



Oregon Coastal Notes

Oregon Coastal Zone Management Association

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Wilbur Ternyik Tribute Logo

Former Senator Mark Hatfield Leads Effort To Honor Coastal Legend Wilbur Ternyik

by Onno Husing, Director, OCZMA

I am pleased to inform you that former U.S. Senator Mark Hatfield has announced plans to create a life-sized bronze statue of Wilbur Ternyik for placement at a yet-to-be determined location in Clatsop County. Wilbur Ternyik is being honored for his pivotal role as an early leader in coastal conservation and many other contributions to the Oregon coast. The bronze sculpture of Wilbur Ternyik (funded by the Bridges Foundation, an Oregon-based philanthropic organization), is expected to be unveiled and dedicated on the North Coast in conjunction with the Lewis & Clark Expedition Bicentennial Commemoration.

In his press release, Senator Hatfield stated, “Wilbur Ternyik never expected recognition. His work was the tangible creation of his heart’s vision.” Senator Hatfield is a close personal friend of Wilbur Ternyik.

I have endeavored to tell Wilbur Ternyik’s life story in this newsletter so young people and newcomers to the Oregon coast can understand why Wilbur is being honored. This short biography only touches the highlights of Wilbur Ternyik’s career. All of us are the beneficiaries of Wilbur’s remarkable legacy.

1.0 Wilbur Ternyik: Humble Beginnings on the North Coast

Wilbur Ternyik, 78, was born in Astoria, Oregon. Wilbur is a direct descendant of Chief Coboway, the Clatsop Indian Chief who greeted Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery when they arrived in Clatsop County in November 1804. Wilbur was raised by his grandparents in Warrenton, not far from Fort Clatsop where the Corps of Discovery spent the winter of 1804-05. Wilbur and his relatives have strong blood and cultural ties to the Clatsop Indian Tribe. He recalls spending much of his childhood outdoors, fishing, trapping and exploring the watery world of Clatsop County.

2.0 A Close Call at Okinawa

Wilbur joined the Marine Corps (the 1st Marine Division) in 1944, just in time to catch the last great battle of World War II—Okinawa (April to June 1945). Okinawa is the last island in a

chain of islands leading toward the Japanese mainland. Why was Okinawa so significant? If the U.S. Armed Forces could occupy Okinawa, they would have an airbase to bomb the Japanese mainland. Knowing this, the Japanese constructed an ingenious network of underground bunkers and tunnels in Okinawa's hills. They also stationed 110,000 crack troops and an unusual amount of artillery to defend the island.

The Japanese plan was simple. They would withdraw to the southern section of the island and fight furiously to give American troops a taste of what lay ahead if the United States invaded Japan. Private Wilbur Ternyik, a 19 year old Marine, came ashore on April 3, 1945. The Japanese did not contest the Marine Corps landings. From earlier battles they learned to let the Americans come to them. They would fight the Americans on their own terms.

What followed was a bloodbath. 110,000 Japanese soldiers lost their lives. An estimated 150,000 Okinawans died (almost a third of the local population). The American casualties were 49,151 including 12,520 killed or missing in action. It took tanks, aerial bombing, naval gunfire, explosives and flamethrowers to root out the Japanese. After seventy-five days of fighting, Okinawa was declared secured on June 21, 1945.

While serving with an Army Infantry Division on the east side of the island, Wilbur and other members of his team watched a medium American tank enter a minefield. The tank was destroyed when it struck a mine. Wilbur and a fellow team member got permission to look for survivors. Working their way through the minefield they approached the tank. Then all Hell broke loose as Japanese artillery shells zeroed in on the tank. With no cover in the open field, Wilbur dove behind the only cover available—the body of a dead Japanese soldier. The dead soldier was lying on his side. Wilbur faced his back. Wilbur's first thoughts were, "This is a large body for a Jap!" He then noticed the body was well preserved. Fearing the corpse was a live soldier posing as a corpse (a common occurrence in Okinawa), Wilbur wrenched the body around. Half of the dead soldier's face was gone. A peaceful expression marked the rest of his face. Shrapnel had killed him instantly. Wilbur remembers thinking how young the soldier looked.

The dead soldier's helmet had fallen off. Wilbur saw photos and a folded Japanese flag tucked up inside. Like any soldier looking for a souvenir of battle, Wilbur grabbed the flag and photos and scrambled back to safety.

