

From Oregon on a Slightly Less Green Leaf

Sorry. We don't use nature poetry. Ours is an urban society.
—Eastern editor, 1959

May we see some more of your ecology poems?
—same editor, 1975

I'm still here, barefoot and lank-haired,
at the rocky edge of the same ocean
studded with arches, caverns and stacks.

My song is about what it was. Thorny.
Low-key as wild blackberry vines circling
old logging spars on the burns.

Inland, the same native rockroses hug
their volcanic ground under high desert sky.
At night you can still breathe in the stars.

But you had a point. We lobby and legislate,
preserve dunes, purify rivers, save rain
forests, religiously lug back the beer bottles.

At that, pollution now hangs over snowcaps.
Dams and ladders threaten our salmon. Freeways
kill neighborhoods. Towns choke on themselves.

—Vi Gale

The City That Might Have Been

As E. Kimbark MacColl travels around Portland he sees the city not just as it looks to us today, but also as it looked to people who were here in 1940 and 1915 and 1890. As author of two excellent local histories, The Shaping of a City: Business and Politics in Portland, Oregon 1885 to 1915 and The Growth of a City: Power and Politics in Portland, Oregon 1915 to 1950, MacColl has a unique perspective on land use planning (or the lack of it) in our city's past. He shared the following thoughts in an interview with Richard Plagge.

Results of . . . laissez-faire are still all around us. . . . The city had a hell of a time when it wanted to put the municipal docks in, because the railroads had accumulated control of a good portion of both sides of the river. Southern Pacific fought the city for

years in getting off what is now Barbur Boulevard. They used to run steam engines right through the center of town.

Up to the 1920s, or even the '30s, a company could locate just about anywhere it wished and hell be damned what anyone thought about it. Sullivan's Gulch (site of I-84) is a good example. It would have made a natural residential area, adjacent to Laurelhurst. But the Oregon Railroad Navigation Company ran a track through it back in 1880. Over the years, several companies located along this railroad until, by World War I, the gulch contained an enormous conglomeration of large factory operations. There was no public policy to limit the growth of these companies, no zoning at all. Finally, you end up with the present situation: a swath of heavy industrial operations

running through a residential neighborhood . . . an incompatible mix.

Land-use is basic to everything we're talking about. Our society can't exist much longer with land ownership maintaining its sacred quality, where you can do anything you want with your land provided you don't literally bring death and destruction to your neighbor. Obligation to the public is going to have to accompany the purchase of land.

We've gotten away with this kind of development over the years because there was always more land, always more energy—we could somehow waste and still get away with it (at tremendous *social* cost, of course). But the noose is starting to tighten. We simply won't be able to afford this lack of planning much longer.

In a local community [in the United States] a citizen may conceive of some need which is not being met. What does he do? He goes across the street and discusses it with his neighbor. Then what happens? A committee comes into existence and begins functioning on behalf of that need . . . All of this is done by the private citizens on their own initiatives. . . .

— Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

An Idea Whose Time Has Been

by John Ferrell

When Dr. John McLoughlin established Fort Vancouver in 1825, he determined that the new post, across the Columbia from present-day Portland, would not be dependent on distant sources of food. He brought 27 cattle from another Hudson's Bay Company fort and secured a few potatoes, two bushels of peas, a bushel of wheat, a bushel of barley and some Indian corn. He stipulated that none of the cattle could be slaughtered (except one each year to supply rennet for cheese) until the herd was built up sufficiently to serve the needs of the fort. In the meantime, fish, venison and wild fowl would have to suffice. By 1828, both the cattle herd and the small initial planting of grains and vegetables had multiplied enough to meet McLoughlin's goal: community self-reliance in food production.

