

RADICAL ACTIVISM ON THE RED COAST

Book focuses on lumber, maritime workforce uprisings

Oregon State University Press touts its new book, “The Red Coast,” as a “lively” informal history of the radical activism that roiled Southwest Washington from the late 1800s up to World War II.

But this book was a project among three academics, so there is that unavoidable whiff of academia. Brian Barnes and Roger Snider are both professors affiliated with Saint Martin’s University in Olympia, and Aaron Goings is a senior researcher at the University of Tampere in Finland.

THIS WEEK’S BOOK

“The Red Coast” By Aaron Goings, Brian Barnes and Roger Snider

OSU Press – 256 pp – \$24.95

“The Red Coast” won’t ever be a bestseller at airport newsstands, but this paperback history does cover a dynamic period of time when extractive industries, sizable immigrant populations and militant activists were linked components of the region’s economic vitality.

The authors focus on the blue-collar workforce that rose up in the lumber and maritime industries in Centralia, Woodland, Aberdeen, Hoquiam, Cosmopolis, Raymond, Ilwaco and Astoria, too.

In chapter after chapter, they detail the workers’ lives. Many jobs involved seasonal stoppages that left workers without income. When they did work, their pay wasn’t commensurate with the difficult and dangerous jobs they performed. There were few protections in place when injuries or even death occurred on the job.

And so the workers organized.

They held solidarity picnics and marches. They organized classes, opened soup kitchens, ran political campaigns and went on strike, agitating to claim their due from employers and establishment powers that weren’t inclined to give it to them.

“Red” Finns, Communists, I.W.W. “Wobblies” and union activists found themselves pitted against not only their employers, but others in the community. Local newspapers, politicians at both local and state levels, a robust Ku Klux Klan and other self-appointed and often violent enforcers of the status quo were formidable opposition.

The authors share some of the frightening stories of mob attacks on union halls and murders of picketing workers and labor organizers. They also point out law enforcement’s often lackadaisical response in seeking out and prosecuting the perpetrators.

Still, the workers persevered, and over time many of their efforts paid off.

They won victories in the form of pay raises, hiring practices and safety measures. The shingle weavers’ union even won the remarkable concession of a six-hour workday.

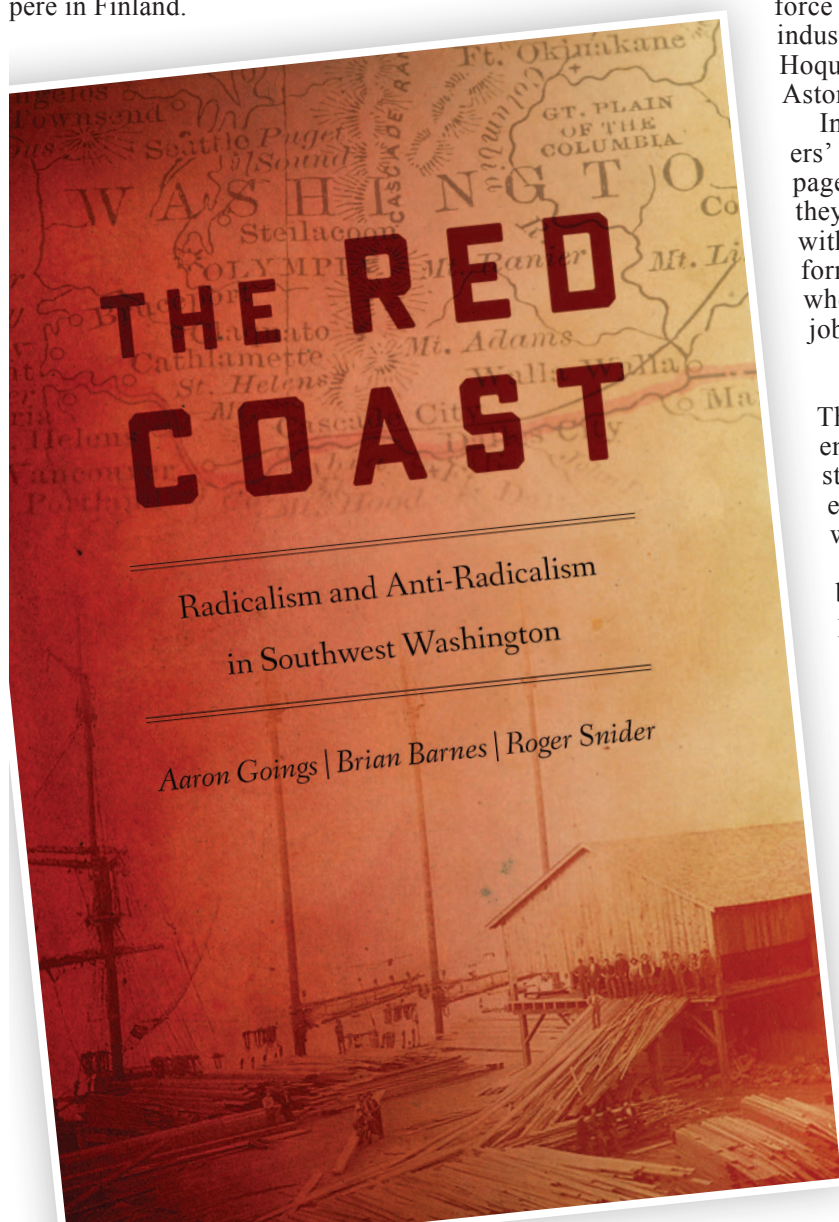
But much of the region’s history of radicalism has faded with time, and the authors suggest that in the intervening half century-plus, there has been a “widespread practice of rewriting, distorting and sterilizing” – of “whitening” the region’s Red history.

For example, the authors lament that in historically Red Coast counties, for the first time in over six decades, those who were the grandchildren of Wobbly immigrants voted “along with their bosses” for a Republican presidential candidate in 2016.

If readers wish to learn more about the Red Coast, the authors provide a short but informative chapter on a quartet of proletarian novels written by Grays Harbor writers who lived through that time and sympathized with the workers’ causes.

“The Red Coast” may not be zippy reading, but it does breathe life back into a turbulent and consequential era.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlinc.com



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