A Ticket Home

A few days later a Japanese machine gun bullet slammed into Wilbur's shin. Wilbur told me, "It felt like someone hit me with a hammer." Wilbur was hit about 9:30 or 10:00 a.m. in the morning. He remained on the battlefield for a harrowing eight or nine hours because the Americans were pinned down by gunfire. The leg wound provided Wilbur a ticket home after 40 days and nights of Hell.

Many Years Later

I became friends with Wilbur Ternyik in the fall of 1989. I will never forget the first time I visited his home in Florence. At one point in the afternoon Wilbur went over to a cabinet and said, "I want to show you something." He took out a small wooden box, opened it, and

unfolded the Japanese flag. It was three feet long and two feet wide and in perfect condition. I exclaimed, “Wow! What an artifact!” Wilbur said sadly, “The soldier’s family should have this. But I guess that will never happen.”

Ten years later (in the Spring of 2001), Wilbur called me and announced, “Guess what? The flag is going to be returned to that soldier’s family!”

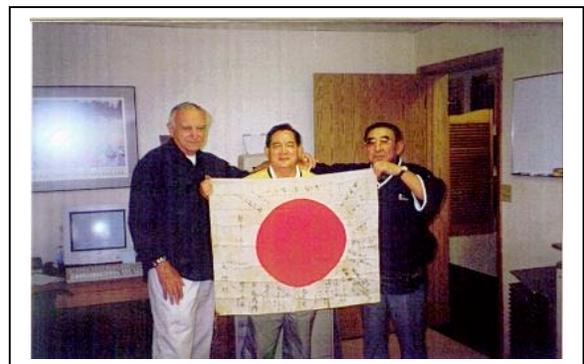
Here’s what happened. In the early 1990s Wilbur became friends with a Japanese businessman named Kenso Arika who built the Sand Pines Golf Course in Florence. A Japanese attorney, Takenori Ishikawa, working for Arika learned about Wilbur’s Okinawa experience. Ishikawa took a personal interest in the flag. He took the flag back to Japan, pledging to try to locate the family. After a long search, the attorney found a ledger of old Japanese place names. Like many pre-war rural communities in Japan, the dead soldier’s farm and village was swallowed up by an expanding city. The ledger contained the name of the soldier’s village, which was inscribed on the flag. With a few phone calls the attorney tracked down the soldier’s family. Only the youngest brother of the soldier’s immediate family was still alive. Imagine the shock when the brother learned his dead brother’s flag was returning!



Several months later, in the late summer of 2001 (just before September 11, 2001), the soldier’s brother traveled to Florence to meet Wilbur. They had a wonderful visit. Of course, they talked about the dead soldier. The brother described him as a revered member of the community, and a fine flute player. He also ran the family farm. Old family photos show he was a handsome man (see the photo to the left). Wilbur learned the soldier was 30 years old when he left for Okinawa—the oldest brother of a large family. The soldier’s brother remembers well the day his family gathered to sign and present him the flag.

During their conversations—aided by an interpreter—the soldier’s brother explained the flag’s enormous religious significance to the family. The flag is so important because it is a physical relic linked to the soldier’s death. Today, the flag occupies a place of great honor in the family shrine.

Wilbur commented to the soldier’s brother, “You know, I always felt uncomfortable having the flag. I am pleased it has been returned to your family.” The soldier’s brother looked at Wilbur and replied, “Oh, that was my brother. He wanted to come home.”



Wilbur Ternyik, Takenori Ishikawa & Kenso Arika displaying the Japanese soldier’s family flag—2001

3.0 A High Profile Life

Wilbur recovered from the wounds he received at Okinawa. To this day, Wilbur wears a small leg brace to support his shin. Obviously, the wound never slowed him down.

Changing the Face of the Oregon Coast

Wilbur joined the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) in Clatsop County after World War II. The SCS was carrying out a major research project on Clatsop Plains to learn how to stabilize coastal sand dunes. Migrating dunes on the Oregon coast were becoming a concern. Dunes were covering houses, roads, railroad tracks, and navigation channels. The SCS imported beachgrass from Europe (Holland and Northern Germany) and the Great Lakes to see if imported beachgrass could tame the dunes.

