In the Path of Destruction
Eyewitness Chronicles of Mount St. Helens
Richard Waitt

A napping volcano blinked awake in March 1980. Two months later, when that mountain roared, Jim Scymanky was about twelve miles northwest, logging a north slope above Hoffstadt Creek. “Rocks zinged through the woods, bouncing off trees, then the tops of trees snapped off… Suddenly I could see nothing…it got hot right away, then scorching hot and impossible to breathe. The air had no oxygen, like being trapped underwater…I was being cremated, the pain unbearable.”

Mike Hubbard was further away—sixteen miles northwest, near Green River. “It was hard to breathe, my mouth hot and full of dust. I was on my knees, my back to the hot wind. It blew me along, lifting my rear so I was up on my hands…It was hot but I didn’t feel burned—until I felt my ears curl.”

Ken Sugarman’s encounter came on a highway near Yakima. “My wife and I drove toward Tieton fifteen miles northwest. Only five minutes since the kids mentioned the cloud, ash rained heavily, the sky so dark I had headlights on.”

Steve Malone, at the University of Washington Seismology Laboratory, was inconsolable. “We’d failed. For two months we’d counted and located thousands of earthquakes, looked for changes to anticipate an eruption. Then it just happened. It killed many people. It killed David Johnston. We could hardly work.”

Author Richard Waitt was part of a U.S. Geological Survey team doing volcano research in the Cascades, and one of the first to arrive following the mountain’s early rumblings. His journey collecting eyewitness accounts began with a conversation in a bar the third week after Mount St. Helens erupted. The couple he met barely outraced a searing ash cloud, and Waitt realized their experiences could inform geologic studies. He eventually conducted hundreds of interviews—sometimes two and three decades later—often making multiple visits to gather additional details, correct errors, and resolve discrepancies.

A meticulous scientist with intimate knowledge of Mount St. Helens, Waitt delivers a thorough, precise chronicle of events. He tapped numerous primary sources—interviews, legal depositions, personal diaries, geologists’ field notes, radio logs, and police records. Newspaper stories and even sun shadows on photographs revealed additional intricacies. In the Path of Destruction details the eruption story through unforgettable, riveting narratives—the heart of a masterful chronology that also offers engrossing science, history, and journalism.
Coal Wars
Unions, Strikes, and Violence in Depression-Era Central Washington
David Bullock

Sleepy little Roslyn has always been a coal town, ever since a railway company opened the first mine in 1886. Strikes are a way of life for central Washington miners and their families, but Tuesday, April 3, 1934, is different. This time, the labor shutdown divides families and pits neighbor against neighbor. Fearful children beg their fathers not to cross picket lines. “I’d rather have you yellow than dead,” one sobs. Supporters of the Western Miners Union of America—ordinary wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters—pelt cars with rocks, rotten eggs, pine cones, and cow pies. They curse and shriek insults. As the morning wears on, their taunts and assaults escalate. They fight for their husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons—tough men performing dangerous jobs.

The striking laborers typically spend ten or more hours at the workplace. Dressing, preparing lights and equipment, and traveling into the mine shaft are all done on their own time. Some trips take nearly an hour each way. The miners and their families want safer working conditions, fair wages, and a six-hour workday. They had expected their longtime national union, the United Mine Workers of America, to stand strong during contract negotiations. Instead, UMWA leaders chose dismissive actions, setting the stage for the rise of a new local organization, the Western Miners Union of America.

With a country in the midst of a national economic depression, the fledgling group faces opposition from a mighty labor union, a powerful railroad empire, and even their own government. Communist activists and other radical labor groups offer support. But when conflicting alliances turn residents of Roslyn, Cle Elem, and Ronald against each other, a heated and violent battle follows, leaving deep, lasting scars.

Author David Bullock witnessed the bitter sentiments first hand. His grandfather, a Roslyn miner, lived through the events depicted in Coal Wars. Fully documented, his refreshingly balanced account is brought to life through interviews with local residents, newspapers, court documents, and corporate archives. Capturing the details surrounding a dual union movement in the 1930s American West, the narrative also describes the region’s melting pot of working families and the socio-political impacts of New Deal policies on their lives.

Of Related Interest:
Native Trees of Western Washington
A Photographic Guide
Kevin W. Zobrist

Soft layers of moss and pine needles carpet the ground as dappled sunlight or misty rain filters through the forest canopy's branches. Western Washington woodlands can be enchanting. Fortunately these magical places are abundant, covering half the state's soil. Affording beauty and recreation as well as economic value, they endure as one of the area's most important natural assets.

