John Miller Murphy, Chronicler of Olympia

by Roger Easton

Olympia's early history is studded with many colorful and interesting characters, which would be wonderful subjects of a brief biography such as this. One such person, who stands out for his many different contributions to the growth of Olympia from a muddy, stump-ridden community with only a few inhabitants, to a well-established capital city, was John Miller Murphy.

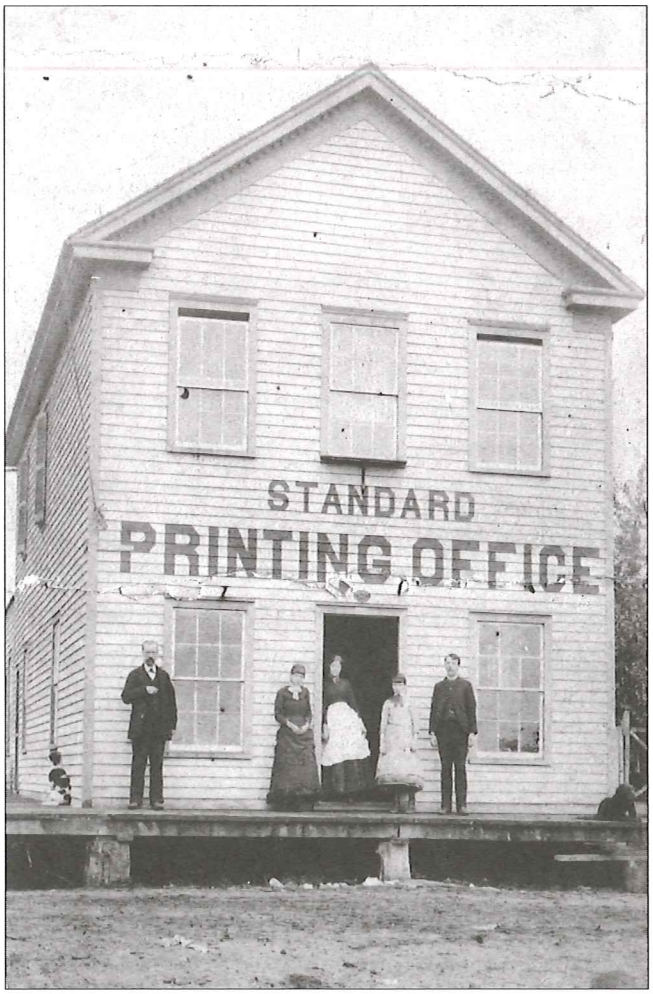
John Miller Murphy, long-time publisher of Olympia's *Washington Standard* newspaper. *Courtesy Washington State Archives, State Library Photograph Collection, 1851-1990.*

It began on a cold November day in 1839, in Federdam, Indiana. John Miller, an Irish immigrant millwright, and Susan (Miller) Murphy, his Pennsylvania Dutch wife, brought into to this world John Miller Murphy, who was destined to become a prominent figure in Olympia, Oregon Territory's, later Washington Territory's history.

Orphaned at the age of seven, Murphy was placed in the care of his sister, Mrs. George A. Barnes of Cincinnati. Mr. Barnes was also to distinguish himself as a merchant, and Olympia's first banker. His bank, the first brick building in downtown Olympia, is still standing on the east side of Capitol Way between 4th Avenue and State Avenue, under a heavy coat of stucco.

Barnes saw great prospects in establishing his family in the West. So, in 1850, ten-year old Murphy rode across the plains on horseback perched behind his sister, while George Barnes drove a wagon. They arrived in Portland that year, where Barnes became a merchant, and opened an early store. Young Murphy became a clerk. He spent his time being a choirboy in the Methodist Church and becoming the first *Oregonian* paper boy in Portland. Seeing the growth of communities in Puget Sound, the family decided to move to Olympia in 1851, where Barnes established Olympia's second store after Michael T. Simmon's store, trading post for Indians, and custom's office, not far from the present day Olympia Community Center.

When the Barnes family chose a site to build a home between 4th and 5th Avenues, and Adams and Jefferson Street, it was covered by virgin timber and



Standard Printing office, home of the *Washington Standard* newspaper in Olympia. *Courtesy Washington State Archives, State Library Photograph Collection, 1851-1990.*

thick undergrowth. Barnes offered hearty frontiersman Thomas Prather the job to clear it for the tidy sum of $100, but Prather turned it down as too difficult a task. Ten-year old John Miller Murphy was assigned the job. Prather described him as "a fat, red-cheeked lad, and a favorite with everybody". Murphy took on the job with a single Indian helper, and turned the wilderness lot into one of the town's beauty spots.

In 1856 Reverend George Whitworth, who built a very early Presbyterian Church in the area and taught school with his wife, held a graduation. It was the custom for graduates to give orations. Among the well-known early Olympians that did so were: Hazard Stevens, Territorial Governor Isaac Steven's son; William Yantis, Henry Hale, Rufus Willard, John Patterson and John Miller Murphy. After graduation, Murphy, realizing he wasn't succeeding fast enough working for relatives, desired to learn the printing trade. He returned to Portland and apprenticed himself as a printer's devil at the *Oregon Weekly Times*. Within two years he had advanced to the position of foreman and drama critic.

