

More than a century of rapacious logging and heedless overfishing, as well as electrifying the river with dynamo dams built upriver and on dozens of tributaries — and the Hanford Nuclear Reservation (and later the Trojan nuclear power plant near Portland) — killed the big salmon runs that had made Astoria the world's fish cannery capitol; the railroads went to Portland or from Longview to Seattle, which killed Astoria as a major seaport; and two huge fires, comparable in their effect to those that swept through Rome, London, Chicago and San Francisco, the worst in 1922, burned out its heart.

Most of the timber industry is gone and fishing along the lower river has dwindled almost to vanishing. (The ocean out front has been raked clean.) The canneries that bought the fish are closed and only a few deteriorating husks are left. The yards that built the boats are gone. The waterfront that used to be so busy is virtually abandoned. For many years it seemed the riverbanks were fenced by fish boats left to fall apart by bankrupt fishermen, something like Rotten Row on Young's Bay where captains beached their worn-out schooners, and later the hulks of steamboats such as the once famous *T.J. Potter*.

Schemes to capture industry to revive the city's economy with aluminum plants, coal docks and shipwrecking yards die in labor, or before they come to labor. Richard Nixon claimed that the lower Columbia River was destined to be the "light metals capitol of the world" and compared its potential to the heavy metals industries of Germany's Ruhr Valley. An oil module builder that named itself Astoria Oil Services marched in as an economic savior in the mid-1980s but crept away like a Bedouin when it failed to meet its contracts.

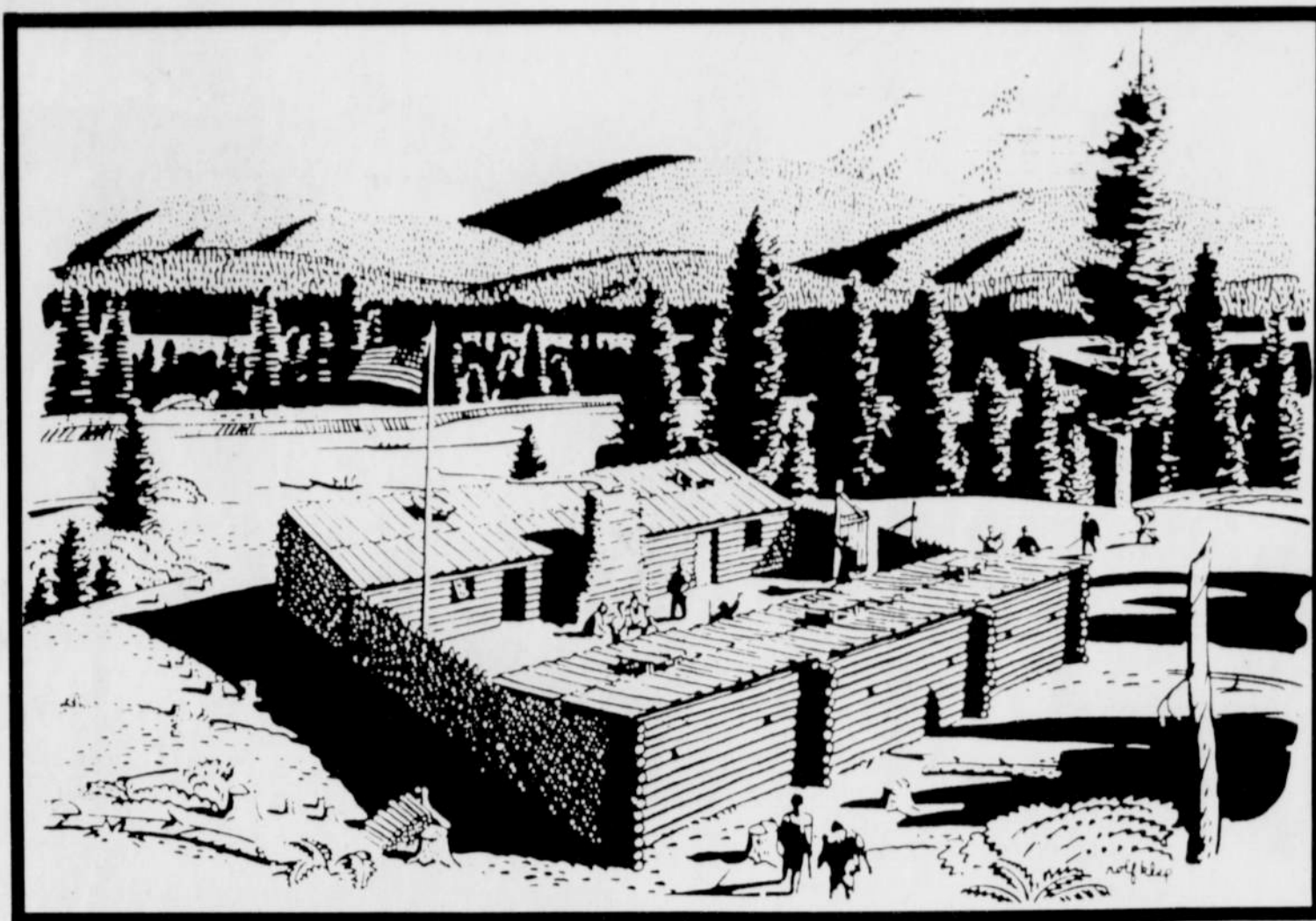
Great plans have been drawn up to transfigure the riverfront that are almost Athenian but are plagued with cost overruns, lack of outside interest and community protest. The city has designated its downtown core as an historical district, centerpiece of its "Museum Without Walls," although most buildings are relatively young, reconstructed from the ruins of the Astoria Fire similar to a forest reseeding on a burn. The hills remain quilted with old wood Victorian houses which were belatedly discovered as a treasure more valuable than condos and malls they were almost displaced by. Having profited and decayed from the ruin of its resources (and reckless disregard for future generations), Astoria puts its money on tourism, thrusting forward as its lure for tourists its colorful but failed history, its boisterous and turbulent reality commercially saccharined into banal nostalgia to entice easy-spending tourists.