The project proved wildly successful. Unlike the native beachgrass (*Elymus mollis*) which dies back in the winter, European Beachgrass (*Ammophila arenaria*) stays green and erect all winter. As a result, European Beachgrass traps blowing sand, creating large steep-sided foredunes, keeping dunes in place. European Beachgrass and American Beachgrass from the Great Lakes are now the dominant beachgrass species on the Oregon coast.

Wilbur TERNYK has been called the Johnny Appleseed of European Beachgrass, but there are many people who care about native plants view the introduction of European Beachgrass as a botanical blunder. Today, because of European Beachgrass, there are thousands of acres of deflation plain wetlands located between dune ridges, teeming with biological diversity. And, foredune systems dominated by European Beachgrass provide enhanced protection against tsunamis compared to the traditional coastal dunes. The transformation came with a price. European Beachgrass now covers miles of what were once open blowing sand dunes. These open sand dunes—an iconic feature of the Oregon coast—are under attack by this imported beachgrass, natural vegetation succession, ATV recreational use, and residential development.

In 1947 the SCS transferred Wilbur TERNYK to Florence to run their Florence operation. In the mid 1950s Wilbur left the SCS and established his own landscaping firm called “Wave Beachgrass Nursery”. For decades Wilbur responded to requests from all over the West Coast for beachgrass to stabilize dunes.

Due to his deep understanding of plant behavior (gained from years of hands-on field experience), Wilbur became a pioneer in environmental restoration. Two of Wilbur’s marsh creation projects in the 1970s were National Research Projects conducted for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ Water Experiment Station in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Both projects were in the Columbia River system. The first project was a three-year, first-time ever inter-tidal project on Miller’s Sand Island (six miles up the river from Astoria). The second was conducted at McNary Dam reservoir in Eastern Oregon (another three year project). Wilbur’s projects succeeded when most other restoration projects in the nation failed (marsh restoration was in its infancy). Wilbur turned down offers from the Corps to conduct other research projects in other regions of the country. To this day, Wilbur continues to work in the wetland field, including designing wetland mitigation projects. Wilbur explained, “Plants are my best friends.”

A Life of Public Service

After moving to Florence, Oregon, Wilbur became a leading figure in his community. For years he served as Mayor of Florence and as a Port Commissioner for the Port of Siuslaw. Wilbur can count as close friends some giants in Oregon political history: Senator Mark Hatfield, Senator Bob Packwood, Governor Tom McCall, Senator Wayne Morse, and State Senate President Jason Boe.

For years Wilbur led delegations of coastal people to Washington D.C. to advocate for harbor



Wilbur Ternyik with Senator Mark Hatfield in his Washington, D.C. Office — 1970s

improvements (jetties, dredging) and other projects. Wilbur forged ties with many Capitol Hill luminaries—including Congressman Tom Bevell from Alabama, the Chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development. Wilbur Ternyik’s closest friend and political ally was Senator Mark Hatfield. Mark Hatfield served as an auxiliary chaplain during World War II and witnessed the carnage at Iwo Jima, Okinawa and the aftermath of the atomic bomb. Both Wilbur Ternyik and Senator Hatfield were dedicated non-drinkers—a rarity in an era when alcohol consumption was fashionable.

A Meaningful Private Life

Like many longtime coastal residents, Wilbur used to go hunting every fall. For a number of years Wilbur traveled to Alaska to hunt mountain sheep. These demanding hunts involved scaling dangerously steep canyons. The walls of the Ternyik home are lined with impressive hunting trophies. In addition to world-class mountain sheep, there are huge elk and even a grizzly bear rug. Wilbur shot the bear because it threatened his hunting party.

After the children left the nest, Wilbur and his wife, Joyce Ann, were licensed by ODFW to rehabilitate wild birds and animals. A wide variety of wounded and orphaned animals lived with them until they could be returned to the wild. I’ve seen the oddest collection of blue herons, pelicans, hawks, eagles, deer fawns, raccoons, bobcats, bears, squirrels, and beavers at their home. Due to some long recovery stays, these animals became like their own children. However, great care was taken to keep them wild. Wilbur and Joyce were angels of mercy at the “Ternyik Halfway House for Birds and Animals.” Through the years Wilbur lost his taste for hunting. As Wilbur put it, “You just can’t fix them up and then go shoot them.”



