



Offbeat Oregon History

Did Sir Francis Drake actually visit Oregon in 1579?

By Finn JD John
For The Sentinel

If Newport resident and British-born historian Bob Ward is correct, Oregon has another name — an older one:

Nova Albion.

That's the name Sir Francis Drake gave to the spot on the West Coast where he dropped anchor for a five-week rest-and-refit in 1579 during his famous trip around the world.

Drake wrote that he pulled his ship, the Golden Hind, into a little bay with cliffs and a creek and a tiny island peninsula protecting it from the surf. Before he resumed his journey of circumnavigation, he claimed the nearby land for England and explored around it a little, and built a fort.

Historian Ward is convinced that the little bay where Drake spent the summer was, in fact, Whale Cove. And he's assembled an impressive array of circumstantial historical evidence to support the theory.

Now, when Ward first started developing this theory, it was very much an "alternative" view. The historical community had pretty much settled the question of where Nova Albion was. And any lingering doubts had been decisively laid to rest in 1937, when a student brought a mysterious old brass plate found near Drake's Bay, just north of the Golden Gate, to Herbert Bolton, a distinguished professor at the University of California.

The plate appeared to be the one that Drake wrote that he had left to mark Nova Albion, back in 1579. Bolton, who had been searching for that plate for his entire professional life, got very excited, bought the plate for \$3,500, and immediately proclaimed to the world that he had proof that Drake's Bay was Nova Albion.

Subsequent analysis, using the best techniques 1930s science had to offer, seemed to authenticate the plate, despite the fact that some of its wording seemed suspiciously modern — for instance, "the" and "this" were used, rather than the contemporary "ye" and "yis."

The find confirmed what most scholars believed at the time (and still do), that Drake's Nova Albion was just north of San Francisco.

But in 2002, rumors that the plate was a hoax — in fact, a practical joke gone horribly wrong — were confirmed. It seems Prof. Bolton was a member of a jocose local-history club. Some of Bolton's fellow club members, knowing his obsession with finding the brass plate, had made the thing and planted it in a spot where they expected him to find it during a club function; whereupon they expected to have a jolly good day or two stringing him along before giving the bad news.

But someone else found it first. So instead of being found by Bolton under controlled conditions, the thing bounced around in the hands of various beachcombers for several years before finding its way into the hands of Bolton's student — neatly scrubbed of any hint of connection to the club.

Before anyone from the club even knew what had happened, Bolton had joyfully announced his find to the public and pro-

claimed it genuine. Knowing his professional reputation would be trashed if they revealed what they'd done, the club members kept mum about it.

It wasn't the sort of secret that can be kept forever. Nonetheless, it was kept for some 70 years, even after close examination in the 1970s revealed it to be a probable fake.

But, in 2002 when the story was fully told, there could be no further doubt: Exhibit A in the case for Drake's Bay had turned out to be a fraud. The field was now wide open.

Ward's case for Whale Cove is a particularly interesting one. It's based largely on the similarities between Whale Cove and the map Drake made of the little bay.

Ward thinks Drake was on a secret mission to find the Northwest Passage, and that's why he was sailing so far up the West Coast. The idea is, Drake sailed up the coast until he found something he thought was the Northwest Passage — perhaps the Strait of Juan de Fuca. But he wasn't prepared to actually explore the passage on the spot, so he sailed back southward, looking for a secure spot to anchor and refit the Golden Hind for the planned continuation of his trip around the world. He sailed south until he found Whale Cove, and put in there; a month and a half later, he was on his way home to England via the Far East.

Upon his return to Britain, Ward says, Drake and Queen Elizabeth conspired to fake up the record so that Spanish spies wouldn't find out how close he'd been to finding a Northwest passage. This, Ward suggests, is why some documents say the bay was at 38 degrees latitude, and others say it's at 44. Drake had planned to return later and explore the passage; but political developments with the Spanish forced him to stay close to home, and he never made it back.

Ward has spent 30 years and a significant amount of his own money trying to confirm this theory. There have been archaeological digs, ground-penetrating radar, and bay dives. Nothing has been found, other than an old English coin found decades ago in the possession of a native.

It should be pointed out that Whale Cove is a notoriously treacherous place to navigate — as at least one rumrunner learned, to his dismay and to the locals' delight, during Prohibition, when an attempted booze delivery went on the rocks and left the beach strewn with bottles of Scotch. It's also in a very dangerous part of the coast. For Ward's theory to be correct, Drake would have had to sail directly past a number of great natural harbors — Willapa Bay, Tillamook Bay, Nestucca Bay, and Depoe Bay, just to name a few — and chosen as his sanctuary one of the least navigable spots on the coast. (Of course, fog may have played a role in cloaking these from view.)

