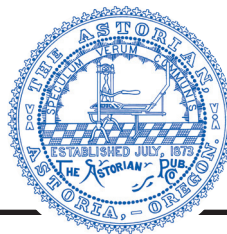


OPINION

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the Astorian

Founded in 1873

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WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

Penner is Astoria's institutional memory

One of this newspaper's great assets lives not in our building. She works some six blocks away.

Over the past three decades, our editors have suggested we should credit Liisa Penner with being a virtual member of our staff. The title would be "Staff Historian."

Our typical encounters with Penner have begun when we called her with a question about an event in the distant past or a phenomenon such as the great Scandinavian emigration to Clatsop County early in the 20th century.



STEVE FORRESTER

My own experience, and that of my managing editors, Laura Sellers and Patrick Webb, has been identical. Over the telephone, Penner would say a few things and we would end our call. Ten minutes later, a long email would arrive, answering our question and much more. And in another 20 minutes, there would be a follow-up email with even more information.

"She is pretty amazing anytime we need her," Sellers said.

"She is the best kind of newspaper source: she never guesses or shoots from the hip," Webb added. "Her replies are always rich in detail, trustworthy in authenticity and timely to meet deadlines."

Being one of the oldest places west of the Rockies, Astoria is like an archaeological dig. The layers of history proliferate, and Penner is our chief archaeologist.

Penner has been associated with the



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Liisa Penner points to Seventh Street on an old map of downtown Astoria.

Clatsop County Historical Society since 1985, first as a volunteer and later on its staff. She earned an Oregon Heritage Excellence Award in 2012.

Erick Bengel, an Astoria journalist now furthering his education at Columbia University in New York, said Penner helped him on such diverse topics as the Astoria Bicentennial, the infamous Mary Louise Flavel saga and even a story about a new ladder truck for the Astoria Fire Department. "When I needed her, she was indispensable," he said.

Telling stories

Her generosity to curious journalists is born of her fervent fascination with history and her quiet joy in telling its

stories.

In an interview conducted by Glenn Gillespie for the Chinook Observer, Penner said: "I loved the language the early news reporters used in these stories, and it really takes you back to the old days on the river. Even as a child — I was about 10 when we moved here — I wondered who the people were who had lived here before me."

The historical quarterly that Penner edits — *Cumtux* — would make any number of state historical societies proud. A typical issue contains the documented memories of a longtime county resident. Some years ago, Penner delivered a special set of issues devoted to the Finnish Socialists of Clatsop County.

She introduced it by saying that it was time to end the silence about this story. And why didn't some people want this story told? Because grandma was a communist.

In that collection of articles, Penner explained the roots of Finnish migration to Astoria and the competing political values those immigrants brought.

Helping others

We are not the only beneficiaries of Penner's historical largesse. The archive she manages within the heritage museum draws quite a number of the curious. Penner is enormously helpful to all of them.

One such beneficiary is Joanne Rideout at Coast Community Radio. Some years back, she was researching historic buildings. "I remember sitting in the photo room with her, with a pair of white gloves on, sorting through these marvelous old pictures," Rideout recalled. "She was always hugely helpful and knowledgeable."

Author Jim Aalberg, who has written books about Clatsop County history, credits Penner with inspiring him with her knowledge and devotion to preserving history.

"I know as a stoic and modest Finn you're not one to easily accept praise and accolades, but for today, be proud and take pride in your accomplishments in maintaining, educating and sharing the history of our community to so many for decades," he said.

Here at The Astorian, we could not have said it better.

Steve Forrester, the former editor and publisher of The Astorian, is the president and CEO of EO Media Group.

WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

The best columnists help shape our reality

Great newspaper columns are portraits in miniature, 800-word windows opening onto lives, places, ideas, tales. A column — one person's impression of something of wider interest — in the right hands can become a blend of poem and documentary, of biography and distilled essence of memory. At their very best, they accurately capture a subject and help make it part of how readers perceive reality.



MATT WINTERS

We've long since crossed a boundary into a time when anybody can be a columnist. Free blogs are universally familiar to anyone with an internet connection, with subscribers numbering from none to many thousands. A few of these are outstanding. But there's still much to be said for professional columns written for well-established publications. As with the news itself, you get what you pay for.

Tom Hallman, *The Oregonian's* Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist speaking at Columbia Forum on Tuesday, is easily among today's most accomplished practitioners of column and feature writing. Guided by curiosity and compassion for the human condition, a Hallman column is the heart of Oregon and the Northwest, and yet can be read with fulfillment by a person on the other side of the planet. Each is about a unique life or situation, but lights a path toward more fully living our own lives.

Hallman is best known for a series written in 2000 about Portlander Sam Lightner and his family, whose quiet endurance inspires confidence that love and dignity are attainable in any circumstance. The series, "The Boy Behind the Mask," won one of American journalism's highest honors, a Pulitzer Prize for feature writing. Full of perfectly observed details, it places a reader beside a facially deformed 14-year-old boy as he walks toward school with a nice girl he has a secret crush on.

"Two blocks from Grant, kids jam the streets. The wavy-haired girl subtly, discreetly, falls behind. When the boy slows to match her step, she hurries ahead. Sam lets her go and walks alone."

Heartbreaking. But also heart expanding.

Read the series online at tinyurl.com/Hallman-boy-column.

