

# AN OREGON COAST CHRISTMAS CAROL

Story by MATT LOVE

On Thanksgiving Day, Old Marley was dead, dead as a clearcut. He'd suffered a heart attack while riding a sublime turquoise wave and washed up, entangled in kelp, a couple hundred yards from his beachfront home.

A week later, Marley, an ageless legend in Oregon Coast surfing circles for 40 years, had his ashes spread upon the ocean at dawn by the largest flotilla of surfers in the history of the sport. The wake raged for two days and the drum circle never stopped.

Then, the anxious mystery commenced. Marley's clan openly wondered who would inherit his magnificent home, a cedarwood, A-frame structure titled Fort Tom McCall, a crude, hand-crafted palace that served as a Mecca, a hostel, a crash pad, a Zen station of the cross, a hospital, a repair shop, a sanctuary for fairies, a lawn gnome orphanage, a flotsam and jetsam art gallery, a history museum and animal shelter for surfers, kite fliers, paddle boarders, rock hounds, crippled birds, old sea lions, real estate novelists and limpet nuts.

Marley never cared where a person came from; everyone was a local in his mind. He welcomed one and all and shared his passion for Oregon's unique heritage of publicly owned beaches. That heritage imbued Marley's spirituality and politics, and it was widely attested that he was the greatest unpaid activist protecting that heritage the state had ever known. One postcard from him could put 200 surfers and

their boards in a zoning meeting or bureaucrat's windowless office in three days. He'd never gone online in his life and did activism the old-school way.

Marley had a standing invitation that anyone could access the beach via his property, 24/7. In fact, he erected neon signs that pointed the way. Luckily, he owned the two huge vacant lots adjacent to his property, prime real estate that non-dreamers dreamed of developing. On his property, he hosted an annual surf camp for kids, principals, seniors, cops, criminals, sinners, saints, dogs, veterans, transgenders, carnies, and every other demographic group under the sun. And then there was Marley's epic Christmas Day salmon bake and bonfire sculpture contest. He fed everyone and then judged the sculptures as they went up in flames. The winners received wooden figurines of androgynous mermaids Marley carved himself with a tiny grandma chainsaw.

Old Marley never charged anyone a cent for anything. He refused all donations. No one ever determined where his money came from, and no one ever asked.

Yes, who would inherit the property? That was the big question. No one even knew if Marley had family. None had visited him. Most in Marley's clan thought he would deed it to a conservation foundation or a surfer in a random drawing. A few believed Marley would call for razing the structure and giving the property to the state to become a new park.

They were all wrong, very wrong, and therefore shocked to learn in the newspaper a few days after the wake that Old Marley had gifted his entire estate to his only surviving relative, his nephew, a 33-year old man with the odd name of Ebenezer Scrooge. What shocked the clan even more was learning that Marley left no provision in the will about developing or not developing the land.

Upon hearing the name Scrooge, one of the Clan whipped out her smart phone and Googled him.

"Oh my God!" she exclaimed, tearing at her wetsuit. "He's a condo developer in San Diego and writes a blog about how much he hates slackers and surfers! He just posted that he inherited some beachfront property in Oregon and can't wait to see it."

Back in Southern California, Ebenezer Scrooge could not believe his good fortune. He had inherited three spacious beachfront lots on the Oregon Coast from a communist uncle he'd never met. He could do anything he wanted with them because they were grandfathered in before Oregon enacted its visionary land use laws that forestalled terrible, foolhardy development shored up by ungodly riprap.

After taking a cursory look at his dead uncle's beachfront property via Google Earth, Scrooge was positively giddy at the prospect of developing it. The only problem was that Scrooge had to travel to Oregon — in winter — to deal with Marley's home, a ramshackle structure that offended Scrooge's cookie-cutter architectural mentality.

Scrooge asked his tan girlfriend if she wanted to

accompany him, and she responded with an epithet followed by the word, "No!"

Scrooge flew first class into Portland on a rainy afternoon and was bewildered by the color: a congealed green and gray. How did these people live here? What motivated them? He rented a Humvee and sped west to the coast. It took Scrooge mere seconds after seeing Marley's home to decide a course of action: He hired an excavator to raze the place the next day, on Christmas Eve, and haul everything away to the dump. The demolition would cost Scrooge triple because of the holiday but so what? He could afford it and wanted the chore over immediately so he could fly home on Christmas Eve.

Scrooge briefly considered venturing inside the strange house to investigate, but he was a totally incurious man outside of a curiosity about how to accumulate more money. He checked himself into a motel, and he'd meet the excavator in the morning, film the destruction for his

blog, and then hustle home to implement his gilded dream for the property: Mediterranean-themed condos with a razor-wire fence to repel the free-loaders.

