



Astoria fire in 1922
Photo: Frank Woodfield



Misty fog over Astoria
Photo: Jimmy Granstrom



View from the Astoria Column
Photo: Jimmy Granstrom

From sailors and shipwrecks to goonies and ghosts – How the fires and storms rising from The Graveyard of the Pacific still reverberate through Astoria, Oregon (By J. Granström)

The Oregon seaside town Astoria is no stranger to the supernatural or scary, as stories of drowned sailors and shanghaied fishermen still reverberate through its streets and shoreline. Astoria is part of the Graveyard of the Pacific, which is a somewhat loosely defined stretch of the Pacific Northwest coast stretching from Tillamook Bay in Oregon to Vancouver Island in Canada. Astoria is described by the Travel Channel as “a treacherous nautical region in the Pacific Northwest, where the freshwater of the Columbia River meets the Pacific Ocean. Here, the ocean has claimed thousands of shipwrecks and countless lives, while unexplained deaths, diseases, fires and murders have impacted areas around the shoreline”. The town is often clad in a misty fog, which can be seen sweeping across the town and surrounding areas from the Astoria column located on the hillside overlooking the river and Pacific Ocean in the distance. From deadly storms to ravaging fires, which have reduced downtown Astoria to cinders on multiple occasions, this Nordic settlement has borne witness to tragedy and despair which still reverberates through its streets and shoreline. When the misty fog sweeps across its mysterious waters, one may still hear the echoes of the forlorn and the blessed ones who escaped the tragic fates that have paved the ground with pain and left a cloak of veiled shadows across the stunning scenery of this tranquil seaside town. From Steven Spielberg’s 1985 movie “The Goonies” and the Travel Channel’s cult show “Ghost Adventures” to the recently released Swedish book “Monstervågen (Rogue Wave)”, Astoria and the Oregon Coast’s fascination with the ocean and the fates of its fishermen and sailors – resting peacefully at the bottom of the sea or still haunting the shoreline where they drew their last breath – is captured both dramatically and comically in the written word and popular culture across many media platforms.

Astoria was formed in 1811 and is the oldest city in the state of Oregon.¹ Located at the south shore of the Columbia estuary, where the river flows into the Pacific Ocean, Astoria has been influenced significantly by the people who immigrated to it over the years.² A large portion came from Scandinavia and their descendants continue to live in the area. By 1910, there were 9599 inhabitants in Astoria and 35% of the population identified as Scandinavians, with Swedes as the third largest immigrant group after the Finns and Norwegians.



“Monstervågen” author Lars Berge in Astoria (middle) and at the Annual Meeting of the New Sweden Cultural Heritage Society in Portland in February 2019 (right).

One Swede who passed through Astoria in the early 20th century was Johan Walfrid (J. W.) Granström,* the great-great grandfather of Swedish author and journalist Lars Berge whose writing credits include the critically acclaimed best-seller “Vargattacken (The Wolf Attack)”. The adventures of J. W. Granström are covered in Berge’s recent book “Monstervågen (Rogue Wave)”. The book broadly covers Swedish sailors abroad during the windjammer-era. One vessel of particular interest to Berge was in Astoria and Portland in 1914. Her name was Alcides and the captain was I.M. Skaugen. On board was J. W. Granström. According to Lars’s grandfather Lennart, J. W. was washed overboard from Alcides by a wave to certain death in the sea, but flushed back on deck again by the following wave outside of Astoria. In an almost supernatural course of events, waves from the sea provided both sacrifice and mercy for J. W.

While doing research for the book, Lars contacted the New Sweden Cultural Heritage Society in Portland, Oregon. New Sweden’s president Kristi Gustafsson connected Lars to the Oregon Scandinavian Historical Society, and within one day they had located J. W. on a ships manifest verifying he had come to Astoria. New Sweden board member Anna Lundin and her husband Hans joined Kristi and Lars on a trip to Astoria so Lars could see the mouth of the Columbia river and also took him to the Clatsop County Historical Society, which is a very interesting place full of info about the Nordic people who had worked in and around Astoria. Lars wasn’t able to find anything specific about J. W., although one of the historians said she remembered reading stories of men being washed overboard and then washed back on board. She couldn’t say when or where it happened, though. In an interview on Swedish Television (SVT) in September 2020, Lars refers to his grandfather Lennart as the reason why he has dedicated his life to telling stories, and that the story about J. W. was the one that had fascinated him the most when he heard it as a child. Lars visited the small town in Sweden where his grandfather had grown up to decide if the story was actually true. It also made Lars think about what a memory is, and according to cognitive scientists researching on memory, people can “remember” things that have never happened.

