“READ YOU MUTT!”

The Life and Times of Tom Burns,
the Most Arrested Man in Portland

by Peter Sleeth

TOM BURNS BURST onto the Portland scene in 1905, out of curiosity, and stayed, he said, for the weather. A loner and iconoclast, Burns found his way into virtually every major organized social movement in his time. In his eighty-one years, from England to Oregon, Burns lived the life of a free-wheeling radical, a colorful street-corner exhorter whose concern for the working stiff animated his life. His story is full of contradictions. Burns noted having been a friend to famous communist John Reed prior to the Russian Revolution, but he despised the Communist Party. Although he described himself as a Socialist, and was what we could call a secular humanist today, Burns was also briefly involved in a publishing venture with the former Grand Dragon of the Oregon Ku Klux Klan. Burns considered himself a man with a simple, lifelong mission: “My whole idea is that everybody should have enough before anybody has too much.” From his birth in the Dickensian tenements of Liverpool to his death in Southeast Portland, Burns lived a life devoted to improving the lives of the working class.

Historians frequently mention Burns’s involvement in Portland’s labor movement, but his life has never been explored in detail. From his friendships with lawyer and author C.E.S. Wood to his alliance with feminist and anarchist Dr. Marie Equi, his name runs through the currents of the city’s labor history. Newspapers of the day — as well as Burns himself — called him The Most Arrested Man in Portland, the Mayor of Burnside, and Burns of Burnside. His watch shop on the 200 block of W. Burnside was a focal point for radical meetings that included luminaries of Portland’s literary, political, and labor landscape.

I first heard of Burns at the dinner table, growing up in Multnomah County, east of the city. He had been a friend to my grandfather and my father, and in my family, he was legend: A liberal and watchmaker who befriended Dana Sleeth, a Progressive Era journalist, and then my father Marshall Sleeth, whose journey to manhood included many nights amidst the intellectual anarchy of Burns’s basement hideout beneath a general store at SW Fourth and Ankeny.

The diminutive Burns stands to the left.
Tom Burns supported his family with his Portland watch repair business until his death at age eighty-one, although his social activism almost always took precedence over his time pieces. Burns was part of what historian Robert Johnston called “The Radical Middle Class” that helped shape Portland’s vibrant political life. His role as a business owner may have made his politics more tolerable to Portland’s elites.

By the 1960s, my father had become a Conservative Richard Nixon Republican, yet he still beamed with admiration whenever he heard the name Tom Burns.

Here is what the record tells us of the man.

When Burns arrived in Portland at age twenty-eight, he was a watchmaker by trade and a Socialist by calling. His fiery rhetoric and aggressive street speaking quickly transformed him from an unknown newcomer to a police target. His crusades — and there were hundreds — ranged from aiding striking workers to advocating for public control of utilities. He became a small-business owner with his watch shop as well as a family man, forcefully weaving himself into the fabric of the city. By the end of his life, he was a Portland institution, having dished out his earnest, if sometimes peculiar, form of arguments in hundreds of street speeches, pamphlets, and newspapers he self-published, with an acidic, sometimes crude, invective that could shock and dismay even his friends: Local Communists were “penus-pulling political polecats,” for example, and Christian preachers were “peddling Jesus junk and Bible bunk.” Even Portland itself was not safe from his pen’s vitriol. In a 1913 screed — an attempt to support his grandfather, who was in the midst of an editorial crusade and legal battle — Burns wrote that his adopted city “is among the Rottenest of the Rotten of American cities. . . . Where, houses of Prostitution, (in Violation of all Law,) run wide open, night and day, that’s Portland; Ladd and Tilton town.” He continued on in the five-page, sometimes-rhyming document to insult everyone by name from local business leaders to the governor before declaring that state legislators “are Saloon Bun Lickspittles and Big Mitt artists, [who] are Raping the Treasury of the State for their Boss, the Southern Pacific [Railroad].”

“Read, You Mutt!” was the only permanent saying affixed to his watch-shop window, where on any given day, Portlanders could learn of his most recent crusades in an ever-changing mix of articles, self-drawn cartoons, and political flyers. He aimed a second admonition at the men who filled the bars and brothels surrounding his shop time shop on Portland’s skid road — “Empty Your Pocketbook into Your Brain” — and Burns backed up the encouragement to read with a lending library of more than 6,000 books, certainly one of the largest personal book collections in the city at the time. All were available for free to working men and women. He believed the only way to escape wage slavery was through education. His compact shop was a warren stuffed with clocks, watch-making tools, and propaganda. Yet it was his collogar, more than 2,000 square feet of basement, that held the shop’s treasure. There, hobos, radicals, and preachers packed in shoulder-to-shoulder to argue, talk, and hide in a safe house for the mad, the brilliant, and the inflamed.

Burns’s Journey as a Portland radical and never-give-an-inch orator started nearly 5,000 miles east of the city, in England. After Nathaniel Hawthorne became U.S. Consul in Liverpool, England, in 1853, he found himself in the slums of the otherwise prosperous port:

Almost every day, I take walks about Liverpool; preferring the darker and dingier streets, inhabited by the poorer classes. The scenes there are very picturesque in their way; at every two or three steps, a gin-shop; also . . . [filthy in clothes and person, ragged, pale, often afflicted with humors; women, nursing their babies at dirty bosoms; men haggard, drunken, care-worn, hopeless, but with a kind of patience, as if all this were the rule of their life, . . . I never walk through these streets without feeling as if I should catch some disease.

