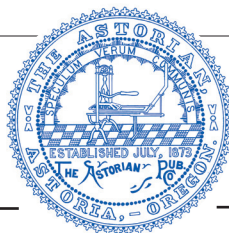


OPINION

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Harvesting oysters is dirty, back-breaking work that eventually sparked creation of local unions in the 1930s, when this two-photo collage was taken on Willapa (aka Shoalwater) Bay.



OYSTER UNION MADE THIS COAST STRONGER

Whatever happened to the labor movement on Willapa Bay?

Labor unions: two words that generate viscerally different reactions. If he had been forced to choose between the esteemed United Mine Workers of America or his venerated Masonic Lodge, my grandpa's brain circuits would have started smoking like a shorting vacuum-tube radio. But his brother George — a coal mine owner — ranked unions somewhere between Satanism and Stalinism on his list of villainies. For decades they were barely on speaking terms.



MATT WINTERS

In the 35 years since they died, with a few exceptions unions have steadily lost influence over Americans' lives and politics. No longer do most union members vote in predictable blocks to swing elections to pro-labor politicians. Seldom do union endorsements make much news or difference. From about one-in-five U.S. workers in the Reagan administration, unions now represent about one out of every 15 private-sector employees (though still around one-third of government workers, with teachers' unions remaining particularly strong).

There are various theories about why union membership is no longer a high priority. Some blame the Koch brothers and other right-wing fat cats for a subtle campaign of disparaging unions and anything else that impedes Darwinian capitalism. Others say labor movements are a low priority so long as beer and TV are cheap — in other words, in the absence of an occasional Great Depression-style economic crisis, workers are lazy about protecting their own interests. Still others think unions are a victim of the broader trend away from membership in groups of any kind. Fewer and fewer of us join civic and social clubs, attend church, or belong to recreational sports leagues like the bowling teams our parents used to enjoy. Who on Earth wants to sacrifice a night to attend a union meeting?

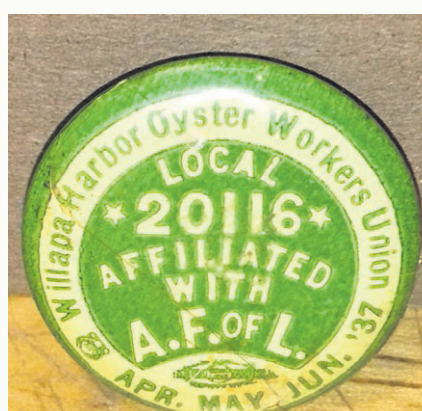
Though my heart swells with pride that starting in the 1880s great-grandpa Thomas Bell was a mine-union organizer in Iowa, Colorado and Montana, I've never been even slightly tempted to join one. I haven't needed to. As a lifelong member of management, the concept of having to run simple decisions through the fine print of a union contract causes my blood to curdle a little. However, looking at stagnant wages in many U.S. industries and regions, and the ways in which disorganized voters can be fooled into going against their own interests, I think there's room to wonder if it isn't time for the pendulum to swing back toward more power for the everyday men and women who keep our country alive.

Oysters on strike

These recent thoughts about unions were sparked by noticing in back issues of the *Chinook Observer* and *The Daily Astorian* that robust unions represented local shellfish workers throughout the mid-20th century.

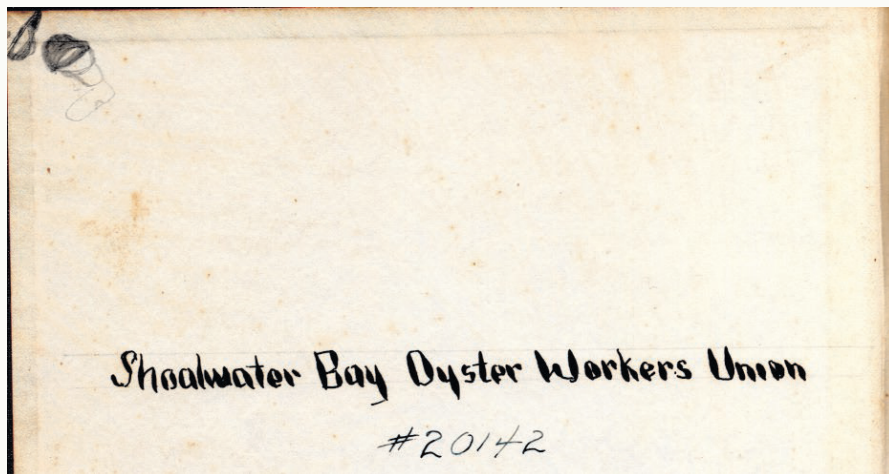
In August 1937, the *Observer* noted in an editorial that "the oystermen of this district decided they cannot afford to pay 35 cents per gallon for opening nor 60 cents per hour for day labor and would ship their oysters in the shell to Portland where the union rate is reported to be 22 1/2 cents per gallon for opening."

Jimmy O'Neil, editor at the time, said "All this sounds as ridiculous as building a cannery in China in order to get a half-cent per gallon rate, when our real purpose here is to build a bigger and better peninsula. ... The men in this country of ours who ever amounted to a tinker's dam are men who stick to their ground and fight things out on the soil that made them."



Matt Winters Collection

LEFT: Payment of dues entitled union local members to wear one of these pins, which were in effect required to work for oyster operations on Willapa Bay in the mid-20th century. This particular union represented workers on the Long Beach Peninsula. RIGHT: The Willapa Harbor Oyster Workers Union represented oyster bed and processing workers in the Bay Center and South Bend area.



Pacific County Historical Society

The inside cover of the Shoalwater Bay Oyster Workers Union minute book from 1937 includes a doodle of what might be a rubber work boot.

