



Offbeat Oregon History: HWY. 101 and the beach

By Finn JD John
For The Sentinel

Tom McCall was a smart, articulate man, and not easy to swindle. But Glenn “Mr. Oregon” Jackson was, by all accounts, even smarter — and he had something he wanted from McCall.

Which was fair enough, because McCall also wanted something from Jackson — wanted it badly: An endorsement of his candidacy for governor.

It was 1966. Tom McCall, having clinched the Republican nomination, was going up against the smart, tough-minded state treasurer, Democrat Bob Straub. McCall and Straub were very similar in many respects, and although Oregon voters tended to favor Republicans at that time, the outcome was by no means a sure thing.

And Jackson, the state highway commissioner and owner of ten Oregon newspapers, was the most powerful behind-the-scenes player in the state. People answering to him built the Interstate freeway system and made Oregon’s secondary highways the envy of the West. So for McCall, a lot depended on this endorsement interview. Put starkly, Jackson was in a position to choose the next governor; neither McCall nor Straub could win without his influence.

On that day, McCall found Jackson in a genial and friendly mood. And the meeting seemed to go very well. After the preliminaries, the commissioner made a proposal: There was a project he was working on, he explained. A highway improvement over at the coast. It would bring huge economic benefits to the communities there; it would open up the north coast to motor tourism from surrounding states; it would give Oregonians access to a part of the coast that few would otherwise see. All the engineering work was done; it was ready to go. But Jackson was running into some trouble with the usual ragtag band of local obstructionists, and this particular group was especially noisy.

Now, if McCall would commit to taking a strong position in favor of this project, and promise to help Jackson get the job done, Jackson would endorse McCall full-throatedly, with all the influence he

and his ten community newspapers and network of well-connected friends could provide.

McCall, lulled into complacency by the friendly and laid-back character of the conversation, accepted immediately. One picture him walking on air as he left the building. With Jackson’s endorsement, he would be elected governor; it was almost guaranteed.

But it couldn’t have taken McCall more than a day or two to find out he’d been conned. The fact was — as McCall would have quickly learned if he’d looked into it before saying yes — he already had Glenn Jackson’s support, simply because he was running against Bob Straub. Jackson would sooner have cut off his left foot than endorse Bob Straub. Bob Straub was Glenn Jackson’s number-one political enemy.

Also, remember that ragtag band of local obstructionists whom Jackson had casually mentioned? It was neither ragtag, nor local. It was, in fact, led by Bob Straub.

The project over which Straub and Jackson were locking horns that year was a doozie. It was a plan to move and straighten Highway 101 between Neskowin and Tillamook. If you’ve ever driven up that way, you’ll doubtless have noticed that the highway leaves the coast behind and plunges inland for 35 miles — routing around sandy estuaries at Nestucca Bay, Sandlake and Netarts Bay, and impassible granite promontories at Cape Kiwanda, Porter Point and Cape Lookout.

That was a lot of grand ocean scenery that was inaccessible to anyone not willing to drive miles out of the way on little bumpy back roads and maybe even get out of the car and walk. And this was the era of Sunday drives; dependable and comfortable cars were, in the mid-1960s, a relatively new thing for most people of modest means.

So in 1964, Jackson’s highway department worked up a plan to do something that would bring those Sunday motorists to that grand ocean scenery: Build a highway right through the middle of it. There were actually three possible plans for the new highway, but the cheapest

one, and the one the department wanted, was to have the new highway route start just north of Neskowin and go straight to the beach. From there the roadbuilders would blast through Porter Point, cross the Nestucca River with a 90-foot-high bridge, then traverse the length of Nestucca Spit State Park on a causeway built on pilings drilled into the sand. It would then go through Cape Kiwanda with the aid of more dynamite, across McPhillips Beach and through the Sandlake Estuary on a roadbed made with acres of trucked-in fill, and finally rejoin the current highway route just south of Tillamook.

Public response to the plan was mixed, but mostly favorable. The local year-round residents were mostly in favor of the plan, but the weekenders — Willamette Valley residents who owned cabins at the beach — were less enthusiastic. Where the trouble arose was with residents who particularly enjoyed natural features that the plan was about to completely ruin. These now started to form groups to oppose the plan — notably one called “SOS,” which stood for “Save Our Spit.”

No problem. The department was used to this sort of thing. A few public hearings so folks would feel “listened to,” and then construction would start whether they liked it or not. You couldn’t stop progress — not in 1965 you couldn’t. What the department was not used to was powerful politicians getting involved. And that’s what happened now. Because among that small group of locals who enjoyed natural features that the plan was about to ruin was one Robert W. Straub, the state treasurer — and a regular visitor to Nestucca Spit State Park.

Straub took one look at the plans and instantly became Jackson’s worst-case scenario. He wrote hundreds of letters and memos, carried a petition with 12,000 signatures around with him much of the time, organized marches and protests — all the while continuing to do his job as state treasurer and, in 1965, launching the bid for the governorship that brought Tom McCall to Jackson with cap in hand. If only McCall had done a little

research before he showed up for that meeting

So history marched on, and McCall was elected. He kept his word to Jackson and pushed for the highway, albeit with far less enthusiasm than Jackson might have wished for; ironically, he was doing this at the same time as his far-more-well-known fight to preserve public beach access. The optics of this were terrible, and people were already starting to ask uncomfortable questions about it.

Luckily, the matter was taken out of McCall’s hands before it could go any farther. Bob Straub had been in contact with Interior Secretary Stewart Udall after learning that most of Nestucca Spit had carried a deed restriction when the federal government ceded it to the state back in 1961: it had to be used for a park.