By the time Thomas Joseph Burns was born to an Irish father and Welsh mother in those very slums on July 28, 1876, things had hardly improved. The immigrants had poured into the city throughout the nineteenth century, seeking the dock jobs and factory work created by the Industrial Revolution. They lived in squalid conditions. The
19th century:

The 1881 British census shows Thomas and Ellen Burns living with four children, including their four-year-old son Thomas. The father listed himself as employed at the “Alkali Works,” or chemical plants, as did all of his neighbors. The plants were poisonous, choking places, filled with employees who had little voice in the conditions at work or home. “We lived in the tenement district,” Burns would later tell a newspaper reporter. “I saw plenty of misery and vice as a boy. When I was 7 or 8 years old I was earning my keep as a newsboy. In those days many of the workingman’s children died before they were a year old because of unsanitary surroundings. It was more from ignorance and indifference than willfulness on the part of the authorities yet the children died like flies.”

Nineteenth-century Liverpool proved a fertile breeding ground for Burns’s life-to-be as a Portland-based radical. By his own account, at the age of eight, he was handing out political literature on the streets, “one step ahead of the cops and out of reach of the deacons,” and he later claimed: “Revolts were born in my blood and bred in my bones.” His father fought for improved sanitation in the slums, then ended up in jail for his public speaking — a behavior pattern his namesake son would later perfect in Portland. “My father claimed,” Burns said, “there was no need for working-men to be crowded like hogs in foul, ill-smelling, disease-breeding tenements. In the district where we lived there were from 10 to 12 people living in a small room, sleeping on straw on the floor.” By the 1891 English census, Tom Burns was fourteen years old and listed as an “assistant,” or apprentice, most likely with Russell & Co. Ltd., a large watch-making firm in the city. He had wanted to become a school teacher, but his father had different ideas. He was one of nine seven children in his Irish Catholic family, his father listing himself as a “general laborer.”

In May 1893, at age seventeen, Burns stowed away on the ship Lucania and came to New York, then journeyed to London three months later. For the next four years, he worked as a watch maker and spent his free time preaching Socialism. By 1898, he saw “the hopelessness of making any impression on the ignorance and indifference of London’s slum dwellers” and sailed for Australia. After another four years of street speaking and watch work, he spent time in Indonesia, China, and the Philippines before sailing for America in 1904. Working on the United States transport Thomas, shoveling coal for the boilers, Burns arrived at San Francisco in July 1904.

Burns, true to his peripatetic nature, stayed on the move. A slight, gray-eyed Englishman with a walrus moustache, he arrived in Portland in April 1905 and quickly melded with the lower end of W. Burnside Street, the toughest part of a wide-open town, a place social revolutionaries mixed precariously in a racial and philosophical melting pot with Chinese immigrants, prostitutes, loggers, and sailors.

PORTLAND WAS a low-slung city. A skyscraper would be just twelve stories, dwarfed by the 1,100-foot Tualatin Mountains rising quickly to the west. “Traffic was congested and noisy,” wrote Laurence Pratt, in his memoir, “I Remember Portland, 1899–1915”:

Iron-shod horses clattered along at a good speed with light wagons and buggies. . . . Two, four, or six Percheron horses, big as elephants, clanged eight to twenty-four ringing shoes on the cobblestones, aided and abetted by the clash of iron- or steel-rimmed wheels. . . . Along Third and Fifth Avenues, up Washington and Morrison Streets almost bumper to bumper the [street] cars ran with the grind and roar of wheels and the constant clang, clang of warning gongs pounded by the motorman’s foot as he approached each cross street.

To see the Willamette River was near impossible from street level, as warehouses and wharves packed the east side of Front Street. Downtown centered on Sixth Avenue and Morrison Street. North of W. Burnside was Slab Town, or the North End, a warren of bars, brothels, and opium dens, many of the properties discreetly owned by Portland’s business elite. If it was no nineteenth-century Liverpool, the North End had this much in common with Burns’s birthplace: Here was where the fringe of society gathered — the hungry, the alienated, and the unemployed. Burns gravitated to the Burnside dividing line. There, he set up shop as a small-business owner and local radical — “Burns of Burnside,” as the Oregonian would later describe him, had arrived.

The city sang with more vibrance than ever in the summer of 1905, when the Lewis & Clark Exhibition was in progress, drawing through its gates more than 2.5 million people, including 135,000 from east of the Mississippi River. The Easterners alone nearly matched the city’s 149,200 full-time residents. The exhibition was a wonder, built on the extensive wetlands of Guilds Lake, surrounded by lush forests, bordered by the Willamette River and Portland, a place rich in symbols of the promise of a city in the wilds. The affair put Portland in the national spotlight, and most agreed it was a wonderful success. Burns refused to even take a peek. The organizers had excluded union labor, and he was not about to visit a scab shop.

People poured into the city during the first decade of the twentieth century, many of them immigrants like Burns, searching for the next best place in the booming American West. Between 1891 and 1900, Portland was the third fastest growing city in the nation, and from 1903 to 1907, the population jumped by 80 percent. Politically, it was evolving just as rapidly. Growing populist and progressive movements pushed for greater control. In 1902, the State Legislature instituted the initiative and referendum system, but a Republican party machine continued its overwhelming control of business and politics in the state and city of Portland. There was no right for women to vote, a guaranteed eight-hour workday was nonexistent, and the labor union movement was nascent. For the working classes, long hours, short pay, and poor working conditions predominated. A de facto class system existed, one Burns would have surely recognized.