4.0 Wilbur Ternyik's Signature Achievement: The Founding of Coastal Resource Management in Oregon

On May 4, 1970, Governor Tom McCall delivered an historic speech in Newport before 140 local government officials from the Oregon coast. Governor McCall proposed creating a body to coordinate local, state, and federal plans affecting coastal planning. The Governor declared, "You people on the Oregon coast must do land use planning! If you don't, someone else will do it for you and you won't like the results." Within days the local paper, *The Lincoln County Leader*, published a front page story entitled, "Coastal Plan Talk: McCall Receives Mild Response." Actually, McCall got a chilly reception in Newport. Wilbur explained, "You must remember, Tom McCall was not liked on the Coast." Influential local people took issue with McCall, arguing that decision making should stay at the local level. *The Lincoln County Leader* reported that Governor McCall responded, "This would strengthen local decision makers, not deprive them of their power."

Wilbur Ternyik attended McCall's speech. He found himself agreeing with Governor McCall. After the speech, Wilbur scheduled meetings with local government officials up and down the Oregon coast. Wilbur explained Governor McCall's challenge and asked community leaders to join the newly formed, Oregon Coastal Conservation & Development Association (OCCA) to begin work on coastal planning. Douglas County Commissioner Al Flagel (an experienced former state senator) was the other key participant in this process.

Wilbur persuaded a clear majority of community leaders to join the OCCA. Wilbur and other coastal officials approached the 1971 Oregon Legislature to seek state recognition of the OCCA. After vigorous debate, the Oregon Legislature enacted a new law creating the Oregon Coastal Conservation & Development Commission (OCC&DC). OCC&DC had thirty voting members. Twenty-four Commissioners came from the ranks of local government on the coast. Governor McCall appointed six at-large members representing broader state interests. The legislation directed OCC&DC to report back to the Oregon Legislature with a plan by 1975.



1971 OCC&DC Bill Signing Ceremony—Wilbur Ternyik, Governor Tom McCall, Al Flagel

A Man and His Tomahawk

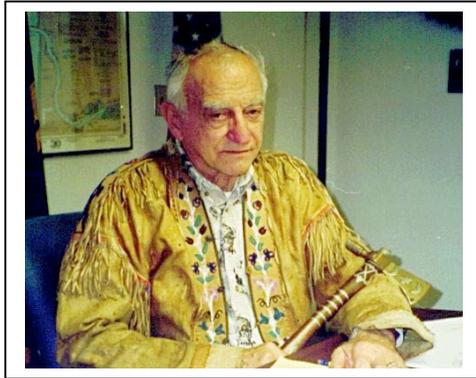
Wilbur was elected Chairman of OCC&DC. He served as Chairman during the four years OCC&DC met (1971 through 1975). By all accounts OCC&DC was a tremendous success. It birthed the framework of the coastal land use goals. OCC&DC met once every month during those four years. About twenty-six OCC&DC Commissioners regularly attended the meetings (using their own funds for travel). In addition, about forty other people—staff from state and federal agencies and interested parties—regularly attended.

OCC&DC members understood that they were plowing new ground at the local, state and the national level. Instead of developing site-specific plans, OCC&DC: (1) prepared natural resource inventories, and (2) developed over-arching coastal management policies. They wisely recognized that a lengthy period of fact finding should proceed the issuance of final recommendations. I learned from a recent interview project with surviving OCC&DC participants that OCC&DC members developed genuine bonds of mutual respect and affection. This is a major reason OCC&DC succeeded.

OCC&DC participants agree that Wilbur TERNYK played a key role in making the OCC&DC a success. Jim Ross, the Staff Director of OCC&DC explained,

*The credit belongs to Wilbur TERNYK. He held it together.
You have to understand what a personal force Wilbur was
in those days. He had the vision. He is a great man.*

During OCC&DC meetings Wilbur wore a buckskin jacket and employed a ceremonial tomahawk as the gavel. Wilbur ran a tight ship.



Everyone was treated with courtesy and respect. Good-natured teasing eased tensions during the meetings.

Wilbur is modest about his role as founder and Chairman of OCC&DC. When asked to comment about his contributions, Wilbur responded, “There were others.” Wilbur has the highest praise for the people who served on OCC&DC. Wilbur and other OCC&DC members also recognize the major contributions of the OCC&DC staff.

A strong case can be made that the significant progress of OCC&DC in 1972 paved the way for the enactment of Senate Bill 100 in 1973. Senate Bill 100 established Oregon’s famous statewide planning law—a milestone of regional land use planning in Oregon and the United States. Had OCC&DC become mired in controversy—which could have easily happened—Senate Bill 100 would never have become law in 1973.

