

Mill Pond rose from ashes of the Astoria Plywood Co-op

‘Fortune does not change men. It reveals them.’ That was in a fortune cookie I opened years ago. I’ve seen many illustrations of its wisdom. And it applies to both good fortune and bad.

How we respond to fortune, or adversity, says a lot about us. And that is no less true for a city. Calamities of all sorts have hit cities — from London’s plague to Chicago’s fire.

San Francisco rebuilt itself after the horrific earthquake and fire of April 18, 1906. The downtown Astoria that we know was a remarkable comeback from the catastrophic fire of Dec. 8, 1922.

A more recent civic trauma was the Astoria Plywood Mill’s decline and fall. This happened not long after our family’s move here in 1987. I recalled this memory when a group of bankruptcy court clerks recently asked me to tell them about Astoria’s rebirth. My presentation did not have to include bankruptcy. But it dawned on me that one of the most pivotal, transformational moments in postwar Astoria began with the collapse of that longtime manufacturer — the equivalent of bankruptcy.



Steve Forrester

I walked into our newsroom for the first time just as the Astoria Plywood Cooperative was entering what became the beginning of the end. One of the newspaper’s stories on the co-op during my first year was the hiring of a turnaround artist, whom the co-op board hoped could save the ship. I met the man, who seemed to have the essential energy and experience. But the weight of debt was too great.

When the end came, it was not strictly speaking a bankruptcy. But the mill — which had sustained hundreds of families and sent plenty of young Astorians to college — shut down. Left behind were significant liens on the property and a polluted piece of real estate, including a mill pond.

The immediate challenge for City Manager Bob DeLong and Community Development Director Paul Benoit was to clear the liens. Those who held significant debt were Weyerhaeuser Co., Clatsop County, Northwest Natural Gas, the federal Small Business Administration and Standard Insurance.

Benoit succeeded in having the liens assigned to the city. Funds to clean up the polluted site were available from the state Department of Environmental Quality, but they were in the form of a challenge grant to be matched. Traditional lenders were not touching polluted parcels — later known as brownfield sites. Thus the city needed a nontraditional lender to fund its portion. That lender showed up in the form of Shorebank, which Portland-based Ecotrust had just brought to Oregon.

Another piece of good fortune was the interest of the Portland developer Art DeMuro, who responded to the city’s request for proposal to redevelop the land into a beneficial use. DeMuro brought an architect who laid out a vision that linked to Astoria’s history. DeMuro took considerable risk. His investment was more than financial; it was emotional.

Lasting evidence of DeMuro’s attachment to Astoria was his request to have his ashes deposited in the mill pond.

The Plywood Mill site was an industrial site since the town’s beginnings. In my search for photos of the mill, I learned a few things. Prior to the Astoria Plywood Mill’s birth in the 1950s, there had been a sawmill on the same site. It was known as the Box Factory, and it manufactured fish boxes. Jon Englund said that one way of knowing the direction of



The Daily Astorian/Clatsop County Historical Society
The Astoria Plywood Mill in August 1955. All the black and white photos on this page are part of The Daily Astorian Negative Collection at the Historical Society.



One of the Astoria Plywood Mill’s buildings.

City of Astoria Archives

the wind was to look at the smoke coming out of the sawmill’s wigwam burner.

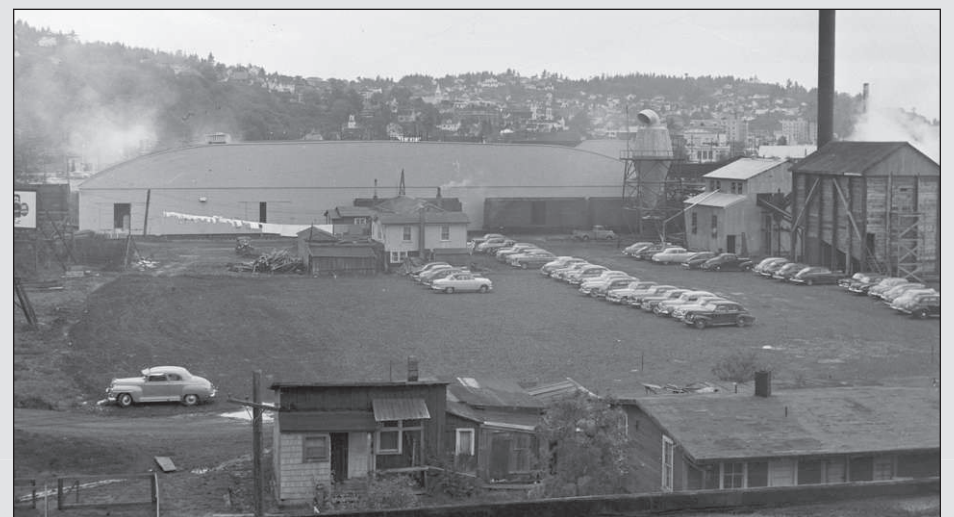
The other thing I realized was the widespread benefit the mill provided to Astoria families. When I asked Nancy Autio if she knew a mill shareholder, she said her father, Harold Akerstedt, was one. When I asked Howard Clarke, he mentioned a number of families where the mill was a source of sustenance as well as summer work. Steve Fick recalled that working in the mill sent a lot of young men to college.

Englund said so many Finns had shares in the mill that part of it was known as Little Finland. Raimo Tila was one of those Finnish shareholders, said his son, Markku, who also worked in the mill for six years, starting in high school.

All cities are built on layers of history. Because of its age, Astoria is even more an archaeological site.

Very few who drive or walk past the Mill Pond residential area know about its metamorphosis. Astoria’s ability to redeem that piece of land was the key to turning the corner to a new economic era. Benoit, DeLong and the City Council of those years showed great ingenuity and tenacity in pulling off a turnaround that other small towns envy.

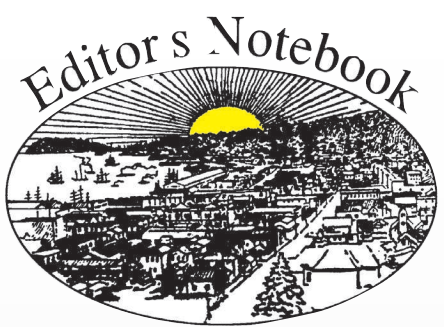
— S.A.F.



The Daily Astorian/Clatsop County Historical Society
The Astoria Plywood Mill in August 1955. All the black and white photos on this page are part of The Daily Astorian Negative Collection at the Historical Society.



The Daily Astorian/Clatsop County Historical Society
The mill pond at the Astoria Plywood Mill in August 1955.



Paul Benoit, Bob DeLong and the City Council showed great ingenuity and tenacity



Paul Benoit



THE DAILY ASTORIAN

Founded in 1873

STEPHEN A. FORRESTER, Editor & Publisher • LAURA SELLERS, Managing Editor
BETTY SMITH, Advertising Manager • CARL EARL, Systems Manager
JOHN D. BRUIJN, Production Manager • DEBRA BLOOM, Business Manager
HEATHER RAMSDALL, Circulation Manager