Still, during the spring of 1905, Portland was beginning to shift in astounding, if tentative, ways. A liberal
and launched vigorous anti-corruption campaigns. Revolt on a number of fronts rumbled in the city. The Thirty-Ninth Annual National American Woman Suffrage Association Convention, featuring Susan B. Anthony, was held in Portland in 1905. Burns spoke at the convention, although the text of his speech has not survived. Also during the summer of 1905, Burns sat in as chairman of a committee that organized the local branch of the Wobblies (Industrial Workers of the World or IWW), whose fierce fight for workers’ rights would paralyze West Coast industries several times during the following fifteen years.

The Socialist movement was gaining steam as the working class sought political allies, and by June, Burns was named Secretary of the Oregon Socialist Party and began leading nightly street meetings. These must have been cacophonous events, with Burns on a soapbox on one corner, while a mix of bands and religious groups shouted from opposing corners. On June 16, he wrote a letter to Jack London, perhaps the most famous writer of the day and a fellow Socialist. Burns invited London to come to Portland during the crowded days of the exposition to speak “in the interest of our common cause...Socialism is just booming here right now.” London deferred, but he authorized the Oregon socialists to sell his picture along with an essay entitled “Scab.” Burns, in full political bloom, addressed London as “Comrade” and signed off in two letters, “Yrs for the revolution.”

In 1905, when neither radio nor television was available, street corner exhorters were the internet bloggers of the day. Newspapers were owned by powerful, typically conservative, business interests. The Oregonian, principle among them, was run by its long-time editor and power broker Harvey Scott. Street activists, whether their messages were religious, political, or philosophical, drew large crowds hungry for entertainment and alternative sources of information. Burns targeted downtown proper for his soap-box advocacy, hoping to reach a cross section of the people with his message of saving the working man and woman. By crossing Burnside into the heart of Portland, Burns immediately drew the attention of police, although in person, he hardly seemed a threat. Given to wearing slacks and suits, rather than working mens’ clothing, he was slender, with a thick matt of dark brown hair and a soft touch of Liverpool remaining in his voice. Yet he was seemingly fearless in charging police lines or confronting intellectual or pedagogic bullies.

Following his first arrest, for “refusing to move on” while preaching Socialism during a street meeting at the corner of SW Fourth Avenue and Washington Street on July 8, 1905, Burns appeared before Judge George Cameron on July 11, represented by the city’s iconic attorney, soldier, and writer, C.E.S. Wood. While official courtroom transcripts of the trial have long since disappeared (if there ever were any), in 1914, Burns’s own newspaper FAX printed this account of the trial:

He was pinned on orders of Police Chief [Carl] Gritzmacher. the charge a fake one, blocking the sidewalk.

Col. C.E.S. Wood, attorney for Burns, proved the charge absolutely false by producing five members of the Socialist party who kept the sidewalk open all during the meeting. Col. Wood also proved that the other three corners of 4th and Washington were occupied by: 1. Salvation Army; 2. a fake Petrified Mummy Show; 3. Tramp Evangelists, who had the sidewalks completely blocked.

The day before Burns’s trial, he wrote a letter to the Lane, demanding to know Lane’s position on free speech and informing the mayor that, as Secretary of the Oregon Socialist Party, he and his attorney were ready to fight all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

If the freedom of speech in Portland, (not to talk of the screeching of wind instruments & the banging of drums & other vehicles of torture) is granted to the Salvation Army and others; why not the 3rd and soon to be the 1st political party, have the privilege [sic] of speech? Awaiting your reply.

Burns, not yet a permanent resident of Portland, was already creating the reputation that would follow him through life. By his own account, Burns established his watch shop when he arrived in Portland in 1905, yet he hardly sat still. In 1906, he travelled to Boise, Idaho, to aid in the defense of IWW leader Bill Haywood and two other union leaders who had been charged with the murder of Idaho’s governor. From at least 1907 through 1908, he maintained a watch and jewelry business in San Francisco, where he married Rita Lapp after taking out a marriage license in February 1907 and
Burns favored wearing suits over workingman's clothing in his street-speaking days during Portland's Progressive Era. From 1903 on, he would show up on downtown street corners, stepping up on a soap box due to his height of only five feet, five inches. When city officials quit arresting him for his street speaking, he quit his public orations, because, he said, why do it if it is not against the law?

witnessed the birth of his only child, Elizabeth “Bessie” Burns, on December 18, 1907.19

San Francisco city directories in both 1907 and 1908 list Burns, and Portland city directories do not show a likely address for him until 1909, when a T.J. Burns had taken a room at 112 Fourth Street, in the North End.20 The 1910 U.S. Federal Census and city directory did not find him at all, but the 1910 U.S. Census shows Burns's wife and daughter staying with her parents in Minnesota. In the 1911 Portland City Directory, a T.J. Burns is living across the river on Union Avenue in the Albina neighborhood.

Radical politics were boiling in the state by 1912. In that year's election, Eugene V. Debs, the Socialist Party candidate for President, would receive more than 900,000 votes nationwide, with a total of 13,343 from Oregon.21 Theodore Roosevelt was estranged from the Republican Party and running as a Progressive Party candidate for President, drawing huge crowds wherever he went. Almost certainly, Burns believed the attention Roosevelt drew was detracting from Debs's candidacy.

