A Bright New Century

State of the Docks

At the beginning of the twentieth century Portland was starting to look like a big, American city and the docks were a prominent part of this picture. Here is a rundown of the various docks at that time:

Grain docks on the west side of the river:
Flanders Dock No.1, operated by the Portland Grain Company
B.G.&Co. Dock, operated by Balfour, Guthrie & Co.
Flanders Dock No. 2, operated by Girvin & Eyre Co.
Columbia Dock No. 1, operated by Allen & Lewis Co. "foot of N Street"

Grain docks on the east side in Albina:
Victoria Dock, operated by Kerr, Gifford & Co. (in 1903 owned by E.W. Spencer)
Montgomery, Old Dock, operated by J.B. Montgomery
Montgomery, New Dock, operated by Balfour, Guthrie & Co.
Oceanic Dock, operated by Pacific Coast Elevator (dock burns Sept. 2, 1905, elevator burns in 1914)
O.R.& N. Co. Dock, operated by Oregon Railway and Navigation Co.

In addition to the grain docks there were four fuel docks, four large municipally owned general cargo steamer docks with warehouses, seven privately owned general cargo steamer docks with warehouses, seven river steamer cargo docks with warehouses, and one dry dock of 10,000 tons lifting capacity. There was at the time a growing trade selling flour to the Orient as well as other coastwise locations, and Hawaii. To cater to this trade Portland had four flour mills with adjoining docks: Portland Flouring Mills Co., Crown Mills, Albers Brothers Milling Co. (Albers Mills had 4 docks and adjoining warehouses in the same location), and the Jones & Columbia Mill.

In 1903 the largest of the east side grain warehouses, Victoria Dock, was burned to the ground by an arson attack. This dock would be replaced by Oregon Dock, a wharf and warehouse at the foot of Oregon street and later, in 1912 by the Globe Grain and Milling Co. dock, with the first cement grain elevator in Portland, joined to a large wooden warehouse. Then in 1919, five years after the city of St. Johns was annexed (July of 1915), Portland would built a state of the art cement grain elevator of its day, Municipal Terminal No. 4, down river from

the site of today's St. Johns Bridge.

Victoria Dock Burns

Dock fires, especially grain dock fires were quite common throughout the history of the Portland waterfront, but the fire at the huge Victoria dock in Albina in 1903 is out of the ordinary. On March 10, 1903 the dock was burned to the ground by an arson fire of such a ferocity that it also burned houses on the hill above, and threatened to burn down Irving dock to the north. The bark, Amazon, that was moored there at the time was saved by the fact that the wind was blowing in the opposite direction. The next day Portland Police announced that they were looking for Frank McGuire, an ex-convict who had just been released for the Oregon State Penitentiary where he had been serving a term for arson. Police say he had been threatening to “burn down the city” when he was released. Earlier that day, six other fires had been started in the city. Anyone who has read Bunko Kelly's book about his days in the Penitentiary during this same period will not be surprised that one of the inmates would develop an intense hatred for mankind. It was a place of terror and torture such as one would expect to have disappeared with the dungeons of Medieval Europe.

Labor and Travail on the Waterfront

In spite of all the hyperbole about entering a new and purified century, Portland entered the 20th Century carrying with it all of the ruthless and degraded baggage belonging to the last one. The rich had become fabulously wealthy and the poor, especially the poor waterfront worker or sailor, was no better off than ever before. The waterfront and the business of ships carried with it the stigma of lowlife, of the very lowest kind. When interviewed about the conditions of the sailors and Portland's reputation as the “Shanghai capital of the world,” the average citizen would say something like, “Why should I care what happens to them? They are no better than beasts.”

In December of 1901 the French Consul General in San Francisco began formal complaints to the U.S. Government about French sailors being continually crimped in Portland. And just two years before, in June of 1899, the British parliament had debated a report by James Laidlaw, the British Consul in Portland concerning the crimping practices in the port. At that time the *New York Times* reported that the British and the French governments were joining forces to bring about change in Portland. Bunko Kelly, for one, was proud of his accomplishments in helping to bring worldwide notoriety (or infamy) to the city. The final chapter of his prison diary is subtitled “How Bunko Kelly brought about a treaty between England and the United States.” Mr. Kelly spun this yarn in an interesting manner, as blatant as the rest of his tall tales. He says in the second paragraph of the chapter, “James Laidlaw, the British consul at Portland, Or., wrote to his home government that there was a bad man in Portland tying up most of the English ships and securing wages for English sailors, and that it had to be stopped in some way.”

