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Oregonian, The (Portland, OR) - Thursday, September 27, 2007

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Bert Edmundson was a saloonkeeper. He wore a large square-cut diamond ring on his right hand, and liked to split lips with it. He also was the mayor of Troutdale.

In 1913, the year Edmundson was to stand for re-election, the Multnomah County Sheriff arrested him for serving alcohol to a minor, according to town historian Sharon Nesbit. Edmundson was jailed in Portland and told to resign -- or be prosecuted.

But Troutdale councilors refused his resignation. The sheriff was outraged, and the governor threatened to come to town. He never did. Edmundson continued to serve as mayor.

"Troutdale has always regarded itself as a maverick town," Nesbit says.

Wild, stubborn, inventive

The city, which marks its 100th birthday next week, has certainly been different. A bit wild, stubborn, inventive: a frontier. Unlike Fairview and Gresham, Troutdale once hosted a legion of saloons and later moonshine stills. It elected feisty women mayors long before other towns. It was founded by a sea captain who brought in the train and raised fish. It was home to residents who cared about one another and cherished the town's characters.

Today, there are people who want to keep that charm alive --though these days, Mayor Paul Thalhoffer decidedly prefers talking with residents to punching them.

If you look at a map, the place is still a frontier town of sorts: the metro area ends here, halted by the wilderness of the federally protected Columbia River Gorge to the north and east. Maybe that's why Troutdale --both cornered and preserved --loves its history.

As it celebrates its centennial, its population grown beyond larger than that of a small town, can Troutdale keep nurturing independent character and maverick flair? Can it even preserve it? How can it help newcomers invest in the community? Those are the questions on the lips of Nesbit, the mayor, councilors and many old-timers. Knowing the history can help, they say.

Liquor is main industry

The 100-year anniversary is actually a little misleading --Troutdale existed before it was incorporated. It started when pioneers landed at the junction of the Columbia and Sandy rivers, now the former Reynolds Metals/Alcoa site that will

soon house a FedEx Ground facility.

The earliest settlers came in the 1850s. One of them was John Harlow, a gruff sea captain from Maine, who became the town's official founder. Because he raised trout in ponds on his farm, Harlow called it "Troutdale." He then persuaded the railroad to build a depot at the farm, so he and others could ship produce. In 1882, when the rail line opened from Portland to Bonneville, the train stopped in Troutdale. And so the name stuck.

The community grew along the main drag, now the Historic Columbia River Highway. The town's reason for existence, in addition to farming, was the large slaughterhouse and meatpacking plant on the north side of the tracks.

According to the town newspaper, the Troutdale Champion, the town had a population of about 300 in 1891. It was home to two hotels, three general stores, a hardware store, a lumber mill, a restaurant, an opera hall, two meat markets, a shoemaker, a blacksmith, a saloon and a few other businesses.

The main growth industry was not farming or meat. It was liquor. Some old-timers recalled as many as six or seven Troutdale saloons in the early 1900s. Workers from the meat packing plant liked to drink, as did other area residents --Fairview was at the time a dry town and Gresham tightly reined in its taverns.

A main reason to incorporate was to deal with the proliferation of saloons and their rambunctious patrons, records show. On some days, drunks fought or lay passed out, facedown, on the street. Troutdale's first order of business in 1907 was building a jail and passing several ordinances meant to control drunks and saloons.

But the ordinances didn't take into account Troutdalians' stubborn streak. Local bars continued selling drinks under the table, and later, during Prohibition (1920-1933), bootlegging became a notable Troutdale sport. Old-timers, some of whom are still alive, recalled that at one point there were at least three bootleggers within two blocks of City Hall.

A progressive city

Others engaged in legitimate pursuits. Troutdale called itself the "celery capital of the world" in the 1920s, and several farmers won the world championship trophy in the Indiana-based Celery King Contest. The town was also known for growing gladioluses, daffodils, potatoes, beans, and berries. About the same time, the Bissinger Wool Pullery, which processed livestock hides, filled the void left by the meatpacking plant's move to Portland.

Despite its Wild West feel, the city was progressive. In 1914, two years after women got the vote in Oregon, Clara Latourell Larsson was elected mayor, one of the first women city leaders in Oregon. In 1924, Laura Harlow, Capt. Harlow's daughter-in-law, also became mayor. (Gresham had its first woman mayor in 1982.)

After Prohibition ended, Troutdale's saloon problems came back into the open. World War II put that problem on the back burner. Men left town to fight.

The war also saw several Japanese families who owned area farms --notably the Tamura and the Fuji families --sent to internment camps.