Roosevelt's presidential campaign was in full swing when he came to Portland on September 11, and the city was waiting for him with multiple gatherings on both sides of the river. Burns planned to distribute a pamphlet (perhaps written with others) that accused the former president of lying, cheating, and betraying the nation. It was written with the type of invective for which Burns would become well known for in the decades to come. His chaotic charges probably made little dent in most people's minds, as they were so densely packed and obscure it made the flyer almost impossible to follow. A sample reads like this:

Roosevelt's Square Deal — Protected by the tremendous power of the presidency and assisted by the venal, guttersnipe, lickspittle, mental prostitutes of the subsidized press a-la-Oregonian; you attacked among others such noble characters as Thomas Paine, [former progressive] Governor [John Peter] Altgeld and Eugene V. Debs. Like the Politically Drunken Myopic Epileptical Raving Maniac that you are and although Mentally, Morally, Physically, and Intellectually you are not fit to clean any of their Toilets.22

Arrested that day for distributing the flyer, Burns had earlier mailed a copy to his wife in Minnesota:

My Darling Rita,

In a few minutes I am starting out in charge of 20 or 30 comrades and we are going to distribute 5,000 copies of this leaflet at different places where Roosevelt is going to talk during the Day. I send you Printer's proof and typewriter copy of manuscript from which this leaflet was printed — some day they might bring Bessee or you some money. When you read in papers of insults offered to Roosevelt in this city you can smile and say — well — I have originals of what caused the trouble.23

The silence in the next day's newspapers must have flattened Burns.

Media attention did come the following year, when he pressed to the aid of women cannery workers who went out on strike on June 27, 1913, at East Belmont Avenue and Eighth Street, on the working-class side of the city. Canneries were a primary source of employment for women workers in the Pacific Northwest, and by the early twentieth century, Progressive reformers had targeted work conditions there. While they succeeded in eliminating the most gruesome features — child labor and long hours — the reforms tended to keep wages low, bringing continued labor strife.24

From the outset of the strike, workers drew support from the Wobblies, Socialists, and other leftists in Portland's burgeoning radical community. Dr. Marie Equi, a 1903 graduate of the University of Oregon Medical School and a blossoming labor activist, joined Burns and dozens more on the picket line. The strike accelerated into a free speech fight by July, when Portland Mayor H.R. Albee banned street speaking — Burns's calling card. Over the next month, Burns would be arrested, beaten by the police, and sentenced to forty days on the rock pile.25 The June 1913 strike put the spotlight on the labor radicals who flocked to the women's defense, and Burns found himself in one or another of the city's newspapers almost daily.

In the first day's coverage, on June 29, 1913, the working-class paper Portland News noted that "socialist speaker" Burns — speaking downtown on his favorite Washington Street perch — had raised $12.75 for the strikers. Two days later, the News reported Burns had "roundly roasted" Multnomah County Sheriff Thomas Word when Word refused to arrest a gun-toting cannery official on the
picket line. “The girls were working in the cannery for 4 cents an hour — 40 cents a 10-hour day. I went on the picket line and was getting arrested all the time,” he told Oregon Journal columnist Dick Fagan in 1953. “Old Col. C.E.S. Wood would bail me out. C.H. Chapman, once president of the University of Oregon, helped out too.”

Gov. Oswald West showed up on the picket line on July 11, using a tar barrel as a stage and trading verbal slams with Wobbly leaders and Burns, until Burns told the governor the strikers would shut down the cannery. “You have the right of peaceable gathering. You have the right of free speech. But when you try to close any plant of anybody’s there’ll be hell to pay,” the governor yelled back at Burns, “and I won’t quit until it is settled.” At ten o’clock the next morning, during a meeting called by the governor at City Hall, the clash between Burns and West intensified. The Oregon Journal reported the confrontation and West intensified. The City Hall, the clash between Burns and West intensified. The Oregon Journal reported the confrontation and West intensified. The Oregon Journal reported the confrontation and West intensified.

The atmosphere grew more intense in the city after Mayor Albee banned street speaking. Burns mounted his soapbox at SW Sixth and Washington on July 15, in violation of the mayor’s order, and began lambasting the governor, the mayor, and the police chief. Word had him arrested, along with others who took his place. “I was beaten in the face and kicked,” Burns said. “I was slugged in the kidneys a dozen times while being taken to jail.” That night, crammed in the county jail downtown, Burns and his fellow prisoners sang Wobbly protest songs, breaking jail discipline and his fellow prisoners sang Wobbly protest songs, breaking jail discipline in a standard IWW protest technique. The city attorney formally charged Burns with violating “An Ordinance concerning offences and disorderly conduct,” and the court paper stated that Burns:

did willfully and unawfully use and direct to and towards certain public officials and citizens [sic] profane, obscene and abusive language as follows, to wit: “scummy rats”; “cawdily skunks” [sic] “cowardly, white livered curs” and other language of like nature, and did willfully and unlawfully conduct himself in a violent riotous and disorderly manner as follows: In continuing to make a public speech on one of the streets of the city after being refused permission to do so by the police, and after being ordered to discontinue such speech.

A jury of six found Burns guilty, sentencing him to forty days on the rock pile. He spent five days in jail, and his appeal led to a dismissal of the charges — in 1919. By contrast, in late July 1913, the city decided not to take to trial twenty-one other activists arrested during the free speech war.

