

Oregon Field Notes, August 1991

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This is my first visit to Oregon in 25 years and my first opportunity to concentrate on Oregon alone. In August 1959 I drove north from the California border through Ashland, Medford, detouring to Crater Lake and then up the Willamette Valley through Eugene and Salem to Portland, and on into Washington. Five years later in 1964, my wife and I drove into eastern Oregon from Idaho just west of Boise, up the eastern side of the state to Pendleton, Boardman, and Hermiston, then westward along the Columbia River through the Columbia River gorge to Portland and southward through the Willamette Valley into California. This trip my wife, youngest son and I fly into Portland, drive eastward through the Columbia River gorge, southward along the eastern slope of the Cascades, then into the mountains at Mt. Hood, southward again to Bend, and into the mountains to Crater Lake, then back to Bend, across the Cascades to Salem, from Idaho just west of Boise, up the eastern side of the state to Pendleton, Boardman, and Hermiston, then westward along the Columbia River through the Columbia River gorge to Portland and southward through the Willamette Valley into California.

This trip my wife, youngest son and I fly into Portland, drive eastward through the Columbia River gorge, southward along the eastern slope of the Cascades, then into the mountains at Mt. Hood, southward again to Bend, and into the mountains to Cratersit and move on. Their great fear is Californians. Their attitude toward Californians is something like Coloradans attitude toward Texans, only perhaps even more so because California is closer and even more threatening. It almost seems that they have an industry of encouraging Californians to move on to Washington.

Oregon is a very beautiful and diverse state, with one of the most beautiful coast lines in the United States and maybe even in the world, lush hills and valleys, a mountain range punctured by spectacular snow peaks, a miniature Great Plains, a mighty river, wine country, cow country, farm country, pretty cities, good universities, some natural wonders, and one of the country's oldest Shakespeare festivals. The state also has a literate, progressive, and predominantly moralistic citizenry. In fact, once again it reminds me of a western version of Minnesota.

This is true even in its negatives: slightly slow, combining the slowness of Scandinavians with the rather deliberately relaxed quality (commitment to being relaxed) of the Pacific coast. There is a certain kind of insularity more or less reflecting a belief that they have it all so why should they be concerned about anywhere else.

My conclusion after a few days was that Orgonians are nice but perverse in a certain way. They do the unexpected for no apparent reason and without making a deal of it. One

example: driving southward on Interstate 405 through downtown Portland, the last downtown exit is very poorly marked and quite confusing. Many people apparently miss it. The next exit is several miles down the pike and cars are usually lined up to get off of it, but there is no clear way to turn around to get back on the freeway. One has to turn east, go across the freeway, and then there is a side street that comes in at an angle so that the point of junction with the major street is quite wide. There is a sign "U-turns permitted." Cars line up to make the U-turn so they will be able to reenter the expressway. The city has obviously calculated this, rather than setting up a formal left turn possibility properly controlled for traffic.

I could multiply examples in every field. One hardly hears a raised voice in Oregon. People are very pleasant. But at times they can drive one crazy in their rigidity, unwillingness to bend or to consider the specifics of a situation. They have a rule; they follow it, with a smile, but like robots. It is clear that rules are very important and are made to be observed at all costs.

Portland

Portland remains a very lovely city. I would still put it among the five best examples of the American model city, like Minneapolis, St. Paul, Seattle and Denver, a city set in a park or garden, with the especially rich green of Oregon forests. It has done very well to preserve its downtown, even preserving a 1920-50s-style theater row. At the same time many attractive new buildings have been built and there has been a good synthesis of the old and the new, including riverfront recreational and residential development downtown.

The heart of the city is still along the Willamette rather than the Columbia, but the airport is along the Columbia so there is new commercial, industrial and recreational development along that river as well. Following its geography, Portland has five sides: northeast, southeast, northwest, southwest, and north. The north side is where the poor underclass lives which is becoming problematic with drug-based gang wars exploding for the first time. Portland has not had gangs in the past or the random violence that they bring. Now it has, confined to the north side, but who knows for how long. Portlanders are quite worried about this for obvious reasons. It is like the serpent in the garden. The southwest side is the most affluent, then the northwest. The two sides to the east of the Willamette are both for middle class working people.

Both Oregon and Portland are small enough so that Portland is not detached from the state as a whole. Quite to the contrary, it remains the state's urban center and its newspaper, The Oregonian, circulates throughout the whole state and serves as a statewide newspaper.

