

Welcome to “History on the Fly” a new podcast series offered by the Washington State Historical Society. This episode is titled: “The Good Old Days,” by Fred Poyner and Ed Nolan for Washington State Historical Society.

Were the “good old days” really so good? As each generation ages there is a tendency to look back on the days of its youth and before with misty-eyed nostalgia. Many politicians are much given to calling for a return to the “good old days.” Modern television has enshrined the saying in sitcoms such as “Happy Days,” while the saying itself has been used to market everything from websites and music, to organic foods and antique store wares.

Looking through the newspaper archives at the Washington State History Research Center, it is apparent advocates for the saying have not read newspapers from those “good old days,” or they might rethink their desire to return to a world that never was. A quick perusal of regional news publications from the late 19th and early 20th centuries would soon demonstrate that these periods were comparable to today’s world, as a time of murder, mayhem, unrest and crime.

For instance, the faded print of the Ellensburg Localizer newspaper, dated February, 1908, tells of how a Cle Ellum saloon shootout between two men ends in murder, prompted over the attentions of a woman. Reading on, we learn that the murderer made his escape on a freight train getting off at Thorpe, Washington. We are assured that “authorities are working on the case.”

Or take an entry from The Seattle Call, from April 8, 1897, where counterfeit \$10 gold pieces have made their appearance in Spokane, next to a story where a groceryman from the same city was held up at the corner of 6th and Washington Streets by “two highwaymen.” The groceryman refused to give up his money, and as a result “was set upon and beaten nearly into insensibility.” We are told “the means of identification are small” and “it is the third hold-up this week.”

Do the words of a century past tell us the world has changed for the better since then, or for the worse? From the Ellensburg Localizer, 1908, we learn that in Walla Walla, Delos Webb is under arrest, charged with assaulting a resident of Mesa and fracturing his skull. The article closes with the grave assertion: “The Victim May Die.”

So too may be the fate of young Fred Lewis, who at age 14, accidentally shot himself while playing with a revolver Christmas Day. He, too, “may die.”

Headlines from these bygone eras rival our current headlines of today. They read as a historical litany which cast real shadows and offer dark glimpses into a shared past long gone: “Police Raids Keep Vagrants on the Move;” “Wife, 53, Sues Husband, 23;” “Two Women Seriously Wounded;” “Fatal Shooting at Cle Ellum;” and even “The Boy Showed Pluck” – and account where a young boy had three fingers amputated resulting from a railway car accident in North Yakima, Washington.

Nostalgia fades in the light of historical record. And while Enlightenment is most often a desirable thing, it is not always an easy thing to accept when the process of Enlightenment becomes too much for us to bear and the comfort of popular sayings is available for us to fall back upon. It reminds me of another popular saying: “There is nothing new under the sun.”

The Washington State History Research Center is open to the public by appointment from Tuesday to Thursday, 12:30 to 4:30 PM, and located at 315 North Stadium Way in Tacoma, WA.

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