Because of these and similar actions in coming years, Burns earned the local newspaper moniker “The Most Arrested Man in Portland” between 1905 and 1920, although it is impossible to tally the number of arrests, due to incomplete police and court records from the period. Burns said “scores,” while police and newspaper accounts only offered testimony to many arrests, (Burns changed his tune in 1946, when federal authorities questioned his immigration status; Burns told them he had been arrested only once since being in the country.) It was apparently the practice to arrest street-level provocateurs like Burns, hold them for a time, and then release them without a trial or any follow up. The idea was to defuse the situation without clogging the courts, as activists would frequently demand full trials rather than accept simple fines.

An example of Burns’s mindset in matters of police confrontation came out of a 1914 interview with the Oregon Journal. The laws against street speaking had been lifted by then, taking the meaning out of his protests. Said Burns: “Who wants to go on the street to talk if there is no prohibition against it.”

If Burns’s political — and jailhouse — life was vibrant, his business life was suffering. In March 1914, R.W. Durschmidt, a partner in his radical book shop and watch repair business, filed a lawsuit against Burns. Durschmidt alleged that the shop at what is now the corner of SW Fourth Avenue and Ankeny Street was being mishandled by Burns and that Durschmidt was being cheated out of money. The lawsuit demanded the business be liquidated and the proceeds refunded to Durschmidt. Burns denied the allegations, but the case dragged on for two years. A court-appointed receiver quickly adjudged that the contents of the store were “of little value, and not enough to justify anyone in giving any time to the same.” The case was dismissed without cost to either man in 1917.

Just before the lawsuit emerged, in February 1914, Oregon Journal writer Fred Lockley visited the Ankeny shop and described it like this:

Directly north of the Multnomah hotel is a moss covered house. In the old days it was a more or less pretentious residence. Now in the midst of the business district it looks strangely out of place. It has been converted into a store and on the awning you may read the sign “Read, you Mutt.” On the window is a sign, “Radical Literature, Read, Think, Act.” Within is a watchmaker’s bench on one side of the aisle while on the other is a stand covered with Socialist and other literature. The works of Owen, Marx and others are to be seen on the bookshelves. Sitting at the bench with the inwards of a watch scattered on the table before him is Tom Burns, watch repairer and would-be world repairer. Many a watch slows down and runs badly because it gets dust in its works. Tom Burns thinks modern society needs to be taken to pieces, cleaned, some of the worn-out parts replaced and others readjusted and put together again.
like the watches hanging on the rack before him. Tom Burns is a volcanic and vitriolic little Irishman.

Lockley continued, quoting his statement to Burns:

"I want an interview. I want you to tell me why you are such a trouble maker. I want you to tell me what is your object in life. What you really live for."

Burns then replied:

"What do I really live for? I’ll tell you what I live for. All that I live for, all that I fight for, all that I ever hope to attain is to make conditions better so that my baby and the babies of those of my class shall have a better chance to live cleaner truer better lives than I have lived."67

Over the following few years, as he operated a watch and jewelers shop at different locations in the city, Burns grew increasingly disillusioned with the Socialist Party, which he believed had been ruined by the Communists and enemies, although what exactly turned communists would remain his lifelong obsession.

Tom usually described himself as a Socialist. The label is not quite accurate. He was more the eclectic, widely read in matters of single tax, birth control, koreshanity, syndicalism, philosophical anarchism, and many other deplorable movements right down the line to the mirage of Technocracy. When I first knew him, in 1923, he was still devoting considerable energy to Freethought, which he dated from the influence of Bradlaugh the Englishman and Colonel Robert G. Ingersoll.68 After Burns's death, Stewart Holbrook, a nationally known journalist and historian, gave this portrait:

Tom Burns of Burnside occupied his most well-known time shop at 221 W. Burnside from shortly after World War I until his death in 1957. In this 1928 photograph of the corner of NW Third and Burnside — the only known photo of the time shop — it is located on the far right under the "Jeweler" sign. Below the shop was a 2,000 square-foot basement, where Burns welcomed radicals and writers, hobos and friends.
aged resident of Albina, he walked to the Multnomah Athletic Club on the west side of the city to train in competitive swimming. He recalled:

In very short order I found the Burnside bridge to be the most interesting by far. It led to all the colorful features of the famous Skidroad . . . and always the curious and sometimes wonderful displays in the windows of Tom Burns’ watch shop. I never failed to stop, or at least walk very slowly, taking it all in.

Mr. Burns was obviously a man with a severe pedagogic itch. His windows were full of oddities and curiosities almost guaranteed to stop the passerby and give him a chuckle. But along with the chuckle the passerby would absorb, or be reminded of, some fact, insight or principle essential to a civilized mind.

But along with the chuckle the passerby might be startled at times when a bare electric light bulb hung above the table, the thousands of books on homemade shelves just visible at the edge of the umbrella of light in the basement’s perpetual night. Visitors would be startled at times when a sleeping form would rise up out of the dark and silently stride past the oilcloth covered forum table and clamber up the stairs to the lavatory.

The basement was a refuge of sorts, a place where all opinions were welcome, as long as they could be defended in debate with Burns and anyone else present. It was a well-set table. A complete list of visitors would be impossible to assemble, as Burns wisely kept no ledger, but Wobblies and radicals like Big Jim Thompson, Elmer Smith, and Mrs. Tom Mooney all made appearances, as did politicians including Washington’s U.S. Senator Homer T. Bone. Journalists included the Oregonian’s Ben Hur Lampman.

