

# Offbeat Oregon: With friends like A.C. Edmunds, early suffragists didn't need enemies

BY FINN J.D. JOHN  
SPECIAL TO THE SENTINEL

Part One —

One of the most dramatic things that can happen in a soccer game is an “own-goal.” Not the kind where a player on offense bounces a shot off a defender and into the net, but the full-on kind in which a defender gets excited and confused and blasts a barn-burner straight past the goalie, scoring a point for the other team.

If Oregon history were a soccer club, and kept stats on such things, there is one particular man who would stand head and shoulders above all the others in the “own-goals” category.

Abraham Coryell “A.C.” Edmunds, throughout his several careers in Oregon and California, was almost like a cartoon — a larger-than-life loser in the vein of Wile E. Coyote, with a little Carrie Nation mixed in along with

a whole lot of Don Quixote.

Nor were his “own-goals” minor affairs. A.C. Edmunds was almost singlehandedly responsible for the demise of the early Universalist Church in California, the temporary collapse of the Universalist congregation in Portland, and for the sudden death of the temperance and women’s suffrage movements in Oregon in 1874.

Before he got involved, Oregon was on track to become the first state in which women could vote. His efforts to help make that happen set the process back almost 40 years.

All in all, A.C. Edmunds was an especially important historical character — but for all the wrong reasons.

“His impact was in fact sometimes significant,” historian George Belknap writes, in his 1983 Oregon Historical Quarterly article. “But his impact was usually the ruin of sometimes worthy and promising causes through his unflinching skill in antagoniz-

ing his publics.”

Abraham Coryell Edmunds was born in 1827 in the Toronto area, and grew up in the Northeast — New York and later Ohio. In 1846 he joined the Army to fight in the Mexican-American war, but apparently by the time his Ohio regiment got to the scene, the war was over.

On his return, he later recalled, he and his comrades collected an assortment of well-shaped sticks from along the banks of the Mississippi, which they sold to new recruits as walking canes captured from Mexican officers.

When the Gold Rush broke out, Edmunds headed for California to join the throng, but didn’t get there until 1850. This may be because he walked the entire way, on foot, from his then-home in Michigan. This would become something A.C. would be known for, in his youth: he walked everywhere. He later claimed to have logged 34,000 miles on foot.

What Edmunds did upon arriving in California is unknown. He probably started out, as so many did, mining for gold. Whatever it was, it left him with a nice cash balance that he seems to have been very good at stewarding — because he would spend the rest of his life, for the most part, starting and abandoning money-losing ventures of various sorts.

Whatever it was, he was done with it by 1857, because we know that year Edmunds was working as an itinerant preacher spreading the gospel of Universalism among the mining camps of the West. Universalism, in the 1840s, was a strain of evangelical Protestantism that argued that every human soul would be saved — that there was no “elect,” and that

Hell was a temporary posting to which souls were sent to square their accounts before admission to Heaven.

Edmunds would set out in the early morning, walk 20 or 25 miles to another mining camp, preach a harsh but rousing sermon, and do it again the next day; he composed and refined his sermons as he walked.

Edmunds’ combination of boundless energy and enthusiasm, plus his passion for righteousness, smoothed his climb into prominence in the growing Universalist church.

He moved to Marysville, founded a Universalist Society, and launched the first of what would become a long string of short-lived publications: The Star of the Pacific.

It was in this magazine that the reading public got its first taste of Edmunds’ rhetorical style. It was cocky, self-righteous, savage, and Manichean — there were no shades of gray in it. One was either in full agreement with Edmunds and right, or irredeemably evil.

Nor did he reserve such invective only for important topics. A.C. Edmunds seemed ready, willing, and able to die upon every hill. A pious newspaper writer’s reference to a group of ladies supposedly saved from a tornado by the power of prayer drew this little gem:

“We are surprised that a man, claiming a decent respect for intelligence ... should send forth, before an enlightened world, such nonsensical trash .... If prayer had such a magical, miraculous influence over the elements, it would be wisdom in our city fathers to employ their services, thereby saving the enormous expense of organized fire companies ... If our gill of brains could

not father a more noble sentiment, we would blow them out, and fill the vacuum with cabbage seeds.”

This kind of style, of course, had the effect of turning every potential ally into an implacable enemy. And this was especially true as he started increasingly mixing religion and politics in the runup to the Civil War — taking up the hatchet against the pro-slavery “Copperheads” with a ferocity and savagery that made most of his readers uncomfortable, whatever their political leanings were.

