

OPINION



the Astorian

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WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

History shapes our perspective

History is all about perspective. Each new layer of events give meaning to those that preceded them. As we deal with the radical change in our lives that the coronavirus has brought, it is useful to look backward. With that in mind, we convened a discussion with two local historians. McAndrew Burns is the executive director of the Clatsop County Historical Society. John Goodenberger is an architectural historian and author of a forthcoming book about the Flavel family.

**Q: This pandemic is changing the course of history. It is not the first time that a national, international or local calamity has affected an entire population. Looking at our history, the 1922 Astoria fire comes to mind.**



**STEVE FORRESTER**  
You may remember a large ad in the newspaper following the fire, saying: ‘Hey everybody, we need to forget about our differences — racial, economic or political. Stop arguing. We have to get out of this.’ The mayor appointed the Committee of 10 to guide us out. And, they did. But there is more to the story. While it’s Astoria’s DNA that we’re supposed to be rough and tumble and independent, there were a lot of Portlanders who helped us get out. We had Portland people investing in the town. Many of the new buildings were built by outsiders. The majority of the buildings were built over a three to five year period. And then the Great Depression happens and we get set back again. We really did suffer in that period.

**Burns:** That sense of optimism — that we’ll bounce back from this — was so apparent. In addition, the geography of the town is altered forever by the fire with the fill that is brought in. ‘If it’s flat — it’s fill.’

**Q: What are other examples of physical events that overwhelmed this town and region?**

**Burns:** Colleagues reminded me about the 1700 earthquake on the subduction zone. We know when it occurred down to the exact time. That’s one we don’t know much about how it impacted locals, because Native Americans didn’t keep written records. It was an oral tradition.

**Q: Then we had the disappearance of the Chinook Nation, which had been here for 1,000 years.**

**Burns:** By 1830, the local (native) population had been wiped out to the tune of 90% of the population killed. Historical accounts talk about smallpox, malaria, measles.

Between the 1780s and 1830, a civilization practically vanishes. It is extraordinary that the local tribes still exist after what they went through.

**Goodenberger:** It is also a mistake to say they are completely gone. They intermarried, and they have descendants.

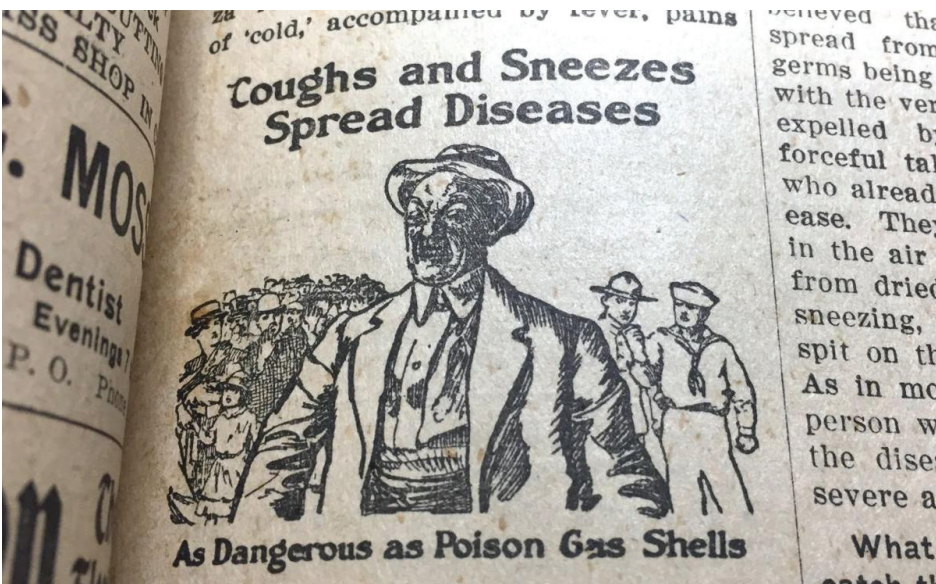
**Q: What do we know about how**



LEFT: McAndrew Burns is the executive director of the Clatsop County Historical Society. RIGHT: John Goodenberger is an architectural historian.



