The Faded Glory of Shively Park

Once home to an impressive 12-acre "Centennial Park," Astoria's Shively Park has been neglected and reclaimed by forest

Story by DWIGHT CASWELL

Submitted photo courtesy Clatsop County Historical Society

Indians perform a "war dance" at Shively Park for Astoria's centennial celebration in 1911. The wooden amphitheater was modeled on the University of California's Greek Theater. The clear cut made for a good view from the park.

Submitted photo courtesy Clatsop County Historical Society

This postcard shows the grand opening of Astoria's centennial at a stadium and amphitheater built for the celebration and pattered after the University of California's Greek Theater. The line of people at the top are standing on the road. The wooden stairs and seats no longer exist.

Submitted photo courtesy Clatsop County Historical Society

This post card shows the raising of the centennial flag pole at the top of Shively Park. The picnic shelters still exist today.

My dog and I enjoy our walks in Shively Park, during which we may not meet another soul. Hidden behind one of Astoria's reservoirs, off the road to the dump, Shively Park seems forgotten.

From the parking lot, we walk up a long flight of concrete steps that take us to nothing more than a set of children's swings. The park sits on a ridge; at the top we find what appears to be the remains of a formal garden. More elegant steps end at no particular place. I wonder, where had they once led?

When I looked into that question, I expected to find a prosaic answer. I found instead Astoria's equivalent of San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, and a sad story of neglect and abandonment.

In 1844, John Shively settled on a land claim in Astoria and laid out a substantial portion of present-day Astoria. In 1846 he was appointed the first postmaster of Astoria, and at various times he served as Justice of the Peace and Clatsop County surveyor and road commissioner. In 1899, six years after his death, the park was named for him.

The new park had a broad vista, enhanced by a clear-cut, of Youngs River and the mouth of the Columbia. The view no longer exists, but it was a major factor in the park's selection as the primary location for Astoria's 1911 Centennial Celebration. Encompassing 12 acres, the park was large enough for the features needed for the "Centennial Park."

Exhibit halls at Shively Park? Indeed, designed by the young, accomplished architect John E. Wicks. There were also a stadium and amphitheater (patterned after the University of California's Greek Theater), an Indian Village, a full-scale replica of Fort Astoria, and gardens designed by Arthur L. Peck, founder of Oregon State University's Landscape Architecture School.

Peck designed the park so that the first thing to strike a visitor was the fort, complete with the "forest primeval" backdrop that had been replanted behind it. Once through the forest, one came upon the exhibition halls, the extraordinary view, and naturalistic plantings of exotic species like purple beech and mountain ash.

"Where did it all go?" you may be asking yourself. Therein lies a story of construction on a tight budget and of later neglect, but first let me tell you something of the glory days of Shively Park.

In the years leading up to the centennial, Astoria was full of itself. It was a place of destiny, and the festivities were designed to reflect that and to bring others to Astoria to fulfill that destiny. One hundred years later, the bicentennial was fun, but by comparison it was a celebration of the past by a town content to slip quietly into its third century.

1911, though, that was something. Track and field world records were attempted in the new stadium, beneath the world's tallest flagpole. There were speedboat races on the Columbia River, and Glenn Curtiss brought his revolutionary seaplane to the aviation meet. Feather-bedecked Indians (Yakama and Nez Perce, but not local Native Americans) emerged from un-Northwestern tepees to perform "war dances" at their village or the amphitheater. Historical plays were presented (with white boys in Indian redface) and exhibits from around the nation crowded the two large halls.

Submitted photo courtesy Clatsop County Historical Society

At the turn of the 19th century, Shively Park had a broad vista, enhanced by a recent clear-cut, of Youngs River. The view no longer exists, but it was a major factor in the park's selection as the primary location for Astoria's 1911 Centennial Celebration. This post card shows the front of Centennial Exhibit Hall, which was located below Centennial Park (Shively Park) above Youngs Bay. In the background, you can see Youngs River

The centennial lasted 30 exhausting days. Then began the slow decline of Shively Park. The buildings designed by Wicks were essentially long barns behind impressive facades, wood framed and built no better than necessary. The amphitheater looked like the Greek Theater, but it was wood, not stone, as were the stadium seats. Even with constant attention, preservation would have been difficult.

Instead, they received neglect; the forest eventually eradicated all structures but the picnic shelters. The replica fort was turned over to the Boy Scouts in 1917, but it was deemed unsafe and torn down three years later. For a while there was a small zoo, but it was closed after poachers shot the captive deer.

Something of the past may still be seen. A few of Peck's trees remain among the regrown forest. The stairs that now lead to play equipment once led to Fort Astoria. Walk along the road on the right of the park, and you will see an enigmatic portal with the inscription "Weinhard • Astoria," all that is left of the hotel of that name, destroyed in the 1922 fire. It was placed there as a "portal to the past."

Follow the road and you come across stairs leading toward the road. They don't reach because the road has been regraded. Farther on you find more stairs. These stairways once led to the stadium and amphitheater to your right, where there is dense forest today. Continue to the far end of the park, as it exists today, and to your left are more stairs. Go up them and you will see what is left of some of Peck's plantings. Turn to look down the stairs and across the road. That was the site of the Indian Village, and there the city plans to lease land for a 150-foot-tall cellphone tower.

Once the heart of a vibrant young city, Shively Park may soon have a monument to modern community as defined by the Internet. Today we interface through devices that preclude actual contact with other human beings, and there is no better monument to this community of isolated individuals than a cellphone tower. There can be few better ways to discourage people from visiting a park.

There must be a better way. Is the current generation less forward-thinking than that of a century ago? If the city decides that a tower is appropriate, must it be ugly? Could a modern Eiffel design a better tower? Could the county arts council use it to display public art? Is mitigation even possible?

Photo by Dwight Caswell

Two picnic shelters still exist at the top of Shively Park.

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The entrance arch was all that remained of the Weinhard Astoria Hotel after the 1922 downtown Astoria fire. The arch was relocated to Shively Park and still stands.

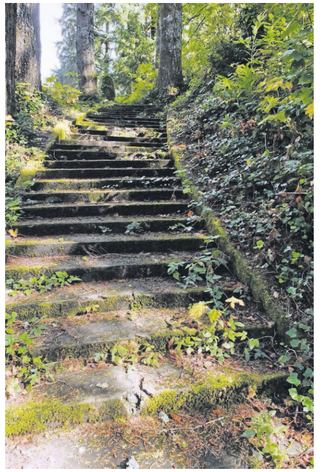

Photo by Dwight Caswell

Today's Shively Park boasts stairs that seemingly lead to nowhere, though a closer look reveals that they lead into the the park's past.

Historic preservation is a byword in Astoria, but it has been limited, for the most part, to individuals and commercial projects. Astoria is often described as a small San Francisco, but we have nothing like a park at the heart of the city. Perhaps, if there is sufficient public interest, Shively Park will be restored, and once again be the jewel in Astoria's crown.

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