

Louis J. Simpson (1877-1949)

By Dick & Judy Wagner

Louis Jerome Simpson was a civic-minded Oregonian who served the south coast, the state, and the nation in his active years as builder and advocate. He worked vigorously to bring railroad service to the Coos Bay area, accomplished in 1916, and traveled the West Coast during World War I to urge support for a military highway (eventually U.S. 101). Simpson also traveled widely in Oregon on behalf of the Red Cross and Liberty Bond campaigns. Whether lobbying for funds in Washington, D.C., for the Port of Coos Bay, promoting migration to the region, or working at his dairy farm to improve Oregon herds, Simpson succeeded in rallying people to his causes.

Simpson was the son of wealthy shipping and timber magnate Asa Meade Simpson. Born in Oakland, California, in 1877, he attended Belmont School and graduated from Mount Tamalpais Military Academy in 1895. Illness cut short his university studies at Berkeley.

Posted in 1898 to learn the business at the family's North Western Lumber Company in Hoquiam, Washington, Simpson rebelled by drinking, gambling, and incurring debts. Yet, his artistic nature flourished, and he wrote short stories, acted in local theatre, sang, and orated. He also fell in love with Cassandra Stearns, who divorced her husband in 1899 to marry him. The forbearing elder Simpson, Asa, gave the young couple a new start at his company town of North Bend, north of Marshfield, today's City of Coos Bay.

Simpson, known as L.J., worked hard and rose to a managerial position. Unlike his father, he had expansionist ideas for the area. He purchased the adjacent Yarrow town site, combined it with his father's holdings, and in 1903 created the City of North Bend. To spur growth, he gave away waterfront sites for manufacturing plants and other lots for a hospital and churches. Using his own and his family's money, he invested in new businesses. He also helped form a commercial club and recruited professionals, including the town's first doctor. Simpson served as the city's first mayor until 1915.

Simpson built a large baseball park in North Bend, where he played on the Simpson Company-sponsored team. He also subsidized a community concert band.

In 1906-1907, Simpson built a large seaside home for his wife Cassandra. Shoreacres (Cassandra preferred "Shore Acres"), on the ocean about fourteen miles from Coos Bay-North Bend, eventually included an indoor swimming pool, spacious gardens, a modern farm, and a dairy herd. The Simpsons moved to Shoreacres in 1915.

Simpson campaigned unsuccessfully for the Republican nomination for governor in 1918, losing to Governor James Withycombe, and then returned to oversee the farm. He regularly traveled to Salem, where he lobbied the legislature for good roads.

Cassandra Simpson died in April 1921, and the Shoreacres mansion burned in July. Simpson remarried in 1922, and he and Lela Gardner adopted two infant girls. The family lived in the gardener's cottage until 1928, when they moved into a new house built on the original Shoreacres site.

Simpson directed his promotional talents to the town of Empire, where he invested heavily in rebuilding the old Southern Oregon Company's sawmill. The crash of 1929 and the ensuing depression took first the sawmill and then property after property, including the mortgaged Shoreacres. In December 1939, Simpson suffered a stroke. Bankruptcy came in 1940.

The Shoreacres mortgage holder sold the estate to the State of Oregon for parkland in 1942, and the property was leased temporarily to the War Department. After the war, the house was determined unsuitable for restoration and was razed in late 1948.

When Simpson died of cancer at his Barview home in January 1949, the *Oregonian* wrote: "In the record of our region his place is secure among the names of the builders." His coastal properties became popular state parks: Sunset Beach, Shore Acres, and Cape Arago.

Sources

Wagner, Judith and Richard Wagner. *L.J.: The Uncommon Life of Louis Jerome Simpson*. North Bend, Oreg.: Bygones, 2003.

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