That the settlers who followed McLoughlin and established the new city of Portland in the 1850s were self-reliant to some extent goes without saying: it was a condition imposed upon them initially by geographic isolation. But did the same spirit carry over to the more civilized Portland of the late 19th and early 20th centuries? To learn how citizens worked together to solve Portland's problems in an earlier day, we will focus on events which occurred during two years: 1893 and 1933. The theme which ties these two years together (and also makes a link to our own day) is one of response to unfavorable economic conditions. In both of these years, there was a new president in the White House, working to restore national prosperity at a time of financial panic and high unemployment. In both years Portlanders were joining together—through their churches, labor unions, ethnic associations, clubs and

neighborhood groups—in many innovative programs designed to combat economic hardship and meet community needs. The special spirit of self-reliance evidenced by Portlanders in 1893 and 1933 was frequently reminiscent of a similar spirit among the city's earliest settlers. It was also remarkably predictive of the spirit shared by many present-day Portlanders whose community activities are described in the Resources Section of this book.

1893

The volunteer fire fighters of the Sunnyside Hose Company were faced with a serious dilemma: how could they continue their essential service to the community now that the city had cut off their \$20 monthly appropriation? They had depended on this small stipend to pay for coal oil, wood, repairs and janitorial services needed in their neighborhood firehouse, and now they were being forced to dig into their own pockets as well as show up at fires. The company scheduled a meeting for September 20 to consider what action to take regarding withdrawal of the appropriation.

But as City Fire Commissioner J.H. Steffen reminded them, times were hard. The Sunnyside Hose Company was not being discriminated against; there simply wasn't enough money to go around. A new president, Grover Cleveland, was attempting to grapple with a nationwide economic crisis and Portland, for its part, was faced with the effects of local bank closures and widespread unemployment.

Conditions had changed drastically in a few short months. In January the Portland Chamber of Commerce had heard its president, George B. Markle,

Jr., exclaim that the city was experiencing its "highest level of prosperity." Indeed, it was easy for Portland's business leaders to be smug. In recent years the city had witnessed the founding of many new banks, installation of the Bull Run water system, completion of three bridges across the Willamette, and the awarding of a number of street railway franchises. As *Oregonian* editor Harvey Scott had observed in 1891, Portland was a "well balanced civic and social organism": it had no dirty industry, little permanent unemployment, and few unassimilated immigrants except for the Chinese.

It was abundantly clear by the latter half of 1893 that the civic and social organism had grown seriously ill. Jobs were drying up and laborers were searching for some means to feed their families. Where could they turn for relief? The *Oregonian* had a ready answer: "there are no poor in Portland who need to be hungry or cold," it assured its readers. "Our rich men have always shown beneficence of a large and judicious kind."

Indeed the "rich men" were contributing generously to the charities which fed the city's destitute. But many Portland residents clearly did not believe that *noblesse oblige* was sufficient to deal with either the economic crisis or the other needs of their community. The movement for change in Portland extended to labor rights, neighborhood improvement, control of local resources, access to education and the empowerment of women.

Labor

The working people of Portland were seemingly too stunned by the events of 1893 to know immediately how to react.



Oregon Historical Society

S.E. 33rd and Belmont looking east.

In July, representatives of a number of labor unions met to consider consolidating their strength by forming a central worker's organization, but for many people who suddenly found themselves jobless, a more pressing concern was basic survival for themselves and their families. There was little rise in crime during this period, according to local historian Joseph Gaston, because of the "well organized methods" of Portland's private relief organizations.

What eventually mobilized many of the city's unemployed was Coxe's Army. "General" Jacob Coxe, an Ohio resident, proposed a national march of jobless people on Washington to impress the president and the Congress with the need for unemployment relief. Coxe's Army units were formed in many places around the country, including Portland, and in the spring of 1894 hundreds of men marched east from the city carrying their blankets and a few days' rations. They soon seized a passenger train but were halted by U.S. soldiers. Then they made an agreement with a railroad company to obtain a train of box cars, and proceeded as far as Wyoming, where they disbanded when it was

learned that jobs were available in the coal mines there. The Coxe soldiers from other locations who did complete the march to Washington were unable to convince the national lawmakers to act on their behalf, but at least the Portland contingent was able to achieve its most immediate goal: as one marcher said before the group started out, "most of us are willing to work hard for what we get, and have a right to refuse to be dependent upon public charity."

