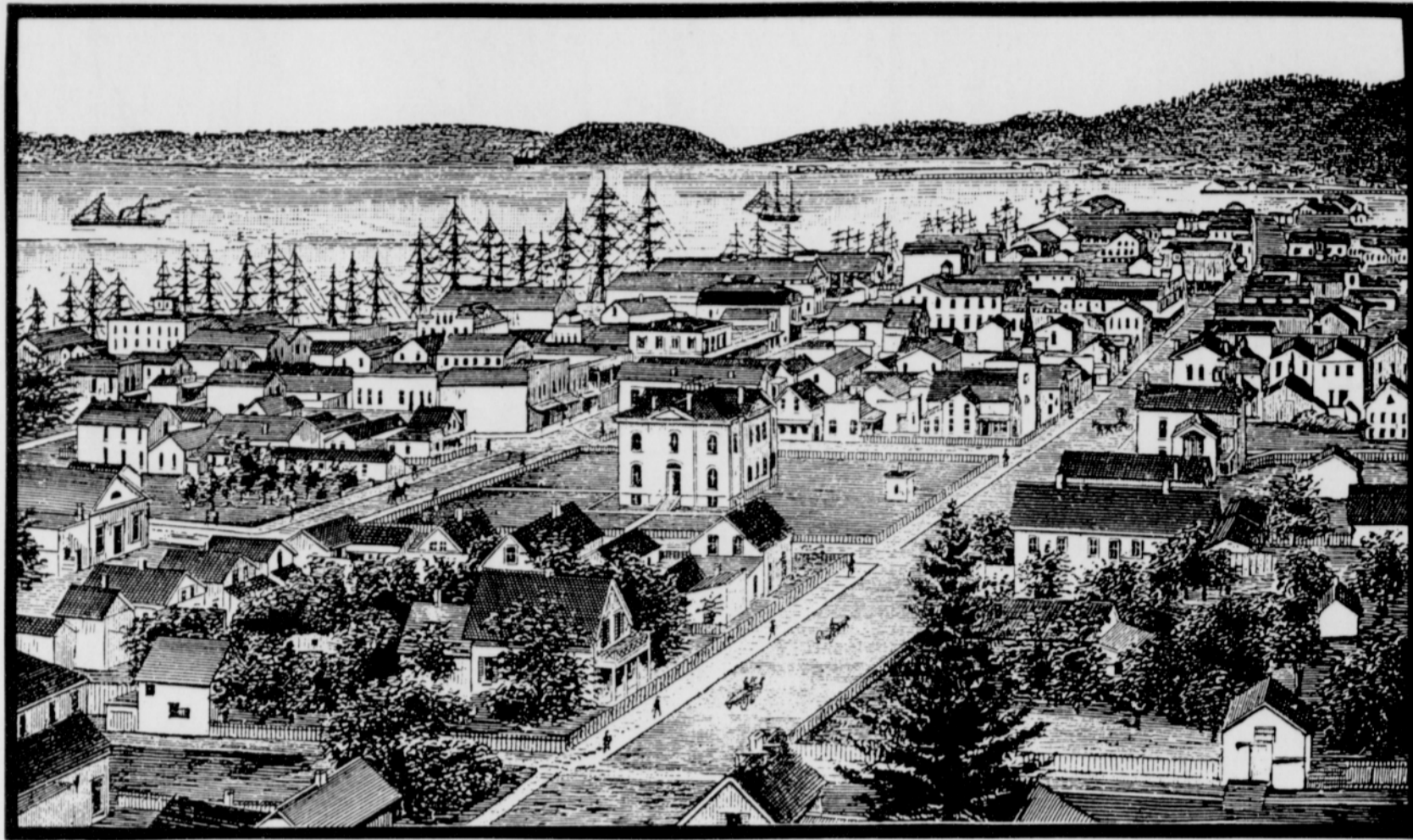


# ASTORIA IS BORN AGAIN



THE CITY OF ASTORIA OREGON IN THE 1880s

BY MICHAEL McCUSKER

Astoria (Oregon) is five years short of its bicentennial, a young city in comparison to world cities, yet the oldest in the American West this side of the Mississippi River. Other western cities now in the USA are older but were taken by conquest from post-colonial Mexico in the mid-19th century.

Astoria was named after John Jacob Astor, a pelt czar who was friends with Thomas Jefferson, and perhaps nowhere else in the world is a holiday made in his honor. He never got closer than 2,000 miles to the city named for him. A myth that has grown about him is that he founded Astoria and died on the *Titanic* when it sank after hitting an iceberg in the North Atlantic 101 years later (his namesake grandson was aboard).

The city of Astoria was built on wooden pilings on the Columbia River ten miles inland from the Pacific Ocean, and on steep hills that rise from its waterfront. For most of its existence, after a brief flurry of pelt extraction in concert with local native tribes that were soon diseased nearly to extinction from neo-European viruses, Astoria's primary livelihood was built around fish and timber. Furs and the China trade inspired its origin but salmon made it rich. The city became famous in the late 19th century as the salmon canning capitol of the world. It was said that before the arrival of Scandinavian fisherpeoples that a person could cross the Columbia on the backs of the salmon. The salmon would last forever, people said. So would the trees.

