

The grand beauty of the beach

Coast Weekend contributor Matt Love shares his favorite passage written about the Oregon Coast

Over the years, I have compiled a list of contenders for the title of “My Favorite Lines Written about the Oregon Coast.” Passages by Don Berry, Ken Kesey, Matt Kramer, John Reed, Ben Hur Lampman and John Haislip all topped the list, but I never settled on a winner.

I have now and only because I recently stumbled across an essay titled “The Coast of Oregon” from an obscure book written by Ralph Friedman called “Northwest Passages: A Book of Travel.” Friedman wrote the essay in 1966, one year before the passage of the famous 1967 Beach Bill that protected the dry sand portions of Oregon’s ocean beaches from privatization and exploitation.

The essay ran some 1,700 words and amounted to a curious literary amalgam of valentine, editorial, history, travelogue, paean, love letter, memoir and warning. I have never read anything like it in either style or substance, and Friedman wrote it when he was 50 years old. He passed away in 1995 at the age of 79 but not before writing 10 books about Oregon, several of which easily qualify as the quirkiest tomes ever written about the state. Given that Friedman also self-published many of his books and drove about a million miles around Oregon selling them out of his vehicle, I guess it’s no surprise that he became a literary hero to me and a direct inspiration for my writing life.

“The Coast of Oregon’s” length precludes full publication here, but I chose some of my favorite passages and strung them together for the reader’s pleasure.

...You can walk for miles (on the beach) without stepping over or around a single body or being told that you are on private property. Dogs can run loose: mine race in circles, tilt with sandpipers, exchange insults with seagulls, bite at the heels of the wind or prance away from the salty tongues of the unraveling tides. You can build a camp fire, drift wood is almost everywhere, and have the blaze to yourself, with the nearest glow hundreds of yards away.

A thousand joys, each contributing to the glory of the sum. Yet the grand beauty, in the summing up, is the sweep and clash of the



Photo by Matt Love

terrain, the misty slopes of the Coast Range, bedeviled by the dark and mysterious maw of the cordillera, lunging at the sea and the frothy waters striking back, with only cliff, beach and road to separate them.

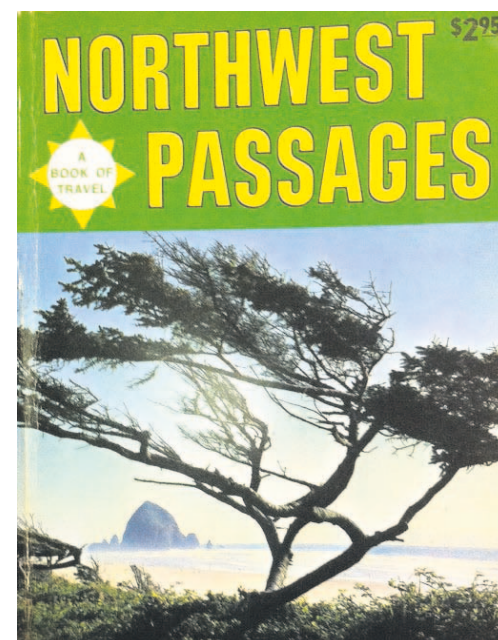
Long before most Oregonians were born, a churlish, impish, moralistic, independent-as-a-hog-on-ice governor, Oswald West, who labored under the quaint notion that the welfare of the people was paramount to risk capital, secured for the state almost single-handedly most of the beachlands, and foresaw, or dreamed of, the day when public recreational facilities would line the sea from Brookings to Astoria.

I saw the Oregon Coast for the first time more than a third of a century ago. If I could tell you how spellbound I was by the endless

panoramas of the wild serpentine cliffs and the illimitable expanse of the Pacific — a hundred drummers pounding inside my heart — I would be a writer, not a journalist.

It is not as moving to me now as it was in 1934. Too many buildings block seaviews. Too many Coney Island towns have fungused along the highway. And now there is danger of losing sections of the coast, bit by bit, to highway engineers whose souls are slide rules and whose eyes light up when they see asphalt and cement; to developers who think that anybody who can’t go first class shouldn’t go at all; to finaglers who wrap themselves in banners of private enterprise and risk capital.

The Coast is not winning its battle for the preservation of its natural beauty. Those who would destroy it, each man and company tak-



Submitted photo

“Northwest Passages: A Book of Travel” by Ralph Friedman.

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ing only a bit, may be more tenacious than the protectors.

Ralph Friedman was wrong in that last paragraph. The Beach Bill passed, as did a visionary land-use planning law in 1973 that helped prevent a lot of additional hideous and ecologically unsound development on the Oregon Coast.

But not all bad development. Tenacity by the protectors is still required today. It always will be if we are to enjoy freely Oregon’s “great birthright,” as Oswald West described the state’s publicly owned beaches.

Matt Love lives in Astoria and is the author/editor of 14 books about Oregon, including “A Nice Piece of Astoria: A Narrative Guide” and “The Great Birthright: An Oregon Novel.” They are available at coastal bookstores and through www.nestuccaspitpress.com.

Coastal Life

Story by MATT LOVE