From 1908 onward successive maritime labor laws were proposed and debated in city, state, and federal legislatures. In 1911 the U.S. Congress debated House Bill 11372, which later on became the The Seamen's Act of 1915 addressing many of the abuses to sailors, and putting a cap to the dollar amount that a man could be “crimped” for. During the testimony Andrew Furuseth, the president of the

International Seamen's Union, testified before the committee where he declared, "I will state that there is one port on the Pacific coast that has always been known as the greatest crimping den in America. I refer to the port of Portland." These new laws were too weak, too hard to enforce, and far too late, for at the same time they were being made the steamship, with its much smaller crews and swifter travel times was making commercial sailing vessels obsolete. The era of shanghaiers and crimp gangs was over, not because of laws, but because of steamships.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries there were individual longshore unions on the Pacific coast but nothing was very well organized. Individual unions were protective of their territory, and the biggest labor dispute seemed to be how to keep the seamen from taking jobs that belonged to longshoremen. In San Francisco the strikes of the early 20th century were easily broken by employers shipping in African Americans to do the job, for the longshore unions were closed to non-whites in those days and jobs were scarce. Often times disputes were settled by violence, with the scales being tipped in favor of industry managers who could afford to pay off the police, the scabs, and the strikebreakers. A strike in October of 1906 by grain handlers at the Pacific Coast Elevator in Albina took a violent turn with shots being fired at the pickets and several men injured. This was not an isolated incident, and barely made the news outside of Portland. (Oct. 24, 1906)

Warships, Wages and Wobblies

On March 31, 1917, the first all-steel steamship to be built in Portland--by Northwest Steel Company--was launched. It was a merchant ship built for a Norwegian company, but soon workers in the Portland shipyards would be asked to work overtime to supply warships for the war that had engulfed the world. The major shipbuilders at the time--Albina Engine & Machine Works, Commercial Iron Works (on the west side near Ross Island), Northwest Steel Company (at the foot of SW Sheridan Street), and Columbia River Shipbuilding

Company--were all busy and prosperous during this period building steel hulled vessels. During this same time Grant-Smith-Porter yard (at the foot of Baltimore Street in St. Johns) continued to build wooden hulled vessels, 80 vessels in 1917 alone.

Beginning around 1913 a period of union organizing and strike actions began to mobilize the working classes largely instigated by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). On the waterfront these were still days of terrible abuse for workers. The "shape up" was the method of hiring longshore work gangs. It entailed large groups of men meeting at a waterfront location before the start of the work day hoping to be chosen by a "boss." Most times being chosen meant giving a kickback to the "boss." Refusal to give a kickback, or participation in union organization led to being put on a hiring blacklist. It could also lead to being beaten, or even murdered, by a "goon squad." The work itself was dangerous, leading to many injuries and deaths with minimal compensation. It was a situation demanding change, and ripe for the IWW who coined the slogan, "An injury to one is an injury to all" which would be used by all successive generations of longshoremen. The strikes and strife of this period is far too varied and extensive a subject for me to do justice to here, but there is a great deal of information on the Seattle International Longshore and Warehouse Union at www.ilwu19.com.

Riverfront Transformations

In the early 1920s the downtown Portland waterfront, once a hub of activity central to the heart of the city's commerce and travel, had taken on the seediness of a neighborhood in decline. The small warehouses no longer even used the river for shipping, but Front Avenue, and gasoline powered trucks. The low bank with its two-storied docks was no restraint against the seasonal high waters that would lap up into the city during the spring freshet. To attend to these two problems, one of a shabby, run down waterfront, and the other, the flooding Willamette river, the city began a building project constructing a seawall from the Hawthorne Bridge to the Burnside Bridge as a bulwark against the flood. This project took from 1923 to 1929, and when it was finished the waterfront of pilings, two-level docks, and warehouses that had evolved from the time of Pettygrove was wiped clean and replaced with a seawall--a 32-foot bulwark against the waters of the Willamette.