During Astoria's most prosperous period ships loaded cargoes of fish, timber and grain for everywhere in the world and disgorged fancy goods coming in. A saloon was claimed to be every 13 steps with a warehouse inbetween to service the rowdy crowds of mariners, fishermen, loggers and farmers, many of whom were drugged and shanghaied aboard hellships sailing to Asia by an army of crimps, madams and saloon-keepers. For awhile Astoria had the second largest Chinese population on the Pacific coast, but they were ruthlessly displaced by arriving Europeans who took their jobs at the more than thirty canneries.

A majority of Astoria men were salmon fishermen on the river, in the bays and later out on the turbulent ocean beyond the Columbia River Bar, known all over the world as the 'Graveyard of the Pacific' for the hundreds of boats and ships it destroyed. Simultaneously, most of the women worked in the canneries. For a few decades straddling the 19th and 20th centuries Astoria had a population of nearly 30,000 and anticipated a peak of 100,000 (the city dreamily imagined itself the 'New York of the West') but the fish and the great spruce, cedar and fir forests that were supposed to last forever were quickly decimated as if there were no tomorrow.

Now, in this new millennium, 195 years since the city's founding as a frontier fort on a bluff above the Columbia River in 1811 (April 12 is Astoria's birthday), it is the day after tomorrow. The millions of fish that once filled the river and ocean are a scanty few. The great forests are clearcut, replaced by human

habitat or skimpy monoculture stands of commercial second and third growth forest. The remaining forests that are owned by the city came very close to being logged a decade ago, saved from extinction only by vigorous popular uproar.

For a long time Astoria was a rough city on hard times, most of the timber industry gone and fishing on the lower river dwindled until only a few men and women could make a living aboard fishboats. The legacies of lifetimes spent in the woods or on fishboat decks ended and experienced loggers and fisher-folk who expected to spend their lives the same way have been forced to find other work; often menial, unpleasant and low-wage jobs. The canneries that bought the fish were boarded up and abandoned to rot into a forest of broken pilings that eat into the river like decayed teeth. Old fishboats were left to disintegrate on blocks along the decaying riverfront. And a huge fire in 1922, comparable in its destruction of downtown Astoria to the earthquake and fire that ravaged San Francisco a hundred years ago this April 6, seared its heart.

Great plans to develop industry and revive the city's economy with aluminum plants, coal docks and shipwrecking yards (most recently an egregious attempt to construct natural gas terminals on the river without public input) to reverse the long decline and revive the economy generally die in labor. After having profited and degenerated from reckless ruination of its resources (not to mention negligent disregard for future generations) the city turned desperately toward tourism as an economic strategy to market its failed history. Preservation groups from many parts of the world visited and advised Astoria officials on how to protect and profit from its remaining heritage.

Tourism replaced fishing and logging as the city's prime economy, squeezing money out of its salty past by prettifying it — the old whore houses, saloons and opium dens seldom mentioned in the tourist literature. The past was romanticized while its shabbily surviving remnants seemed to disappear from commercial view.

Until recently, the old city on the upper edge of the lower 48 seemed isolated and abandoned by the larger culture of North America (though of course to its residents it seemed to be the center of the universe). Now Astoria suffers the dubious distinction of a boosterly acclaimed "renaissance." It has been rediscovered, essentially as a result of the just concluded Lewis & Clark bicentennial commemoration.

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

This much touted renaissance might be good for property values but not for people who want an affordable place to live. Families (and particularly young people) leave and don't come back. An underclass is developing that perpetuates the cycle of poverty and puts disturbing 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 abuse.

The so-called renaissance has a paradoxical character in the sense that rising property values and rents displace many who live in Astoria, in particular low-wage service workers who are not able to afford to live in the city they work in, not to mention the difficulty of finding affordable housing in nearby communities. A subculture of artists, musicians and writers (which of course includes poets) that moves into shabby low-rent areas and revitalizes them by opening shops of art, music and candles (erroniously labeled as "New Age" stuff) attracts the *noveau* trendy, causing a cultural shift with upscale gentrification of the low-rent parts of town, specialty boutiques and high-end art galleries supplanting so-called street art, raising property values that in turn cause a folkrek by the street artists who, by pricing themselves out of where they have been, reseed some other decaying town or part of town, perpetuating a cycle of renewal, displacement and renewal.

Like anywhere, Astoria is besotted with petty corruptions among its political class and rural squiredom. Most decisions are made to benefit both local and émigré fiscal mercenaries, for now a grasping attempt to attract tourists and homebuyers with the potential of the city's historic riches. Undeveloped lands and uncut trees are bitterly fought over between what a city manager of another coastal town called "the kamikaze environmentalists pitted against rape & pillage developers."

Tourism can only be a temporary solution to Astoria's problems. A more solid intellectual base must be set in place through local schools to develop an industry Astoria could be good at and profit from. Although Astorians realize tourism has superseded fishing and logging as the city's major industry, most do not wish for their hometown to be refabricated into a vacationer's elysium. Visitors are welcome but Astoria belongs to Astorians.

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