Today, the direct connection between the work of OCC&DC and the enactment of Senate Bill 100 is seldom if ever recognized. Alas, we live in an era where key events in our history quickly fade into obscurity. Celebrating the life of Wilbur TERNYK is an effective way to tell this important story.

One hundred and forty people attended Governor McCall’s speech on coastal planning in Newport that day in 1970. Why did one man—Wilbur TERNYK—rise to Governor McCall’s challenge? It took courage and tenacity to pull OCC&DC together. Few environmental laws and regulations existed in the early 1970s. Yes, Governor McCall showed leadership during his 1970 speech in Newport. But, it took Wilbur TERNYK’s drive and credibility to make McCall’s vision a reality.

I have often pondered the source of Wilbur Ternyik’s courage and vision. Here’s what I believe. The World War II generation were doers. After surviving Okinawa, other challenges appeared manageable to him. And, Wilbur Ternyik brought a certain Native American sensibility to this historic task; a frame of reference many do not possess. Indeed, the wellspring of Wilbur’s vision for coastal planning derived from his intimate knowledge and respect of the natural world. Senator Hatfield is correct—it came from Wilbur’s heart.

An Important Lesson

I came away from the OCC&DC interview project struck by the power of local people coming together to spark meaningful change. The late House Speaker Tip O’Neil coined the famous expression, “All politics is local.” There is no substitute for local leadership. Coastal planning in Oregon happened because local leaders from the Oregon coast wanted it to happen.

There’s a valuable lesson in this story. Today, in an increasingly polarized America, many believe “local interests” are unwilling or unable to exercise environmental stewardship. Indeed, local interests are often viewed as obstacles to progress. A careful review of this chapter of Oregon history leads one to a different conclusion. Under the right conditions—when challenged—local leaders can serve as leading agents of social change.

Another legacy of Wilbur Ternyik was the creation of the Oregon Coastal Zone Management Association (OCZMA) in 1976. After OCC&DC completed their report in 1975, coastal planning oversight duties transferred to the Land Conservation & Development Commission (LCDC)—a statewide commission. At the time, Wilbur Ternyik and other coastal officials believed coastal communities still needed to band together to address state and federal issues. They created OCZMA in 1976.

If you want to learn more about the history of OCC&DC and the origins of land use planning in Oregon we recommend you read, *Interviews with Members of the Oregon Coastal Conservation & Development Commission (OCC&DC) 1971-1975*. This oral history project was a joint project of OCZMA and the Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development (DLCD). The document contains in depth interviews (undertaken in early 2004) with Wilbur Ternyik, Ellen Lowe, Jack Broome, Maradel Gale, and Jim Hill Jr.—all members of OCC&DC—and a ten-page summary. In addition, Jim Ross, the staff director of OCC&DC was interviewed. Soon, the report will be printed and distributed to coastal jurisdictions, interested parties, and key repositories of Oregon history such as the Oregon Historical Society and the State of Oregon Archives.



Wilbur Terynik & Senator Mark Hatfield holding Russian trawl net—Washington, D.C.



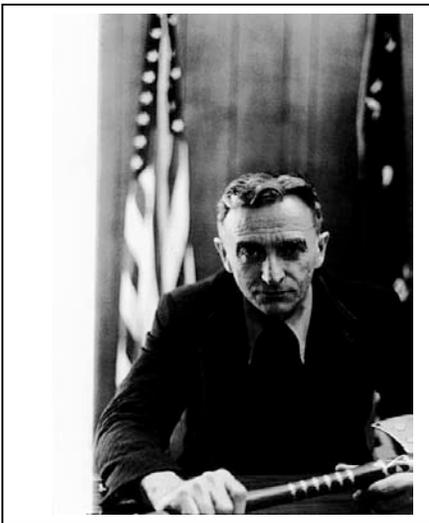
Senator Mark Hatfield, Wilbur Terynik and Wilbur's Daughter Kathleen—Washington D.C.—1971



Wilbur Terynik with Patty the Raccoon



Mayor Wilbur Terynik in front of Florence City Hall—1970s



Mayor Wilbur Terynik—1970s



Wilbur Terynik with Senator Wayne Morse, Mrs. Morse and other federal legislators in Senator Morse's Office—Washington, D.C.—1970s