

Depression-era program preserves rare recollections of the pioneers

Don't we all wish go back in time and pay more attention to our grandparents' stories?

In the age before television and other forms of mass entertainment, family gatherings often centered around reminiscing about personal adventures and origins. No doubt there were exaggerations and mistakes, but those old tales mostly were grounded in first-hand experience. A basic rule of gathering folklore is to work back as closely as possible to the source — it still may be imperfect but will come nearest to the unvarnished truth.

A dedicated Mason with a masonic talent for memorizing long passages, Grandpa Bell was loaded with spell-binding yarns from his decades as a coal miner and rancher. I recall just drabs and drabs of what he said — for example, climbing into the tippie above a mine shaft to free a jammed cable from which dangled an unstable load of TNT that would have blown the miners below to atoms. Without overplaying it, his language conveyed the commonplace terror that was intrinsic to underground mining.

Having even just that one story in his own words would be a treasure, at least to my family, and a testament to the everyman courage that built our still-great nation.



Federal Writers' Project

For many Northwesterners, little-known narrative riches are readily available — or in some cases still waiting to be mined — in the files of the Federal Writers' Project. A Depression-era employment lifeline for about 6,600 white-collar workers, one of its meritorious efforts here on the West Coast was interviewing and preparing oral histories of first-generation settlers, people who were grandparents living in the 1930s.

In Washington state, the highlights of these interviews were boiled down and made readily available in three volumes published by the Washington Pioneer Project in 1937 and 1938. (See tinyurl.com/ToldByThePioneers1, tinyurl.com/ToldByThePioneers2 and tinyurl.com/ToldByThePioneers3)

In Oregon, reading most Federal Writers' Project interviews requires a visit to the Oregon State Library and the University of Oregon; with rare exceptions, the files haven't been put online.

Here is one Astoria story I was able to find, a recollection by Dan Cummings, retired brakeman on the Astoria and Columbia River Railroad:

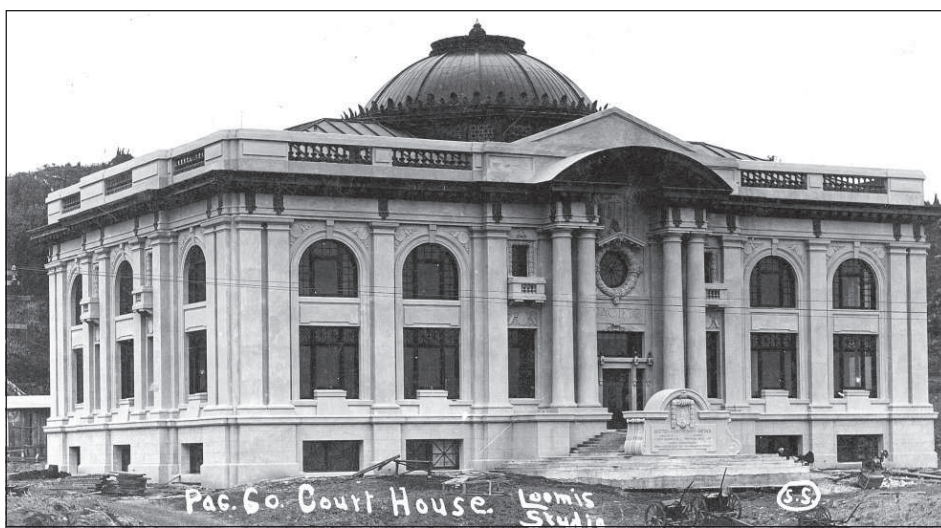
"I was very good on logs in those days. I had been a logger and I was quite nimble of foot. There happened to be a regatta at Astoria, with a fifty dollar prize posted for the winner of a logrolling contest. ... They got a pair of boots from somebody at the sawmill and gave them to me. Half the caulks were missing, and besides they were worn out and hardly any good at all.

"It was a light cedar log we were to roll, and I got out there with my heart in my mouth. I had never rolled with anybody like that fellow. But he was too confident, because it wasn't long before he missed his footing and in he went. Well, the contest was two duckings out of three, so he climbed back on and we went at it again. I knew I could win easy this time because he was wet and I was dry. He couldn't move as nimbly as I could. In he went again, and I collected my fifty dollars."

