

Forrester: Family has owned the Astorian since 1919

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A: I knew more than most people for two reasons. One, I had been a page in the U.S. Senate for Oregon Sen. Neuberger, so I knew my way around some of the buildings, and secondly I had been a substitute for Smith. I had no clue at that time he would offer me the bureau.

Q: What were the key lessons that you learned there?

A: The whole place, Congress that is to say, is a laboratory in power. I happened to be there during what I would call the ‘golden age’ of Pacific Northwest power. Magnuson, Jackson, Hatfield and, eventually, Packwood, Al Ullman and Frank Church of Idaho — all were committee chairs. And then in 1980 Magnuson gets swept out, Church loses, Al Ullman loses, but then Mark Hatfield and Bob Packwood are committee chairs. And then Tom Foley, he was chairman of House Agriculture, as well.

So, that was a pretty exciting time.

Q: You were in Washington a decade? And you met Brenda (Penner, his wife) while you were in D.C.?

A: We met before I left. She was in Portland being a certified-nurse midwife and we met, and then she came back to D.C. as part of her professional group and looked me up. When we got married, we had spent two weeks total elapsed time together!

Q: So what led you to coming back out to the far left edge of America to be editor here?

A: Brenda and I had decided we’d had enough of D.C. It was time to move and we were looking for options. And my mother called me at the end of one day and said ‘Your father is thinking about retiring,’ which was something we never expected in the family. We feared he would die at his desk, as my grandfather had. He was 72. I had never expressed any interest in coming back to run the paper, but it took us about 5 minutes to make that decision.

Q: The family had owned the Astorian for a long time?

A: Since 1919. I knew Astoria to a certain extent, but I didn’t grow up here and we visited only occasionally. Brenda and I knew some people from meeting at parties and so forth, but even though we’d owned the paper for half a century or more, I was regarded as an outsider. And probably still am, to a certain extent, because I didn’t go to high school here.

In journalistic terms, that’s useful, because if you are in fact an outsider you see things more clearly.

Q: What do you feel about Oregon’s current crop of politicians?

A: It’s not original to me, but I agree that you really have to go back to Victor Atiyeh to find a really decent governor. John Kitzhaber had his moments, in his third term, until he flamed out on us. But for a really substantial governor, it’s Atiyeh, and before him, well, Robert Straub was a very decent governor, a one-termer. And then you have Tom McCall, the golden age, and Mark Hatfield was a good governor. We had four in a row there.

Now, in the case of Kate Brown, too timid. Needs the job too much, I think.

On the federal level, (Sen.) Ron Wyden certainly knows what he’s doing. I’ve watched Ron since he came to office in the House, and



Danny Miller/The Daily Astorian

Steve Forrester, retiring editor and publisher of The Daily Astorian, chats with Stewart McCollum, who was an early president of Clatsop Community College at a community open house for the newspaper on Wednesday at The Daily Astorian office in Astoria. Chuck Meyer is in the background.

when he was a candidate. I’ve watched him go through several growth spurts. He’s very savvy. Merkley, I think it’s yet to be seen what he will become.

Q: Were people glad to have you come here?

A: Some were. One of the first social occasions we went to with contemporaries was at Ron Louie’s house, Ron and Jo Louie. Ron was chief of police and I’d met him already, and I think Brenda had gotten to know his wife because our children were the same age. And at that party was Willis Van Dusen and his first wife, and Paul Benoit and his wife. And of course the Louies were from not here and the Benois were from not here. And Willis was very much from here.

From the start, Willis was incredibly friendly and much different from a lot of native-born Astorians that you would meet at that time.

At the same time, I met other people who either were standoffish, or in the case of Martin Nygaard, shunned me. I remember vividly, it was a business gathering at the Chinook Room at the Port of Astoria, and I had not been here more than a few months and there was Martin Nygaard, and I had not met him. I stuck my hand out and he turned the other way. I subsequently learned that my father had offended him in something he wrote about one of Nygaard’s proposals. Nonetheless, I had seen enough of politics by then to know what I was looking at, which was kind of another version of Bob Packwood.

I was told there is a group here that doesn’t want anything to happen, so they stand in the way of progress, and I never found that group of people. I don’t think they existed. What I concluded was that things didn’t happen here because of inertia. The way I put it was that good ideas here died for ‘lack of a second.’ No one would say, ‘Well, that is a good idea and I’ll help.’

