

VFW Contest Winners

VFW Peninsula PEP Post 1325 and District 3 held an Awards Dinner on December 15, 2015 to host winners of their essay contest. Certificates and monetary prizes were awarded to their Annual Voice of Democracy Contest



for grades 9-12 and The Patriot's Pen Contest for grades 6-8.

First, second, and third place prizes were awarded in both competitions at the Post and District Levels. First place winners will be forwarded to the State of Oregon competition. For more information, call Bruce Hall at 503-285-8468. Pictured here is: Ryaan Akmal--Stoller Middle, Jenesis Spires--Roosevelt High, Abigail Cooper--Archbishop Howard, Commander Hall, Jasmine Pham--Archbishop Howard, Clara Liebert--Da La Salle North, Levi Heiser--Clackamas Middle College

Continued from Page 3 "Walking with Ghosts"

By Jim Speirs

the Central Hotel, the blunt realization of the changing face of St. Johns made itself known to me. I was like an unseen spectator in a sci-fi movie as the panorama of the future unfolded in front of my eyes. The "for sale" sign seemed to take on a life of its own, and I found myself surrounded by ghosts. It occurred to me the fate of the Central Hotel represented far more than the closing of the business; it says to any and all who care to ponder it, this signals the end of old St. Johns.

Let me digress. Let's go for a brief walk into the not-so-distant past, where the shadows of our community dwell. The Central Hotel can be a symbol of what was and stands in glaring contrast to what is coming.

Many people remember when the "hotel" was Dad's and if you go back far enough, you'll recall what Dad's was really like in its heyday. For those who have not read some of my articles in the Review, or don't care to ponder it, here's a brief bit of history. I think this helps to get a feel for then and now. The notes won't be long, but hopefully it will help to understand where I'm headed.

The community of St. Johns was bracketed by shipyard workers who plied their skill in Henry Kaiser's wartime shipyards. Most of these thousands of workers were transplants from the east; Ozarks and Appalachia in particular. They were housed in the various "Kaiser Towns" located throughout North Portland. These hastily built complexes were worlds unto themselves, some having their own banks, schools, grocery stores,

and police departments. For the most part, the people were foreigners; they were different, they knew it and we knew it. They certainly weren't bad, just very different. They were here to build ships and nothing more and their integration into the mainstream life of Oregon was never a serious consideration. Just as quickly as the war started, it came to an abrupt end; two atomic bombs insured unconditional surrender.

With the end of the war came the end of workers building ships. They had no jobs, no savings, and no place to go. It's true, many took what they could and returned to their place of origin, however, many stayed in North Portland.

The war insured that North Portland would have all the necessary facilities and equipment for the building and repairs of ships. As a result, the docks of Swan Island, Terminals Four and T-6 remained hubs of maritime industry. Depending on contracts, labor disputes and purchase orders, these locations hummed with workers day and night. None of the activity reached the frenzy of the wartime production, but it remained a thriving maritime related location, which supported thousands. Not surprisingly, many of these workers were men, (with women mostly in clerical positions because "Rosie the Riveter" was no longer needed,) who remained from the wartime industry and continued to live in the crumbling "Kaiser Towns" in North Portland.

The fifties were economically good times for most of America. What we refer to as "suburbia" exploded as families grew with the proliferation of the "baby boomer" generation. In St. Johns, new housing blossomed and as the workers abandoned the decaying Kaiser shacks, many moved into North Portland, where they remained close to work and in the company of friends.

St. Johns remained the proverbial "blue collar" community. We had jobs and we had a close-knit community and in actuality the area nearly became an extension of the remnants of the Kaiser era. Most of its residents made their living in the surrounding labor-intensive industries and made no bones about being different. After all, St. Johns was different. It was an out-of-the-way appendage of Portland, and a community that was still

fiercely independent, (having been its own town twice before,) in spirit and mindset. St. Johns was not a destination point; it was a little known neighborhood and one that most of greater Portland looked upon as strange. Many St. Johns citizens never traveled to downtown Portland; we stayed here, we shopped here, we partied here, we drank here, and we married here. Outsiders were not welcome and St. Johns soon gained a well-deserved reputation as a place where a non-resident could find himself in trouble fast.

The number of bars that dotted Lombard was huge. Most have now disappeared; replaced by new yoga spas and craft/artisan stores. But there was a time when the juices of life flowed like water in a flooded stream in St. Johns. On a given pay day in the surrounding ship yards, hundreds of men thirsty for liquor and fun poured into downtown St. Johns, making the Lombard strip look like a scene from an old town in a western cattle drive.

Dad's club was a location that would personify the old St. Johns that's quickly dying in 2015. It was rough and it was wild, and it was hugely profitable. The owners knew exactly when surrounding workers would get paid. They also knew that often workers could not get to banks in time to cash their checks. So, the proprietors of Dad's had thousands of dollars on hand to cash pay checks. This service came at a price, anywhere from two to four percent of the check went to a "check cashing" fee. Naturally, once the money was in the hands of the hard working (and very thirsty) men, more money was spent on booze, pool, gambling and prostitution. (The North Portland cops knew illegal gambling was going on, but a little "smile" money in their hands insured they'd turn a blind eye.) Bars up and down the block were filled with rowdy drunks and a person like the owners of Dad's made money both legally and illegally. It was a machine and it was old St. Johns. The stories that came from those days are fading with each trendy new bicycle retail and repair store. (Most people don't know it, but the little known basement at Dad's was a spot that has a storied reputation of its own. What went on there is the stuff of sordid legend.)

There's no time or space to paint a much larger picture. What's necessary is to try and close your eyes and picture what St. Johns was once and contrast it to where it's going. By profiling Dad's (the Central Hotel,) we can isolate a sliver of the old St. Johns and draw a mental image of Lombard when it had a much different flavor. Our past is what makes the area distinct and it's what some in the community resent seeing fade. There's no turning back, however, even the most progressive among us are often sorry to see the once unusual and unique St. Johns begin to appear like a clone of Hawthorne or Mississippi. The march to this brave new world is not bad; it's inevitable and must be somehow woven into the fabric of our past. We shouldn't forget where we came from.

So, as I stand and look at the shuttered Central Hotel, the ghosts from Dad's secretly ooze from the building. They dance and twirl as they rise to the street above. They look at me directly and open their hands, as if to say "see what you've done!" It's Friday afternoon and once the loud voices coming from Dad's could be heard for a half block. They mingled with shouts from other patrons at other bars all along Lombard. Now, silent walls echo a mournful tale of a colorful loss as they blend in with a fascinating future.

I decide to go into Starbucks, but then an invisible spirit creeps up on me and makes me stop. "No", I say to myself, this is St. Johns and I'm going to Slims' and breathe a brief air of the past!

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