A hero honored: Studies center named for Ernie Tanner

Ron Magden Collection

Ernie Tanner stands with other members of the Seattle and Tacoma longshore strike committee.

By Al Gibbs
The News Tribune

The year was 1934, and a strike had shut down docks along the West Coast.

Longshore union leader Harry Bridges was in Tacoma, working to maintain the union in the face of employer efforts to break the strike.

"And my father and Harry Bridges talked about the necessity of keeping blacks and whites together in the union – not separate so the employers could break the union," U.S. District Judge Jack Tanner recalled.

"That was probably the first time that has happened in the history of this country."

The father Tanner often talks about was Ernie Tanner: star athlete at Tacoma High School in the early years of this century; a man who was college-educated but could find no job other than elevator operator until he went to work on the docks; a black leader in the longshore union long before the days of integration and equality.

He was a longshoreman from 1918 until his death in 1956.

Today, Longshore Local 23's dispatch hall at 1710 Market St. will be dedicated as the Ernest C. Tanner Labor and Ethnic Studies Center. The ceremony begins at 2:30 p.m.

Tanner was chairman of the union's building committee when the hall was opened in 1952.

The hall will be owned and operated by the University of Washington Tacoma in conjunction with its Harry Bridges Chair in Seattle. It will be a center for community meetings, speakers of international acclaim and research into the role of minorities in the labor movement.

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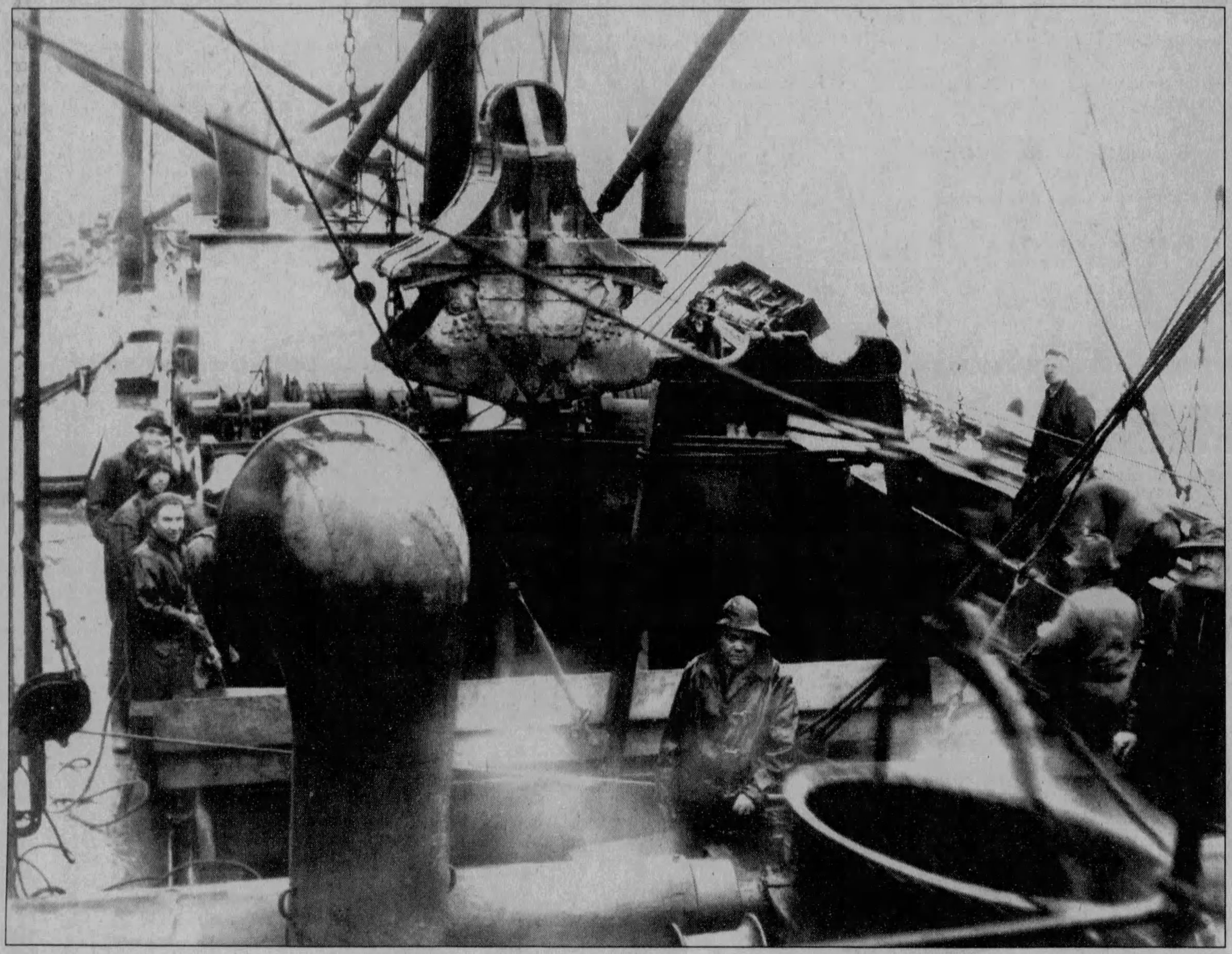