The larger infrastructure picture was that the plywood mill was on its last legs, the county fairgrounds were in the middle of town, there was no Aquatics Center, for instance. There was no Riverwalk. On the weekend, especially on Sunday, downtown was dead. The Astoria Sunday Market had not happened yet. It was just absolutely closed up. It was an entirely different set of cir-

cumstances. The old Safeway was in the middle of town — one of the smallest Safeways.

Q: What happened to turn all that around?

A: I think the era of change started with Mayor Edith Henningsgaard. She brought the city into the modern era. She started that process. She was succeeded by Willis Van Dusen who continued that process and built on that. The important thing about Willis is that unlike so many people who grew up here, he was impatient for change. And impatience is essential in a leader. Edith was, too.

And then at the same time, I think there were a group of us who moved here. Paul Benoit was one. He’s another element in the whole thing — an enormously creative community development director. He created the Riverwalk through a series of grants and gifts he was able to generate.

Our Liberty Theater project, a number of the people I recruited had not grown up here. At the same time, other board members like Hal Snow and Cheri Folk were longtime residents.

And then you have Shorebank coming here to help do the Mill Pond — a completely outsider organization that was also an unconventional lender.

So all these new things show up within years of each other. And after two or three failures on Commercial Street, we get our first new restaurant that lasts, which is the Urban Cafe, operated by a guy, Paul Flues, who grew up here, went away and learned the business, and came back.

So one by one, all of these things happened. It was not completely by outsiders, but I do think that new blood was essential, because the new blood that came here brought new ideas that they’d seen done elsewhere. They brought connections with people elsewhere who would approve grants and gifts, and in some cases they brought money. Those are the essential things for change in a small town.

Q: Were people resistant to change?

A: I think it was more apathy, back to inertia. You would always have naysayers and I’m sure Paul Benoit would tell you what was said about the Riverwalk when he started it up. Willis took the very bold step of proposing a \$1.3 million urban renewal

grant for the Liberty Theater. I don’t remember exactly, but I’m sure there were people saying, ‘Well, couldn’t that money be put to use better elsewhere?’ An of course his response was ‘This kind of thing is what urban renewal money is meant for.’

Any town has a bedrock of naysayers. They will always be there, and the sad thing is that they never make a contribution to anything. So in a sense, they really don’t matter. They write themselves out of the script, because all they’re good for is telling you why things shouldn’t be done.

Q: Did you have a well-formulated editorial agenda at that time?

A: No, I developed our positions on things as they came up, and right as I got here, Clatsop County was in the tank fiscally. It had no tax base and they were letting people out of jail. They were not prosecuting a certain number of cases. They’d reduced certain agencies. I believe Home Health was eliminated. Columbia Memorial Hospital picked it up. And so the first election when I was here had two big items on the ballot. One was a new tax base for the county and one was home-rule government for the county. Editorially, the newspaper supported both of those and they both passed.

We now have a very strong historic preservation value in the newspaper. It wasn’t around when I got here. I had met Dr. Edward Harvey, who really started it here in the 1970s. Well, we did the Liberty, and then it became a big deal, with one project after another of historic preservation.

Q: Has the area missed chances along the way?

A: There was an opportunity to do an Astoria bypass when we got here and it was a live topic with the state Transportation Department and the commission. The Chamber of Commerce at that time was ambivalent, took no position on it, and one person in town, Jim Parker, now deceased, was very visible in his opposition to it. Made a lot of noise. When the state sees local division, they go someplace else. So that kind of blew Astoria’s opportunity.

Q: So to summarize, looking back over nearly the past 30 years, it seems

there has been a lot of progress locally?

A: In both a physical sense and a cultural sense, Astoria is a much richer place now. Looking ahead, I doubt the size of the place changes much; we’re just sort of limited geographically. There’s no room to expand, especially if people keep saying “no” to new housing.

Q: Was there a single most-difficult story you’ve dealt with in your time here?

A: Most difficult was certainly the mayor’s drunken-driving arrests. And they were difficult because Willis had his first one in Eastern Oregon. To his credit he called to tell me about it. And for reasons I don’t understand, my father was not printing drunken-driving arrests in the paper. He had up in Pendleton in the East Oregonian, but we didn’t here in Astoria when he handed it over to me. So we had no policy. So we really didn’t know what to do with Willis’ arrest up there.