Photos by Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian



A graphic in the Seaside Signal from 1918.

**the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 affected the Columbia-Pacific region?**

**Burns:** I like to look at the similarities to today. On Sept 27, 1918, in the newspaper we read that there’s nothing here; we’re OK. At the end of September, they transfer about 1,600 soldiers from Camp Lewis in Washington to Fort Stevens. On Oct. 2, 1918, the paper reports that Fort Stevens is under quarantine. The commander claims there is no Spanish flu. They’ve got really bad colds and are confined to the hospital.

The newspaper carries this headline: ‘The Spanish Flu is nothing more than old fashioned Grippe — and no more dangerous.’

Then 12 soldiers die. The Astoria Evening Budget says that while a number of soldiers are sick, the epidemic seems to be subsiding. On Oct. 12, Astoria is closed by the mayor. At mid-October, there are 1,500 cases in Astoria.

There’s a month and a half, and it comes back again.

**Q: World War II, of course, transformed the mouth of the river, with the U.S. Navy arriving. And the**

**Navy’s departure following the war’s end was devastating to the economy.**

**Burns:** That may have been the only time downtown was full — during the war. We’d been a military area for quite some time — with three forts. With the Navy’s arrival, greater Astoria goes from a population of 10,000 to 20,000.

**Goodenberger:** There was also the fear after the shelling near Fort Stevens by a Japanese submarine. The war comes that close to Astoria. It was suddenly very real if it had not been before. Then there were the day-to-day sacrifices people made in rationing and curfews and limited access to things like the beach.

**Burns:** (Lifelong resident) Denny Holmes had a house on the beach and has strong memories of MPs walking up and down the beach.

**Goodenberger:** When the train went past Tongue Point, a military base, you had to draw the curtain.

**Q: John, in your research of Capt. George Flavel, have you come across family correspondence that reveals this phenomenon — of a national**

**crisis?**

**Goodenberger:** So there are letters from the women of the family — they are the best letter-writers, and Nellie is my favorite. They are hanging out in San Francisco in 1898, as soldiers are being sent off to the Spanish-American War. The military is not taking care of their soldiers. They are camping in the fields near the Presidio, some of them don’t have tents, and it’s raining. They are getting sick.

Nellie stood in the street and watched them march out to get on the transport ship. She wrote: ‘All of the soldiers here are so very young and they certainly do not realize what they are going to. So many will die from the climate at the Philippines if they are not killed in battle.’

In early 1893 to the spring, the captain was confined to his house for 20 weeks, bedridden, until he can go to San Francisco for gallstone surgery.

He has real estate, agriculture, a bank. His secretary, Samuel S. Gordon, writes to the captain, who is in San Francisco: ‘I sent you a bank statement on June 1. You will see deposits are way down, but that is no fault of ours, but due to the extreme scarcity of money. I hardly expect deposits to go much lower as the gillnet fishermen are doing well and must soon put money in circulation.’

During this period, several financial reversals are happening. The stock market crash comes, May — August 1893. The captain dies in July of 1893, in the middle of this.

**Q: In your research of prior public health calamities, what else have you found?**

**Burns:** I pulled some smallpox stories from the paper. One involved the 1881 quarantine of the American barkentine, Alden Bessie.

In 1906, the city pest house is occupied by an imported smallpox patient.

In 1929, schools are closed because of smallpox.

**Goodenberger:** I have in 1903 that schools, churches and businesses were closed in Astoria because of scarlet fever. Uppertown seemed to be the hardest hit. If you had scarlet fever, and your house was quarantined, they had a special police officer stand in front of your house to prevent anyone from coming or going.

Crises like what is happening today are reoccurring through history. I would like to get rid of using the word ‘unprecedented.’ We’ve been through similar things before. This one right now may be unique. But there are similar things in our history.

