

Hidden History of Ashland, Oregon

Joe Peterson

Looked at over its sweep of 170 years, Ashland has been a town full of exotic, imaginative dreamers (and schemers) who created a unique tapestry of urban myths and mysteries that most locals have heard about — but most don't know the real story.

Joe Peterson's new book, "Hidden History of Ashland, Oregon," shines a light in the corners, seeking to explain its rich legacy of tales and the characters who made them happen.

His 25 vignettes, each readable as standalone stories, spin yarns about:

- A faith healer, Susie Jesel, who powered the town economy for years during the Depression and beyond, resulting in a boom for motels and rentals. Why? Because when she healed, it worked.
- A Fortune 500 company that exploded out of a small-town car dealership, Lithia Motors.
- A brothel for lonely railroad men at 4th & B streets, whose madame was run off by police.
- A world-famous erotic novel "Lolita," which was written here by Russian Vladimir Nabokov, who came for the butterflies. Raggedy Ann was written here too. Country music legend Rose Maddox settled here, too.
- An ingenious man, former Shakespearean actor and World War II sailor Jim Parsons, made a life out of turning scrap "mill ends" into a giant, recession-proof business, with 100 workers making mouse traps, wine racks, Lincoln Logs, you name it, while pioneering now-standard business practices like profit-sharing and safety pay. Once, he even paid his workers in \$2 bills so the town could see all the cash he sent flowing around.
- JFK came here on a smart political mission when he ran for president. He needed to win a solid Protestant state, showing that being Catholic didn't matter to voters. They loved him — and 300 mobbed him at the small house of a professor Art Kreisman, who set it up. The ploy worked and he carried Oregon by less than one point.
- Baseball players all over the region were stunned (and defeated) when in 1884 the curveball was invented by George McConnell of the Ashland baseball team. Actually a guy earlier started throwing it on the East Coast, but this was a masterful and seemingly impossible first to fans in the West.
- Standing on principle, Ashland almost didn't get its free Carnegie library, because it was "tainted money" from a legendary steel magnate who exploited the sweat of the common man. But the council narrowly said OK. It still stands 108 years later.
- Much Shakespeare was staged in Ashland decades before Angus Bowmer, in 1935, thought the Bard might fly here. Famous dramatist Charles Hanford, who acted with the Booth brothers (John Wilkes Booth being the assassin of President Abraham Lincoln) in New York, led a touring company that appeared every year at our palatial Ganiard Opera House at Pioneer and Main streets, a literal stone's throw from where Bowmer would site his Oregon Shakespeare Festival on the foundation of the old Chautauqua dome.
- The birth of OSF was made possible by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's job-providing Works Progress Administration. Local unemployed men tore down the creaky Chautauqua dome and, at Bowmer's behest provided the labor to build the first stage. Men from the area Civilian Conservation Corps staged the first Green Show by boxing each other. By the way, the plays sold better than the boxing.
- Another quirky tale: Bowmer was trying to get a professor job in Ellensburg, Washington. He was driven, says Peterson, and would have started a Shakespeare Festival there. But he didn't get the job. Now Ashland has it.
- With the boom of motorcars and highways, Ashland in 1915 sought to lure travelers between Portland and San Francisco with a free auto camp in Lithia Park. It worked. Magazines called it the best auto camp on the West Coast. People shopped and dined. It grew to 40 tiny cabins and drew up to 10,000 people a year, soon charging 50 cents or a dollar a night. But then came motels and the Depression and war. It got too expensive for the city to run. But it

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was an idyllic chapter in the time when America first embraced the fun and freedom of car travel.

- Al Willstatter and his family ran Twin Plunges pool for many years, this after fleeing the Nazi Holocaust. A Jew who spoke German, he joined Army intelligence and, at war's end helped track down fleeing SS officers who ran concentration camps, so they could be tried at Nuremberg. It wasn't hard. Most had SS tattoos in their armpits or had burn scars where they tried to get rid of them. After that, he helped with the refugee crisis.
- The firestorm that scourged Talent and Phoenix? It almost happened in 1959 to Ashland, when arson fires were set near Jackson Hot Springs, but winds carried it slightly to the south, so it burned behind the town's south ridge, instead of engulfing the town. It was an amazing evening spectacle for an OSF audience, who could barely focus on "Anthony and Cleopatra." The faces of the audience, reflecting the blaze, looked like bright red tomatoes, said actors. The festival had an evacuation plan, but it wasn't needed.
- Liberal Ashland is often reminded that its Ku Klux Klan marched hooded down Main Street in the 1920s, but, far from lynching and Jim Crow, they thought of themselves as just another service club, says Peterson, concerned with slowing immigration from Catholic countries like Italy.

"It's not the Klan after the Civil War of the one who fought Martin Luther King," says Peterson. "It's a weird version. Ashland was a small, white Protestant town with lots of lodges and it would have been odd if it didn't have a Klan. They pitched patriotism and were good at selling themselves as a paternal group."

Peterson, author of the 2009 Arcadia book "Ashland: Images of America," says he loves research, especially on business, which has a big impact but is often overlooked in history. Especially compelling for him were the stories of Parson's Pine and Lithia Motors.

He has lived here almost three decades, lectured at the Historical Society's Windows in Time, and taught history and political science at SOU, but was surprised to learn so many "quirky and off-the-wall" tales about his town.

The book is engagingly written in highly readable language and "reflects my interpretation of events. The real value of local history is it helps you understand national trends. If it's happening locally, is it happening nationally? If not, then it can cause a reinterpretation of what's happening at the national level."

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