Even to Holbrook, the kind of man who could stumble into in the cellar of the watch shop could be a stunner: As Tom moved from one crusade to another, I met some surprising characters in what, after all, was supposed to be a den of radicals. Around the table I remember seeing Lem Dever, the big K.K.K. [Ku Klux Klan] fellow from Tennessee, Fred Gifford, the K.K.K. big shot local, and the sinister-appearing but genial Norbet Sero, a huge man of Sioux descent who was said to be a sort of bodyguard for Klan officials. I do not recall what the discussion was, but it seemed friendly enough. When later I asked Tom what he, an avowed radical, had to do with the Klan, he muttered something to the effect that “the Oregon Klan is a very liberal Klan.” I never heard a more confusing statement. I still don’t know what Tom meant.

The encounter likely occurred in 1923 or 1924, when Gifford and Dever were still top dogs in the Oregon Klan. Their presence in Burns’s basement could be read as a simple testament to his open mind; however, a decade later, he would work closely with them in the most bizarre partnership of his long career.

The Klan had arrived in Oregon in 1921, with Gifford as the Grand Dragon and Dever as the bombastic propagandist. Dever was a writer to challenge Burns in the art of invective, and he freely went after the Klan’s enemies. No complete membership rolls exist for the Oregon Klan, but estimates put its number at 15,000 to 15,000, including quite possibly the Mayor of Portland and the sheriff of Washington County. Yet, politically, the Klan accomplished little of lasting substance, and its state-wide power quickly waned. Dever renounced the Klan, as well as his old comrade Gifford, in a pamphlet he published in 1924.

By 1933, both Dever and Gifford were working to start their own fraternal groups in Portland, largely shed (at least publicly) of the racial and religious bigotry that infused the Klan. Neither was successful, likely because both men were more concerned with making a living through their new organizations than rallying the masses to a cause. Fraternal organizations like the Ku Klux Klan and others survived by the generosity of dues-paying members, whose donations then went to pay the salaries of their leaders.

Under the banner of a new group called the “American Vigilantes,” Gifford, Dever, and Sero partnered with Burns in a campaign to aid striking dock workers during the 1934
little more than hired thugs and strike breakers. On June 17, the four activists began a campaign to recall Portland Mayor Joseph K. Carson, presumably for the use of the special police. The recall effort lasted only a few weeks, and it failed. On June 19, Burns read a demand from the American Vigilantes at the Portland City Council, asking the body to require a $10,000 bond from each special policeman, a requirement that would all but kill their use in the strike. Burns made a plea for the bonds, which he argued would protect the strikers from "thugs." This, too, went nowhere. Finally, on June 25, Dever wrote to Gov. Julius Meier, objecting to a rumored move of Oregon State Police to replace city police in Portland while they worked the strike.

According to Dever, Burns only reluctantly went along with this protest, as Burns believed Meier would do the right thing and refuse to unleash the newly formed state police (Burns often corresponded with Meier and had objected to the formation of the state police in 1931, arguing they could be used as "Cossacks," presumably against organized labor). An explanation for Burns's participation in the American Vigilantes is his continuing hatred of communists, who were present in the leadership of the Portland longshoreman's union; Burns may have been trying to aid the longshoremen while avoiding working directly with the union.

The work of the American Vigilantes subsided quickly, but Dever and Burns sustained a writing partnership from late 1933 to mid 1934, jointly publishing Burns's longest running newspaper, FAX. In a 1934 letter appealing for advertising and subscriptions, Burns referred to FAX as the "Official Journal of America's Anti-Nazi Federation." As Adolf Hitler rose in Germany during the 1930s, Burns's focus turned to publicizing the growing threat of domestic and international fascism. He was an early opponent of Hitler's hate speech, focusing his attention on an American fascist movement known as the "Silver Shirts." He told potential contributors: "We have halted temporarily, with clinical publicity, the mass-organization of the Silver Shirts in the Northwest, but they are merely marking time and will advance, unless we can get sufficient expense money to continue our publication and far-reaching investigation work." Silver Shirts in the Pacific Northwest were briefly led by Luther I. Powell, who had been one of the early organizers of the Oregon Klan and was an occasional opponent of Gifford and Dever. After several months of virulent attacks on the Silver Shirt movement in the pages of FAX, Dever split with Burns sometime in 1934. Burns objected to some of the people Dever asked for money, although who or why is unclear. Dever continued as a pamphleteer on his own, and one edition of his American People newspaper included, oddly, a long, front-page tribute to Burns's forty-year history as a Portland radical. Gifford and Sero remained intermittently on the masthead of FAX, listed as officer managers or circulation directors — Gifford until 1936 and Sero until 1944.

Without Burns's own words on the subject, whatever attracted him to this unusual trio of men remains shrouded. We do know that Burns was an illegal immigrant and virulent opponent of the Christian faith, making him wholly ineligible for membership in the Klan. Burns's adherence to the humanism encapsulated in the philosophies of Ingersoll would have precluded any of the bigotry inherent in Klan dogma that Gifford represented. Burns simply may have found convenient, temporary company amidst zealots who briefly were fighting the same enemies.

In addition to FAX, which ran from 1934 into the 1940s and typically had as a lead headline a tribute to President Franklin Roosevelt, Burns published several newspapers over the course of his life. The Red Rag appeared briefly in 1915, followed by The Harpoon, published intermittently from the late 1920s through 1933. He also co-authored at least one issue of The American Citizen, a newspaper started by Dever. Filled with bold print, capital letters, and long diatribes on everything from local politics to national finances, Burns's newspapers always took on his iconoclastic personality with puckish, vituperative, and frequently libelous attacks on whomever he found wanting on a particular issue. He ran a regular column of his own in FAX, appropriately entitled "Acid Drops."

