



New garden will commemorate contribution of Chinese to Astoria

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Lori Tobias, The Oregonian



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MulvannyG2 Architecture

This conceptual drawing shows what "The Garden of Surging Waves" along the seawall in Astoria will look like. The park will commemorate Chinese immigrants' contribution to building Astoria.

A dozen or so years ago, Astoria Mayor Willis Van Dusen invited Chinese American elder Duncan Law to a meeting at a local museum. Law firmly declined -- and by way of explaining, gave Van Dusen a history lesson he'd never known he missed.

Law told him: "The **Columbia River Maritime Museum** has no mention of the Chinese, but the Chinese built the jetties, they built the river wall that protects Astoria from the Columbia River. ... The Chinese brought the railroad to **Astoria**. Astoria was the salmon capital of the world and the Chinese were exclusively the processors. Yet there was no mention of the Chinese anywhere in the museum."

That was all news to Van Dusen. "I've lived in Astoria my whole life and I had no idea about the Chinese contribution until he refused to go into that building," the mayor said.

The museum eventually corrected the omission, which came in part because Chinese laborers left so few artifacts, said museum deputy director David Pearson.

That might have been that. But then came the afternoon about two years ago when Van Dusen found himself walking in the city's neighborhood known as old Chinatown, pondering what might make a fitting legacy gift for the city's 2011 bicentennial. In 1911 for the centennial, the city raised \$1 million to buy Coxcomb Hill and build the beloved **Astoria**

Column.

Now, as Van Dusen considered this next milestone celebration, once again he heard Law's words and knew what the city needed.



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Duncan Law

On Saturday, Astoria will open an exhibition of artwork commissioned by the city from China that ultimately will go in a public site named **The Garden of Surging Waves** in old Chinatown. The city spent \$100,000 for the work, and the artist donated a number of pieces.

"What an opportunity to talk about the Chinese contribution," Van Dusen said. "Astoria was over 20 percent Chinese in the late 1800s. And yet it was not a part of our history. For our bicentennial we are going to go back and tell this very important history that was never told."

Growing up, Duncan Law's mother told him about the family's 1921 voyage from China to Astoria when he was a year old.

He had gotten so ill on the boat, his mother feared he would die. "She used to say, 'Boy I was ready to feed you to the fishes.' Because if I died, that's what they would have had to do," said Law, chuckling.

He thinks now perhaps his mother had the gift of prophecy. "Because I've been in fisheries ever since," said Law, for whom the Duncan Law National Consumer Center in Astoria is named.

Law, 90, got his first job in the canneries at age 14 after lying on the application, adding two years to his age. "Astoria was a pretty wild town in those days," he said. "Lots of loggers and fishermen. A lot of bawdyhouses in Astoria."

He worked 14 to 16 hours a day and made very little money, he said. "It was really an opportunity for me as well as a lot of younger Chinese. We used that as a springboard to get an education."

If you go

What: Public celebration to open the exhibition of artwork for The Garden of Surging Waves

When: 3 p.m. Saturday

Where: Foot of 15th Street and Marine Drive by the trolley line

More information:
www.astoriachineseheritage.org

When they weren't working, they slept and ate in the flea- and bedbug-infested bunkhouses near the canneries, where light came from a single bulb and furnishings were meager at best.

"They gave us a couple of sawhorses and four planks," Law recalled. "You put the planks on the sawhorses and we used our blankets for mattresses and warmth. One old fellow told me how to fix the bed and he quickly went to the main cannery and got a couple of big cans and he filled each one full of kerosene and he put it under each of the legs of the sawhorse. I thought, 'Gee, what kind of pyre is he building for me?' The next morning in those cans with kerosene there were quite a few bedbugs that had tried to go up the sawhorses to get at me."

Work in the canneries was repetitive and monotonous, he said.

"The fish contractors hired the Chinese to do the drudge work most people couldn't stand. The jobs didn't offer enough challenge to the other ethnic groups in this area," Law said. "This is what the Chinese heritage park is all about, to emphasize that the Chinese did play an important role in getting Astoria to what it is today."

But there is still a ways to go before the park becomes reality.

The city needs to raise \$800,000 to construct the waterfront park, where 14 tons of sculpture will include a 12-foot-tall hand-hammered bronze moon gate, granite columns, two Ling Bi "Scholar Rocks" (delicately textured limestone formations that produce a metallic sound when tapped), cast bronze scrolls with classic Chinese quotations, 24 bronze timeline markers and a 6-foot-tall cast bronze lantern inspired by a Western Han Dynasty miniature incense burner from 204 B.C.

The garden takes its name from a Chinese term that speaks of turmoil and strife, and represents what the Chinese went through here, Van Dusen said.

"Hopefully the community will be able to realize \$800,000," he said, noting that supporters have raised \$200,000 so far. "I feel very confident we will. This is important for Astoria's history. It's very fascinating and very powerful."

-- **Lori Tobias**

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