

They lived by the whistle

Author reveals untold stories of Clatsop 'company towns' at Thursday Night Talk on April 19

By **PATRICK WEBB**
FOR COAST WEEKEND

Fresh from success writing about Westport as a company town, author Jim Aalberg has broadened his scope to Wauna and Bradwood.

The Portland author's latest work is "Historical Company Towns of Clatsop County," telling the story of those hardy folks from yesteryear who "lived by the whistle."

Like his first book in 2015, it is a collaborative effort with the Clatsop County Historical Society, and all proceeds from sales will benefit the society.

Aalberg will talk about the book 7 p.m. Thursday, April 19, at the Thursday Night Talk in the Fort George Showroom in Astoria.

A Portland resident, Aalberg, 68, is a retired senior executive for the Kroger Co., which owns the Fred Meyer stores. His first work, "Westport Oregon: Home of the Big Sticks and Gold Medal Salmon," now in its third printing, had family meaning because he is the great-great-grandson of Westport's founder, John West.

Westport opened its first mill in 1854, initially water-powered then steam-driven during the early 1900s when Wauna's first mill came online. Both played a role in milling lumber for the World War I effort.

Bradwood began operations in the 1930s with old-growth Douglas fir, hemlock and spruce "feeding the insatiable appetite of the mills," as Aalberg describes in a chapter heading. When World War II began, all three mills were so important that a large Navy security presence kept constant watch on the Columbia River. They won government contracts to supply treated lumber for docks used in the Pacific Theater, the rebuilding of Pearl Harbor and in laying down keels for minesweepers.



Historical Company Towns of Clatsop County



Jim Aalberg in partnership with the Clatsop County Historical Society



COURTESY CLATSOP COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

'Historical Company Towns of Clatsop County' by Jim Aalberg is a collaborative effort with the Clatsop County Historical Society.

A happy, stable workforce

Aalberg said he felt almost obliged to write a second book because he discovered so many untold interesting details about Wauna and Bradwood during his earlier research, as well as Westport's role as a central hub with the movie theater, the 4L Clubhouse (the Loyal Legion of Loggers and Lumbermen), the café and the school.

"The school brought all these people together, the social life was driven by the school, the athletics and the plays," he said.

Aalberg credits Donald Helwig, now retired in Salem, who allowed him to draw on details from his book about Bradwood.

What struck him during his research was the apparent contrast with the negative image of "company towns" in Eastern regions, for example in West Virginia coal mining communities.

Although he concedes that management-worker conflict exists in any organization, the monied Midwest logging barons saw the importance of a happy, stable workforce.

"They were lumber people who built the mills, and they knew that they needed

good, well-trained workers who would stay, married men with families, not so much the unmarried men!" he said. "They built the library, the doctor's office, the church and supported the schools. Eventually, whole generations of people worked there."

Aalberg was aided again by history provided by Francis V. Anderson, son of Westport Lumber Co.'s meat market butcher, and considerably benefited from recollections of Billy Keys and Don Taylor, war veterans whose memories brought the heydays of the mills into perspective. Taylor's father, Jack, ran the planer mill at Westport. "They loved telling stories," Aalberg said, noting that both have died in recent months.

An untold story

The book includes about 100 photographs and a foreword by McAndrew Burns, executive director of the Historical Society, who is effusive in his praise for Aalberg's meticulous research.

"He has combed libraries, dusty archives, newspapers, trade journals and company correspondence and interviewed

INFO BOX

What: Thursday Night Talks: Historical Company Towns of Clatsop County by Jim Aalberg

When: 7 p.m. Thursday, April 19 (doors open at 6 p.m.; accompanied minors admitted)

Where: Fort George Showroom, Lovell Building, 1483 Duane St., Astoria.


Admission: Free; food and drinks available for purchase.

For details, call 503-325-2203 or email cchs@cumtux.org

The book is priced at \$35. Money raised benefits the Clatsop County Historical Society.

dozens and dozens of people with direct connections to the towns and businesses," Burns wrote.

He notes that Aalberg's financial background gives him context to examine the mills' business models and explain their eventual decline.

For Aalberg, the reward is telling an untold story of millers and loggers who kept the sawmills alive for generations, he writes in his introduction. "This book is a testament to their hardscrabble lives and their commitment to their jobs, their families and their community." 

Author Jim Aalberg has expanded his research about Westport by writing about other Clatsop County "company towns," including Bradwood and Wauna.

PATRICK WEBB
PHOTO

