

# SPIRITED STORYTELLING

'Talking Tombstones XIV: Over My Dead Body' brings the dead back to life



By HEATHER DOUGLAS  
FOR COASTWEEKEND

The spirits of dearly departed locals will rise for an afternoon of fun history during the 14th annual "Talking Tombstones," presented by the Clatsop County Historical Society. The free event takes place 1 to 4 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 29, at Greenwood Cemetery (91569 State Highway 202) in Astoria.

The Historical Society recruits talented community members to prepare vignettes of ten characters each year. The actors stand by the gravestone of the person they have been assigned and, after much research and preparation, that person will be brought back to life in front of small groups who rotate through the cemetery.

"One thing I love about this program is that cemeteries are filled with people, and those people have stories; unless you make a point of telling these stories they will be forgotten," said McAndrew Burns, the Historical Society's executive director. "It's a way to remind people."

## From Kansas to Astoria

Burns was inspired to create Talking Tombstones after stopping in the small town of Caldwell, Kansas, years ago and witnessing a group of locals give a similar performance.

"A lot of small towns do variations on this concept. There was no reason to stop in this little town except for their cemetery program," Burns said. "It was just an amazing way to bring history to life."

Once upon a time, cemeteries did not hold the same cryptic power they do now. They were parks for picnicking and visiting loved ones. It was a place of remembrance, rather than a place where ghosts were imag-



PHOTOS BY JOSHUA BESSEX

ABOVE: David Reid portrays a character from Clatsop County's past at Talking Tombstones in 2015. TOP: The Grim Reaper made a special guest appearance at the 2015 Talking Tombstones, held at Warrenton's Clatsop Plains Pioneer Cemetery.

ined to haunt or terrorize.

Burns remembered that, "after we did our first Talking Tombstones, we got lots of letters and emails. One said: 'I walk my dog through the cemetery every day and have never thought to stop and read the stones; now I read them and try to get a picture of who that person might have been.'"

## Stars of the show

Matt Hensley, a history teacher of 30 years and one of the founders of Seaside Salt Works, has been a key player in Talking Tombstones since the first event was held at Hilltop Cemetery in Astoria in 2004.

Hensley's first character was a scoundrel lawyer from the 1900s who cheated

fishermen out of money and was eventually gunned down by a disgruntled fisherman.

"We have some interesting folks in Astoria's history," Hensley said, laughing. "I also once portrayed a man that everyone thought murdered his first wife so that he could marry her sister."

Another unforgettable character Hensley portrayed was a Clatsop County deputy sheriff from the early 1900s. The man accompanied the sheriff to arrest a man in Seaside who had committed some crimes, and when the man answered the door to find the sheriff and deputy outside, a gun was pulled. The deputy stepped in front of the sheriff attempting to save his life. Both sheriff and deputy were killed in the line of duty.

"I really enjoyed that character," Hensley said. "He gave up his own life in an effort to save another."

David Reid — the lead adviser at the Small Business Development Center at Clatsop Community College — has participated in Talking Tombstones for 11 years.

"You have to make it interesting," Reid said of historical interpretation, "but sometimes the history of a person is 20 pages' worth from a bunch of different perspectives. Other times, it's just an obituary. It can be a challenge, but I enjoy that."

Reid's performances have run the gamut, he said.

"You have to imagine a person's whole life distilled down into a five-minute talk," he said. "The variety keeps me coming back and the good feedback from people. I'm not an actor, but I get to play an actor for a few hours on Sunday afternoon once a year."

## Spirits in waiting

Repeat attendance at Talking Tombstones has become the norm.

One question Burns asks at the beginning of each event: How many of you have come before? "Invariably over half of the hands go up," he said.

When it's time again to plan next year's event, Burns and his team begin another round of research. "We usually start with a murder victim, a prostitute and a grieving mother, and go from there," he quipped.

Hensley, in fact, is already thinking about next year.

"Mac showed me a flat stone grave marker in a cemetery last year that said 'bear hunter extraordinaire.' If we go back to that cemetery again someday, I told him this is the person I want to portray next." 