Now the sultans of fun replace loggers and fisherpeople. They build shopping centers and malls, condominiums, bigger and glitzier motels, restaurants and bars that displace the remaining trees and block ocean and river views. Cannon Beach to the south, which in an earlier era resisted opportunities to be a second Carmel, has acquiesced and booms like a goldstrike town. Seaside mixed its sand with water and remade its graceful downtown into a cement mall. Astoria hustles its history and carpenter gothic houses to draw tourists from the beach towns, which are obviously tough competition.

The transformation of Astoria from a resource extraction economy has caused harm to many of its residents who have not recovered or successfully profited from the present reliance on tourism as a replacement. Tourism generally profits only a few, the rest are paid minimum wages, usually work seasonally, receive little or no benefits and are seldom protected from employer abuse.

The legacies of lifetimes spent in the woods or on the decks of fishboats are over and experienced loggers and fisherfolk and their children who expected to spend their lives the same way are forced to find other work; menial and low-wage jobs are usually all that are available — or they leave.

The younger generations flow out of Astoria and often out of Oregon. They move away right after high school or following a year or two at Clatsop Community College ('Harvard on the Hill'), which might move its campus, once the city's high



FORT CLATSOP 1805-06 WINTER QUARTERS OF LEWIS & CLARK EXPEDITION

school, to the Astoria downtown. Some of the city's young leave for college elsewhere; most go to look for work in Portland and Seattle, or south to California.

A pervasive underclass is developing in Astoria, and the cycle of poverty perpetuating it puts burdensome pressures on city services, on housing which is inadequate to meet escalating need, and on families, leading to rising domestic abuse, heavy drug and alcohol use and crime.

