

Out of the ashes: From ashes to concrete
By Jaime Lump For The Astorian Jun 23, 2023



The character of downtown Astoria is distinctive for many reasons and one of the charms of its history is how interwoven the names of the people and the places tie together. Connecting with Astoria history can sometimes feel like sitting around the dinner table at a family reunion, because every building's story traces a line back to a person or a family who carried one of many building blocks that created the familiar streetscape, which we know and appreciate today. Many shed clues to the past with engraved names, some of which have been lost to the past or completely unknown to newcomers, while a few buildings present more anonymously, awaiting visitors to discover their histories. Four downtown buildings, one of which celebrates its centennial this year, can be traced back to a lesser known yet notable Astoria family: the Spexarths.

In Astoria, the Spexarth story begins in 1874 when August Spexarth arrived in the area by way of Prussia then Portland. Upon his completion of business college, Spexarth opened a downtown general store selling all the 19th century essentials, like watches, sewing machines, barometers, and of course, guns. Prosperity from fishing and logging allowed Astoria's business district to flourish and soon enough, Commercial Street (formerly Squemoqua St.), was lined up and down with wooden storefronts. Unfortunately, in 1883, the city's exponential growth came to an abrupt but temporary halt when Astoria faced its first major downtown disaster. Spexarth was one of many businessmen who lost everything to the Clatsop Mill fire, yet, instead of feeling downtrodden by challenges as many of us might under those circumstances, Spexarth leaned into his business sensibilities, planning ahead, and somehow, in the end, always seeming to be at least two or three steps ahead of everyone else. |

By 1909, Spexarth owned two buildings across from one another on Commercial St. between 11th and 12th, and plans for a brand new, modern, four-story building on the corner of 8th were underway. For this new building, Spexarth considered three predictions: one, the tideflats beneath downtown would be filled in, which would necessitate the city to raise the buildings up by four or five feet and make room for sub-level basements; two, the streets would be widened to accommodate automobile traffic; and three, downtown Astoria was still at the mercy of another big fire since little was learned from 1883, and the city's wooden infrastructure was more or less built to burn. Spexarth invested in the strength and integrity of his new building by opting for reinforced concrete, a material being used in bigger, more modern cities, but unconventional for an area like Astoria that was so rich in timber. The large cube was built on concrete piers with concrete walls, stairs, and roof. Because of his predictions, the new Spexarth building remained standing with little damage after the 1922 fire and since it was built with a sizable setback, it could easily be incorporated into the downtown rebuild which included wider streets.

Post-fire, Spexarth was one of the eager businessmen to roll up his sleeves and get started on Astoria's reconstruction. He began his efforts with a personal project. Though his home on 8th and Exchange streets narrowly avoided burning down, he recognized that concrete was the future of Astoria and opted to build his family a brand new fireproof

concrete home on the East side of his property. The 2-story, fortress-like mansion was designed in the stately Colonial Revival style with a square columned porch and a heavy cornice, crowned with a large parapet. The exterior was left unpainted, an odd choice, giving the smooth gray walls a sort of stony appearance. The home was built with 12 rooms including a full concrete basement, six bedrooms, three bathrooms, a sewing room, a canning room, and even a telephone room. Spexarth, who was recently widowed, seemingly did not have the need for so much space and invited his daughter, May Spexarth Miller, and her family of five to live there with him. Around June of 1923, just as the new concrete house neared completion, Spexarth had his old wooden family house knocked down to make way for a brand new 4-story apartment building. Another formidable fortress, the structure was built with 12 inch thick concrete walls and fire-safety apparatuses installed throughout. Spexarth spared no expense to make the 34-unit apartment building a source of pride for the city's reconstruction efforts. Though plain in appearance, he opted for the best built-in bathtubs money could buy, hardwood floors, and the latest conveniences which included an automatic elevator. Its first tenants moved in March of 1924. Spexarth was on a roll and employed the same construction crew to break ground atop the sites of his former Commercial St. buildings. As one would expect, these two buildings were also built with reinforced concrete. In fact, nearly every new building in downtown Astoria was designed this way - evidently appropriate that the theme of the reconstruction celebration in July of 1924 was "from ashes to concrete."

August Spexarth lived his life charging at full speed, but found himself succumbed to heart disease in his 80s, passing away in 1934. His pragmatic legacy, however, did not follow him to the grave. Spexarth's daughter, May Spexarth Miller, inherited his community spirit and the tenacity Astoria needed to preserve its character and exceptionality. Her dedication to the city's history and heritage is most notably remembered in her work to protect the Flavel mansion from demolition and reviving it to its current splendor. Miller was a trailblazer for historic preservation in Clatsop County, dedicating decades of her life to the Clatsop County Historical Society and museum, but the city was inevitably changing around her. After a change of ownership, the Spexarth Apartments next door to her home eventually became the Astoria Clinic building. By the 1970s, the Spexarth family home was more house than Miller really needed since her kids had long since grown up and moved out. As she

made plans to downsize to a smaller residence, the clinic had its eyes on her home. Initial plans presented a concept of renovating the house to adapt it to their needs then connecting the two buildings with a sky bridge. But once the purchase was complete and the papers signed, the clinic resolved to demolish the concrete Spexarth home and construct a brand new medical building. The task of knocking down a building that was designed to last centuries didn't come so easy for the demolition contractors, who had clearly never encountered such a brute. In their first attempt, the crew went at it with a large clawed tractor, which was designed to "chew through wooden buildings like potato chips." In the wake of their realization that the house was not, in fact, wood covered in stucco as they had expected, they resorted to the wrecking ball. The house fiercely resisted this attempt as well, treating the first swing as nothing more than a balloon bobbing along a wall. After a bit of head scratching, the demo team found a vulnerability on the eastern wall and gave it a good knock leaving the fortress little more than a pile of rubble. In its place, a modern brick building was constructed in 1978. Ten years later, the clinic shut down and abandoned both buildings.



Today, locals come and go through the modern building, now owned by Clatsop County, to pay their taxes and register to vote, largely unaware that they are on the former site of May Miller's one-of-a-kind concrete house. The hundred year old Spexarth Apartment building next door now functions as offices for county workers. The Spexarth building on the corner of 8th and Commercial streets remains tirelessly at its post -



downtown traffic constantly rushing by, not pausing to consider it as one of the very few surviving structures from the 1922 fire. Up Commercial between 11th and 12th, the two Spexarth store fronts run parallel on either side of the street and await their centennials next year. Passersby can take note of the “S” in their parapets and consider the Spexarth family’s contributions to the history of

downtown Astoria.

Photos:

1974 May Miller Spexarth home Exchange and 8th Streets (Sara’s Old Photos)

Spexarth Demolition (The Daily Astorian)

Astoria Clinic (Jaime Lump)