Moreover, Ward is not the only one working on an alternative Nova Albion theory. Nehalem resident Gerry Gitzen has built an impressive case for Nova Albion being Nehalem Bay, a little farther north. He's even found some artifacts — carved stone survey mark-

ers — that might be old enough to be evidence of Drake's presence.

And a Canadian, R. Samuel Bawlf, has advanced a theory that Nova Albion was actually Vancouver Island, and that the cove Drake dropped anchor in was Comox Bay.

The proponents of the California site, naturally, are feeling a little hard-pressed by all this.

"He's working on a fantasy," scoffed a former president of the Drake Navigators Guild in California, when he heard of Ward's theory.

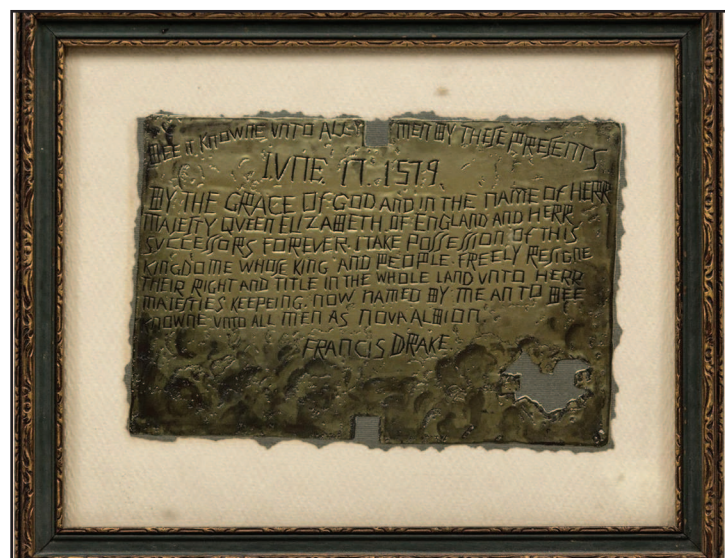
More recently, the Navigators Guild lent its support to an application to have Drake's Bay designated as a national landmark. When this was approved, in 2012, Edward von der Porten, the current president of the Guild, said it was tantamount to official recognition of the Drake's Bay theory.

"We're very pleased the National Park Service has chosen to say yes," he told reporter Guy Kovner of the Santa Rosa Press Democrat. "Were there any scholarly debate, this would not have happened."

That's not what the Parks Department said, though. In an e-mail to Kovner for the same story, Park Service spokesman Mike Litterst noted that the nomination form for the site didn't even mention the controversy over where Drake landed, and added, "(This) should not be interpreted as providing a definitive resolution of the discussion."

Probably the best one-line summary of the question of where Nova Albion really was came from archaeologist Melissa Darby, in an interview with Colin Fogarty of National Public Radio. Darby, at the time, was studying the Whale Cove site.

"Darby says that as a scientist, she doesn't trust anyone who's 100 percent sure of something that happened more than four centuries ago," Fogarty reported.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A take on tiny homes

I have been following the progress of the Cottage Village Coalition since it began, and now even more so since they have purchased the property on Madison 2 blocks behind my house. As chairman of Friends of Coiner Park, I am very concerned about any development that may affect the quality of life in my neighborhood. Friends of Coiner Park has worked very hard to advocate improvements in Coiner that keep it a wonderful family friendly place for our children to play.

I have also volunteered in the feeding programs that help feed hungry people in the Grove and have met many of the veterans and families that hope to apply for this program once it is available. These people didn't just hop off the Eugene bus. Most of them have families that have been in the Grove a long time,

one family has been here 3 generations. A minimum wage job won't get you very good housing here, and many of these veterans and families have struggled with adequate and safe housing their whole lives.

I have carefully scrutinized the designs of these small homes and they are nothing like the 'tiny houses' in Eugene. These are regular homes built to code with kitchens and everything, just on a smaller scale than what we are used to.

I have also viewed the application process and the rules that will govern this Village, and I am satisfied that the people who occupy these little homes will be a good and dependable addition to my neighborhood.

Maybe our school district should consider a cottage village project on school property for new young teachers. I

understand we are losing great teachers because they cannot afford affordable housing so they can stay here.