In 1860, he moved to the *Argus* in Oregon City, and then to Vancouver, Washington Territory, and with E. V. Coon, established the *Chronicle*. Later that same year, he removed to Olympia, and established the *Washington Standard,* which was to be his last paper, printed in Olympia under his supervision for five decades. Murphy never missed an edition in all that time. His first edition chronicled Abraham Lincoln's election to the Presidency. Though Olympia's first newspaper was the *Columbian,* which began on September 11, 1852, the *Washington Standard,* beginning in 1860, far outlasted any other newspaper. Later Murphy published the *Evening Olympian* while still printing his weekly *Standard*. From the daily paper, all its incarnations—*Morning Olympian, Daily Olympian,* and the present *Olympian,* were derived from Murphy's efforts. It is interesting to note how important newspapers became as part of Olympia's daily life. In 1868, the town had five newspapers competing at the same time.

Murphy returned to Portland in 1861 to marry Miss Eliza A. McGuire, from a family of Oregon printers, who blessed their marriage with ten children. This union was not to last. Murphy complained that Eliza treated him in a cruel and inhuman manner, citing that "on a day in 1876, without cause or provocation, threatened to 'mark' Murphy and thereupon assaulted him with a stick of stove wood" and laid violent hands upon his person. He further complained that she would not cohabit with him, barred the doors of their residence, compelling him to find lodging and shelter in other places. Murphy accused Eliza of associating herself and their children with a Mrs. Fisher, who was morally weak, being a prostitute. That daughter Anna, who was still a minor, was encouraged to leave home to go to Seattle to consummate a marriage with one Mr. Wilson. He claimed

Wilson was "an idle, dissolute and vicious person, the associate of gamblers, thieves and prostitutes", unfit for the alliance of Anna and him. He sued Eliza for divorce.

Eliza countered with testimony stating that Murphy had been verbally and physically abusive to her, and on several occasions had drawn a pistol and threatened to shoot her. She complained that Murphy didn't aid her when she was sick, confined to bed, not able to feed and keep the children warm. Further, she recounted that Murphy and Miss Kate Mathews had been living together on the second floor of the *Standard*, and they were guilty of adultery. The suit ended in favor of Murphy, who retained their common property and the custody of the children.

Interestingly, the more prominent tombstone of Eliza, who died in 1895, is located in the Murphy family plot at the Odd Fellow's Cemetery in Tumwater. Murphy remarried in 1898, but there is no sign of his second wife, Mrs. S. C.'s stone in the plot. Very little is known of her, except that she died of a "brain abscess" soon after the marriage.

Early in the life of the *Washington Standard*, Murphy began a column, which ran for many years. It was titled "Mere Mention," and chronicled events around town from Murphy's view point. By today's assessments, he might appear bigoted and opinionated, but one should keep in mind the historical context in those early days. His banner headline always carried the words, "Hew to the Line; Let the Chips fall where they May". He was never afraid to state his opinion bluntly and ardently. Later, upon reflection, he admitted to being a bit bold with statements, referring to Chinese, Indians, and African-Americans in a racist way all too typical of the era.

He also wrote, "Some time since a fellow, who bears the same name as Rip Van Winkle's famous dog, Wolf, got into trouble in this city by paying too much attention to another fellow's frau. For some time after his attentions ceased from parties who are in a position to know, it is said he is again treading on dangerous ground. The husband ought to see that his gun is loaded this time with cartridges that have fulminate caps on."

During this time, Murphy loftily touted temperance as a prime virtue of a civilized and educated man, but still frequented local saloons for his daily portions of beer and cheese.

Murphy was instrumental in the establishment of Olympia's first fire department, known as Columbia Engine Company Number 1, in 1866, and remained a key member until 1872. To be a member of the fire fighting team, one needed to join, and tender dues, very much like a fraternal organization. Membership in the company was a step up in Olympia's society. The Company was famous for its many balls and other entertainment to raise money for its operation.

In 1872, Murphy and Benjamin Harned published the most ambitious and one of the earliest known directories of the region entitled, "*The Puget Sound Directory and Guide to Washington Territory, Comprising a correct history of Washington Territory, and a condensed but Comprehensive account of her Agricultural, Commercial and Manufacturing interests, climatology, Mineralogy, Inhabitants, Natural Advantages and Industries, together with a complete and thorough Directory of Olympia, Steilacoom, Seattle, Port Madison, Port Gamble, Port Ludlow, Port Townsend, and Every Town and Hamlet on Puget Sound.*" It also featured Portland, Oregon and Vancouver, British Columbia. It was a commercial directory, featuring only businesses and their owners. Harned like many early entrepreneurs was a jack-of-all-trades, being a carpenter, funeral director, as well as involved in many other endeavors.

According to William Mit, Murphy spoke of his early print shops: "For five years the *Standard* was published in a little building on the corner of First and Main Streets (Thurston Avenue and Capitol Way today). In 1885 I purchased the land where my office and home stand to this day (now Washington Street and Olympia Avenue). When I was ready to move my office, I procured a scow and floated it right up to the door of the First street office, loaded my cases and press and other printing material on it, and poled the scow over to the new office, unloading and getting the scow out of the way on high tide. That is the time I cheated the express man".