The attrition of the past decades has created serious problems for a civic renaissance. Astoria has little industry and limited appeal to men and women of skill or business — not only in attracting them but keeping those who are here.

Tourism is only a temporary solution to Astoria's long economic decline. A more solid intellectual base must be set in place through local schools to develop an industry Astoria could be good at. In the meantime development of recreation facilities should not result in loss of habitat for residents.

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 solid houses in good health with good schools, libraries and entertainment, and are putting money in the city treasury rather than sucking it dry which happens in hard times. Astoria possesses the skills that built industrial America but the nation is painfully converting from production to services, sending most industrial jobs overseas. The USA's purpose is to administrate the growing world economy and import its basic needs from developing (and economically colonized) countries. Astoria is part of a larger culture that is ebbing into a less vigorous middle age. What it has been is not only lost, it is unnecessary.

City leaders claim to be soberly facing the future. They say that Astoria will not prosper by fantastic schemes as it has banked on in the past. The city's decline will only be reversed by

hard work, wise and creative decisions (which have been rare), and above all equitable community participation at all levels.

The Astoria/Megler Bridge is a symbol of the retreat of Astoria's citizens from the maritime environment that built the city. Designed and built with considerable skill 35 years ago, the bridge displaced a fleet of ferryboats that daily crossed the four mile river between Astoria and now defunct Megler, Washington. The steel bridge stands ankle deep in the river like a gigantic museum skeleton. Its body arches high over the river on the Oregon side so that large ships can pass underneath and its tail drags just above the water for about three miles beyond the ship's channel to the Washington shore. The river no longer plays a principle role in the lives of the people who live alongside it. Once and for a long time the river was the main highway and major means of livelihood for most of the people who settled its banks and uprooted the tribes of Indians with small busy towns along its length.

History moves on. The USA claims world supremacy as its collapsed nemesis rots in catastrophe, and the aftershocks of its fall at least diminish the likelihood of a nuclear missile kissing the mouth of the Columbia. A massive earthquake is predicted soon, the grinding and shifting of geological plates off our shore. (A problem for anyone running up the hills for shelter from a tsunami and the downtown landfill dissolving into the river like Alka Seltzer during an earthquake might be that the hills would tumble down upon them.)

The crowding earth is pushing into sparsely populated areas like irresistible tides and it should be expected that eventually 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 resources. Only a devastating catastrophe such as the anticipated earthquake will prevent the Pacific Northwest from filling up.

The Millennial century just breaking ground commences Astoria's third century, which inspires provocative questions: Will Astoria in this new century be the great port it has always wanted to be? Will Astoria be overwhelmed by a mushrooming population? Will the Astoria/Megler Bridge be replicated a dozen times? The old Victorian houses and churches preserved, burnt in another series of fires or torn down and replaced with a denser architecture that will terrace the hills in massive housing developments and business malls? Will fleets of ships to meet greater needs thoroughly modernize and expand port facilities and possibly reverse the current project of refurbishing the city's antiquity? Will Astoria prosper or conversely turn into a huge and starving squalor?

A few years from now, probably beginning in 2004, the bicentennial of Lewis & Clark's transcontinental trek across the middle of North America, from the Missouri River (the epic began on May 14, 1804) to the mouth of the Columbia River, will be ardently celebrated as planned and promoted, especially at the end of trail in Astoria. Tens of thousands of tourists are optimistically expected to visit the reconstructed 'Corps of Discovery's' winter camp of 1805-06 at Fort Clatsop on the Lewis & Clark River that drains into Young's Bay and in to the Columbia — and SW Washington wants a fair share of the hordes because Lewis & Clark stepped ashore on the north bank of the Great River of the West first.

Probably much less celebrated or promoted will be Astoria's bicentennial in 2011.

The momentum of history has opposite cusps, such as being propelled to greater achievements as a result of the past, or its downside, history as a coffin with each passing moment another nail hammering it shut. Prosperity and decline are temporary, a slipping from here to there. The only real certainty is that future Astoria is unlikely to be any place familiar to us.