We have a housing crisis in the Grove, and it's time to start thinking outside of our current paradigms of what housing should look like.

Sherry Adams
Cottage Grove

Irony

The irony of members of Congress working diligently to strip Obama Care of anything worthwhile, while at the same time, THEY receive the benefits of a WELL paying job that includes the best medicine taxpayers can pay for, in the form of Single Payer healthcare! It's criminal.

Robin Bloomgarden
Eugene

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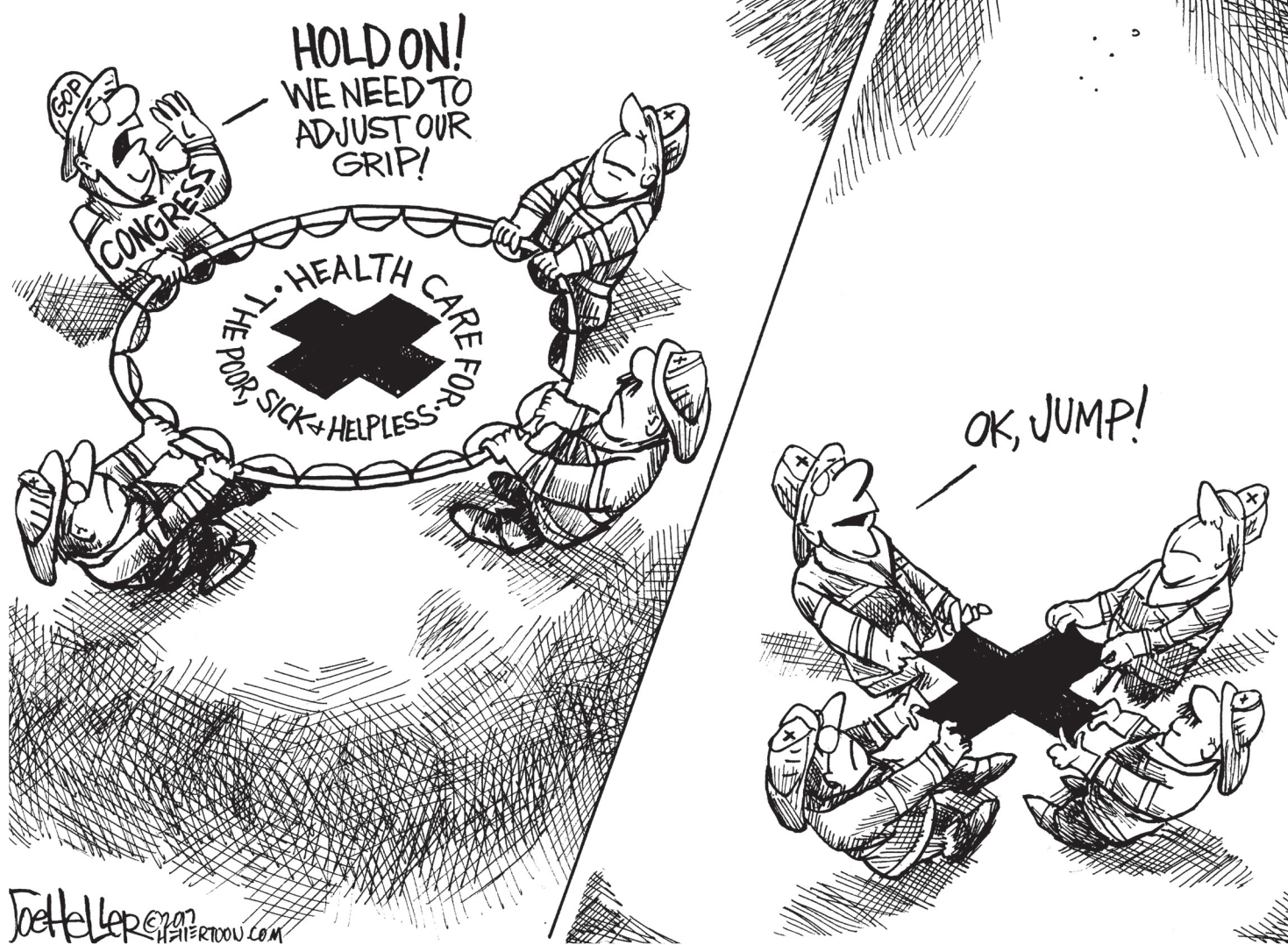
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