At 2 a.m., a loud knocking on the door roused Scrooge. He was afraid and called out, but no one answered. The knocking accelerated. Scrooge frantically searched for his phone but couldn't find it.

A minute passed, and finally Scrooge rose and opened the door. He beheld three elderly, barefooted men with flowing white hair, dressed in dark suits. They each held staffs hewn from driftwood and wore necklaces of hairy tritons, the state shell.

"Who are you?" said Scrooge. "What is the meaning of this?"

"We are the ghosts of Oregon beaches past, present and future," said the tallest one. "I'm Gov. Tom McCall, this is Gov. Oswald West and Gov. Bob Straub. And you sir, are an interloper, a grasping wastrel of the land, a hungry hussy for profit."

"Let us depart; we haven't much time," said

West. "By the way, Mr. Scrooge, no selfish interest, through politics or otherwise, shall be permitted to impair or destroy our great birthright."

"What great birthright?"

"Oregon's publicly owned beaches!" the ghosts thundered in unison. They held their staffs aloft, sparks exploded, and away everyone flew.

Their first stop was 1912, and they watched West ride his horse over Neahkahnie Mountain, a feat that inspired him to draft a 66-word bill that later became law. It declared the wet sand portions of the ocean beaches a public highway and thus in the public trust forever. "This started it all," said West. "The people's coast began here."

Cannon Beach circa 1966 was their next destination. They watched a beachfront motel owner assert a private property claim into the dry sands area, a heretofore unthinkable act that ignited an epic legislative battle, culminating with the passage of the Beach Bill in 1967. By signing it into law, McCall had protected the Oregon public's right to the "free and uninterrupted" use of their ocean beaches... forever.

"It's on to Nestucca Spit now!" boomed Straub, and soon they observed how in 1968, as State Treasurer, Straub singlehandedly slew the Department of Transportation's insane plan to relocate U.S. Highway 101 down a pristine stretch of beach in Pacific City. "This was the greatest achievement of my political life," Straub told Scrooge. "I simply refused to give up when everyone was in favor of the highway.

They called it 'progress.' I did it for my grandchildren, the future of Oregon."

"There is such thing as a grand public good, Scrooge," said West, "Something monumentally larger and richer than anything you could ever imagine. It's called community. In Oregon, our free beaches create a recreational and spiritual community found nowhere else in the world. You apparently could use some of that yourself."

Scrooge didn't know how to respond. He'd never heard such stirring words. What was this ridiculous place called Oregon? He marveled how they'd done it differently here.

"We have one last place to visit, Scrooge, and then you are free to go," said McCall.

Moments later, they were standing behind a group of surfers sitting around a small beach bonfire. They were talking about Scrooge and how they turned up to protest the razing of Marley's house.

"Can you believe he died on top of the bulldozer like that, a heart attack like his uncle?" A few surfers laughed.

"I felt sorry for him," said a man.

"Sorry?" said the woman.

"He looked like the most vacant, soulless man I've ever seen and that was from a hundred feet away."

"No! No!" Scrooge screamed. He went to his knees and wept. "Spirits, I don't want to die! I have good in me yet! Please! I can show you!"

"Show your community," said Straub. "That's all that matters in the world." The spirits then vanished, and Scrooge heard nothing but the old sound of the ocean. He heard it for the first time in his life. The tide came in and swept over his loafers. He took them off and flung them into the sea. All his clothes followed.

Scrooge woke up at the crack of dawn and quickly packed his things. He jumped in the Humvee and raced to his uncle's house where a crew had gathered. Several bulldozers were idling, and someone had decorated dumpsters with garland. Scrooge found the boss and called the whole thing off. He paid them for their time, and they left.

Next, Scrooge drove to the surf shop. It was open. He walked up to long-haired proprietor and said, "I'm Ebenezer Scrooge, and I need a surf board, a wetsuit and a big favor from you."

That afternoon, approximately 300 surfers and two dozen dogs gathered at Marley's home for the inaugural Old Marley Christmas Float. Scrooge had a bonfire raging when they arrived and everyone brought loaves, fishes and beer. The kids pitched in to decorate a shaggy shore pine with strands of kelp. Scrooge delivered a brief speech vowing to uphold the spirit of his uncle and said all he wanted for Christmas was to hear stories about Marley.

Then Scrooge called his girlfriend. Naturally he got her voicemail. "I'm not coming back. You can have everything, the condo, the cars, the rugs. Sell it. Keep it. Give it away. I don't care." He shut off the phone and cast it wordlessly into the fire. The crowd went wild.

Scrooge faced them and said to no one in particular, "Hey, is someone going to teach me how to surf? And where can I get a dog? I'm going to name it Tiny Tim."

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*Matt Love is the author/editor of 14 books about Oregon, including "The Great Birthright." His books are available through coastal bookstores or nestuccaspitpress.com*



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