

# FOSTER CHURCH

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## TURNING DOWN THE SOUND

*Travel Escapes in Washington's*

*Small Towns*



## Turning Down the Sound

ALSO BY FOSTER CHURCH

Discovering Main Street

*Travel Adventures in Small Towns of the Northwest*

# Turning Down the Sound

*Travel Escapes  
in Washington's Small Towns*

FOSTER CHURCH

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## Introduction

This book celebrates the small towns of Washington as places to explore, savor, and spend a night or two. It treats them as travel destinations rather than dots on a map to drive through on the road to someplace else.

Three things can happen to small towns in the state of Washington. Most were founded on natural resources—minerals, timber, fish, wheat—and when demand or supply runs out they slowly die. The second, which some might say changes them even more, is that they are transmogrified by the spread of the Puget Sound region, which extends about one hundred miles from Deception Pass in the north to Olympia in the south. A third is that they hang on. This book is about towns that hang on and the fun to be had in visiting them. 7

There are lots of small towns in the Puget Sound region. Many are charming and scenic. But the sudden arrival of new people and businesses changes their appearance and culture, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. The distinctive qualities that make them what they are gradually evaporate. They become



bedroom communities and weekend tourist attractions, fine places to live, perhaps, but not that different in culture and point of view than Seattle or its satellite cities. If it's small towns you are looking for, you have to look outside the Sound, and that leaves lots of territory. The total area of Washington is about 71,000 square miles. The Puget Sound region, which includes King, Kitsap, Pierce and Snohomish counties, is only a small pocket—about 6,300 square miles.

Washington small towns offer a continent of variety. The Makah Indian town of Neah Bay on the Strait of Juan de Fuca is a place of massed clouds and surging water where the spirit of whaling lives. But a day's car trip will take you across the state to Pomeroy, a dry little town in southeastern Washington wheat country. The Lewis and Clark expedition passed near here, and every year the town stages its Tumbleweed Festival.

Most small towns sit in magnificent surroundings. Forests, wheat fields, rivers and mountains are on the edge of town and visible everywhere. The Pend Oreille River makes a turn around Metaline Falls; the Cascades rise, steep and axe cut, above Darrington, and bronze rock is everywhere around Coulee Dam.

Less visible than wheat, rock, and rivers is the culture of a town, a mix of people, history, environment, and years of neighborliness. The soul of a place appears in a museum where a 1860s piano is displayed, in a café where waitresses urge a second cup of coffee, in a high school gymnasium where the town turns out for a game. One way to sample the culture of a place is to drop in on events, sometimes events that you would rarely visit at home: These can be potluck suppers and ice cream socials, little theater productions, celebratory parades, and city council meetings. A visit to a small town allows us to move around and investigate things that catch our attention. A half hour at a city council meeting can open a window on the town's problems and aspirations, as can a Chamber of Commerce luncheon or a Sunday morning church service.

## Introduction

Small towns aren't static. They absorb trends from outside, undertake beautification schemes, tear down one old building and restore another. Towns such as Morton, Metaline Falls, and Longview have created performance halls from old movie theaters and abandoned schools. New styles in restaurants are appearing in places where steak and baked potatoes once were the standard. The Glass Onion in Goldendale and Harvest House in Waterville offer fine cuisine but keep a solid footing in simple, well-prepared food.