Newspaper people are prone to overestimating our influence, but in Hallman's case it's genuinely plausible to think that in the course of his career he's played a considerable part in shaping and reinforcing Portland's ideas about itself. If a city can truly be said to have a personality, Portland's and Hallman's are much alike. What city wouldn't like to be known for caring about one another and helping everyone reach their potential?



Tom Hallman, *The Oregonian's* Pulitzer Prize-winning feature writer, will speak at Columbia Forum on Tuesday. Hallman has a long connection with the Long Beach Peninsula.

COLUMBIA FORUM

For dinner reservations, to become a member or be added to the contact list:

Call: 503-325-4955

Email: forum@dailyastorian.com

RSVP: By noon Monday

E-ticketing: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/columbia-forum-tom-hallman-jr-tickets-80305663401>

(Reservations are not required if you want to attend the talk but not have dinner. Arrive at about 6:45 p.m. for the 7 p.m. program.)

Making connections

Without necessarily being aware of it, we all hunger for connections with others. Columns that focus on what we in the business call "human interest" help build those connections by providing insights into the lives of neighbors. In a sense, we get to know them, hear their stories, and learn about how they resemble and differ from us. Nowadays, thanks to social media, we can chat online with thousands of others about what we've learned about these fellow "interesting humans."

In my parents' and grandparents' days, clipping out columns to share was routine, and I still come across them among envelopes jammed with old letters, canceled checks and other detritus of these past generations. In the mid-20th century, living in the Rocky Mountains, inevitably their favorite columnist was Robert "Red" Fenwick, *The Denver Post's* most popular and enduring writer of modern Western lore under the title "Ridin' the Range."

In a remembrance published a couple of years ago, *The Post* said of Fenwick, "He possessed a hearty laugh and a love



Donelle Fenwick Manton/*Chinook Observer* Denver Post columnist Red Fenwick was a celebrity in the mid-20th century, traveling the countryside learning about ordinary people and telling their stories. Leading up to a special promotional event at the newspaper in May 1950, Fenwick and his trusty house G-Boy went on a multistate tour.

for Old Yellowstone whiskey, both of which he used often. For many living in what editor/publisher Palmer Hoyt imperiously declared the "Rocky Mountain Empire" — *The Denver Post's* 13-state circulation area ranging from Montana to New Mexico — Red Fenwick was *The Post*: as a reporter, columnist and general emissary. He roamed the West, talking to ranchers, farmers, housewives in Kansas, American Indians in New Mexico and just plain folks."

In a column looking back at his time as a Civilian Conservation Corps foreman in 1933, Fenwick commemorated his crew:

"It was the sorriest assemblage of humans since Indian treaty days. All needed a shower and shave. They looked as though they had walked past an army surplus supply depot after an explosion and had grabbed whatever items of clothing they fancied." On the job in Yellowstone, Fenwick remembered a young worker excitedly telling his companions, "Hey youse guys! Lookit dat t'ing squoiting outa d'ground. It's a geezer! Dat's wot it is — a 'geezer.'"

One of Red's expense accounts included this item: "One bottle of booze for Wyoming politician, \$5."

Now fighting to maintain something of its former glory, *The Post* could sure use another Fenwick, a rounder-up of real stories of the modern West, capable of making everyone feel part of a larger enterprise and a participant in ongoing human adventure. His 1982 obituary described him as "a friend of children, cowboys, Indians, rodeo, the U.S. flag, hot-wire linemen, horses, dogs, yucca and everything American." A man couldn't hope for a better epitaph.

My columnists

The first columnist I ever personally paid much attention to was my uncle, Tom Bell, whose *High Country* column and newspaper, *High Country News*, served the cause of preserving the West with evangelical fervor. Tom rightly perceived Western treasures as being constantly under threat by corporate interests and bought-and-paid-for politicians. Just a couple of days ago, I came across a 1964 column of his that my grandmother clipped and saved:

"I can respect the feelings of those who are opposed to wilderness areas, but I cannot accept the subterfuges some opponents use to try to defeat the concept. One of their choicest weapons involves the almighty dollar. But this is an American characteristic which evidently cannot be avoided."

He certainly didn't win every argument, but with scrupulous use of the facts he did win that particular one, with Dubois, Wyoming's 1,100-square-mile Washakie Wilderness Area surviving as one of his legacies. He shares America's top conservation honor with Jimmy Carter and Robert Redford, among others.

Reaching the age when newspaper content beyond the comics was starting to catch my attention, Washington Post satirist Art Buchwald was the first nonfamily columnist I paid attention to. Reading his latest lambast of Richard Nixon was a morning ritual in our house. Thinking of it, I can smell the black coffee and feel the warm mahogany at my parents' breakfast table. Little did we know that today Nixon would nostalgically seem to be a model of comparatively honest competency.

One of Buchwald's Watergate-era columns, "Here are handy excuses for Nixon backers," has precise echoes today:

"1. Everyone does it."

"3. A President can't keep track of everything his staff does."

"4. The press is blowing the whole thing up."

"6. The Democrats are sore because they lost the election."

"17. What's the big deal about finding what your opposition is up to?"

"23. I'm not for breaking the law, but sometimes you have to do it to save the country."

"29. This thing should be tried in the courts and not on television."

To be fair, I've also enjoyed and learned from Buchwald's opposites, commentators like George Will and Charles Krauthammer. William F. Buckley's erudition and wit amuse me to this day. Old-fashioned rationality shouldn't ever go out of style. Neither should newspaper columns, of every type and flavor.

*Matt Winters is the editor and publisher of the *Chinook Observer*.*