Olympia Opera House on 4th near the Swantown Slough. *Courtesy Washington State Archives, State Library Photograph Collection, 1851-1990.*

The Washington Territorial Prison, which had been operating for 10 years in Seatco (Bucoda), probably closed its doors in 1888 through the efforts of John Miller Murphy. He had always objected that it was built in that small community instead of Olympia. And, the contract prison had been guilty of many prisoner abuses, which gave Murphy more ammunition. Many believe his scathing articles brought about its demise. The new Prison was run by the Territory, rather than private men exploiting the prisoners for profit. It was located in Walla Walla, and in 1889 was to become the Washington State Prison, which name it still bears. Murphy recounted, "Music, sweet music, was ever my heart's delight. I have always taken the greatest pleasure in music, and although I make no claims to ability in that line, I certainly enjoyed plink plunking my guitar. Many a pleasant night, in company with Jim Hays, Dave Drewry and Henry Willard, have I gone from house to house serenading the pretty girls. The other boys all performed on violins and with my guitar we made some very creditable music. At least we thought we did, judging from the pleasant receptions we received from our charmers."

Murphy had been saving money for years to present Olympia with a new cultural experience. His love of music and entertainment prompted him to build the Olympia Opera House, in 1892. This impressive structure was built on pilings on the edge of Swantown Slough, at what is now 4th between Jefferson and Cherry Streets. It was a 3-story wooden structure, which seated 1000 people. Inside it featured hand-painted scenery, plush maroon seats, and

a baroque stage. The doors were of art glass. It was one of Olympia's earliest buildings wired for electric lighting.

The opera house featured music and minstrel shows, and hosted an array of well-known entertainers including John Philip Sousa, Mark Twain, the Barrymores, and even Billy Sunday. The varied entertainment had something for everyone, such as boxing and wrestling matches. The moving picture shows in local theaters like the Wray, Rex, and others took their toll, and the dwindling number of customers for the opera house spelled its demise. By 1925, it had become a fire hazard, and succumbed to the wrecking ball.

Murphy continued to tout Olympia as a great opportunity for emigrants still coming from the East. He authored "Olympia the Beautiful" which appeared in the *Coast Magazine* in 1903. It promoted Olympia as the cultural gem in the Puget Sound region. He had been writing glowing reports for settling down in this area for years, being one of Olympia's greatest backers.

Over the years, Murphy held various offices in the area. In 1855-56, he was Quartermaster-General of the Territorial Militia during the Indian Wars. In 1863, Murphy became the Territorial Printer, followed in 1867, by the office of Territorial Auditor for three terms. He served on the Olympia Town Council, and was County Superintendent of Schools.

In 1910, he not only became the first President of the Thurston County Historical Society, he was also wined and dined at the Olympia's new (and current) YMCA for his 50 years of publishing the *Standard.* Governor Hay was toastmaster, and frontier newsmen in Olympia, Thomas Prosch, Clarence Bagley and others gave testimonials. The head table was adorned with a large bouquet from the women of Olympia, who wished to honor Murphy's stance as a veteran champion of Women's Rights, presenting him with a large loving cup. White-haired and mustached, Murphy related that he had chronicled 11 territorial governors and seven state

John Miller Murphy and a parrot on the stage of the Olympia Opera House. *Courtesy Washington State Archives, State Library Photograph Collection, 1851-1990.*

governors. He recounted one of his first stories, featuring the advances of technology in medicine, mentioning a Dr. Fox of Philadelphia, who had pioneered in the tattooing of an eyeball on that of a blind girl, rendering her appearance as if she was a sighted girl with normal eyes.

Murphy was to sell his beloved *Standard,* in 1912, retiring after more than five decades of publishing. In 1914 he contracted blood poisoning, which resulted in the amputation of his foot. Confined to a wheelchair, Murphy died two years later in 1916. Administrators of his will elected to remove $100 from his estate to have a stone made for him, as they felt his contributions to Olympia's history deserved to be memorialized with a gravestone. The marker still stands at the Odd Fellow's Cemetery in Tumwater.

Undoubtedly, Olympia will never again see such an interesting and bombastic character as John Miller Murphy.

Roger Easton taught in Washington elementary, secondary schools, and colleges for 35 years. Long interested in genealogy and historical research, he has volunteered at the Washington State Library and State Archives for nearly 20 years. Roger is the current President for the Boards of the Bigelow House Preservation Association and Ruddell Pioneer Cemetery; as well as a member of the Olympia Heritage Commission, Lacey Historical Commission, and Thurston County Historical Commission. In 2009 he wrote a weekly column for Olympia's 150th Birthday in the Olympian newspaper, and coordinated the City of Olympia's monthly events celebrating the historic Birthday.

View of Olympia from the Westside drawn by Edward Lange, ca. 1891. Lange was a talented artist who lived in Olympia from 1889 to his death in 1912. His detailed drawings illustrated a community changing from frontier village to modern town. *Courtesy City of Olympia.*