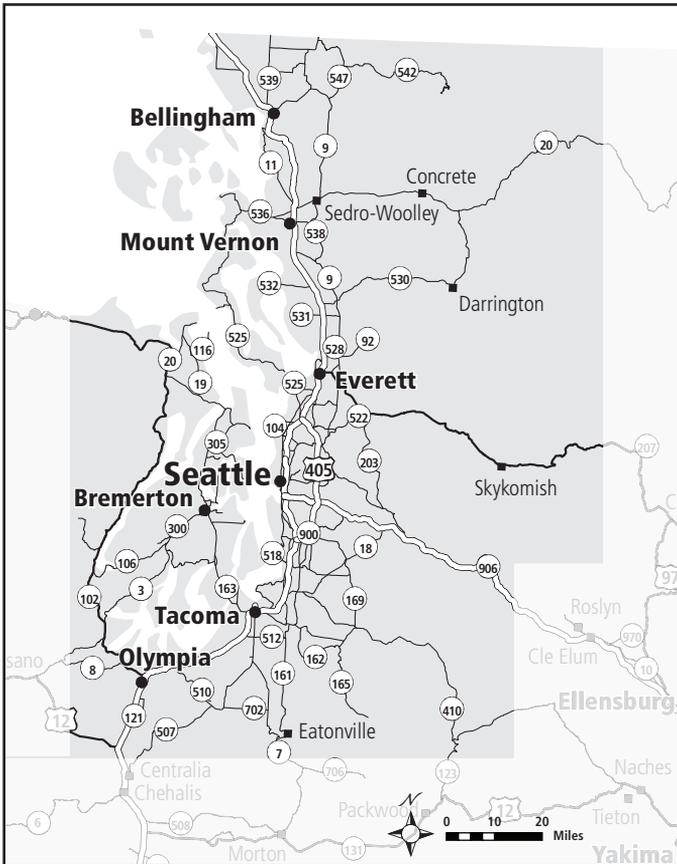
A good day in a small town would be an early morning drive to a spot above town where you can see it in its setting, then breakfast at a popular café, like Joy's in Sedro-Woolley or Judy's Country Kitchen in Centralia. Walk Main Street and stop in on a few shops and visit the museum. By then it's time for lunch. In the afternoon, take a drive to a scenic lake, a nearby town, or a breathtaking mountain view, and in late afternoon, stop by the local tavern and listen in on the talk of the day. But there's no need for a plan. Just follow where the town takes you.

10 And a final word of caution. The towns I describe in this book haven't been gussied up to attract tourists, and at first glance, they may seem grim and worn. The industries that built them often have closed or cut back. Half the stores on Main Street may be empty. You may want to leave. But stick around. In the course of the day, the beauty of the town's surroundings, the romance of its history, and the spirit of the people will become apparent. It will never seem the same again.

Northern Washington



## Northern Washington





## Concrete

710

The Road: From Seattle and points south, take Interstate 5 north for sixty-five miles to the intersection of SR 20 at Burlington, and drive east. This is the North Cascades Highway, one of the most scenic roads in the Northwest.

Concrete must contend with its name, which suggests smokestacks and big ugly buildings. The first sign of the town is a fortress-like cluster of connected concrete silos that once held cement for aging by the long-closed Superior Portland Cement plant. The words “Welcome to Concrete” are emblazoned in big red letters across the silo, but this hospitable message was added when the town was used as a location for a 1993 film, *This Boy’s Life*, a sad tale about a boy growing up in an industrial town where he is mistreated by his stepfather.

It all sounds like a place to speed past, especially if you are traveling east and some of the most glorious scenery in the United States is just ahead. But it’s an endearing, richly textured

place, combining small town atmosphere with big deeds and big ambitions. Even now, after its cement and timber industries have folded, it's got pride and heart in a setting of forest and rushing water. The Baker River pours into the Skagit here, and just a few miles east, hundreds of bald eagles gather on the Skagit from December through early February to feed on spawned chum and coho salmon. Deep green forest presses around the town, and a few miles away, Shannon and Baker lakes change in color and light with the seasons from misty gray-green to cobalt blue.

Amasa "Peg Leg" Everett, a prospector, was looking for gold in the late nineteenth century, but instead found large deposits of limestone and clay on his property. They are ingredients for cement, which might be considered gold of another sort in a nation that was building roads, bridges, and dams. A cement plant was built on Peg Leg's property east of the Baker River. Later, in 1908, another plant was built on the west side, and the town of Concrete was born. Concrete's cement plants supplied half the cement needed for Grand Coulee Dam. Their dust deposited a film of powder that in the wet winters turned to something like cement, forcing automobile owners to clean their vehicles with acid.