By the time he had his second arrest, two things had happened. One, we figured out what we would do and we did report it fully, and then the second thing that was going on was that within our family we had realized that my cousin, Jacqueline Brown, was an alcoholic, so we were dealing with that. And part of dealing with that is learning the vocabulary of it all and getting past the discomfort of talking about it. So, on the one hand, I was able to be more conversant with what I was seeing going on with Willis, but at the same time it remained very uncomfortable to cover a guy in this way — a guy whom I’d gotten to know.

And by the time the third one comes along, it had its upside in the that Willis decided he would go to Betty Ford (Clinic). I’ve always said there were two eras in Astoria politics in that period — before Betty Ford and after Betty Ford. Willis was a good mayor I think throughout, but after Betty Ford he was a really good mayor, because he was just a lot more in the moment.

Q: The Astorian and the newspaper industry in general have gone through amazing changes in this period. How is it that the Astorian has managed to arrive at the 21st century when so many others have failed?

A: The metropolitan papers like the Oregonian are in a whole different category than we are. They have a set of forces arrayed against them that we don’t. It’s always easier for us to define ourselves in terms of our market and our mission.

But I think one thing that has made a critical difference is that our owning family has been prudent. We’ve always had very competent business managers. We take their advice. I’m always amused when I am labeled as a liberal editor. Little do they know that we’re very conservative as a business.

Our entry into the digital world was very systematic. We did not take a big plunge and lose our shirts. Digital has always made money for us, right from the very start. The same is true of other efforts to centralize processes within the company. We’ve managed to do that without losing each paper’s individuality. We’ve created new opportunities that way for ourselves. Incremental is the key word with respect to how we approach things.

We’ve always been very fortunate in the talent that we’ve attracted. Certainly, in this building among our managers and many of the people in the building. Everybody has a particular talent. That’s true throughout the company. We’ve got people across the state who have particular talents and that’s our high card. We’ve got the equipment; you’ve got to have the equipment to play. But if you don’t have talented people who know how to sell, know how to write, know how to design and manufacture, it doesn’t happen.

Q: What are the opportunities moving forward? Are you confident the Astorian will be around 30 years from now?

A: It should be. My cousin Kathryn Brown, who’s 20 years younger than I am, is next in line, and then, 20 years younger than she is my daughter, who’s on our board. Ownership will mean a much different thing for my daughter than it did for me or for Kathryn, but that’s part of a business maturing. There are just many different ways into the company now than there used to be.

Q: You are continuing as an active president of the company. What does that mean?

A: My wife and I will get around the company more than we have. Or more correctly, when we get around the company, we’ll be able to take our time about it instead of hurrying. I will see all the papers every day. I will occasionally write editorials for the Astorian, especially on topics where I have a deeper vein of knowledge than anyone else does. And then at the corporate level, Kathryn and I will be responsible for the transition to a new chief operating officer someday.

Q: Any closing words of wisdom?

A: I am fond of a quote from Sherlock Holmes. I don’t know that it’s Conan Doyle. It’s in “Sherlock Holmes Meets the Spider Woman” — one of those Basil Rathbone-Nigel Bruce movies.

In this movie, they are setting Holmes up for the night to be bait for the spider woman and Nigel Bruce says, ‘What do you think is going to happen?’ And Basil Rathbone says, “I expect nothing (pause) and everything.” Which I think is the perspective a news person has to take each day. You often don’t know if you are looking at nothing or something.

Port: Solution is likely hooking cleaning stations into municipal sanitary system

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With the state already fining the Port more than \$30,000 for mistakes in runoff sampling and mandating the Port to drastically improve storm-

water collection and treatment, Knight said it’s imperative to keep a good relationship and try to be in compliance, no matter how small the issue.

Knight added the Port has already talked to tenants

and put up signs.

Although the Port has not reached out to the city, Knight said, the solution is likely hooking the fish cleaning stations into the municipal sanitary system.

Knight compared the issues with fish remains to the air quality concerns at the port’s old offices and meeting space inside the Gateway Building. After hearing from a former Port commissioner

that staff were moved out of the building because of air quality concerns, the agency did some research and learned the chemical carcinogen benzene had been identified under the building in a

report from the mid-2000s. The Port stopped using the building for meetings and is planning to spend nearly \$46,000 to have the air inside and soil beneath the building tested.