

6/7/06

The Charlie O. Porter Riverfront

I propose that we name the new post-EWEB downtown riverfront after Charlie Porter. After all it is the cutting, confrontive, abrasive, eroding edge of the river, the urban edge. Like Charlie it has grit. Not much healthy riparian vegetative hold-tight anymore, but we could fix that and give both Charlie and the river some long overdue.

This area, between the EWEB Headquarters building and the old steam plant, is our downtown riverfront, the promise and the prize of former mayor Ruth Bascom's visionary "return to the river." Here the Willamette grinds away at its sandstone riverbank the way Charlie unceasingly ground away at the willful evasion of our Bill of Rights.

Looking downstream, Alton Baker is the Right Guard of the river across the way, and I think Charlie would be more than pleased to guard the left. Rivers have no problem taking sides. Think Paris. But time runs past fast here, and this elemental place transcends the babble-babble of our Babylonian civic life. Words here are just old skipping rocks, worn-down from battles, returning to the silence that is sand.

This proposed memorial makes even more sense if this is the place where we resurrect and reconnect Eugene's historic Millrace to the river. There is a local legend that proclaims, "Eugene won't return to its river until its Millrace does" – and I would add, in a manner more fitting than its present pipe. I've told the story of Millrace Charlie, about the child that was supposedly conceived on the Millrace being really Charlie Porter, so many times that I now believe it to be true.

It was former Dean Fred Cuthbert of the School of Architecture and Allied Arts, (now an amphitheater in Alton Baker Park), who first brought the plight of the Eugene Millrace to my attention, how it had been buried in the big move of 1949 when the railroad and Franklin Blvd. were switched as a part of the rebuilding of the Ferry St. Bridge. And it was former UO President, Robert D. Clark, (now an honors college), who first came to me in 1975 with \$50,000 he had gotten from an alumna, who fondly remembered her student days on the Millrace and wanted to enhance it. I of course had no idea when I came to town in 1970 that I would be drawn into an already twenty-year old struggle for Millrace restoration or that our Quixotic ex-congressman had been and would continue to be its constant champion.

Charlie certainly added to our early proposals at the school to revive the Millrace and give it a place to go by joining it with Amazon Creek through an eleven-block

long Emerald Canal. And before very long we had forged the forces of town and gown into the Emerald Waterways Citizens Committee, Inc. with us as co-chairs. We would remain so for almost 30 years. Al Curry, who was one of the editorial page editors of the R-G at that time, pulled me aside at an editorial board presentation of the Emerald Canal idea and warned, "If you want to get anything done in this town, stay away from Charlie Porter." But I was immune to such advice, and besides Charlie was much too much fun.

At our EWCC, Inc. inauguration event, we toasted one another with Perrier water while the local cameras rolled, and then climbed into a canoe at the campus millpond to paddle off in search of that mythical Inland Passage we had named the Emerald Canal. Facing each other, we paddled out our tongue-in-cheek mockery of town and gown co-operation. Film at eleven.

And another time, we transported the first symbolic bucket of water from the Millrace in the back of a towed Mc Kenzie Riverboat through alleys and across town where we then ceremoniously dumped it into Amazon Creek near Hiron's on 17th. The idiosyncrasy police pulled us over, of course, wondering what we were doing riding in a boat with this blue bucket held high in our hands, but Charlie had thought ahead and taken out the required parade permit.

"The one thing I've learned about Charlie," John Altucker announced in a Rotary Club introduction to the Emerald Canal slideshow presentation that he was sponsoring for his long-time adversary, "is: don't cross him."

Don Bishoff and I took Charlie out for lunch last October, two months before he died. We had to keep reminding him who we were. He enjoyed his blueberry pancakes, and lit up when recognized by passers by. "I voted for you twice, Congressman" one man said. And another, "I always thought you were right about Cuba, the Millrace and that canal." I pointed out to Charlie that we were eating right next to the project we had spent so many years pursuing, but it was clear that he was lost in space and time.

They say, "Great cities remember themselves," and remember to memorialize their dead heroes I would like to add. Unless they wait too long, until we're all undone, unable to recall the intersection of our lives, the Millrace and Charlie Porter.