Neighborhoods

In addition to operating volunteer fire companies, Portland citizens organized to meet other neighborhood needs. They petitioned the city for street improvements and the street railway companies for better mass transit service. Sunnyside residents met in September, 1893, and decided to withhold payment of their water bills to the city on the grounds that an inadequate supply of water was being provided. Apparently the water pressure increased dramatically during the next few days, since the residents soon met again to express their satisfaction and call off the

strike.

Some neighborhoods established their own free libraries and reading rooms. In 1893 the Library Association of Portland (later to become the Multnomah County Library) was still a privately run organization, operating on a fee subscription basis. Judge Matthew Deady, who served as president of the Library Association for many years before his death in 1893, once explained why he did not believe it desirable to operate a library as a free service:

I admit, that in a certain large and wide sense, those who are ahead in this world ought to take care of those who are behind; but as a general rule, this is best done by furnishing the latter with aids and opportunities to help themselves, for all experience teaches that what costs people nothing does them but little good. Everyone should . . . contribute something, however small, towards the means of his own improvement and advancements.

Clearly not everyone in Portland agreed with Deady's definition of self-help or with his concept of how people

might contribute to their own advancement. Portland newspapers of 1893 tell of an entertainment benefit to be given at the South Mt. Tabor Schoolhouse to aid the library associations of South Mt. Tabor and Russellville. The Young Men's Library Association dramatic club of Albina announced an upcoming play entitled "Nevada: or The Lost Mine" which would be performed to benefit the free public reading room they were setting up in their neighborhood.

Politics

The Populist Party, which would later join forces with the Democrats to nominate William Jennings Bryan for president in 1896, was already an influencing factor in Portland politics in the early '90s. The party's numbers had grown dramatically in the months preceding the presidential election of 1892, and it nominated a full slate of candidates for the municipal election of the following June. None of the Populists won (they had elected one candidate the previous year), but the party's active presence in Portland demonstrated the interest of a substantial number of residents in such "radical" ideas as the eight-hour day for workers, the vote for women, and municipal ownership of electric utilities.

Women

In January, 1893, Abigail Scott Duniway, Oregon's leading suffragette, wrote her son that she had just been to Salem to lobby for removal of the words "white male" from the Oregon constitution. Duniway was again becoming active in women's issues after a hiatus of several years. How much her efforts, and those of other suffragettes, were needed in Portland is well illustrated by an account carried in the *Oregonian* on July 20. The obviously amused (and obviously male) reporter tells of "three representatives of the fair sex" who insisted, despite "time-honored precedent," in participating in city council proceedings. Mary Woodcock, a businesswoman, wanted to complain about the lack of street improvements to her property. The mayor would not let her speak, and her protest that her payment of taxes to the city gave her the right was ignored. The other women, Mrs. E. M. Winnie and Mrs. Orilla Read, had slightly better luck. They were allowed to state their complaints, but the council paid them little heed.

Women in Portland were not letting denial of their political rights (and

sometimes their dignity) stand in the way of some remarkable personal and organizational achievements. One of the city's leading suffragettes was Dr. Mary Thompson, who, more than twenty years before, had been Portland's first woman physician. Her medical practice had been so successful that she was able to retire in 1883 and devote herself to women's rights and a host of community activities. Her example may help to explain why in 1910, when relatively few women in the United States were entering professional careers, eight percent of Portland's physicians and surgeons were female.

For young women fortunate enough to have jobs in 1893, pay scales were abysmally low, but an organization called the Women's Union was a great help to those who wanted or needed to be financially independent. Formed in 1887, the Union provided women with board, lodging, books, music and entertainment at actual cost—about \$3.50 to \$5.25 a week. Within a few years of its founding, the Union had two successful spinoffs. The first was its night school, which began with twenty women and soon proved so popular that a demand arose that men be admitted as well. Eventually, the program was taken over and continued by the public school system. The second spinoff was the Women's Exchange, which provided a market for needlework and artwork that women could do in their own homes. This program, too, was highly successful, and eventually it operated separately from its parent organization.

