

# Conversations with the dead

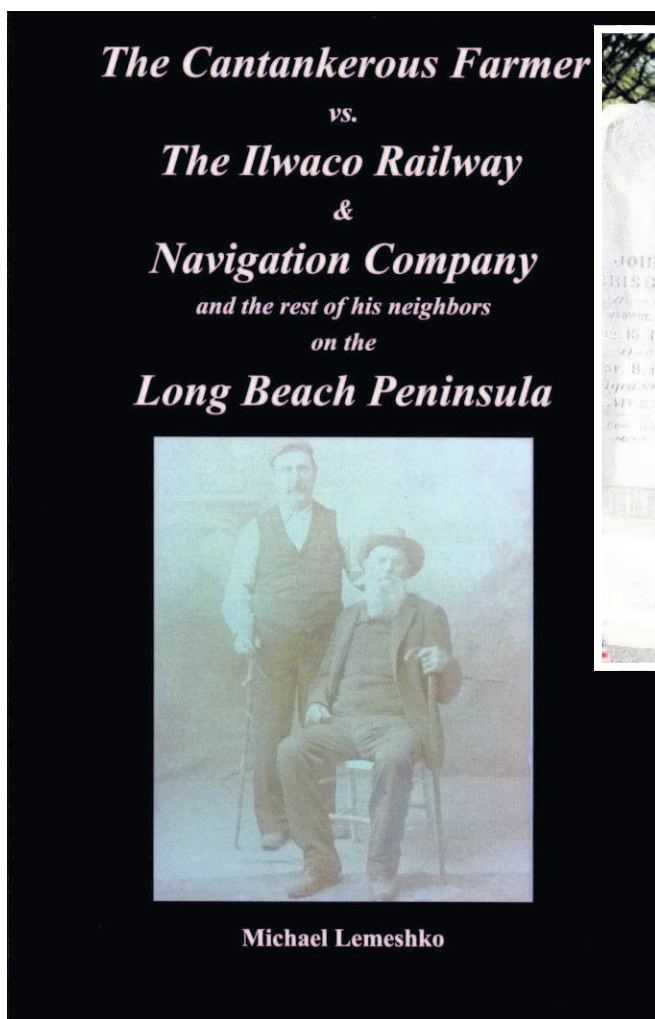
Local history buff-turned-author resurrects the legacy of a Long Beach Peninsula pioneer

By LYNETTE RAE MCADAMS  
FOR COAST WEEKEND

Tucked into the lee side of a weathered ridge just north of Long Beach, Washington, surrounded by a white fence and a legion of Sitka spruce, a tall monument, worn but proud, marks the grave of John L. Briscoe. Laid to rest in 1901 — his wife, Lucy, nestled by his side — Briscoe epitomized the spirit of enterprise and adventure that defined the American West during the second half of the 19th century. A pioneer farmer, entrepreneur, politician and probate judge, who arrived to Pacific County in 1853, he was a founding architect and prominent member of the peninsula's string of communities — by every measure, a legend in his own time.

Through the many decades since his life and death, the Briscoe family cemetery has been lovingly tended by neighbors and service groups: the markers kept clean, the weeds held at bay, the fences mended after a storm. And while it seems fitting to pay such homage to a father of local heritage, in this case there's one thing obviously amiss: Until quite recently, no one had any idea who John Briscoe was.

"He'd been dead for more than a hundred years before I knew his name," said Michael Lemeshko, community historian, newly minted author and the world's latest (and only) leading expert on all things Briscoe. "He had an enormous role in shaping the peninsula as we know



*The Cantankerous Farmer*

vs.

*The Ilwaco Railway*

&

*Navigation Company*

*and the rest of his neighbors*

*on the*

*Long Beach Peninsula*

Michael Lemeshko

SUBMITTED PHOTO

Published in 2016, "The Cantankerous Farmer vs. the Ilwaco Railway and Navigation Company," is available for purchase in Ilwaco, Washington, at the Columbia Pacific Heritage Museum and the Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center, as well as at the Apello Archives Center in Naselle, Washington. Find it online at blurb.com.

it today, and he was quite a character, believe me. It's another great story that time just forgot."

Almost.

## Rising curiosity

In his book, "The Cantankerous Farmer vs. the Ilwaco Railway and Navigation Company," Lemeshko

chronicles the life and times of this fascinating frontiersman who, on a government promise for 320 free acres, brought his family to an unknown land and set out to make his fortune.

His efforts, and those of his contemporaries, were not without conflict — brilliant, sometimes juicy, conflict.



LYNETTE RAE MCADAMS/  
SUBMITTED PHOTO

Michael Lemeshko, author and community historian, at the graves of John and Lucy Briscoe, located at 116th Street, Long Beach, Washington.

Meticulously researched, and told with a narrative style that conveys his love of story, Lemeshko splashes the colorful details of Briscoe's adventures onto a canvas shared by cutthroat competitors all looking out for their own interests. It is the story of schemes hatched and busted, of hardship and moral principle, of greed and entitlement, courtroom dramas and passions run amok. (If that's not enough, add a shipwreck, a prostitute and a midnight attempt at murder — all with a railroad running straight through the heart of things.)

Now a clever and wel-

come addition to any shelf that yearns for local history, the book began as something altogether different, but eventually took on a life of its own, Lemeshko said. An investigation into a land use dispute surrounding his family's vacation property led him on a search for records at the county courthouse, then the state archives, where Briscoe's name kept coming up as a key to it all.

Happily, the dispute was settled. But by then, Lemeshko's curiosity was rising.

## Unlocking doors

Newly retired from a long administrative career in public transportation, and eager to dust off his bachelor's degree in history, he signed up for the Community Historian Project — a 15-week winter course offered annually through the Columbia Pacific Heritage Museum in Ilwaco, Washington. Composed of classes, lectures, tours and demonstrations, the intricate program seeks to provide participants with enough information and ability that they can become community resources themselves, going on to share their knowledge with others.

"It's an incredible experience, totally unique among museums," Lemeshko said. "You're offered skills and exposed to local experts who have this almost hereditary knowledge, lending you a perspective you won't find anywhere else. It creates a connection — a kind of conversation between the present and the past — that keeps unlock-

ing door, after door, after door."

For Lemeshko, the program inspired his project goals to morph from a simple academic article into a formal lecture, and finally, the published volume it is today.

"Mike's book is the perfect example of what the Community Historian Project aims to do," said the museum's executive director, Betsy Millard. "Our goal is to develop a sustainable chain of accurate, interesting information, one that preserves story and a sense of place."

"When someone has a personal interest, the program allows them to develop it against a larger backdrop and within a broader context, and that works really well," Millard said. "Now, instead of merely satisfying his own curiosity, Mike has given us all John Briscoe — a remarkable new story to add to our shared collection. We couldn't be happier."

## 'That's the joy'

And Lemeshko's happy, too.

"My goal in writing this book was never to sell books," he said. "What I wanted was to research and find new things — that's what drives me; that's the joy. I wanted to tell a true story no one was aware of."

"John Briscoe made a huge contribution to this place, and in digging it all up and adding to the knowledge base, in some small way, I hope his contribution also gets to become mine."