Jackson, of course, figured this was no problem. The spit was already a state park; the highway would simply provide better access to it. But Straub thought Udall might not consider that to be in keeping with the spirit of the deed restriction, and brought it to his attention. It took a while for Udall to get around to looking into the matter. But when he did, he was unambiguous about it. No, the state of Oregon could not build a highway there. If it did, the Bureau of Land Management would take action to cancel the land transfer.

And just like that, the fight was over. The highway department prepared and presented a new plan — a much costlier one, involving running the highway around the former BLM land on a raised causeway over miles and miles of open water in Nestucca Bay. It seems likely this plan was offered as a face-saving move, because it quietly died a few months later, and Nestucca Spit has been a peaceful, highway-free park ever since. In 1987 its name was changed to Bob Straub State Park.

As for Straub, he was finally elected governor of Oregon in 1974 after McCall’s second term ended. He lived long enough to see his beloved Nestucca Spit State Park renamed in his honor; he died in 2002 in Springfield.

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(541) 942-3325

Administration

James Rand, Regional Publisher
Gary Manly, General Manager Ext. 207
gmanly@cgsentinel.com
Aaron Ames, Marketing Specialist Ext. 216
aames@cgsentinel.com
Tammy Sayre, Marketing Specialist Ext. 213
tsayre@cgsentinel.com

Editorial

Caitlyn May, Editor Ext. 212
cmay@cgsentinel.com
Sport Editor Ext. 204
sports@cgsentinel.com

Customer Service

Carla Williams, Office Manager Ext. 200
Legals, Classifieds Ext. 200
cwilliams@cgsentinel.com

Production

Ron Annis, Production Supervisor Ext. 215
graphics@cgsentinel.com

(USP 133880)

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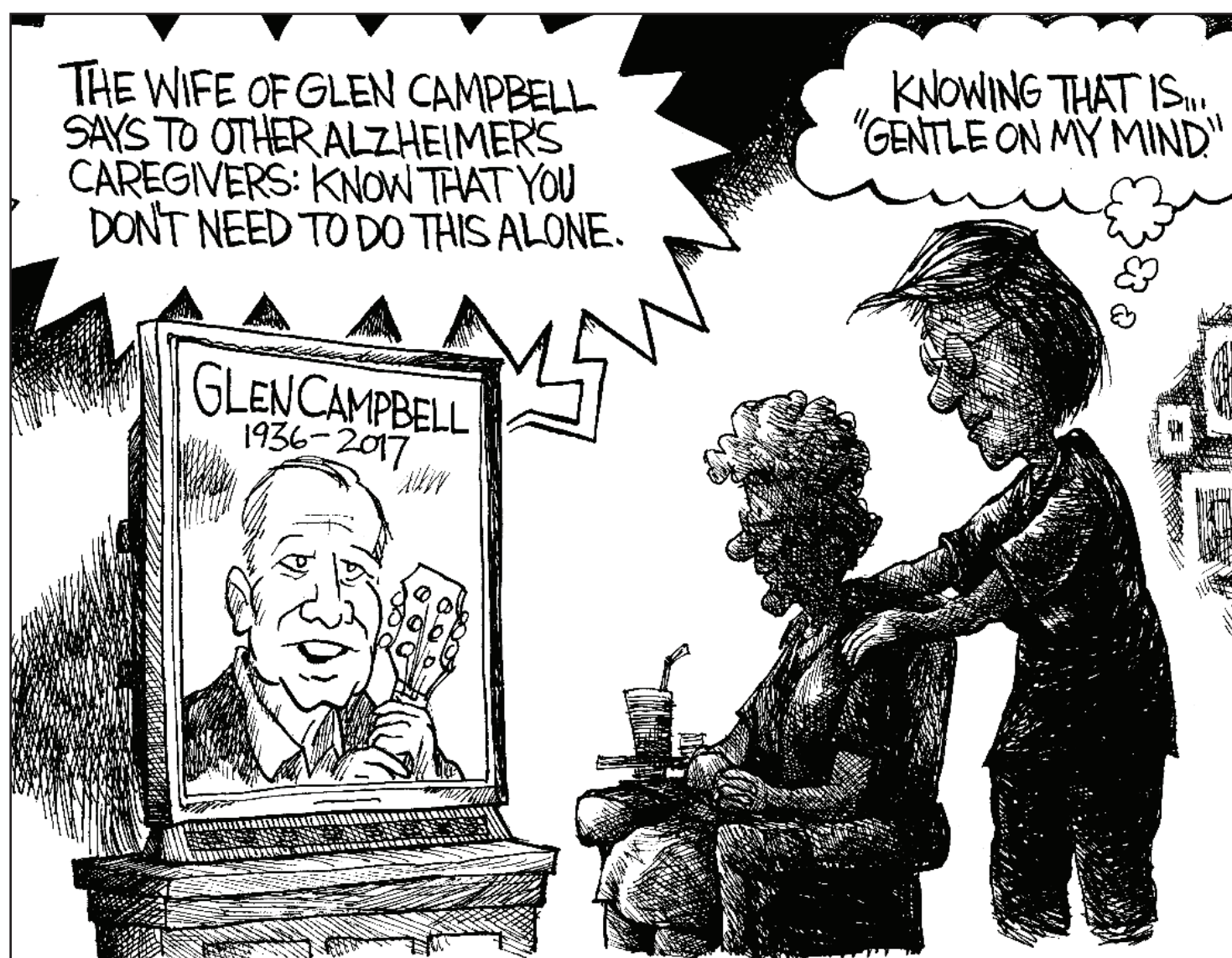
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