Burns frequently overshoot his mark, according to Holbrook, and his copy...
could be difficult to read. Often, Burns found himself defending his syntax from friends and enemies alike, as in this 1934 selection:

A few friends have protested about my Chauvinist English (strong language) and they are real friends too. But, when I ask if they have been reading the mental masturbations of "the Pervert Maniac, Adolf Hitler, and his Gangsters," my friends say no . . . [yet after reading Hitler’s writings] . . . they will look upon my clinical criticisms as milder than the sweet, loving lullabies a doting mother sings while rocking her first born to sleep . . .

After reading one of Burns’s 1934 articles ridiculing Hitler, Dr. Henry J. Berkowitz, of Portland’s Congregation Beth Israel, wrote to Burns that he found the piece both interesting and amusing, but added: "If I have any criticism to offer, it is the extremity to which you have gone to heap up insults . . . I agree with you that ridicule is an effective device in polemics, but some restraint should be exercised."

Restraint seemed foreign to Burns’s blood, although by the late 1930s, most of his work had left the streets and moved into more traditional venues. An Oregonian reporter visited Burns in 1931 and found him greatly changed. Claude M. Bristol had witnessed the wild Burns and wanted to see what had become of the street fighter:

And thereupon we renewed our acquaintance with Tom Burns, but a different Tom Burns of the days before the war. Still short and stocky, a little fuller at the waist . . . While the fighting spirit of a game Irishman remains, there’s a mellowness about Tom that enchants you, a vocabulary that amazes . . . Tom Burns, the militant Socialist, the radical, no longer exists, but Tom Burns, philosopher, humanitarian, student, thinker, liberal, lecturer, debater, a friend of high school students, enjoying the confidence of nationally-known editors, politicians, scientists, thinkers, and last, but not least, a watchmaker, a jeweler, a collector of valuable watches and clocks, is very much alive.

In addition to these roles, selling used books, and publishing, Burns became a frequent visitor to Portland City Council meetings. In 1936, for example, he championed a resolution by his friend Councilman Ralph Clyde to censure the City of Los Angeles for attempts to exclude poverty stricken immigrants at the state border. Newspaper editors found themselves with regular correspondence from Burns, whose letters occasionally made it into print.

Burns frequently challenged to public debate virtually anyone with whom he disagreed—from politicians to business elites to religious figures. Few ever took him up, but he kept asking. Nationally renowned preacher Billy Sunday — as famous in his day as Billy Graham in the late twentieth century — often came to Portland after purchasing some land in Hood River. On at least two of those visits, Burns threw down the gauntlet, challenging Sunday to a public debate on the merits of Christianity. No evidence exists that Sunday ever answered Burns.

After World War II, most of the great American political and labor issues of the first half of the twentieth century had gone the way Burns thought they should. Fascism had been defeated in Europe; workers had an eight-hour day enshrined in law; the dams on the Columbia River were controlled by the people; and Roosevelt’s New Deal reforms had changed the social structure of the nation. To be sure, poverty and the struggles of the worker endured, and Burns’s advocacy continued, albeit mainly confined to his shop window, letters to the editor, and personal encounters at his watch shop. As the red-baiting of the 1950s neared, Burns’s enduring hatred of the Communists seemed in tune with the times. "I know the rats well. They wrecked the Socialist party," he told a Portland newspaper columnist, dismissing the local Communist party members as “dues collectors, phonies, or middle-aged homely women who couldn’t get a man.”

In 1947, Burns, now seventy-one years old, was hit by a motorcycle while crossing the street near his home in Southeast Portland, crippling him for life. His workshop was closed from September 10, 1947, to July 1948, and that year, his business generated just $925 in revenue. By 1953, Burns said,
even his hero, Socialist leader Norman Thomas, was quitting. He hobbled about on a cane, continued catching a bus to work, and took some orders at his watch shop. He attached wheels to a kitchen chair to move around the shop, while rarely visiting the basement any more. His daughter Bessie declared: “He was more at ease there than at home.”

Peter Psihogios swept out the Wax Building from 1948 to the mid 1950s, carefully cleaning the sidewalk in front of Burns’s watch shop each day, and he found Burns to be quiet, polite, and not much of a businessman. “His business wasn’t a thriving business,” Psihogios said; “He didn’t put the efforts into his business.” Loggers would come into town, and they were fascinated with the old watch maker. At times, people would crowd the shop except Burns’s services as a watch repairman. “He was more intelligent than most people thought him to be,” he said. “He had unique ideas.” Burns seemed a thoughtful, gentle man, Psihogios noted, recalling that he let an old, homeless man sleep in the basement. Burns simply handed over a key and not much of a businessman. “His estate probably is very little in terms of justice and humanity. And any way you look at it, that is quite a bank account.”

Burns kept no personal diary that has been found, and I suspect one will not be discovered. His life was lived in the public eye, and his private thoughts that remained must have been very few. Restraint was not in his nature.

