

# Meet strong pioneer women of the West

What do Jason Lee, John McLoughlin, Marcus Whitman, Mother Joseph, Esther Hobart Morris and Chief Washakie have in common? The three states where I've spent my life commemorate these six in National Statuary Hall in the U.S. Capitol.

Few of us in Oregon, Washington and Wyoming will have any idea who they were.

The very concept of designating official heroes and honoring them with bronze and marble statues in an over-decorated East Coast room is obsolete in our age of rap stars and money worship. But who would Pacific Northwest residents select today? Matt Groening and Phil Knight? Bill Gates and Gypsy Rose Lee? Dick



Matt Winters

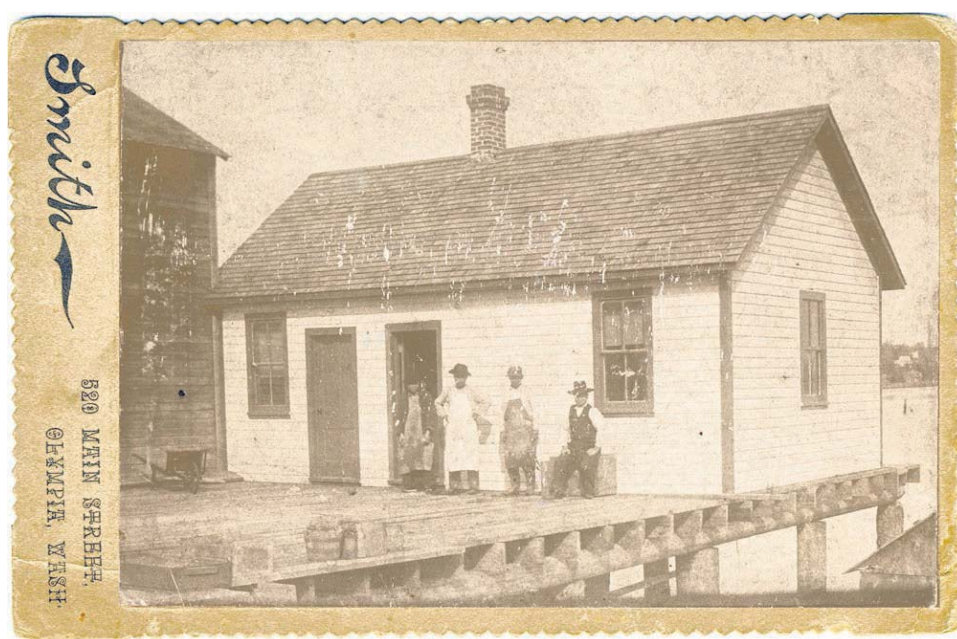
Cheney and Harrison Ford? It'd be intriguing to put a slate of possibilities up for a vote. (Each state gets to supply two statues, and they do trade them out from time to time.)

Controversial as it would be to pick fresh winners of the Hero Sweepstakes, new ones might be at least marginally relevant to nonhistorians. When was Jason Lee — an early 19th century Canadian missionary who settled for a time near Salem — last mentioned outside the four Oregon and Washington elementary and middle schools named for him?

Only nine women are honored in Statuary Hall, so Washington and Wyoming can be proud to buck gender bias — along with Montana, Nevada, Colorado and North Dakota. Outside the West, only Minnesota and Alabama honor women.

It's tempting to speculate why the West places a premium on female role models. (Public Television newswoman Charlayne Hunter-Gault used to invite groans at her high-minded sincerity by calling such women "sheroes.") Is it because in thinly populated pioneer times we needed women and men to both be active participants in all matters? Did the harsh conditions of that era call forth heroism of one kind or another from everyone? Or did the thrill of Western settlement simply attract women who were tough and in charge of themselves?

Despite its reputation today as the mountain stronghold of relentlessly right-wing firebrands, Wyoming once was a semi-progressive place. Its motto is "Equal Rights." It was the first government entity in the world to recognize women's right to vote. Esther Hobart Morris was the first female justice of the peace in the U.S. in 1870, serving in South Pass City, where my family owned one of our several picturesque but no-account gold mines.



Matt Winters collection

LEFT: This is the only known photo of Mary Elswick, the first white woman to run a shellfish business in Olympia, Wash. ABOVE: A shellfish-processing crew — possibly Chinese-American — pauses for a photo in about 1895 in front of the Elswick oyster plant on the Olympia, Wash., waterfront. This structure can also be glimpsed behind the Elswick residence in the accompanying photo on this page.



Matt Winters collection

The Olympia Oyster House on West 4th Street in Olympia, Wash., was operated in the 1890s and early 20th century by Mary and Joseph Elswick. The photo is by early female Western photographer Ida B. Smith.

In fourth or fifth grade, we spent a few classroom weeks on state history, learning the probably apocryphal story of how Hobart Morris hosted an 1869 tea party to politely strong-arm candidates for the first territorial legislature into supporting women's suffrage.

In reality, the decision flowed from a complex set of motives. (See tinyurl.com/mqkcc7b.)

## Did the thrill of Western settlement simply attract women who were tough?

For one thing, Wyoming had six adult white men for every white woman and wanted to attract more. For another, in the anxious post-Civil War era, Wyoming Territory's governor was a Republican appointed by U.S. Grant, while legislators were southern-sympathizing Democrats. The two sides were intent on embarrassing one another and winning political advantages. Democratic legislators thought grateful women would vote Democrat, counterbalancing African- and Chinese-Americans who were being encouraged to vote by the Republicans.

