

1886 and 1896 - Memorable Years for Finns in Astoria, January 20, 2012

Greg Jacob, FFCPC Board Director:

On behalf of FFCPC I gave a talk on “Finns in Early Astoria,” January 12, in the Finnish room at PSU. I talked about three key events: Finntown, the creation of the Finnish Brotherhood in 1886, and the founding of Union Fish in 1896. I offer this brief summary of my presentation:

By the 1870s Finns were migrating from Pennsylvania and the Great Lakes Region. They also came from the old country by rail to San Francisco and ship to Astoria. Many who emigrated from Finland came from two rural areas: Kälviä and Kaustinen (fishing and logging). According to one source there were 173 Finns in Astoria in 1880 and only 18 were female. In 1900, in just twenty years one-half of Astoria’s population could trace its roots to Finland. By then Uniontown had restaurants, a playground, barbershops, dry goods store, Taylor Public School, the Finnish Evangelical Church, the Finnish Congregational Church, a drug store, doctor and dentist offices, saloons, brothels, nineteen boarding houses, and many steam baths. In 1920 Finns made up one quarter of the population. Let me quote something from the Columbia River Fisherman’s Protective Association from 1890—too much cannot be said of the steady thrift and perseverance of these people. Idleness to them is unknown. They are wide-awake, sober, and intelligent.”

By the mid-1880s there was a sizable Finnish community in Astoria, but there were few opportunities for social and civic activities, other than the boarding houses and the saloon business. Even though the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Finnish Temperance Society, both established in 1883, provided some cultural activities, the Finnish people “sensed the value of an organization which would serve the needs of the tightly-knit group of immigrants, that would offer some material guarantees and cultural activities in keeping with the customs of their own people” (from the History of Astoria Lodge #2, 1937). So on December 6, 1886 Finnish community established the Astoria Brotherhood Lodge. The first meeting of the Finnish Brotherhood had 50 charter members, and their by-law states that the purpose of the lodge is to help the sick and needy members, to provide for burial for deceased members, and to promote and enhance the reputation of the members and of the Finns in general.

In 1895 fishermen in Astoria went on strike because the cannery owners refused to pay five cents a pound for Chinook salmon. A year later 200 fishermen (some accounts say that 172 were Finnish) each put in \$100.00 to purchase a cannery site, 50 by 200 feet with boat moorage and net racks. The cannery became known as the Union Fishermen’s Cooperative Packing Company. “It was a proud moment to our founders on the morning of April 11, 1897 when one hundred ninety one sailing gillnets tacked into the new cannery loaded with salmon.” I can’t go into detail about the following decades, but I will say that each fisherman received not so much for the each fish he delivered, but his share of the company’s proceeds. By 1898 most people referred to the cannery as Union Fish. For many years Union Fish promoted general research in the preparation of new fisheries products. It remained a cooperative until the late 1940s when it was sold to Peter Pan Seafoods.