1. Oregonian, October 22, 1951.
4. Burns’s long-running arguments against private power monopolies and for public control of utilities, ranging from Columbia River dams to Portland streetcars were frequent topics in his many publications, and in his support for Washington Senator Homer T. Bone, known as the father of public power. Some examples include: Tom Burns’ Harpoon, November 1932, authored by Tom Burns, in Tom Burns Papers, Collection AX 109, box 1, folder 2, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries [hereafter Burns Papers, UO]; handwritten flyer, authored by Tom Burns, in Burns Papers, UO, box 4, folder 1.
5. Self-Defense Committee Bulletin, May 1, 1929, authored by Tom Burns, in Burns Papers, UO, box 4, folder 1; Flyer, “Close The Churches To Prevent Crime?”, authored by Tom Burns, in Burns Papers, UO, box 4, folder 1.
9. 1881 England Census, (Township of Widnes, City of Liverpool, County of Lancashire), 69.
15. Burns notes his Portland arrival in many places, but most officially in a document entitled “copy of Census Bureau Report, June 8, 1949,” Burns Papers, OHS, box 1, folder 1.
18. Ibid., 261, 262.
22. See the American People, October 1945, newspaper authored by Lem Diver, Rennar Collection, Mss 2196, Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland [hereafter OHS Research Library].
24. See correspondence from Thomas Burns to Portland Mayor Harry Lane, July 10, 1905, and August 18, 1905, Socialist Party of Oregon Record Series 0256-01, 1905, City of Portland Archives [hereafter Socialist Party Series].
26. FAX, April 14, 1934, Burns Papers, OHS, newspaper collection.
Burns to Lane, July 10, 1905, Socialist Party Series.
30. San Francisco directories list Burns as a watchmaker and jeweler at 1429 Ellis Street in 1907, and at 1507 Ellis in 1908.
31. For 1912 Oregon election numbers, see the online Oregon Blue Book, http://bluebook.state.or.us/state/elections/elections08.htm; and for national election data, see http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/national.php?year=1912.
32. See typescript manuscript for Theodore Roosevelt pamphlet in Burns Papers, OHQ, vol. 1, folder 22.
33. Ibid.
37. Ibid., July 11, 1913.
38. International Socialist Review 14:3 (September, 1913), 311.
42. Oregonian, October 18, 1913. Burns was deemed the “Most Arrested Man in Portland” or the Northwest repeatedly in newspaper articles, and in his own writings.
48. During an immigration investigation into Burns’s citizenship in 1916, he told an investigator he had been a Socialist until the Roosevelt Administration, and then became a Democrat in sympathy with the New Deal and other changes under Roosevelt. Immigration files of Thomas J. Burns, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, File series: A File; file number: A-4897122.
49. For a discussion on the role of the middle class and small business owners in Progressive Era Portland, see Johnston, The Road to Middle Class, 1915.
51. Ibid.
52. For a comprehensive review of Ingersoll’s speeches, as well as his life, see the websites: http://www.robertgreeningersoll.org/; and http://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php/section/ingersoll&page=bio.
53. Ibid.
54. Copy of obituary of Dana Sleeth, The News-Telegram, April 7, 1936, in Burns Papers, UO, box 4, folder 2.
56. Oregonian, August 19, 1917, obituary of Tom Burns. Newspapers, pamphlets, and Burns himself frequently referred to Burns as the unofficial Mayor of Burnside.
57. Ibid.
58. Marshall Sleeth, interview with the author, his son. Marshall Sleeth was taken frequently to Burns’s basement by his father, journalist Dana Sleeth, from approximately 1931 to 1936.
60. Oregonian, Oct. 13, 1937; Marshall Sleeth in an interview with the author, his son. Marshall Sleeth was taken frequently to Burns’ basement by his father, the journalist Dana Sleeth, from approximately 1913 to 1916.
64. Johnston, Radical Middle Class, 243; Len Dever, The Confessions of an Imperial Kloman (Portland, 1924), 4. Dever later noted in a 1934 letter to Gov. Julius Meier that the Washington County Sheriff also had been a member of the Invisible Empire.
65. Ibid.
68. Ibid.
69. Ibid.
72. Tom Burns to potential financial supporters, February 2, 1934, Burns Papers, UO, box 2, folder 3.
74. Len Dever to Tom Burns, March 28, 1934, Burns Papers, UO, box 2, folder 2.
76. See irregularly issued copies of FAX held at the OHS Research Library.
77. Immigration files of Thomas J. Burns, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, File series: A File; file number: A-4897122. Burns came to the attention of immigration officials in the 1940s as an illegal alien; he was ruled illegal but not deportable.
78. The American Citizen, January 23, 1934, Sleeth Family Papers (parentheses and boldface in the original).
79. Dr. Henry J. Berkowitz to Tom Burns, January 9, 1934, Burns Papers, UO, box 2, folder 2.
80. Oregonian, October 18, 1933.
81. See correspondence from Thomas Burns to Portland Mayor Joseph K. Carson, February 21, 1936, and attached resolution, Record A/F/A/885, City of Portland Archives. Burns began his visits to the city council as early as 1913 and continued through the 1940s, as is documented in Burns papers found at the City of Portland Archives, the Oregon State Archives, the Oregon Libraries, and the OHS Research Library.
82. Tom Burns to William Ashley Sunday, October 19, 1925 and October 23, 1925, Burns Papers, OHS, box 1, folder 4; Tom Burns to William Ashley Sunday, August 16, 1947, Burns Papers, OHS, box 1, folder 25.
86. Oregonian, August 19, 1917.
87. Peter Psakhis (co-owner of the Wax Building) in discussions with the author, December 2009 and April 2010.