

A lot of red, white and blue for the Great White Fleet

JEAN SHERRARD AND I first used this Pioneer Square classic photo years ago on the back cover of our out-of-print book, “Washington State Then and Now” (2007). We described the crowded scene as a celebration connected with Seattle’s summerlong 1909 Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition. It seemed like a reasonable claim at the time, but it was wrong. There are no AYP signs or flags anywhere. But there is a lot of patriotic bunting, especially American flags.

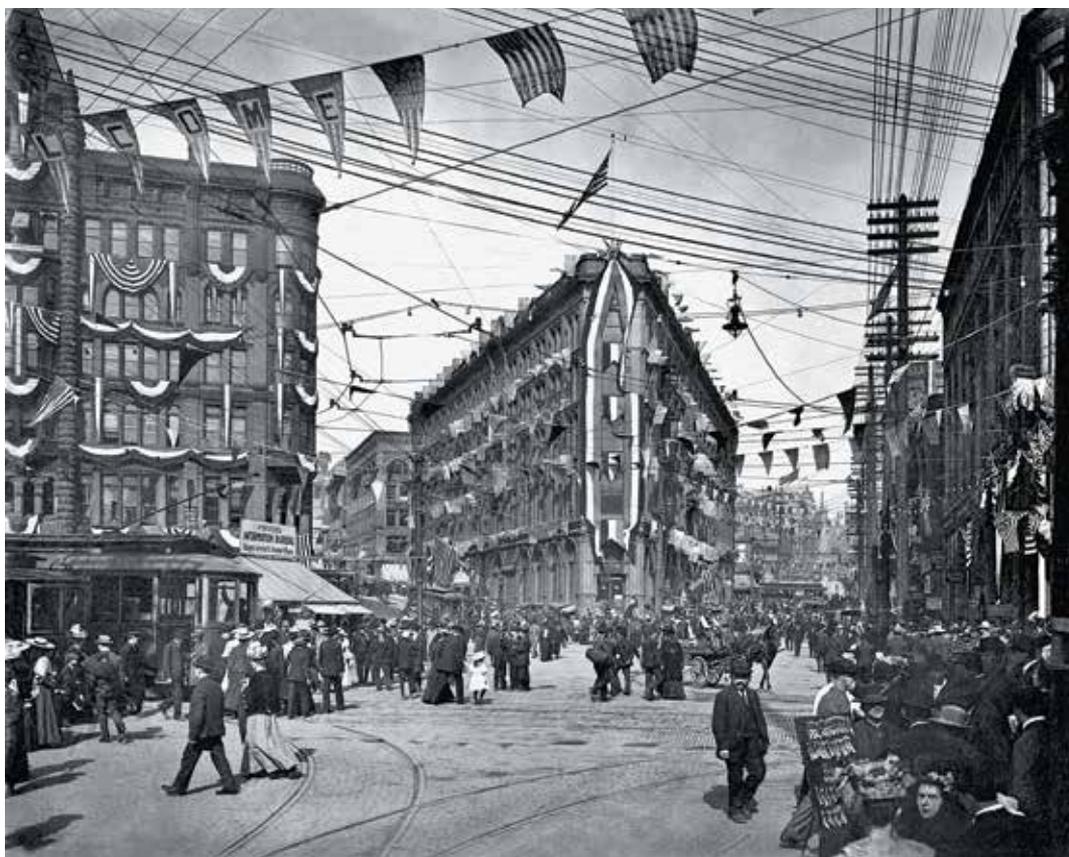
The best clue for identifying the occasion is spelled out in the line of pennants hanging near the top, showing the last five letters for “WELCOME.” The location is Pioneer Square, when it was more popularly called Pioneer Place, during the four-day visit of President Teddy Roosevelt’s Great White Fleet. (Leaving the East Coast in December 1907, it required 14 months to circumnavigate the world with its military parade.)

Most likely, the scene was photographed on May 26, 1908, following the completion of the Grand Parade for the visitors. It started that morning, but in the photo, the pedestrian celebrants cast afternoon shadows.

The popularity of what Seattle called “Fleet Week” was overflowing and depleting. Crowd-counters estimated that 400,000 watched the parade. Downtown businesses were more than willing to decorate their facades with flags and patriotic festoons; many of the decorations were stunning.

Five days before the parade, The Seattle Times announced, “Seattle Has A Bunting Famine. Merchants were unable to supply another yard of acceptable decorating material to patriotic customers (and) Tacoma and Portland were unable to help.”

Most of the fleet’s admirers came from Puget Sound, and extra Mosquito Fleet steamers and passenger trains were enlisted to bring the eager hordes to witness “the largest sea-fighting machines in the world.” The trains were often stuffed beyond standing room, and many people from distant communities were left standing on depot platforms. Visitors who managed to reach Seattle often had to camp in parks. The temporary tent, showing right-of-center in the “Then”



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THEN: Circa 1908, the photographer looks east on Yesler Way through its intersection with First Avenue. James Street enters the five-star corner left of center.

NOW: The post-1889 Great Fire Pioneer Building, far left, still holds to its landmark northeast corner of First Avenue and James Street. At least five of the brick landmarks showing in the 1908 photo are still in their places in 2018.

photograph, tries to help. Its sign reads: “Free Information Bureau, Strangers Directed to Furnished Rooms.”

On May 25, The Times wrote, “Thousands Visit Ships ... With every detail outlined by the bright sunshine which followed the dreary rain of yes-

terday, the eleven huge, white fighting machines now at anchor in the harbor lay in stately majesty in a wide crescent that stretched from Smith’s Cove to the south end of the harbor.”

Check out Paul Dorpat and Jean Sherrard’s blog at pauldorpat.com.