Ron Magden Collection

Ernie Tanner (lower center) controlled the winch as a longshore gang unloaded copper ore at the Tacoma Smelter in the 1940s.

Tanner

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"We want to develop our own programs," said Ron Magden, a retired Tacoma Community College history professor who has written books on the history of Tacoma's waterfront and longshore union.

Magden, Jack Tanner and longshore leaders past agree it's natural to name the new center for Ernie Tanner, a quiet, gentle man who nonetheless possessed a strong physique and tougher will.

"I look at him as one of two phenomenal people of color on the waterfront," said Phil Lelli, a longtime leader in Local 23. "A lot of people back then would say, 'I'll never work with a nigger,' but I've never heard anybody talk ill of the guy."

Ernie Tanner was born in 1889, the son of a circus trapeze artist who called himself "Prince" Tanner, Magden said. His mother had been a slave in Kentucky.

Tanner was a standout athlete at Tacoma High School in track, baseball, basketball and football. He spent three years at Whitworth College, then located in Tacoma, before he went to work as an elevator operator in the Berniece Building downtown. His pay: 10 cents an hour.

On Dec. 6, 1918, he paid his $5 initiation fee and became member No. 549 of the longshore union here.

Longshoring then wasn't as mechanized as it is today, but Ernie Tanner progressed to the point where he was a hatchtender – essentially the boss of a gang working ships.

The job was tough.

"I can remember lifting those sacks, shoveling that ore," said Jack Tanner, who worked on the docks for a decade before he attended law school. "They were whiskey-drinking, snoose-chewing guys back then, they were, they were."

Jack Tanner modeled himself on his father.

"I believe I'm the first longshoreman, black or white, to go from longshoring to the federal bench, and that's because of my education and my father," he said.

Ernie Tanner was at the forefront of union and equality movements in Tacoma, Magden said.

"The trust his fellow union members placed in him was shown by the fact that they made him a hatchtender," he said. "He was in charge of their lives."

Tanner refused to work for companies that paid his black gang the same wages as white longshore gangs but insisted that the black gang work harder.

He was an outspoken opponent of interning Japanese Americans in World War II. When they returned from the internment camps after the war, many whites boycotted their stores.

"It was Ernie Tanner who broke the picket lines of the Remember Pearl Harbor League," Magden said.

It also was Ernie Tanner who saw technology and mechanization as the future of port facilities, his son said.

"I am convinced my father is a primary reason for the existence of the Port of Tacoma as we now know it," Jack Tanner said. "I am convinced he'd be called the godfather of the union – he'd be like Harry Bridges – if he'd been white."

Ernie Tanner and Bridges were fast friends. Bridges often dined with the Tanner family when he visited Tacoma.

And he agreed wholeheartedly with Ernie Tanner's view that there must be racial equality in a union known for its tough, independent members.

"I think it is true to say Ernie Tanner had that kind of effect on Bridges," Magden said.

He influenced others as well.

Ike Morrow, a black longshoreman who today is the foreman of a major Port of Tacoma operation, grew up down the street from the Tanner family. As a boy, he mowed Tanner's lawn.

"He was such a gentle man, yet he had so much power," Morrow recalled. "What made him so special was that he was a black man – that just didn't happen in those days.

"He was just a helluva man – period."