

# 1970s Portland was smutty, corrupt, dance-crazed -- and led to the city you know today

Updated Jan 09, 2019; Posted Apr 13, 2017

By Douglas Perry | The Oregonian/OregonLive

Braless girls in tight tees. Guys with big mustaches and bigger shirt collars. Booze-fueled "key parties" and bitter divorces. Disco and cocaine.

This is the 1970s of the popular imagination.

And Portland saw all of it -- and more -- during the game-changing Me Decade. Green-friendly and pleasure-seeking and protest-ready: the Rose City we all know today took root in the 1970s. (You can see for yourself in the photo gallery above.)

But in important ways the city also remained deeply conservative throughout that long-ago decade, a working-class throwback on an increasingly cosmopolitan West Coast.

A minor example: In 1973, Linda Franciscone, a credentialed teenage sportswriter, was denied entry to the press box at Civic Stadium (now Providence Park) because, well, because the fairer sex had never been allowed in. Another: until 1977 -- eight years after The Who's "Pinball Wizard" stormed the Billboard charts -- pinball machines remained illegal in Portland.

That second example might not be so minor.

"Once you pay off a policeman to overlook some nickel-and-dime pinball gambling, it doesn't take a lot more to pay him off to overlook prostitution and narcotics," Capt. Norman Reiter said in 1976 in a last-ditch attempt to head off legalization of pinball wizardry.

Reiter had a point. Police corruption was much more than a nickel-and-dime problem in Oregon's biggest burgh. The booming narcotics trade would lead to officers being charged with stealing, evidence destruction and lying to judges to get search warrants. (Official corruption is the theme of "Rose City Vice," a new 1970s-set history by Phil Stanford that gleefully zeroes in on bed-hopping politicians -- such as disgraced former wunderkind Neil Goldschmidt -- and murderous, establishment-connected hoods.)

To some observers, such dark deeds seemed an inevitable result of the country's sudden decline. Stagflation held down employment and the stock market. The national "energy crisis" prompted Oregon Gov. Tom McCall to ban outdoor display lighting in the state, plunging Portland into darkness. An editorial in The Oregonian suggested that "bright light" advertising was a moral issue -- just look at that prostitution haven Las Vegas, where neon ruled! -- but added that economics trumped even family-values concerns. "[T]he gravity of the impending energy crunch

in Oregon this fall and winter," the paper wrote in 1973, "will seriously question whether businesses should remain open at night at all."

So the 1970s was in many ways a dreary decade for Portland, even with the Trail Blazers winning their lone NBA championship. It was a decade punctuated by long lines at gas stations and the deterioration of the region's long-dominant industries. As a result, the city seemed to be physically falling apart. The New York Times' Ada Louise Huxtable lamented "the scattered, bomb-site look of downtown parking lots made by demolishing older buildings that pay less than metered asphalt."

For relief from the urban blight and waylaid dreams, Portlanders increasingly turned to smut. Mary's Club and other strip shops packed in customers, while adult bookstores popped up around the city. The Oregonian called Portland "the pornography capital of the West Coast."

But the city's denizens didn't just watch naked women dance. They danced themselves, flooding venues that pumped an addictive beat until dawn.

"Discomania is a billion-dollar business that has Oregon businessmen hustling," The Oregonian's Patrice Haffey wrote in 1978. And it wasn't just dance clubs like Earthquake Ethel's raking it in. Added Haffey: "To buy a woman's disco outfit, including a dress that will 'move' on the dance floor, good dancing shoes and a disco bag (a tiny purse to carry lipstick, identification and money that is worn around the neck like a pendant while dancing), can cost as much as \$250."

Portland's economic revival had to start somewhere.

-- Douglas Perry