**Burns:** We’ve shown that we know how to shut the community down, starting with Spanish flu.

But it’s our short-term history and our lack of knowledge of history that shapes our current perspective. Because it’s happening ‘to me,’ and affecting us, it becomes unprecedented.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Great concerns

I have great concerns about the coronavirus threat. People being kept in their homes. Children not going to school. Items getting completely empty off of shelves in grocery stores. People being out of a job. And people being kept far apart from one another. All I want is for things to get back to normal; we need a vaccine now. All I want is people being out and about with their normal lives, children going back to school, store shelves having plenty of items so people wouldn’t fight over them, people working again, businesses active again and above all, people interacting and being closer to their loved ones again. I know it’s wise to keep people healthy, like by washing hands constantly to decrease the growth of coronavirus. But if shutdowns and closures and stay-at-homes go on further, until like maybe the end of the year, the outside world would be emptied and lifeless. Let’s all hope and pray a vaccine that works will be found, so everyone can have their normal lives again, and at least just in time for Easter.

DYLAN MILLIREN  
Seaside

Stunning

With our nation suffering the worst health crisis in over a hundred years, and with thousands of American deaths, it’s simply stunning what letter-writer Jim Spurr

chose to do (“Parroting,” The Astorian, April 4). He resorted to viciously disgusting attacks against President Donald Trump. And against myself for supporting the president. And, childlike, he even wants someone to disable my keyboard (which by the way is old and well-worn — like me and the First Amendment). This is no time for anybody to politicize the coronavirus scourge. As for complaints about President Trump’s personality, charisma is superficial and cosmetic. A charming persona can be deceiving for an individual with presidential power. Think Richard Nixon. Or think Bill Clinton. In my book, personality takes a back seat to the long-needed policies President Trump has established for the federal government. Especially in times of national peril, we all need to remember we have only one president at a time. And the recent decisions President Trump has made are among the hardest made by any president in my lifetime. President Trump has put together a team of the world’s best experts. And President Trump’s decisions about what we all must do about the coronavirus appear to be working. Seems to me, we all need to struggle though this threat together as one nation, regardless of political party affiliation. Everybody’s a winner when we win the war against America’s “invisible enemy,” as President Trump so accurately puts it.

DON HASKELL  
Astoria

Will of the people

We’ve been residents of Oregon nearly one half of my 78 years; 11 years in Eugene, and now in Seaside since 1998. We’re not particularly active politically, but neither are we unaware of the necessity and importance of voting. We’re proud to be Americans, and especially Oregonians, whose progressive spirit accomplished the mail-in ballot. We think it should be adopted throughout the country. It encourages voter participation, ensures our privacy and protects our choice of leadership. We believe in the expression of those freedoms provided by our Constitution, the law of the land. That reality, taught from elementary level to the completion of higher education, is the foundation of our lives — our identities. We suppose that personal view defines us as populists — we the people, for the people, in accord with our representative government. However, currently, we’ve observed, and are deeply troubled and disturbed by, the steady erosion and corruption of our constitutional imperatives, which has led to broken government and economic collapse by hijacking our freedom. This looks and sounds like an authoritarian state, not a democracy. This is why we appreciate our mail-in ballots: they not only protect our privacy, but ensure the will of the people, and provide a legitimate write-in option, whether

a candidate is nominated or not. Not only will we use this option to vote for Elizabeth Warren, but listen up, women throughout our nation: This is your fighting chance to exercise and take back your power with the candidate who truly and finally supports women’s interests, and keeping our families and nation together.

SANDRA and SHAWN  
SHACKELFORD  
Seaside

Surfing?

So the Seaside beach from the Cove north to the estuary has been closed off to everyone. All beach access points along the Prom have been taped off and posted with signs stating “closed with no access due to COVID-19.” Great, I get it and I support it. The City Council and the mayor finally stepped up and did the right thing. But, if the Cove is shut down to access, then why are surfers still allowed to access that strip of beach to go surfing? And why did I see, while driving by there the other day, City Council member Seth Morrissey walking back up said beach coming back from surfing? I guess the rules in place are just for the majority, but don’t apply to a select few and the privileged, especially one who had a hand in the closing.

RANDY ANDERSON  
Seaside