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Guest column: Taking another look at the last frontier

By Suzie ZQ Taylor

For The Daily Astorian

I remember the early days of working for one of the super powers in the high-tech computer world. Frantic pace, vast rows of cubicles, 40,000 coworkers, free donuts on Wednesdays—the excitement of it all. Why would anyone ever want to leave wonderland? Now, I work from home in Astoria as a freelance writer for those same companies, in my slippers sometimes, with only the interloping of cute nibbling deer or the soaring of resident Bald Eagles just beyond my desk to distract me. I don't even miss the donuts.

Welcome to Astoria, a.k.a. the last frontier.

Why do I call this coastal nodule of our country the last frontier? Not to diminish the ruggedness or remoteness that earned Alaska that nickname, but Astoria is an unexpected bastion of life that resides between rugged and peaceful, contemporary and unintentionally charming and with politics occasionally cantankerous but passionate. It is remote in more modern, positive ways: too far for people to live here and commute to work in urban-mania; too inaccessible for the lookie-lous to come in search of the next best thing; and too isolated for shopaholics on a binge. This frontier is still the place where we can stop and smell the roses—even tend to them. I planted my own last spring. Damn those cute nibbling deer.

Astoria is the place my husband and I came a few years ago, in search of that ethereal feeling of childhood, a place where things were good, life went by slowly, and we were always warm. Well, temperatures on the last frontier aren't always warm—I heard some folks referring to last month as “Juneuary.” Weather is a word that, in Astoria, can evoke more conversations and less enthusiasm than any other. But I meant the warmth that comes in the greetings people exchange as they stroll along the river front. The warmth seen on children's faces as they eat kettle corn or chase dogs at Sunday market.

I suppose you're wondering where I originated, why I might have this wide-eyed sentiment. Hailing from a small Florida town that reinvented itself into a chic, cosmopolitan and completely unrecognizable “it” city, I mourn the barefoot exploration of neighborhood woods, and balancing pennies (that I plucked from public fountains) on railroad tracks in anticipation of rumbling trains from afar. I lived there for three decades, it is still my hometown, and it is gone. My career took me to several metropolitan locales,

including Denver, Southern California, and San Francisco. Funny how the more we travel, the more we look for what is familiar, for what is like home.

Ten years ago, I found the “small town in the big city” atmosphere in San Mateo, located just south of San Francisco International Airport, with penny parking meters, no big-box, and only one Starbucks. Progress follows popularity, I guess, because San Mateo has become a bustling international mecca of consumption with literally dozens of foreign languages audible in any public place and about six too many coffeehouse chain stores.

When we first signed our lives away on a fixer-upper here, I would piece together days off to come weed our neglected yard or patch and paint walls. Then, I would return to my mainstay with stories of the eagles or of raccoons stopping by to observe us newcomers. Coworkers assumed this was a novelty for us. But after 18 months of owning the home, my husband and I were able to become full-time Astoria residents. Our southerly friends continue to inquire about how I am “surviving life” in such an out-of-the-way, cold-weather place. My replies are rarely embellished but apparently entertaining. Some people simply cannot imagine living in a place where you actually know—and like—your neighbors, where the coffee culture is sophisticated but independently operated, and where animals roam outside the zoo. So I began signing my emails “from the last frontier” to placate them.

While we will never be natural born Astorians (NBAs), each of us who transplant to another nook in the world are NB somethings from somewhere. And it’s good to know that we can collectively long for all things ethereal, on the last frontier or elsewhere.

*Another guest columnist joins *The Daily Astorian* this month. Suzie "ZQ" Taylor is a relative newcomer to the area who works as a freelance business and technology writer.*