

HISTORIC EXHIBIT FOCUSES ON ASTORIA FIRE OF 1922

Memorabilia, accounts on display at Heritage Museum

BY HEATHER DOUGLAS

On a windless December night in Astoria, light snow was falling around 2 a.m. In just moments, the city would experience one of the most devastating urban fires in Oregon's history.

This year marks the centennial of Astoria's landmark 1922 fire, an event that ravaged nearly every building in the downtown corridor. Now, the historical moment is commemorated in an exhibit at the Clatsop County Heritage Museum in Astoria.

Chaotic scenes

Few physical artifacts remain from the 1922 fire, and these fit into a small banker's box, leading one section of the new exhibit. While artifacts are on display, the core of this exhibit features panoramic images, personal accounts, items such as firefighter gear and recreated downtown scenes.

But the chaos of living through that moment in Astoria's history is difficult to convey. That's why the exhibit features what curator Chelsea Vaughn refers to as a "pile-o-stuff," a recreated scene of a pile of possessions from the era.

"People were trying to save stock from their stores, from their apartments," Vaughn said. "They moved their items down to the street not knowing how bad the fire was and then it came closer. Eventually they had to abandon their things. There were looters, and at the many sporting goods stores, ammunition was catching fire and exploding. It was a chaotic scene," she added.

One personal account from the exhibit comes from Kermit Gimre, who described his father Sven's efforts to salvage merchandise from his shoe store, Gimre's. "The whole downtown was afire, and here was my poor dad, downtown, trying to save something from his store. He got downtown before the fire burned his building, but it's a wonder he didn't burn to death, because he was caught right in that fire. He realized he couldn't save a thing. So he just ran into the store and ran out," Gimre said.

After the fire consumed approximately 30 blocks of Astoria's business district, the flames' perimeter was littered with mattresses and destroyed belongings. Many lost all of their possessions.



A panoramic image of a burned out district from the 1922 Astoria fire is seen at the Clatsop County Heritage Museum.



A small chest features the few remaining items from the era of the fire.



An overview of headlines and memorabilia from the era of the great fire.

Debates and accounts

The true origin point of the fire has remained a curious question for nearly a century. Decades ago, one man, on his deathbed, may have admitted that the cigarette he failed to properly extinguish

started the fire.

Other accounts point to the origin as the basement of the former Thiel Brothers Restaurant, while still more point to the Beehive Department Store, once housed at 12th and Commercial streets. "The Bee-

'The Great Fire of 1922'

Clatsop County Heritage Museum, 1618 Exchange St., Astoria

Exhibit open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

www.astoriamuseums.org

hive was up in flames within a half hour of the first sighting of the fire," Vaughn said.

Inconclusive

Vaughn also noted that the fire chief at the time had for years warned of severe risk leading up to the fire. Astoria's downtown had been constructed on a system of wooden viaducts which spread the flames and allowed the fire to travel underground. "That's why the fire was so hard to fight," Vaughn said, "it actually traveled underground. The firefighters would have it under control in one place and it would spring up under the street in a different place."

An insurance bureau filed a report on the fire, ultimately ruling its cause inconclusive, but Vaughn confirms that many conspiracy theories drifted through town. Now, questions surrounding the blaze remain, while this exhibit seeks to collect the facts and the memories.