From the earliest days of the city, Portland had always had a public market where farmers could bring produce, joined by butchers, fishmongers, and other merchants, much like Seattle's Pike Street Market today and for decades past. By the 1920s the market at Yamhill was overcrowded, so the city fathers had great plans for the new face of the waterfront along the seawall. Starting in 1929 and finishing in 1933 they constructed an eleven story, 620 foot long, 220,000 square foot cement edifice with tall clock towers on each end--the new Portland Public Market. Whereas this same vision, this same building, in this same location would be immensely popular today, drawing tourists and shoppers from afar, it was way ahead of its time and the project failed. From the beginning its conception and construction had carried with it a bad taste, having been steeped in the typical (for Portland politics) bribery and scandal stories, with their subsequent arrests and convictions. And then, the public the market was meant to serve found that it was inconveniently located. By 1942 the market was forced to close. The building was then leased to the U.S. Navy until 1948, when the *Oregon Journal* newspaper moved its operations there until it was demolished in 1969. It may not have been obvious at the time, but now it seems to me more than obvious that opening a new, expensive market during years that we now refer to as “the great depression” was a project that was bound to fail.

Big Trouble in Rivercity (and coastwise as well)

Workers on the waterfront had been trying for many years to improve their horrible working conditions and poverty level wages. The job was grueling, dangerous, and strategically vital to the nation's economy. Shipping company tycoons, importers, exporters, politicians, and police all knew that trouble on the waterfront was big trouble for everybody. But, instead on making the job a little less dangerous, and compensating the workers in a more reasonable manner, the employers just turned the screws a little tighter and used subterfuge and dirty tricks to manipulate the situation to their advantage. Strikes in 1916, 1919, 1921 had been failed efforts, with the disorganized nature of the various waterfront unions falling prey to ship company owners’ “divide and destroy” methods.

By 1933 the longshoremen had learned from the mistakes of the past, and through the leadership of such men as the Australian ex-merchant mariner, longshoreman, Harry Bridges, they organized into a single union on the Pacific

coast, an effort that carried with it a lot of clout, causing the industry owners and managers a great deal of discomfort. The demands of the union were simple and sensible. They wanted to end the favoritism and kick backs of the “shape up” by instituting a union hiring hall. They wanted a single contract for the entire Pacific coast, with the same working hours, conditions. and wages.

The industry owners refused to give in to any of the union's demands and in May of 1934 a strike began that shut down shipping on the entire west coast. The industry bosses resorted to their old tactics of hiring goons, and strikebreakers. When by July they had been unable to break the strike the industry bosses decided to open the ports by force and showed up with the National Guard, guns, and tear gas ready to do battle. In one day, July 5th, in San Francisco a pitched battle began, with two longshoremen killed by bullets, another killed by injuries and a total of 31 others (including police) seriously injured. This day would go down in infamy as “Bloody Thursday.”

In Portland battles raged as well. On July 11th police began shooting at the

strikers at Municipal Terminal No. 4 in the Saint Johns district. After four strikers had been downed by bullets, a crowd, estimated by the newspapers to be from 800 to 1000 strikers and sympathizers, “chased police inside the terminals and set siege to it.” While Police Captain H. A. Lewis telephoned downtown asking for “500 more rounds of buckshot and a supply of gas bombs” one of the longshoremen strike committee members, Matt Mehan, grabbed a blood soaked shirt belonging to one of the gunshot victims and headed downtown to where he knew the city council was in session. He rushed into the city council chambers waving the bloody shirt and shouting, “The blood of these men is on your hands!”

Tensions continued heightened by the arrival of 1,000 National Guard militiamen, but no more bloodshed ensued between the authorities and the strikers. Finally the deadlock ended on July 31 with a decided victory for the ILU. The longshoremen now had their long sought after hiring hall, as well as better hours, and better wages and the waterfront would never again be the workingman's hell that it had been for centuries. For an in-depth history of the Pacific Coast longshoremen and the ILWU go to this Web site: http://www.ilwu.org/history/ilwu-story/ilwu-story.cfm.

Next: Portland Waterfront, 1940 through 1979

1848-1869 1870-1899 1900-1939 IMAGE GALLERIES
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