While the state capital remains in Salem, it is clear that a good deal of state business is conducted in Portland. The State Historical Society and its museum and bookshop have moved up to Portland to be pro-active with a lot of outreach. The Society has an excellent bookstore of works from Oregon and the West. Like Minnesota, Oregon takes its history

very seriously, with the added seriousness of the Far West. In general, Portland seems to have many bookstores, if not as many as Seattle, still, above average.

Portland and Oregon have undergone the "sophistication" that one sees throughout the United States. The wine industry has expanded and Oregon wines are now quite good and served everywhere. Good restaurants have multiplied. Resort areas of various kinds have developed along the coast and in the mountains and tourism is a big industry. The Columbia Gorge is now viewed as a recreation area rather than as a source of cheap electric power which is taken for granted. Thirty years ago the symbolic meaning of the Columbia Gorge lay in the great dams that brought federal power to the people. Now its symbol is wind-surfing.

Looking at the civil scape of Oregon, one is forcefully reminded that the state was settled in the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s at the same time as much of Illinois, Wisconsin, and southeastern Minnesota. Its towns look like midwestern transplants from that period. They are actually implants rather than transplants, as indigenous to Oregon as their counterparts are to Illinois. More than any other western state, Oregon looks like the Midwest with mountains. Even the patterns of decay and reconstruction are the same. Indeed, because Oregon has not encouraged in-migration and development beyond the minimum, it has retained many of the same physical characteristics in its cities and towns that one finds in Illinois or Iowa, unlike Washington or California where there either were no such older traces or, if they existed, they have been obliterated by the inundations of subsequent development. But Oregon is unique in having that early period of settlement, a whole generation of Americans arriving before the Civil War, something that is true of no other mountain or Pacific state. This is reinforced by the fact that the Willamette Valley, the Oregon heartland, is a lowlands, and in any case is not even as many feet above sea level as what we think of as the lowlying Illinois prairies.

The moralistic political culture remains predominant in the state's heartland while its southern reaches -- around Medford and Ashland -- seem to have had reinforcement of the individualistic political culture and the Oregon coast, which is growing in population, seems to be a MI mix. East of the Cascades political culture seems to be M with a little bit of I.

The Oregon coast has become an attractive recreational site and it is beautiful. The state has managed to preserve approximately half of it in public ownership and the decline of the lumber industry which has little serious consequences economically has helped to reduce environmental deterioration. For example, Tillamook, once a heavy industrial area because of the logging industry, now has a quiet tranquility about it and the 3,000 foot mountains rising out of the Pacific to its north are wreathed in clouds almost like tropical peaks. In fact it is the most tropical scene I think I have ever seen in the United States, but the Pacific waters are freezing cold and the area itself has an unmistakably full four season climate. Unfortunately, the price of that is that the city of Tillamook is depressed except insofar as it has captured tourist trade, which it has not done so well because the older industrial base has left its scars and the tourists seek better beaches to the north and the south.

Oregon's mountains are unique among American mountain ranges because of the way in which the main range of the Cascades is only 4-5,000 feet above sea level, but is punctuated every 40 or 50 miles by a 10,000 footer, give or take 1,000 feet, that is snow-capped from 6,500 feet up, each a dormant volcano, hence, completely conical in shape. What this means is that there are large areas for fishing and hiking recreation but only so much "scenery," although it is very beautiful in its own way. Crater Lake remains a very impressive jewel in the Cascades, of course well-maintained by the National Park Service.

This means that the Cascades are principally used for the kind of forest and lake recreation that one finds in Minnesota, only 2-3,000 feet higher in Oregon. It is a very different kind of recreation than one finds in Colorado, for example, where mountain climbing, white water rafting, and horseback riding are more appropriate. Here we have fishing, boating and hiking.

Mt. Hood, at well over 11,000 feet, is the highest peak in the state. It was also the closest major peak to Portland so it is the primary mountain recreation area in the state, an hour and a half away from the city. Its western slopes are covered with summer homes and resorts, housing skiers in the ski season and golfers and swimmers in the summer. One can drive around Mt. Hood on forest roads and get intimately close to its 5,000 feet of snow-capped cone, or drive up to Timberline Lodge at the 6,000 foot level on the mountainside to the ski area. It is a picturebook mountain in every respect.

South of Mt. Hood and a thousand feet lower is Mt. Jefferson and south of it down another thousand feet, Mt. Washington. The only "concentration" of snow-capped peaks is just west of Bend, a "family" of five peaks dominated by the Three Sisters. (Incidentally, the weather was clear enough so that by the end of the trip we had seen the entire range, from Mt. Rainier in Washington on the north southward to Mt. Shasta in California.)