The Women's Union was still serving the community in 1910 when Dr. Emma J. Welty described its self-reliant operations to Portland historian Joseph Gaston:

It has been the policy of the Union to appeal to the public for money as infrequently as possible. . . . The Union's money affairs have been managed by the women themselves, and have been uncommonly well managed. They meet all their expenses, have no debts, and have a good property in their name.

1933

One day in August, Oregon State Highway Commissioner Leslie Scott was visited in his Portland office by nine men and three women of the Unemployed Citizens League (UCL). The nation was in the depths of depression, and it had been reported a few months

earlier that more than 24,000 unemployed heads of households were on the rolls of the Portland Public Employment Bureau. A new president, Franklin Roosevelt, was attempting to deal with the crisis, and federal relief moneys were being made available—including six million dollars to Commissioner Scott's office to provide jobs in highway-related projects. The men and women of the Unemployed Citizens League wanted to know Scott's plans. He bluntly informed them that most highway work would soon end. He was not interested in unemployment, only in keeping the state government out of debt. When his visitors described instances of undernourished children whose fathers were out of work, the commissioner (according to a sworn deposition later filed with the county by the UCL) became even more rude:

What did you do with your money anyway when you were making big wages? You just squandered it. You are right where you deserve to be. You wouldn't have sense enough to keep it if you did have it.

As heir to the substantial estate of his late father (Harvey Scott), and as part-owner of the Oregonian Publishing Company, Leslie Scott apparently had considerable difficulty empathizing with his visitors and their cash flow problems. His attitude may have been extreme, but it was not unique among Portland's established government and business leaders. Ship owners, for example, were taking the position that longshoremen should be grateful for any kind of job at all. The men along the docks were finding their wages cut drastically, and some were being forced to work shifts of more than 36 hours. Those who protested were fired. Membership in the International Longshoremen's Association was growing rapidly during 1933, and the stage was being set for the devastating waterfront strike of the following year.

On the other hand, many people in a position to help were doing what they could to alleviate hardships experienced by depression victims. The newspapers of 1933 tell of charitable programs sponsored by such groups as the Progressive Business Men's Club and the Portland Federation of Women's Organizations. (The latter body highlighted extremes of wealth by sponsoring a bridge, tea and style parade at the Meier & Frank department store auditorium for the benefit of the needy!) When the



Brooklyn School garden

Portland City Council and the Multnomah County Commission agreed to set up work projects and pay those employed on them in scrip, more than 2,500 local merchants agreed to accept the scrip in payment for goods in spite of some uncertainty whether they would be fully reimbursed. (They were.)

All of these efforts were important, but Portlanders of 1933 (like those of 1893) were not content simply to rely on the goodwill of the well-off, and they were not willing to let the city's government and business elite dictate their needs. Community self-reliance was alive and well in the Rose City and it found expression in a variety of projects sponsored by social organizations, churches, ethnic associations and neighborhood groups.

Self-help Response to Financial Hardship

- In March, sixty volunteers from the community were working with the Portland Garden Club to develop a plan for converting unused city lots into neighborhood gardens for the unemployed. The volunteer gardeners agreed to make their own plots working models for their neighbors and to assist less experienced participants in the program. An *Oregonian* reporter noted that "one of the finest features of the plan is the spirit of helpfulness that is already active among the workers."

- In December the Suey Sing Cham-

ber of Labor and Commerce sponsored a celebration in conjunction with its move to new headquarters at 510 SW 2nd Avenue. The group, which had more than 250 members, operated a free employment agency and did relief work among the city's Chinese population.

- The Catholic Women's League announced during May that 505 girls and women had been placed during the preceding year through the league's employment office. In addition, 489 families had been provided with relief aid.

