the window. "They could have done something to fix it up," she says. "Maybe made a museum out of it."

I think of a remark by my first boss at the Maritime Museum when I made the same complaint about the obliteration of an old flour mill on the Astoria port docks. "You can't save everything," he said.

~MICHAEL McCUSKER

SHALLON



WINERY

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