

# Characteristics of the Pacific Northwest

*Historian Gordon Dodds identifies some important themes that emerge from a study of the region's history. He writes from the perspective of Oregon, and while there are some important differences between Oregon and Washington, many of his insights apply to both states.*

1. The Pacific Northwest has always been characterized by a **proximity to nature**. Until very recently, the regional economy was based upon timber, fishing, mining, and the availability of cheap hydro-power. But from before the time of white settlement, nature has also been valuable to the region's people spiritually as well as economically and there has always been a strong environmental movement here.
2. **Pacific Northwesterners have not been very community-minded**. While the region's politics have been mostly "clean" and civil, community spirit has been lacking and political parties are weak. This can be seen in the popularity of tax limitation measures, low support for the arts and education (Washington is better than Oregon on this one), and a reluctance by people to commit time and dollars to charitable causes in comparison with other regions.
3. Part of this may be attributed to the region's reputation as the "**land of the second-chance**" from the Oregon trail to the depression to the great California migration of the 80s.
4. The region has been relatively **homogenous**. Most of the residents have been of northern European descent while others have been "uncomfortable" here. This is changing, but there is a mostly unacknowledged legacy of racism that is part of the region's history.
5. The Pacific Northwest has been a **colony** in every sense of the word.
  - **Economic:** Hudson's Bay Co., railroads, timber (we still export raw logs like a third-world country), the federal government, Wall Street, etc.
  - **Political:** The seniority system has greatly benefited our region. Historian Bernard Devoto once characterized Pacific Northwesterners' attitude toward the federal government as being not unlike an adolescent: "Leave us alone and give us more money!"
  - **Cultural:** Except for the Indians and a few writers, our region has not been very artistically innovative or distinctive. (This may be changing with the emergence of a regional group of writers).
  - **Religious:** We always get our "theological experts" from outside the region; with few exceptions, there haven't been any new "religions" that sprang from the region; the Pacific Northwest is a non-player in the ELCA.<sup>1</sup>
6. Despite a progressive reputation, the Pacific Northwest has tended to be **politically conservative/ libertarian**. People use progressive means to preserve the best of the past, e.g., the bottle-bill, land-use planning, growth management, etc. Dodds has called Oregonians "cheap progressives," i.e., they will vote for progressive legislation as long as it doesn't cost them anything.

## A few facts and figures<sup>2</sup>

- The Pacific Northwest has 1/5 of the nation's total land base yet 3.5% of the population.
- Fewer people per square mile live here than in any other region.
- 4 of 5 Northwesterners live in urban areas.
- While the nation's population tripled in the 20th century, the Pacific Northwest grew by only 10%.
- As a region we are whiter than the nation as a whole.
- The Pacific Northwest has the lowest level of illiteracy in the nation, a higher median household income, a lower percentage in poverty, yet the highest per capita hunger rate in the nation.
- The Pacific Northwest has persistently higher unemployment.

<sup>1</sup> Gordon Dodds, *The American Northwest: A History of Oregon and Washington*, The Forum Press, 1986, 353. [Taken from *Preaching the Gospel in Ecotopia*, by John Rosenberg, Feb. 28, 1998.]

<sup>2</sup> Patricia O'Connell Killen and Mark Silk, eds., *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone*, 2004, chapter 1 [Taken from class outline by Jim Norlie, spring 2008].