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# WEEKEND BREAK

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## Local innocence collided with World War I's harsh realities

By MATT WINTERS  
The Daily Astorian

When the U.S. entered World War I a century ago this month, local news was dominated by — what else? — the spring salmon season.

One of the many fascinations of running a newspaper is the easy ability to travel in time by diving into archives and seeing what our journalistic ancestors were thinking about at any point. While most larger publications, including *The Daily Astorian* and the *Oregonian*, have long-since donated their old stacks to museums and libraries, at least for now the *Chinook Observer's* historical volumes still reside within easy reach of my desk. They are, to me, an almost-living presence — a conscience and inspiration that prod me toward trying to comprehend how our lives mesh together across the decades.

### Writer's Notebook

The war had been raging for nearly three years by the time the U.S. became directly involved. Beforehand, local papers carried ample news about it and U.S. defense policy, much of it initially skeptical. In September 1915, for example, the *Observer* and many other papers carried a front-page story about the “soaring” annual cost of military spending. The U.S. Army and Navy cost a combined annual total of about \$50 million in the 15 years before the Spanish-American War in 1898, compared to \$240 million in 1915. This prompted the headline, “High cost of militarism in America reaches enormous figures.”

“In this connection, it is legitimate to ask to what extent the awful increase in cost is due to the systematic agitating of the possibility of war by those who profit financially from the ever-increasing expenditures on the military branches of our government,” the article’s author said.

A century later in 2015, U.S. military spending was estimated at \$597 billion — about 2,500 times more than in 1915. Even accounting for inflation, this seems like a heck of a leap — even to a proud military family like mine.

#### Immigrants to Americans

I’m not here to re-fight old battles, but to recount a few local news items from just before and after the U.S. Congress issued a declaration of war on April 6, 1917, back in those quaint days when Congress still insisted on its constitutional prerogative to be the declarer of wars.

A majority of citizens in our area, like the nation as a whole, turned on a dime to support the war effort — partly on account of heavy-handed German blunders that made themselves into easy-to-hate enemies. We saw our role as providing men, fish and spruce lumber.

In terms of manpower, it’s interesting to note what an immigrant-heavy place the Columbia River was a century ago.

“Astoria, a small fishing town on the mouth of the Columbia River, has never attained much importance to anyone except Finns. During the first part of the [20th] century approximately 4,000 Finns, comprising between one third and one half the population of the town, occupied Astoria, making it the largest Finnish community west of the Mississippi River and earning it the nickname of ‘the Helsinki of the West,’” historian P. George Hummasti wrote in a 1977 analysis of WWI’s impacts here.

Other articles correctly note the strong influence of Norwegians and other Scandinavians in the estuary area, many who came for fishing and logging jobs.

In an April 20, 1917, editorial, the *Chinook Observer* commented, “When it is realized that three-fourths of the population of Chinook are foreign-born or foreign-extraction, the patriotic American spirit shown since the declaration of war with Germany is a thing to be proud of.” The crowd attending the “moving picture films” at the Chinook Theater often broke into “deafening and thunderous” applause during showings of war speeches by President Wilson and others. “Our foreign-born population is principally composed of Norwegians and Swedes, who are loyal American citizens and proud of the Stars and Stripes.”

Although hundreds of local men ultimately enlisted to fight or were drafted — 21 were killed in action from Clatsop

An ad in the *Chinook Observer* touted Astoria’s July 4, 1917, celebration, the first during World War I. More clippings available online at [DailyAstorian.com](http://DailyAstorian.com).

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County and 16 from Pacific — it’s important to note that attitudes here were complex. Some went to prison in opposition to war they regarded as staged for capitalist profits. Thousands more stayed home to provide food and wood for the war effort.

#### Vignettes from the home front

Here are a few news items I find interesting from the first weeks of the war, while its costs and realities were still hypothetical.

- “With the clearing and brightening of the weather the fishermen are getting busy with their web and putting it in shape for the opening day of the [fish trapping] season. Some pile-driving has been done. The married women are taking hold of their gardens and planting spuds, which have now reached \$4 per sack and still climbing. The rising prices of sugar and flour has given an impetus to buying, as a further rise is expected.” April 20, 1917
- “The crab fishermen took to the sea Tuesday, three boats from Chinook and two from Ilwaco, and returned with good catches. ... They sell for 75c to \$1.15 a dozen.” April 20, 1917
- “Mayor Harley of Astoria will return home from the East and Washington, D.C. on May 2nd. He has secured a submarine base on the Columbia river, and has interested the government so deeply in a naval base here that surveys will be made....” April 27, 1917
- “Six bottles of beer, discovered in a suspicious-looking grip, on board a launch which landed at the Ilwaco dock recently with a party of ‘jolly good fellows,’ male and female, bent on having a social dance, threw the town into a paroxysm of righteous wrath and woe. ... Six bottles of beer! ... When that game old sport, Jack Wilson, ran his liquor emporium in Ilwaco, we’ve seen six bottles of real beer disappear down the gullets of Ilwacoites in six minutes, and nobody had the horrors.” May 11, 1917
- “Colonel Ellis, commanding officer at Fort Stevens, announces that target practice with the large guns at Forts Columbia and

Stevens will be engaged in, but every effort will be made not to interfere with fishing operations or the movement of steamers.” May 18, 1917

- “Old account books hold interesting matter. One recently found in the old Bureau saloon, which went out of business in the Dry Cyclone, laid its pages open, showing the patrons who went on the books for installments of liquids in large and small packages. Some of these names show many of our prominent citizens now identified with the Drys, were formerly numbered among the extreme Wets....” May 18, 1917
- “War has been knocking at our doors this week. We have felt the pulse of the Kaiser, and the throb of Freedom. We have been reading about the horrors of war for the past three years, with little more effect than that produced by a moving picture film, but this week we have been brought in contact with the real thing. Our boys are moving closer to the firing line, and vacant chairs will soon be found at family tables. Millions have been killed, and no one knows what the toll will be before the German lust for world domination and utter annihilation is suppressed or satisfied.” June 8, 1917
- “All of the Chinamen employed at the Chinook Packing Co.’s cannery were willing to fulfill the requirements of the conscription law, but an examination revealed the fact that none of them came within the specified ages.” June 8, 1917
- “The United States is a great nation. It has been flooded with immigrants from every old nation on earth, and those who entered it came here to better under their material condition, be protected by its laws, and enjoy the institutions erected under those laws. To these blessings it adds freedom and personal security, such as is not guaranteed under monarchies and autocracies. From these causes it has become the greatest nation on the face of the earth.” June 22, 1917
- “The young Finn, Elmer Kratsm, who

A news clipping from the *Chinook Observer* reports one of many interesting recruiting efforts for the U.S. military, which rapidly mobilized at the outset of American involvement in World War I.

1917 was still an era of steamships and intense commercial fishing on the Lower Columbia River, as these newspaper advertisements indicate.

was previously arrested at Knappton and brought to Chinook, and later let loose, was picked up Sunday morning wandering around the Wallicut. Saturday night he awakened Mrs. Coleman at the hotel and asked for a boat to go trolling.” June 22, 1917

- “Astoria is going to have a glorious celebration on the 4th of July. Her leading men and sports have gathered up a large sum of money by popular subscription, much of which will go for prizes for the leading events. The parades will be grand and picturesque. Areoplane flights will be pulled off every day. One of the big events will be a log-bucking contest. ... All the towns on the Columbia and surrounding country are invited to participate. Music, dancing, hilarity and festivity galore. Get there, and you’ll have a good time.” June 22, 1917