14 Concrete and its environs, however, possessed another resource more valuable than cement, and that was hydroelectric energy. The Baker River flows from snows deposited on Mount Baker and Mount Shuksan, and in 1925, the company that is now Puget Sound Energy completed Lower Baker Dam, a 285-foot-high, 550-foot-long concrete dam within the Concrete city limits. At that time, it was the highest hydroelectric dam in the world. It sits high and mighty in its narrow canyon now, looking like a scaled-down version of Hoover Dam, on the Nevada-Arizona border, and it shouldn't be missed. Upper Baker Dam (312 feet in height) was completed in 1959, and the two dams generate enough power to supply sixty thousand

households. Puget Sound Energy offers tours of its hydroelectric operation, and there's also a visitors center.

Concrete's fortunes began to sag in 1968 when the cement plant closed and was demolished. Later, the lumber mills in the area shut down. But Concrete hangs on. Town promoters waggishly have devised a list of "62 fun things to do" in and around Concrete. Among them is "Stop at State Bank of Concrete's new cash machine before your Main Street shopping spree."

Downtown may not support a shopping spree, but it has a nice heart-of-town feel. Fred West, a yacht broker, and his wife, Valerie Stafford, a hospital executive, moved back to Concrete a few years ago and bought the Concrete Theater, where they show first-run movies on weekends. Up the street, the Hub is a lively place, with pool tables, a long bar, and loud music from Creedence Clearwater days. The town also has a monthly newspaper, the *Concrete Herald*, and an airport. And what other town in the world has a dam inside city limits?

The Basics: A popular dinner spot is Annie's Pizza, a friendly place about a mile west of the city center on SR 20. Washington Café and Bakery on Main Street serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The lodging scene in Concrete can be unpredictable, but at this time, three motels are operating. The Cascade Mountain Lodge, on SR 20 next to the Red Apple Market, has fourteen rooms, and Cascade Mountain Suites—Mount Baker Hotel (formerly the Hi Lo), on Main Street in downtown Concrete, has seven suites. The Eagle's Nest Motel and RV Park on SR 20 is an inexpensive, bare-bones establishment with a string of rooms on the second floor above a laundromat and a shop that sells Native American crafts. Also, a few miles from Concrete on Concrete-Sauk Valley Road is Ovenell's Heritage Inn, an unusual combination of cabin and lodge accommodation on a 580-acre ranch.

In *Turning Down the Sound: Travel Escapes in Washington's Small Towns*, Foster Church guides adventurers—lifelong residents of the Northwest and visitors alike—to the small communities beyond the state's well-known urban center.

As in his previous book, *Discovering Main Street: Travel Adventures in Small Towns of the Northwest*, Church employs the skills of his Pulitzer Prize-winning journalism. He also shares his passion for encouraging tourists down less traveled paths—paths that curve beside valleys and wheat fields, travel along orchards and straits, and abut mountains and rivers.

Once inside these small towns, local flavors abound. Church reveals how each community's unique character informs its hospitality and culture: In Morton, the abandoned Roxy movie theater was re-opened to host lectures and live performances. In the town of Palouse, a once-lonesome farming community in the Washington wheat country is now home to antique shops and art galleries, and in the farming town of Ritzville, local farmers sculpt life-size figures from the American West out of sheets of steel and display them in the downtown.

With maps, photographs, and recommendations for more than thirty-five towns in all corners of the state, *Turning Down the Sound* vastly expands the resources available for readers and travelers keen on encountering what Church calls American tourism's last frontier: its small towns.

FOSTER CHURCH is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and was for twenty-seven years a staff writer for *The Oregonian*. He is the author of *Discovering Main Street: Travel Adventures in Small Towns of the Northwest*, a companion volume to *Turning Down the Sound*, and his travel articles have appeared in newspapers throughout the United States. He lives in Portland, Oregon.

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