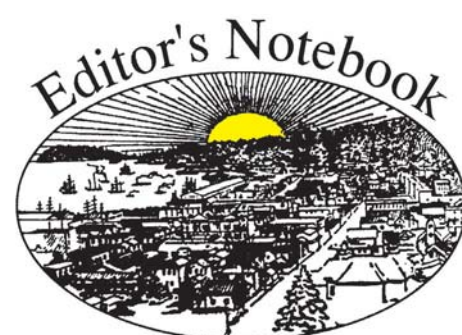
"Damn it," an unnamed Democratic law-

maker purportedly said, "if you are going to let the n—rs and the pigtailed [the Chinese] vote, we will ring in the women, too."

Washington Territory was unsuccessful in an 1854 effort to give women the vote, but females nevertheless went on to play major roles in territorial enterprises. Two more recently came to my attention.

Mary Elswick was the state's first white woman to lead a shellfish business. Initially with her husband Joe, she set up the first of the city of Olympia's still-thriving oyster operations, probably by 1894. Joe is described as a brakeman, age 46, in the 1892 Thurston County Census and Mary, 36, is listed without occupation in that year. But in the 1902-03 Olympia city directory, Joe is identified as proprietor of the Olympia Oyster House at 420 West 4th, living next door at 416 West 4th.

"Mrs. Mary Elswick makes a specialty of the open clams, which sell at from



35 to 40 cents a gallon," according to the March 1906 edition of *Pacific Fisherman* magazine. "She has been interested in the oyster business for ten or twelve years ... During the year of 1902 Mrs. Elswick shipped as far east as Illinois and sometimes even to New York."

A photograph of the Elswicks recently turned up — in an Arkansas auction of all places — along with the oyster house, residence and a separate image of their shellfish-processing building on the waterfront behind the house. Both were taken by pioneer photographer Ida B. Smith, whose 1890s studio must have been among the West's first operated by a woman.

Perhaps because she felt herself to be something of an outsider, Smith seems to have made an effort to document Chinese-Americans in a time when the KKK and labor groups were exhibiting tremendous antagonism toward them. The Elswick processing-plant photo includes what appears to be a Chinese crew, while the Washington State Historical Society has in its collection a wonderful formal portrait taken by her of the Jim Ah Toone and Nettie Chiang James family.

We ought to do more to recognize early Western female leaders like Mary Elswick and Ida Smith. Thinking of all the strong, fantastic women in my life — the products of natural selection — I'm sure their great-great-grandmothers also were individuals I would absolutely love to have known.

— M.S.W.

Chinook Observer and Coast River Business Journal editor Matt Winters lives in Ilwaco, Wash., with his wife and daughter.

## Open forum

### Taking over docks

It has come to not only my attention, but also Astoria residents, that the sea lions have completely taken over the nearby docks and drastically put an decrease on our fish. Biologists say they'll stay gorging on the fish, and will likely continue to feast when the chinook salmon arrive in the spring.

This is a huge problem that has been going on for four years and is only getting worse. I feel that we need to figure out a solution to decrease the sea lion problem — maybe not completely, but at least to where the docks are safe to properly use again, and our fish population starts to increase.

The section of the docks the sea lions have taken over used to be able to hold a lot of boats, but now nobody can get down there to use it.

Not only have the sea lions overpopulated the docks, but they have been destroying them. They have already destroyed one nearby dock that is now just pilings in the water.

Port operations managers have said sea lions cost them \$35,000 dollars a year. This problem needs to be stopped now, before people start losing their fishing jobs and all of our docks are just pilings in the water.

AMBER JONES  
Astoria

### GMO concerns

I had to write and tell you — I just returned from an amazing trip into the future. The world had conquered diseases we now think may never be curable. That was (will be) thanks to an amazing company called Mansatan, which develops a totally im-

mune GMO, or genetically modified offspring. By submitting to the procedure, couples are soon to be capable of having babies that will grow up totally defended from disease.

Mansatan retains propriety over the GMOs by virtue of their patents; and couples may not propagate (sow the seed, as it were) without permission from the company. Of course, if you want to have babies you may have to agree (and be held legally accountable) to raise your children by company directives; those children will not be able to cross town and conceive kids of their own with just anyone, because their "seed" (sperm and/or egg) is the company's property.

But no one gets sick. Such a godsend as this has totally won over the population of Earth, and no one continues to object, save for a few

humans who are ignorant of, or in denial of, the science and history of sickness and the medicine.

OK, I made it up, I never went to the future. But the story can stand on its own in the context of the recent editorial about Monsanto ("Monsanto is sorry, but decades late," *The Daily Astorian*, April 2). I will add that writer has said that genetically modified organism critics have no scientific evidence of GMO health complications, as if the concerns about restructuring the way humanity grows food was just a triviality.

The writer also says these remarkable GMOs may be the only way to grow enough food for the earth's population. Yet, on these very pages, an editorial told me that the cause of starvation on our planet is not due to our inability to grow enough food,

but because of poverty. Millions of people cannot afford, or don't have access to food because of economics, infrastructure, politics, etc.

I, for one, don't believe that Monsanto's "solution" to food production has earned them the right to encroach upon the whole ecosystem of farming, and even eating. So: Monsanto did "an excellent job in marketing", and "applied equally impressive innovation to its business practices"; and their "critics ... wield powerful emotional arguments that aren't backed by science."

But there are other concerns here than just what goes on in my stomach.

From someone still trying to believe in feeding humanity without turning it over to Monsanto ...

MIKE TUELL  
Long Beach, Wash.



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