Accepting congratulations from another



Stationed on the remote Columbia River and missing his family, homesick future president Ulysses S. Grant, center in top hat, is said to have dried out in Chinook following an epic bender.



Pacific County's current courthouse in South Bend, pictured here under construction in 1910, housed records spirited away from the old county seat in Oysterville in the dead of the night in 1893. It cost \$132,000, which was considered wildly extravagant at the time.

brakeman, Cummings confessed he didn't win because he was the best roller, but because he couldn't swim and was terrified of drowning.

Gen. Grant in Chinook

Among the rich pickings available on the Washington side is "Told by the Pioneers." Here are a few favorites, along with some context:

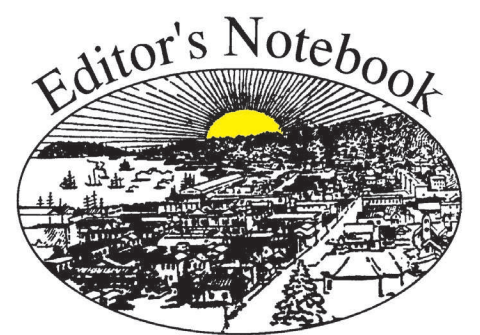
• Agnes Louise (Duchene) Eliot of Wahiakum County: "While Rocque Duchene and wife lived at Chinook, Gen. Grant was sent there to recover from an attack of delirium tremens. He stayed in their home. He shook so terribly he spilled his coffee all over, so Grandma Duchene took him into the kitchen and fed him herself. She was the doctor and midwife for that whole country. Grant loved children and used to pick up (one of the babies) and carry her about but he was so unsteady he could never be trusted alone so grandma always walked with him."

Duchene was an interesting character, a Hudson's Bay Co. store manager who bought company sea Capt. James Scarborough's claim at what is now Fort Columbia State Park for \$1,250 in 1856, starting an early salmon-packing business. His wife, Mary Rondeau, was the granddaughter of Chinook

Chief Comcomly. The hard-drinking Grant, victorious Civil War general and screw-up president, was stationed at Fort Vancouver from September 1852 until early 1854 — he grew his famous beard there — and was then transferred to California. So the dates don't quite match up in Eliot's account, though it's possible Grant stayed with the Ducheneys at another Chinook residence before their move to the Scarborough property.

• C.O. Rhodes, whose father homesteaded in Pacific County in 1866: "When 12 years old I had an exciting experience on a fishing trip with my uncle on the North Palix river. ... In those days, 1887, there were tens of thousands of these fish in these shallow streams. Well, it was then and there that a fish got me. ... Not being content to stand on the bank, I crawled out on an old slippery log that projected out into the creek some 10 feet, right among the fish. I picked out a good, big one, and did I hook him! He landed me right off that log among all those fish. The water was only about 2 feet deep, and there were fish over me, under me, and on all sides of me, and as fast as I would gain a footing, down I'd go again with fish splashing salmon eggs in my ears, eyes, and mouth."

Rhodes also recalled "rounding up cows and calves at milking time and many an old



black bear did I see. They were harmless unless accompanied by their cubs, then they were not to be fooled with." This is still true today — Pacific County is endowed with amazingly docile bears.

• George Wilson, Pacific County: "It was in 1890 that six 'promoters' came to Oysterville, and I had the honor of sailing them to South Bend in a sail boat called the 'Indona' ... It was not long until the town had grown to be a quite important place, and all kinds of business was started. Being located near the center of the county, the people wanted the county seat moved there from Oysterville. There were no roads then, and all travel and traffic was by water and it required two steamers and a scow to move the courthouse records and courthouse material to South Bend. I helped to move them, and owing to the bitter controversy over the matter, it was moved by night."

