

OPINION



the Astorian

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WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

Mencken's brashness is like catnip

Like many young journalists, I went through an H.L. Mencken phase.

Known as the "Sage of Baltimore," Mencken wrote with a brashness that was like catnip to young male writers of my age group. In the early decades of the 20th century, Mencken was more than a newspaperman. He became one of America's leading literary critics in the American Mercury magazine that he and George Jean Nathan founded.



STEVE FORRESTER

During every election season, I think about Mencken's essay on Calvin Coolidge, whom he dubbed "the darling of the Gods." Mencken evokes the necessity of luck or providence in politics.

Writing four months after Coolidge's death, Mencken described the effortless manner in which Coolidge climbed the slippery pole to the presidency. At the Republican nominating convention that yielded presidential nominee Warren G. Harding and running mate Coolidge, a Boston newspaperman who had watched Coolidge's early career told Mencken that if Harding won, he would be dead within months. And he was, catapulting

Coolidge into the presidency.

Coolidge's ultimate luck, said Mencken, was to quit after his first full term, leaving the onset of the Great Depression to his successor, Herbert Hoover.

In his autobiographical work, "Newspaper Days," Mencken's description of the newsrooms of his youth were noisy, witty and irreverent. They were the kind of fast-paced stage sets that are depicted in the play and the movies "The Front Page" and "His Girl Friday." I was fortunate to see a production of that comic drama on the London stage. The enthusiasm of that evening drew me toward journalism, even though I had already been born into its ranks.

The range of Mencken's intellect extended to philology and his multi-volume "The American Language" and also to music. His essay on Beethoven is spiced with colorful imagery not usually found in the scholarship of classical music. "It was a bizarre jest of the gods to pit Beethoven, in his first days in Vienna, against Papa Haydn. Haydn was undeniably a genius of the first water, and after Mozart's death, had no apparent reason to fear a rival. ... But when Beethoven stepped in, poor old Papa had to step down. It was like pitting a gazelle against a bull. One colossal bellow, and

the combat was over."

His own works and those written about him make the Mencken bookshelf long. Of the biographies, I especially appreciate "The Skeptic: A Life of H.L. Mencken," written by Terry Teachout, who died in January. "For (Mencken) the United States was a land in which puritanism is constantly at war with hedonism," Teachout wrote, "(and, analogously, collectivism with individualism), and his great achievement as a social critic was to isolate and dramatize the struggle in a permanently memorable way."

Teachout asserts that Mencken was to the early 20th century what Mark Twain was to the last part of the 19th — "the quintessential voice of American letters."

At the same time, Teachout reveals aspects of the man which have not aged well. During the 1980s, my wife and I attended a one-man play in which an actor portrayed Mencken. The part that startled me was Mencken's cluelessness about Adolf Hitler's evil. In this play, the Mencken portrayer said of Hitler: "He's a joke."

Teachout wrote: "Blinded partly by his hatred of Roosevelt and partly by his familial affection for German culture (Mencken was Saxon on his father's side, Bavarian on his mother's), he adopted an



H.L. Mencken was a contributor to the Baltimore Sun.

isolationist line that at its worst was rigid and callous beyond belief: 'I find it difficult to work up any regret for the heroes butchered in World War II. Anyone silly enough to believe in such transparent quacks as Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill leaves the world little the loser by departing from it.'"

Mencken is strong stuff. If you want a taste, "A Mencken Chrestomathy" is the perfect sampler.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Best way

I am a full-time Gearhart resident living on a fixed income. I am a fiscal conservative, which is a nice way of saying I am cheap and suspicious of new taxes.

I am a retired law enforcement veteran of 30 years. Throughout my career, I managed projects to remodel and build emergency response facilities. I was also a commander of a small fire camp. I share my background to illustrate my training and experience in order to qualify my opinion that a "yes" vote on Measure 4-213, the Gearhart police and fire station bond, is the best way to limit my tax exposure.

Gearhart's fire and police stations do not meet modern industry standards in either profession, and it is obvious, to even a layman, a new facility is required. The costs associated with the project have grown significantly since its conceptualization, and will continue to increase the longer we delay.

There are some who are justifying a "no" vote with the misguided belief that the proposed structure is too large. In my professional opinion, it is not. It is also my opinion that eliminating proposed space will not significantly reduce the overall cost of the project, and certainly not enough to negate the overall increase a delay will cause.

Meeting current Occupational Safety and Health Administration, Environmental Protection Agency, Americans with Disabilities Act and critical infrastructure building regulations, as well as studies and permits, will absorb much of the budget.

This project is unavoidable, and a delay will only increase our taxes. Please vote "yes."