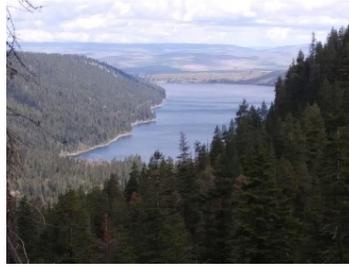
* The author of this article is not a close relative of J. W. Granström.



"The Goonies"



Oregon Film Museum



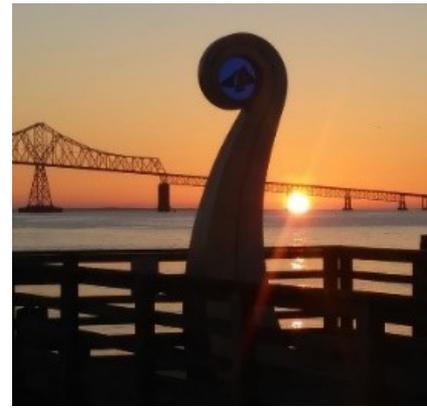
Wallowa Lake (left) and high desert (right) in OR.



Photos: Jimmy Granstrom

Another story covering an old ship on the Oregon Coast can be found in the Steven Spielberg movie "The Goonies", which was released in 1985. The film grossed \$124 million worldwide on a budget of \$19 million and has since become a cult film.^{3,4} In 2017, the film was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being "culturally, historically or aesthetically significant".⁵ The story brings together a bunch of kids, including the central characters Mikey and Brandon Walsh, facing foreclosure of their homes in Astoria's Goon Docks area (hence the name "The Goonies") to an expanding country club. Their efforts to save their families homes from foreclosure brings them on a treasure hunt to Ecola State Park outside of Cannon Beach (26 miles south of Astoria), where a 17th century pirate ship is anchored in a grotto.

"The Goonies" is not the only Hollywood movie filmed in Oregon. In fact, Oregon has been the location for a significant number of other famous movies, including "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest", "Animal House" and "Kindergarten Cop". Furthermore, some refer to Oregon as "Hollywood North" due to the unique landscapes of the state, offering film-makers to use Oregon as the desert, mountains, river and the sea. The "seven wonders of Oregon" include such diverse landscapes as coastal scenery, stunning waterfalls, high elevation deserts and the "Little Switzerland" of the Wallowa Mountains in the Northeastern corner of the state. Many of these sights can be covered during a seven-hour drive from Astoria to Wallowa Lake, one of the most beautiful locations in the Wallowa Mountains, and Oregon has been recognized as one of the most geographically diverse states in the country. In movies, Oregon has been depicted as everything from California and Georgia to a South Pacific Island. The magic of Oregon film-making is on display in the Oregon Film Museum housed in the Clatsop County Jail in downtown Astoria. The building was an actual working jail (from 1914 to 1976) and the scene of the opening jail break in "The Goonies".⁶ Fans of the movie have visited Astoria over the years to see everything from the Walsh family residence - to the great nuisance of current residents - and the Oregon Film Museum to the George Flavel House Museum, which was featured in the movie as the museum where Mikey Walsh's father works as a curator. The real-life house museum is on the National Register of Historic Places, where it was built in 1885 by Captain Georg Flavel, a Columbia River harbor pilot who became one of the first millionaires in the area. Other popular Oregon coast sights for "Goonies" fans are the aforementioned Ecola State Park and Haystack Rock on Cannon Beach. Without the stunning scenery of Astoria and the Oregon Coast, a lot of the magic of the movie-making of "The Goonies" would probably not have been possible.



The Ghost Adventures team at the Peter Iredale shipwreck Astoria bridge. Photo: J. Granstrom

The supernatural and sea-faring stories of Astoria have also attracted the attention of the Travel Channel, for example their cult show “Ghost Adventures” where paranormal investigators led by Zak Bagans visit haunted sites across America and the world. After visiting the Oregon theme park “Enchanted Forest” in 2018, the show returned to Oregon in 2019 to film a special four-part “Ghost Adventures” miniseries called “Graveyard of the Pacific”. In the series, the team explored multiple haunted locations in and around Astoria, including the Fort Stevens military base and the shipwreck of the Peter Iredale. The wreckage is still visible, making it a popular tourist attraction as one of the most accessible shipwrecks of the Graveyard of the Pacific.⁷

Astoria offers something for everyone, from paranormal investigators searching for disembodied echoes of despair to history buffs who want to find out more about the oldest settlement west of the Rocky Mountains. In addition, Astoria is proud to acknowledge its Nordic heritage, with work underway to bring a Nordic Heritage Park to reality in 2021.⁹ From history and heritage to fiction and fantasy, Astoria continues to engage visitors with a wide range of interests.

References:

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