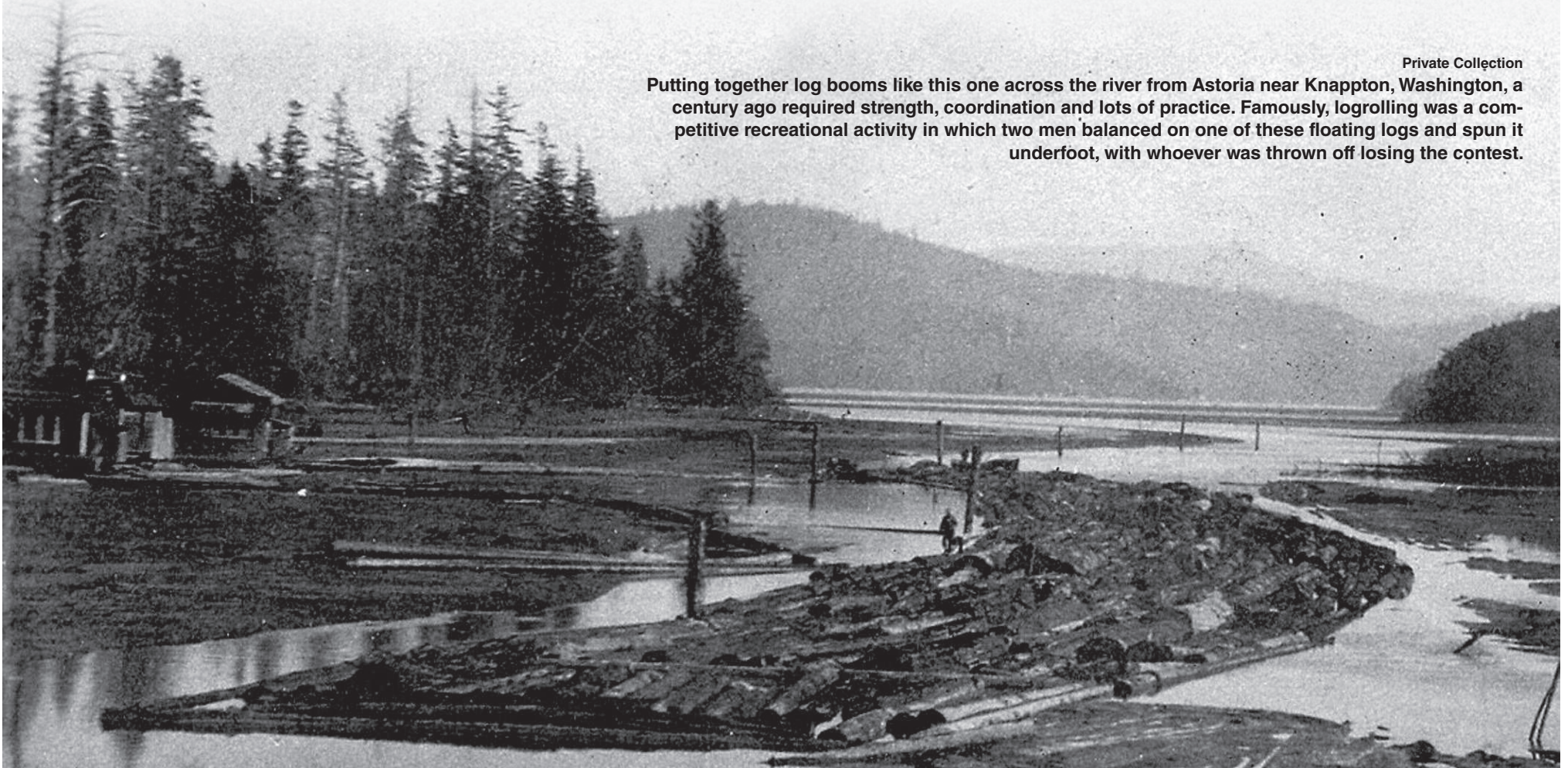
Nowadays, county government and oysters are about South Bend's only remaining industries. Were it not for its spectacular courthouse, it would be tempting to move the county seat back to Oysterville.

One of these days, I'll make a trip to Salem and Eugene and see what gems are buried in Oregon Federal Writers' Project records. The project's most famous writers are a pantheon of 20th century literati, names like Ralph Ellison, John Steinbeck, Studs Terkel, Saul Bellow and John Cheever. It's irresistible to think the rich and gifted language in their books is a direct reflection of the thousands of unique stories they absorbed during this sensational exercise in capturing American memories.

— M.S.W.

Matt Winters is editor and publisher of the *Chinook Observer and Coast River Business Journal*.

Putting together log booms like this one across the river from Astoria near Knappton, Washington, a century ago required strength, coordination and lots of practice. Famously, logrolling was a competitive recreational activity in which two men balanced on one of these floating logs and spun it underfoot, with whoever was thrown off losing the contest.



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