The plains to the east of the Cascades are wheat and cattle country. Just south of Mt. Hood in the foothills is the Warm Springs Indian Reservation of confederated tribes. It has benefited from logging and mining money which has been well used. The seat of its government is Warm Springs but it has a major regional resort at Kahneeta Hot Springs. Apparently this is an Indian confederacy that works, that is to say, working as such today.

Because of its more classically western character, the area around Bend, Redmond and Sisters is horse country and also has tried to foster a somewhat ersatz western myth. Sisters, for example, has redone itself as a cutesy western cow town which is, at best, semi-justified by history, but it has been done attractively as Oregonians would do something like that. The whole area was settled in the 1880s, much later than Oregon to the west of the Cascades, and the railroad did not reach Bend until 1911, so this is a "last frontier" region of the continental U.S.

The Jews of Oregon

When I added them up, it turned out that I had far more acquaintances in Portland than I thought. Arden and Lois Shenker were our principal contacts. He is perhaps the major figure in the local Jewish community and president of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council. Reuben Lenske, just 92 in July, is the last surviving member of the first graduating class of the Minneapolis Talmud Torah, still active in his real estate business though he has retired from law practice. He gave me a copy of a short memoir he wrote on the Talmud Torah. Rabbi Joshua Stampfer is rabbi of the city's large Conservative congregation. He is very concerned with crypto-Jews around the world. His son, Shaul, is presently directing the Steinsaltz Yeshiva in Moscow. Alan Abarbanel, an attorney, is the founder of the Abarbanel Family Association and publisher of its newsletter. Rabbi Emmanuel Rose is the rabbi of the Reform temple. We were at Camp Sharon-Avodah together in 1950.

Portland now is estimated to have 12-15,000 Jews. There are congregations in Salem and Eugene as well. In Salem, the Jews are primarily state government employees and in Eugene primarily University of Oregon faculty. A Jewish community is developing along the coast especially in Cannon City and north. They have a new congregation in that area at Sea Beach but it does not have a building.

There we have another connection, Sammy Mirviss from the Minneapolis Mirviss family, who went to Hollywood as Michael Loring in the 1920s, then became hazan in Fresno, California, and is now 81 and has retired to Cannon Beach where he had a son (who died of AIDS this year) and is now leading services for that congregation. His brother Jack who lives in Kibbutz Urim and is now in his 91st year comes every year to be the hazan at High Holiday services in Portland to be with his brother-in-law Reuben Lenske.

Jews have been in Oregon for a long time. It seems that both Arden and Lois Shenker's families have been in the state for more than a hundred years. Arden's great grandfather came across the plains on a covered wagon to Portland in 1880, a few years before the city was connected with the East by rail, so he is fourth generation in the state and his children have already established the fifth generation.

Nevertheless, the change in the situation of the Jews in this generation is becoming apparent. However much they were part of the community in the past, there were still barriers which prevented very extensive intermarriage. Now those barriers have dropped and the Shenker children are following the prevailing pattern. The one who is staying in Portland and who is most interested in pursuing service to the Jewish community as a career has married a non-Jewish woman who has converted and is seriously Jewish, observing kashrut, Shabbat and holidays. The boy, Josh, wears a kippah. Another son who lives in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, has married a non-Jewish woman who has not converted but who is active in the Jewish community. She is the program chairman for the local community relations council and was responsible for arranging an appearance by Arden in his capacity as President of NJCRAC. While interested, she still is not planning to convert. The same is true with a daughter who was about to get married the

next week. She was marrying a non-Jewish man who was also not planning to convert, though they were going to "raise their children as Jews." All three children are seriously Jewish by American standards, but all three have married out and only one has brought a spouse into the fold.

Portland used to be at the end of the world Jewishly. Now, however, the world has changed. Arden Shenker is President of a major national Jewish organization. Joshua Stampfer is one of the more active and better known American Conservative rabbis involved throughout the world, especially in the Soviet Union, and his son even more so. Manny Rose plays some kind of significant role in the Reform movement. And even a relative outsider like Allan Abarbanel has created a worldwide family network from his Portland office.

Moreover, people are beginning to come through. Larry Rubin, the Executive Director of NJCRAC, came out to work with Arden while I was there and we had dinner together. The list of well-known Jewish leaders who come to speak or otherwise appear is growing. The Portland-Israel connection is not insignificant. Quite a few Portlanders live in Israel and those who are Jewishly interested do spend time as young students or later on missions in the Jewish state.

The Portland Jewish community has a day school but it is apparently not very strong. There is a Portland Talmud Torah which remains the focal point of whatever Jewish education most Portland Jewish youth obtain. It is an old Talmud Torah that has undergone some reorganization in recent years. As in Minneapolis, it has in a sense blocked the development of a community day school.