



ROGER HAYES



AGWORLD

BEAN COUNTERS, BLEEDING HEARTS & STINKERS

BY BRAN MASSEY

I set out to write this piece with a very rosy picture of The Community Store's history in Astoria. Specifically, I was looking into the time around the formation of The Committee to End Amorphousness and the events following. It didn't take much digging to realize that what I'd thought to be a model of amicable problem solving was something very different.

First thoughts when confronted with this kind of surprise were, "There goes my article," and "Jesus, Mary and Joseph, what in the hell have I got myself in the middle of?" Conflict is fine, but revisiting one twenty years old was neither attractive nor of any value. But I wasn't ready to toss out the whole project. The issue of conflict and the widely varying recollections of the long-time members I interviewed got me to thinking about how co-ops work.

The name *cooperative* is both instructive and misleading. When a cooperative venture is working well — cooperating — it is often the result of skillful conflict. Co-ops are by their nature places of conflict. They are businesses and they are institutions with a social and educational purpose. The twofold nature of co-ops attracts two camps of persons, sometimes (uncharitably) called the bean counters and the bleeding hearts. While most members partake of both qualities, we tend to see one camp's perspective as more *fundamental*. Co-ops get their energy from the tension between these two poles, like a battery. The two sides need each other.

When the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers opened the first cooperative store in 1844 they had conflicts. It was the early industrial revolution, and conflict was in the air. Four years later would see working people fighting soldiers at barricades in city streets across Europe. In Rochdale working people opened a store, a store whose purpose was to confront economic injustice and whose style of governance has endured for 160 years.

Conflict is good for co-ops. It's meant to happen. But it has to happen in a particular way for it to carry the institution forward and not sink it into a morass. In the old samurai movie *Roshomon* (sometimes spelled *Rashomon*) each person retells the same event giving widely varied interpretations, but the difference is that people's motives are the good of the institution. At least that's the intention. When I heard long-time Community Store members remember the events of twenty years ago in their different ways, I heard a common theme of wishing the best for the store and the

community. Twenty years later it doesn't matter who was "right." What matters is how we see the conflict and how we do conflict.

Conflict is skillful when it's about ideas and not about persons. Ideas are our shared capital during meetings. We do it this way to find solutions, maybe even a measure of truth. Anybody who returns again and again to a cherished opinion is hogging the meeting's capital. This is greed. Anybody indulging in a display of moral indignation to further their point is stealing that capital. Occasionally a stinker with no intention to listen or to treat others with respect will find their way onto a co-op committee. A member committee I served on once had a man come who proposed the co-op give him \$5,000 to make a study with a very noble objective. When the co-op's management heard the objective they agreed it was a good idea and put the idea into practice on the spot. Instead of being pleased, the man stood at the next member meeting and denounced co-op management for its "back door tactics." This is an extreme example, but self seeking isn't always about just material gain. When members understand the working of the cooperative process they will respond confidently to this kind of behavior.

Back in 1844 at the cooperative on Toad Lane, those members were up against huge odds. They came through in large part from their consistently honest dealing. This is harder to do than it is to say. But it's so much worse to spin wheels and get nowhere.

Bran Massey lives in Astoria. He served on the Board of the NW Cooperative Federation and worked in co-op governance for ten years. He has been involved in co-ops for his whole adult life, longer than he cares to admit.

This article is inspired by the Community Store's co-op expansion resulting from the relocation of Safeway from downtown Astoria. The bylaws of the Astoria Cooperative define its purpose as, "serve the lower Columbia River community with fairly priced, wholesale foods and other goods in an ecologically sustainable, socially responsible, and economically appropriate manner." Co-op members and community residents are being asked to comment on the proposed expansion. Contact the co-op at 1389 Duane Street, Astoria 97103, or e-mail balstrom@pacifier.com.

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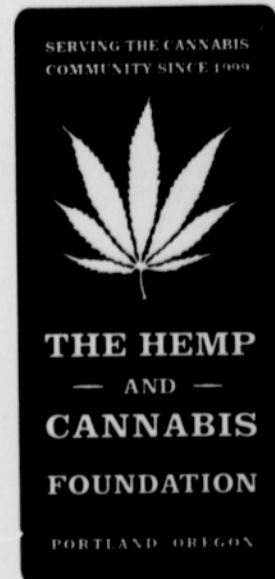


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