Still, it was a rough era, and Edmunds’ style worked well enough in the mining and logging camps where he continued to travel and preach.

Historian Belknap suggests that his constant motion was actually a mechanism he employed to cope with the inevitable eventual failure of his enterprises — that before the pigeons could come home to roost, he’d have moved to greener pastures — and there may be something in that; but, anyone with more than a smattering of the AD/HD cognitive style will understand that the “outrunning failure” theory isn’t the only possibility here.

Then, in 1860, Edmunds organized the first statewide Universalist Convention in 1860. He drew up an ambitious and exciting plan for the event, including the establishment of a Universalist college. Edmunds was, it seemed, on the cusp of becoming a very important person indeed.

But before the convention members could meet to get things started, the American Civil War broke out. Edmunds dropped everything, ran to the recruiting office, enlisted in the California militia, learned that his company wasn’t going to go and fight, quit in disgust, and moved to Portland.

The Universalist Convention, abruptly deprived of its leader, vanished.

Meanwhile, that leader was diving headlong into the rhetorical battle over slavery and the secession of the South. Edmunds plugged back into the Universalist circle, of course; but by mid-

1962, barely nine months after his arrival, the Portland Universalists were already wishing he would go away.

He leaped back into journalism by founding the Portland Daily Plaindealer as a stridently pro-Union paper, and for a while it looked like a winner; but Edmunds eventually got around to insulting enough people that his investors pulled out, and he was forced to close up shop.

He then moved to Eugene and did it all over again, launching the Herald of Reform, renaming it the Union Crusader, and then — in case anyone thought that was too subtle — titling it “Copperhead Killer.”

This was very inconvenient for the Eugene Republicans, who really wanted to reach out the olive branch to the less strident “Copperheads,” the Douglas Democrats, who opposed slavery and were pro-Union but were not ideologically pure enough for Edmunds.

So the city fathers in Eugene got together with Edmunds’ print-shop foreman, Harrison Kincaid, and bought Edmunds out — renaming the paper the Oregon State Journal.

The Journal went on to a prosperous 50-year run in Eugene, and was on at least one occasion “borrowed” by Edmunds as a success story (he called himself a “co-founder”).

But now, at last, it was 1864, and Edmunds decided it was time to volunteer for war service for real. He went back east to do it, and finished the war as an Army hospital administrator.

Edmunds stayed back east for a few years after that, settling in Iowa and Nebraska and engaging in more publishing ventures.

Paying customers soon grew loath to be associated with his enterprise, and it petered out. By the early 1870s, he was back to seeking out unburned turf where he might have another go ... and that’s what brought him back to Portland, where his biggest and most history-shaping own-goal waited to be scored...

(Part II next week)



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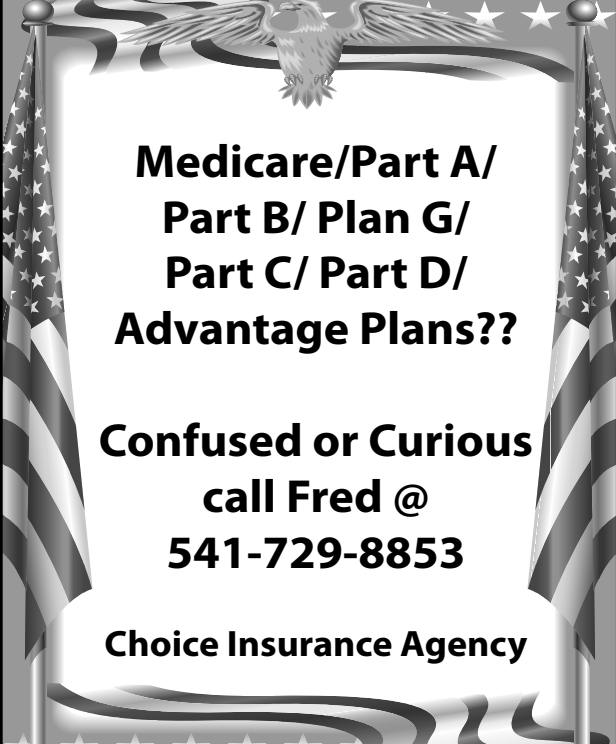
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