In Native Trees of Western Washington, Washington State University's Kevin W. Zobrist examines regional indigenous trees from a forestry specialist's unique perspective. He explains basic tree physiology and a key part of their ecology—forest stand dynamics. He groups distinctive varieties into sections, describing common lowland conifers and broadleaved trees, high-elevation species found in the Olympic Mountains and western side of the Cascades, and finally, those with a very limited natural range and small, isolated populations. Numerous full-color photographs illustrate key traits.

In addition, Zobrist discusses notable features, offering information about where to find particular species. He includes brief lists of some common human uses, citing Native American medicines, food, and materials, as well as commercial utilization from the time of European settlement to the present day. The result is a delightful and enlightening exploration of western Washington timberlands.

Don Stuart believes these two dangerous trends—the loss of farms and damage to ecosystems—are connected, and that a major cause is the political deadlock between farmers and environmental activists. Instead of achieving a reasonable balance, this stalemate stalls funding for incentive programs and prevents progress toward essential regulations.

Stuart offers a radical proposal: collaboration would advance the economic needs of one group while furthering the conservation efforts of the other. With a goal of promoting understanding, he presents opposing perspectives on topics such as incentives, regulations, government spending, environmental markets, growth management, climate change, public lands grazing, and the Federal Farm Bill. He points out costs of continued political impasse. Finally, drawing from a lifetime spent settling conflicts, he identifies characteristics of successful community programs to suggest a model for a prosperous, healthy future.

Author Don Stuart has been the executive director of a commercial fisheries trade association and the Washington Association of Conservation Districts. Currently, he engages in private consulting work on agriculture and environmental issues.
Red Light to Starboard
Recalling the Exxon Valdez Disaster
Angela Day

Minutes before supertanker Exxon Valdez ran aground on Bligh Reef, before rocks ripped a huge hole in her hull and a geyser of crude oil darkened the pristine waters of Prince William Sound, the ship’s lookout burst through the chart room door. “That light, sir, it’s still on the starboard side. It should be to port, sir.” Her frantic words were merely the last in a litany of futile warnings.

At the same moment, Valdez native Bobby Day was waiting for herring season to open. His intimate portrayal lends a local perspective and conveys the damage suffered by individuals and the fishing industry.

Red Light to Starboard documents a tragic event that stunned the world, recounts regional and national history, and explains how oil titans came to be entrusted with a spectacular, fragile ecosystem. It discusses the disaster’s environmental consequences as well as ineffective governmental and public policy decisions. The book tracks responses to these failures that, through opportunities for citizen input and oversight, offer hope for the future.

John Mullan
The Tumultuous Life of a Western Road Builder
Keith C. Petersen

John Mullan’s celebrated road, a 625-mile link that connected the Missouri and Columbia Rivers and eventually became a significant component of Interstate 90, established the West Point graduate as an accomplished engineer. After completing the West’s first highway, he lived for nearly another half century, a period of dynamic change. Now Idaho State Historian Keith Petersen takes a fresh look at the dashing young soldier/explorer—probing his complex personality and continuing a story that includes business partnerships and personal relationships with some of the West’s most intriguing characters.

Rethinking Rural
Global Community and Economic Development in the Small Town West
Don E. Albrecht

The vastness and isolation of the American West forged a dependence on scarce natural resources—especially water, forests, fish, and minerals. Today, the internet is shaping another revolution, and it promises both obstacles and opportunity. Rethinking Rural summarizes characteristics of isolation, mass society, and global society eras, provides an overview of western environmental history, explores the significant challenges identified during the forum discussions, and offers guidance to community leaders, policy makers, and scholars seeking ways to address poverty, increasing inequality, changing demographics, resource management, and conservation issues.
The Blue Note
Seattle’s Black Musicians’ Union: A Pictorial History
David Keller

Documenting a portion of American cultural history, The Blue Note focuses on Seattle’s black American Federation of Musician’s Local 493. It is an upbeat story of race, jazz, gender, and union culture, set in the Pacific Northwest and the wider jazz world. Detailed research and end notes underpin a user-friendly pictorial format, spanning the years from the 1880s to the mid-1950s. Featuring more than 100 photographs and other illustrations—many previously unpublished—The Blue Note uses union documents, first person oral histories, and extensive primary and secondary sources.

David Keller is an archivist and historian with a strong interest in labor and jazz history. He has written for Down Beat, Jazz Times, Columbia, and BlackPast.org.

“The Blue Note takes me home to the heady days of Seattle’s jazz scene. It’s a fine blend of rare photographs, first person accounts and solid scholarship. It also shines light on the path-breaking union musicians who played Seattle and ultimately brought about the merging of the black and white unions.”
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