By a couple weeks later, O'Neil was walking this back and said his editorial had been "misinterpreted as union-inspired."

"It is just as true as anything in the world that when working people ask for more than a business can reasonably pay, the worker is destroying his own job," O'Neil concluded, suggesting the real problem was some growers undercutting their colleagues by selling oysters for too little.

By the *Observer's* Oct. 8, 1937 edition, my old friend Edith Olson, our Oysterville correspondent at the time, reported "The bayfront, which has been the scene of much activity recently, will be quiet for some time or until the dispute between the oyster growers and workers is satisfactorily settled."

Hard bargaining transpired. "Willapa Bay oyster workers have ended their two-weeks-old strike and accepted pay raises offered them, it was learned here today," the *Astorian* reported Oct. 24, 1937. "Randolph M. Sherwood, president of one of the two locals of the Shoalwater Bay Oyster Workers Union, visited in Astoria over the weekend with W.H. Forsyth, former Willapa resident, and told him of the strike's end. Bed workers got a 15 percent increase to 70 cents an hour, with a minimum of \$2.40 per tide, instead of \$2 as before. Openers received 36 cents a gallon packed, instead of 25 cents as before."

Putting this in context, that 70 cents is the equivalent of about \$12.50 an hour today, a bit better than Washington state's current \$11.50 minimum wage. This was pretty good considering the U.S. economy, after dramatically recovering from the horror show of 1929, had swooned back into a recession in 1937.

Smoked records

There were three oyster unions that covered parts of Pacific County. The Shoalwater Bay Oyster Workers' Union represented the Peninsula, Willapa Harbor Oyster Workers Union covered Bay Center and South Bend, and there was another local for the oyster workers and clam diggers of the North Cove/Westport area. I imagine a separate union local existed for the clam workers of Clatsop Beach.

The Pacific County Historical Society preserves union minute books and other records from 1937 into the 1970s, when they seem to have faded away.

Cracking the covers of the oldest minute book made me think — of all things — mummies. Extracurricular reading recently took me on a side trip into what mummies smell like, for which one amusing answer was "It comes down to the spices. Beef jerky smells pretty good." Someone else remarked on a message board, rather horrifyingly, that "At my high school, we had a mummified Native American boy, kept on the top shelf of a closet. There was no dehumidification or other climate control, other than steam heat in the winter. We would take him down and look at him, and I don't remember any odor."

Well, it turns out old union meetings smelled like mummified cigarette smoke — not all that surprising — but it gave me a palpable sense of being there, sitting on uncomfortable folding chairs, the air turning blue with smoke and passion for economic justice.

One of the first basic lessons of news reporting is that you can't ever count on official meeting minutes for the real story about how decisions are reached. That's very true of the old oyster union records. Frequently, they say something like "a

lengthy discussion ensued" about this or that, but without going into any details or reporting what decision was reached. In records for the 1930s, I particularly wish for more detail about what seems to have been a transparent effort to exclude Japanese-Americans from union membership. We'll never know whether this was due to racism or because they may have had family ties to local Japanese-American cannery owners to whom they could have leaked union information. (In more recent times, Willapa oystermen like Richard Murakami and Giro Nakagawa came to be universally admired.)

Essential engagement

What most strongly comes through in the old minute books is the extent to which good union jobs helped bolster a healthy and mutually supportive community. They are filled with names I know of people who were deeply woven into this place. I'm certain older residents would remember many more.

The slate of Shoalwater union officers in 1938 included Beulah Wickberg, whose name I recalled from an historical obituary we ran in 2002 of her mother Evelyn Slingerland — "the oldest pioneer resident on the Peninsula, she was born in Oysterville on July 29, 1861." Her father was Isaac Clark, co-founder of the village in 1854.

Getting into the 1940s and '50s, the books refer to people I knew personally, such as Bob and Adelle Beechey. Adelle, a keystone in the original Ocean Park Village Club, was a lovely progressive woman who fought the good fight until her death a couple years ago at age 96. Union minutes record donations to the Village Club and sponsorships of local organizations, including Cub Scouts.

The 1949-52 minutes record the union's fight for oyster workers to get Social Security, including close cooperation with U.S. Sen. Warren Magnuson. Other entries cover more mundane matters, such as "The lunch committee has decided not to serve lunch."

In the 1960s, fun-loving union local President Ray Stone ran for a fictitious political office. His campaign sign said, "Elect Ray Stone Mayor of Nahcotta (or President.) No taxes! Free love! Fairly honest. Almost Able. Occasionally upright. Paid for by the Committee to Put Parking Meters in Nahcotta."

The underlying theme throughout local union history, however, was making sure that local people made decent wages in respectful work settings. It would be fascinating to unravel the tangled history of how such a robust system unwound into Willapa Bay labor situation today, in which first-generation immigrants — some with citizenship or green cards and some without — are the un-unionized backbone of the oyster labor force.

One of the names that most stuck out for me in these "smoked-oyster records" is one that has become famous since her death in 2010 at age 98. Financial secretary for Shoalwater Bay Oyster Workers' Union, Local No. 14, Verna Oller saved her pennies and parlayed a bequest from her sister into a gift of millions to her neighbors. Her generosity funds swimming lessons for any locals who want them, with millions more going to the Ocean Beach Education Foundation. Quoting myself from the time, "Verna Oller's commitment to a life devoted to economy, simple pleasures and modest giving should serve as an example to everyone. What a wonderful person."

The oyster union, by providing a firm anchor on this coast for hardworking men and women, made everyone stronger. It's impossible to see this as anything other than a very profound and useful thing.

Matt Winters is publisher and editor of the Chinook Observer.

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