- An unusual community was flourishing in Sullivan's Gulch (near the present day Lloyd Center) in 1933. Called Shantytown, it was temporary home to several hundred depression victims who were living in self-built temporary structures. The town had its own mayor, civil servants, police force, and laws. Plans were afoot in February to erect a community building for spiritual and educational activities, and "Mayor" James W. Moran was anxious to lessen his constituents' dependence on food donations by obtaining use of some land for gardening. "Most of the men here have a trade," Moran explained. "They are victims of the depression and are not looking for charity. They much prefer to work and help themselves."

- The women of the James John School Parent-Teacher Circle planned a unique entertainment benefit at the

beginning of the year to raise money for the milk fund in St. Johns—so unique, in fact, that school authorities asked them to find another location for it. "We got to have money for the milk fund if the babies are to be fed," one of the women explained. "You know very well we can't raise more than ten dollars if we give a nice, quiet home talent benefit entertainment at the school-house. And you know that our husbands and the other men will pay 50 cents for a good smoker." Thus, boxers were found to entertain the men of St. Johns so that babies in the community would not go hungry.

Self-help Response to the Public Market Closure

Portland's Central Public Market, a thriving madhouse of small-scale commercial activity, was nationally famous. Extending along Southwest Yamhill between 3rd and 5th, the market had begun in 1914 and had been under city management almost from the beginning. It was here that future grocery tycoon Fred Meyer got his start, running a stall in company with local Chinese, Japanese and Italian truck gardeners.

As early as 1926, plans were afoot to construct a new public market along Southwest Front Street. The proposed move became a very controversial issue in Portland, and when the City Council gave its final go ahead to the project in 1931, it did so in spite of opposing petitions filed by 18,000 market customers and 246 farmers. One commissioner, who had been out of town when the council ordinance was passed, questioned his colleagues' right to ignore the petitions and charged that the public interest was being betrayed in favor of a few large property holders who stood to benefit by the move. Nevertheless, the council chose to let the project proceed.

Before opening the new Front Street Market building in December, 1933, the council called for removal of the sheds used at the Yamhill Market. (They were distributed to city parks to protect horseshoe players from the rain!) The idea was to force reluctant farmers to move to the new facility, but few took the hint. Some simply closed up shop and others moved off the street and into street-level stories of buildings along Yamhill. Two hundred of the former market tenants formed their own cooperative market and moved into another Yamhill location.

The new Front Street Market was a failure. Compared to the magical old world atmosphere of the Yamhill Street stalls, the Front Street facility was sterile indeed—an early version of a supermarket. Within a few years, the market which so many Portlanders had protested was in serious financial trouble. The city finally sold the building to the *Oregon Journal* in the '40s.

Some market activity continued along Yamhill for many years, but in spite of the determination of so many farmers and merchants to stay, the city's forced closure of the old central facility began a slow death for the market concept in Portland. Only with the birth of the Saturday Market under the Burnside Bridge during the '70s was some of the vitality of the old Central Market recaptured.



The Front Avenue Market Building, opened December 1933

Oregon Historical Society

A PORTLAND VISION . . .

A very happy form of community wealth is a lively and beautiful neighborhood. In its physical form signs of care and signs of fun abound. Take the houses themselves. Houses have faces. What delight we have when the faces are cheery, grinning and winking. Sadly, many new houses, instead, look boastful or scream for attention. They don't seem to care whether they sit here or in Dallas. Their main interest is themselves. Their neighbors, their streets and the land around them, are of no concern. But there is that feeling a house can evoke that makes us say: "That's a real Portland house." We may not even notice the house at first. It has a calm repose and an emphasis on amenity to all around it. We notice the generous windows watching over the street, the fine crafted detail of some trim, the intriguing entryway draped with fragrant vines, and beyond, the carefully proportioned door. Tracks lead to the car's place—no overbearing garage door is visible. And there are the raised flowerbeds, the hollyhocks, the windspinner, the toys, the ladder, the bicycles, and the vibrant voices.

—Dave Deppen, Portland Architect