Rolf Klep was a commercial and Navy artist and founder of the Columbia River Maritime Museum. He died in 1981.

ASTORIA'S COLUMN

Astoria seems to be a client city in the manner that Oregon is a colony of large out of state corporations. Business czars in Portland who refute Astoria's objections to dredging a deeper shipping channel in the Columbia River yet attempt to impose their own undesired designs on the locally cherished Astoria Column atop Coxcomb Hill.

The Astoria Column is 75 years old, constructed in 1926 to mark the end of the Oregon Trail and establishment of Astoria as the first American city in the West. It has been nearly six years since its incredible scroll of history that for many years resembled a mudpole was given a facelift that has made it gleam like a new tattoo.

The 'Friends of the Astoria Column', a bifurcated group that includes a few eminent Astorians as well as Portland elite, was formed as a group to raise the necessary money to restore the Column to its former grandeur.

But the 'Friends' had more on their agenda than just refurbish the Column. Their grand scheme is to redesign everything around it. The next stage in this 'restoration' plan is to landscape around the Column and build an interpretive center for the thousands of visitors from all over the world (and a large parking lot in the meadow below the Column).

A part of the plan is to incorporate already paid for personally inscribed bricks in the landscaping and place more expensively purchased 'vanity' steps up the inside of the Column.

People from all over the USA and the world visit the Column. The great majority are delighted and awed at the expansive beauty of ocean, rivers, valleys and mountains. From wherever they visit they acclaim the view as among the most beautiful anywhere. A 5 year old Astoria girl once exclaimed, "You can see the whole world from up here!"

Visitors and locals have voiced comments and opinions of the plans to redesign the Column's environment. A few are pertinent to the current controversy as they reflect sentiments of people the project is presumed to attract and benefit.

~The new interpretive center should be a solid simple Northwest-type of design (perhaps built with the bricks) that does not compete with the Column's grandeur.

(A grandiose Parthenon design for the interpretive center has been scaled down due to public criticism and its

site has been changed from the westside prow of the hill to the southeast corner already utilized for the caretaker's house as well as garage and public bathrooms.)

~The info/trinket shack should be incorporated into the interpretive center (which is planned) to give Column visitors a virtually unobstructed view from north, west and south (the east is forested); a horseshoe-shaped walk along the crest of the hill that shows the rugged topography and complex drainage of the lower Columbia basin.

~Existing park lawn around the Column should remain instead of being bricked over, though that might not be possible because of the amount of bricks that have been sold. The idea of an inner courtyard around the Column constructed of bricks might be acceptable, as well as the present concrete areas, including walkways around the hill.

~The most adamant opinion is that a parking lot should NOT be built below the hill. Visitors and locals alike overwhelmingly say they do not go up to the Column to look at a parking lot. Enough spaces already surround the Column that if all were filled with cars and buses the hilltop would be overcrowded. A parking lot in the meadow would displace the deer most people (especially children) like to see.

Bitter controversy erupted when a small forest was cut to improve the view from Coxcomb Hill a few years ago, which profited a local logger whose ambition might still be to clearcut the entire city forest; and The 'Friends' were severely criticized for removing the famous cherry trees planted at the Column as a memorial to Astoria's war dead because they interfered with camera angles.

Astoria city officials would be wise to embrace the modest proposals of the citizen committee appointed to devise alternative designs rather than knuckle under to big city business moguls, whose arrogant disregard for adverse economic and environmental impacts on lower river communities dredging the river to protect Portland's maritime monopoly will cause, is the source of considerable resentment.

Although Astorians realize tourism has replaced logging and fishing as the city's current major industry, they do not desire their hometown to be refabricated into a vacationers' elysium. Visitors are welcome but the Astoria Column belongs to Astoria.

~MICHAEL McCUSKER

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