DANA GOULD
Gearhart

Fortunate

Those of us who are fortunate enough to live in Gearhart have the opportunity to vote "yes" on Measure 4-213 to build a new fire and police station.

Our volunteer firemen and women are the community's first responders to emergencies — fire, accident, medical, storm and, at some point, earthquake and tsunami. In addition to responding to several hundred calls every year, they spend many more hours of their own time training to improve their readiness and professional skills. They do this operating out of a more than 60-year-old building that has served the community well, but it's too small for current needs, and is structurally unsafe.

The arguments against the ballot measure seem to center around, "yes we need a new station, but ..." not on that location, not that big or not that expensive. We are in danger of making the perfect the enemy of the good. I urge you to vote "yes."

DIANNE WIDDOP
Gearhart

Firehouse questions

How did we get here, and where do we go from here? How we got here is easy. In the 1950s, volunteer firemen built the existing firehouse. As the years



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LETTERS WELCOME

Letters should be exclusive to The Astorian. Letters should be fewer than 250 words and must include the writer's name, address and phone number. You will be contacted to confirm authorship. All letters are subject to editing for space, grammar and factual accuracy. Only two letters per writer are allowed each month. Letters written in response

to other letter writers should address the issue at hand and should refer to the headline and date the letter was published. Discourse should be civil. Send via email to editor@dailyastorian.com, online at bit.ly/astorianletters, in person at 949 Exchange St. in Astoria or mail to Letters to the Editor, P.O. Box 210, Astoria, OR., 97103.

important vote, and educate yourself beyond the disinformation campaign that is being waged.

I hope to see you at the open house — the hot dogs are delicious, and we have a wonderful group of volunteers to visit with. Support our first responders: Vote "yes."

SHEILA NOLAN
Gearhart

Time has come

The time has come for a new Gearhart fire and police station. For generations, Gearhart's police and fire have taken your calls 24/7, whether for a fire or anything else, when you needed their help.

Now we're calling on you to take one call for them, by supporting a ballot measure that improves the safety of our first responders in the event of a tsunami.

Your support ensures our responders get a strong and resilient facility, located in an area that is out of the tsunami inundation zone. Without such a facility evacuation, sheltering and transportation will be compromised.

Like other coastal cities, Gearhart has researched and developed alternative locations for over 10 years. Now is the time to realize this project, before interest rates and inflation run out of control.

Our proposed new location for the fire station offers abundant space for a city park; something that residents have expressed a strong desire to have during past consultations.

The current building has outlived its purpose from what volunteers built back in 1958. Now is the time to give Gearhart police, firefighters and residents a modern building at a safer location.

Now is the time for Gearhart residents to step up and help our first responders, who are asking for our support on this important issue.

Vote "yes" on Measure 4-213!

DAVE HURLEY
Gearhart

Great opportunity

The Gearhart Volunteer Fire Department Station open house is a great opportunity to learn the facts about the necessity of voting "yes" for Measure 4-213.

On April 16, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., please visit the fire station at 670 Pacific Way. See the station with your own eyes, listen to the firefighters with your own ears. I am repeatedly asked, "Who votes against supporting first responders?"

We've all read and heard the disingenuous battle cry of, "voting 'no' does not mean you don't support our firefighters." Well, what the heck does it mean, then? You expect them to continue to work under current dangerous and substandard conditions?

What happens when the Occupational Safety and Health Administration visits the station? How can they support our community without the tools to keep themselves safe? If not the new Highlands Lane location, where? If not now, when?

Our community has been jerked around enough! Supporting our first responders, and supporting our community requires a clear "yes."

Disinformation is rampant. People are working hard on social media, and telling lies to divide our community. You, the voter, part of our community, owe it to yourself to think critically about this

passed, it became dilapidated and inadequate. Most everyone agrees that it needs to be replaced.

With that in mind, a group of local citizens came together to develop a plan for a replacement. They spent hundreds of hours developing a plan, and bond, that were eventually approved by the Gearhart City Council.

Answering where we go from here is more difficult. If the bond issue passes, the bond money will become available, and a replacement fire house will be built. But if the "no" vote wins? We will be back to square one.

Will the "no" voters step forward and spend hundreds of hours to put together a different working plan that will be approved by the City Council? History tells me that's just not likely to happen, and Gearhart will be stuck with the same old dilapidated and inadequate firehouse that everyone agrees needs to be replaced.

One further comment. "No" voters always seem to say, after they make their argument to vote "no," that "they support the firefighters." They don't. The firefighters are out knocking on doors asking for voters' support by voting "yes." They are not asking for voters' support by making some gratuitous statement that you support them. That is an insult.

TERRY D. GRAFF
Gearhart