

# Tales: 'I want people ... to know how that person felt'

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The chosen historical figures in years past — whether soldiers or pioneers, housewives or business folk, famous names or unsung commoners — took different journeys and met different fates. Some died of old age, others contracted influenza in 1918; some dropped dead after crossing the plains, others perished during World War II. Gimres and Shivelys, Flavels and Van Dusens are often mixed in with families who left no local legacy.

As few as 400 and as many as 700 have attended the free event, which is sponsored by Astoria Granite Works. It takes about 70 minutes for attendees to rotate through the presentations, including the Q-and-A segment with the actor (who must answer as the character).

"If it's raining on us, we don't reschedule. We go no matter what," Burns said. "On a rainy, windy, cold afternoon in October, it's pretty amazing to have that many people standing in a cemetery."

## Dead men tell tales

David Reid, an Astoria resident preparing for his 10th-straight year as a Talking Tombstones actor, said it is rewarding to tell the story of someone who cannot tell it themselves — especially when it's a story few others have heard.

"There's no other way for that person to reach out and tell their story," he said.

Come Sunday, Reid — armed with information compiled by Liisa Penner, the Historical Society's archivist — gets to tell the story of a judge.

"I'm told he was a bit of a scoundrel. He married well — twice — into the same family. Married two daughters of a very wealthy man," Reid said. "These are the fun ones, the ones where you get to dig through and sort of tease their story out of a lot of different information."

Some years, the museum hands its actors reams of archival information. Other years, the actors have to build a life story around something as simple as a newspaper clipping.

One year, Reid was given the obituary of a tinsmith and nothing more. Because Reid didn't have much information on his assigned role, "What I had to do was say, 'OK, in 1860, why would a tinsmith have come to Astoria in the first place? And then, what would their job look like? And what might they have faced?'"

## 'Edu-tainment'

In Steve Nurning's experience as a longtime Talking Tombstones veteran, "nobody cares what (the deceased's) birthday was. Nobody cares (about) the day they died. They don't really care about who they were married to or what their work was like," he said. Rather, "it's, 'What was that person's experience?' So I always try to bring that out and have the people at Talking Tombstones understand that person's life.

"I want the people who come to Talking Tombstones to know how that person felt, what that person was thinking," he said.

Nurning, an Astoria resident, chose not to



Hugh McKenna/For The Daily Astorian

Chris Carlson, portrayed by Cliff Larson standing with cane, tells about his life as a chauffeur for Nellie Flavel and her family during the Talking Tombstones' event, two years ago.



Submitted Photo

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join the cast this year. But let it be known that he takes his Talking Tombstones roles very seriously.

The year he played a cannery worker who fell through an outhouse and drowned in the Columbia River, he built a prop porta-potty and

climbed out of it for the show, while a recording of barking sea lions rolled in the background. Two years ago, he played Thaddeus Trullinger, the electrician who wired up an electrified gallows for Astoria's last hanging — so, naturally, Nurning built a gallows.

**'We tend to forget that these cemeteries ... People are buried there, they led lives, and they have stories, and this is a way to remember that.'**

## McAndrew Burns

executive director of the Clatsop County Historical Society

"If you want more facts, go to the library. Go to the Internet. If you really care about where that person went to school, that's where you go get that information," he said. "But you come to Talking Tombstones to be more entertained and get a flavor for the history at the same time."

Burns has dubbed Talking Tombstones an exercise in family "edu-tainment."

"We tend to forget that these cemeteries ... People are buried there, they led lives, and they have stories," Burns said, "and this is a way to remember that."

## What will the Oregon economy look like in 2016?



**Joe Cortright**  
November 5

Joe Cortright is president and principal economist of Impresa Consulting of Portland. He is chair of the Governor's Council of Economic Advisors. Also he is director of a new think tank called City Observer, funded by the John S. Knight Foundation.

### TO ATTEND:

**For Members:**  
Dinner & Lecture: \$25 ea.  
Lecture only: no charge

**For Non-Members:**  
Dinner & Lecture: \$35 ea.  
Lecture only: \$15 ea.

Appetizers will be available at 6 p.m.

Dinner will be served at 6:30 p.m.

The speaker will begin after the dinner service is complete and non-dinner members and guests of the audience take their seats.

Forum to be held at the CMH Community Center at 2021 Exchange St., Astoria.



# ColumbiaForum

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