When they were allowed to return, they found the place transformed. The U.S. government had built a plant in 1941 to supply aluminum for equipment needed in the war. Reynolds Metals leased it in 1946 and bought it a few years later. Residents would now go to sleep lulled by the hum of the plant. A planned community formed on the outskirts of town, later becoming the city of Wood Village. And, shortly after the war, Troutdale got a state-sanctioned liquor store.

Unpretentious folks

Somehow, the place calmed down. Those who grew up in Troutdale after the war say it was a self-sufficient, close-knit community of genuine, unpretentious folks. It was a place where kids biked the streets, doors stayed unlocked, and annual smelt-eating contests attracted crowds.

"When I was growing up in Troutdale, everybody knew you, and you were related to half the town," says Mary McGinnis Bryson, who was born and spent her childhood in the 1950s in Troutdale.

"We were surrounded by people in the community that cared," echoes Greg Handy, who also grew up in the 1950s. "Everybody was always checking on everybody else."

Handy and his three brothers worked at their parents' gas station on the main drag. For years, locals called the station's office "Troutdale's country club," because people came to share doughnuts and coffee and swap stories. Today it's the office of the Handy family business.

There were other well-known residents. Lucky, at the Multnomah County Poor Farm (now McMenamins Edgefield), was a former weightlifter who had been paralyzed in a neck accident; he sat in a wheelchair on Halsey Street and waved to passers-by. Kids would buy him Cokes and ice cream. Uncle Walt owned a flock of geese that would follow him everywhere. The geese regularly stopped traffic on the historic highway.

And many still remember Roy Meger at the Troutdale General Store. He was, they say, "the glue that held Troutdale's old business district together." When he closed shop in 1995, he was 80 years old and used a magnifying glass to see the cash register.

Today the general store is still the community's center. But it is a very different place from the store that Meger ran. It sells less food and hardware, more gifts and collectibles. Locals stop by for a hearty bowl of vegetable soup, but the place is often full of out-of-towners come to rummage the city's myriad antique shops.

As one patron put it, "downtown Troutdale is a shopping center, except there is nothing to shop for."

Preserving history

Mayor Thalhoffer admits he misses the days when he knew everybody and Troutdale was "just a down-home small town." Now, he knows only community leaders and folks involved in city politics. And most of Troutdale's 15,000 residents --double the population of 1990 --live away from the historic downtown.

"The new residents don't know much about our history," says Nesbit, the historian. "They slide right past old buildings and don't even notice."

So what happens when you have history lovers and history-clueless people living in one town?

"Have you seen Phoenix?" Nesbit asks, referring to Arizona's capital city.

But she quickly adds that it won't get that bad. The Troutdale Historical Society, formed in 1968, has worked too hard to preserve downtown, showcase history in the city's two museums, and save McMenamins Edgefield.

"We're trying to keep the small-town feel," Thalhoffer agrees, "and I think so far we've been able to do that."

Building a community

The near future will once again test Troutdale. Urban renewal at the former sewer-treatment plant was approved by voters last year. The site will eventually feature a promenade along the Sandy river, a public plaza, condominiums and restaurants. This month, the city gave final approval to FedEx to build its Northwest distribution hub on 77 acres of the former Alcoa-Reynolds Metals site. Local developers are moving ahead on a public-private partnership of the burnt-out downtown "discovery block." And just last week, the county approved a sale of the old "pig farm" to Edgefield and the Reynolds School District.

Thalhoffer says Troutdale remains "small" --despite recent growth --because it's easy to get involved in city government, and the city offers a great recreation program and active neighborhood associations.

But others say there's still a lot to do --in addition to learning history --to preserve the flair of quaint, livable Troutdale. Councilor Norm Thomas wants to see another "Imagination Station" playground and a library built, as well as more business attracted to downtown.

"We need to have the resources residents want, so that they don't have to go miles to get them," Thomas said. "If you do that, people start running into other people, you start building relationships and getting to know your neighbors, and that's how you build up a community."

Councilor Doug Daoust sees Troutdale becoming a strong arts and culture center, with more concerts at the new Edgefield amphitheater, a new bronze foundry and an antiques destination point downtown, and new restaurants and trails for strollers along the Sandy River.

In short, Thalhofer says, "The challenge will be the next 100 years."

Well-timed name

But one thing is certain in this centennial year. Troutdalians can sleep easier knowing their town was not named just a little later.

After raising trout in the dale by his house, Capt. Harlow decided to export European carp. The fish later bred out of control in Northwest waters and are now considered unsavory pests.

Thankfully, Harlow christened his farm before he got the carp.

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Edition: Sunrise

Section: Metro East Neighbors

Record Number: MERLIN_10579616

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