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Spindrift Two

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Whidbey Island's Indian heritage

Whidbey Island, in the days before the white man came, was the summer home of many Indian tribes. The Samish, Swinomish, Snoqualmie, Stilliguamish, Suquamish and others came from the mainland to the territory of the Skagits and Snohomish tribes to gather the abundance of food resources the Island area offered.

South of Greenbank the Snohomish tribe lived and their lands included a large portion of Camano Island east to the Cascade mountains, and south to Richmond Beach near today's Edmonds.

The bleak cold days of winter found the Snohomish people repairing nets and making baskets, clothing and blankets. They built canoes and sharpened knives and other weapons to prepare them for summer use.

As summer emerged from the fog and rains of springtime, small groups of Indians journeyed to Whidbey Island, and by the end of June villages dotted the beaches at Sandy Point, Colum-

bia Beach, Skagit Head, Cultus Bay, Double Bluff, Mutiny Bay, Bush Point, Lagoon Point, Holmes Harbor and Langley. When the camp site was selected, the building of shelters began, made of overlapped and tightly woven mats, and a fire pit in a wind-protected site. The days were spent hunting small game, digging clams, oysters, mussels and cockles, fishing for the many varieties of fish. The meats were dried along with the other harvests, for wintertime use.

In mid-July there were berries... blackberries, blackcaps, salal berries, blueberries, huckleberries and thimbleberries. These were sun dried, to be made later into "berry soup."

The very existence of the tribes depended upon the summer harvests. The Quilayute Indians on the Olympic Peninsula had experienced in legend the failure of fish to run for two years, which resulted in widespread starvation and death in the tribes... so every Indian knew that every available hour



was to be used in scouring for edibles for the winter.

Whidbey Island was called "Paradise" by the Indians. On South Whidbey there was an Indian settlement on the southeastern side of Cultus Bay. The entire tribe lived in a "long house" constructed of the bark of fir trees. When the white men came the Indians lived there for some time afterward.

A long sand bar paralleled the northwestern shore of Maxwellton, forming the eastern side of the creek that flows through the marshland even today. The mouth of the creek was near John Patton's bluff, and Indians camped along both the Maxwellton sandbar and along the shore of the creek in a grove of trees.

Island huckleberries were so well known that Indians came from east of the Cascades to pick them for winter food.

Puget Sound Indians did not wear great feathered head-dresses and ride on high-powered horses, but they were fairly sure of one thing: food. There were deer and birds, fish and always the ubiquitous clam.

Clams were strung on willow switches and hung over a low fire to smoke, much as "barbecues" are today. Paddling a canoe around Puget Sound, when the paddlers got hungry they found a likely beach when the tide was out, and dug enough clams for a meal which they strung over a beach fire. ♣



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A brief history of Skagit County

As early as 1870 two pioneer families had settled in what was to be Skagit County near the big log jam on the Skagit River, to lay the foundation for the town of Mount Vernon. Jasper Gates arrived to become the "father of Mount Vernon" from Missouri, followed in a few months by Joseph Dwelley. By 1872, after a number of other families arrived, the first school was started in a building originally built for a barn on the D. E. Kimball ranch.

Among the "firsts" in this area, Mount Vernon was the first permanent inland town. Guemes was the first Skagit territory to be opened, "a land of many deer, wild life, and a thousand wolves"; and Anacortes the first community founded. Early pioneers had landed in the Fidalgo and Guemes areas as early as 1853 and 1860.

In 1867 La Conner was born with Alenzo Low its first settler. Edison was settled in 1869 while Skagit City, a flourishing village destined for early extinction, was established that same year.

After Mount Vernon came Fir in 1876, with Conway in 1891; Clear Lake and Hamilton in 1877; Sedro Woolley and Sterling in 1878; Cypress in 1881; Burlington, Bay View, Avon and Padilla Bay in 1882; Lyman, 1884; Concrete in 1888; Fidalgo in 1890 and Rockport, 1890; Bow in 1901 (first homesteaded in 1869).

The river settlements ran up against two huge log jams on the Skagit, one centuries old, which were major obstacles in the development of communities. But the settlers didn't give up and were finally victorious and when the river opened to traffic, the community grew rapidly. The largest log jam was located a



mile above the present city while the second was a half mile below (Mount Vernon). So dense and solid were the jams that even large trees grew on top of them!

The log jams were serious detriments to the development of towns along the river, and for opening the countryside for farming. Samuel Calhoun and Michael J. Sullivan were the first of far sighted farmers who sought to convert what pessimists called "tideswamps" and laid the groundwork for farming, with Mount Vernon as the heart of a prosperous agricultural section.

Appeals to Congress for help in breaking the log jams were fruitless. In 1877 Mount Vernon received its first mail which came from La Conner to Skagit City by skiff and packed afoot by Jasper Gates to Mount Vernon! 1877 was also the year of the actual founding of the town, with Harrison Clothier and Edward G. English playing leading roles. The first hotel, an unpretentious building, went up on Front Street at a cost of less than \$100. Mining in the Ruby Creek district in

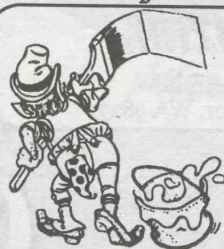
1880 created new interest in the area and by 1881 there was a population of 75.

A Baptist Church and the Skagit News were established in 1884. Two years later the Methodists organized and in 1889 built the town's first church, at a cost of \$2,500!

By 1889 the population of Mount Vernon was estimated at nearly 1,000 with incorporation demanded. Legal troubles followed, but an election was held with 112 voting for incorporation and 25 opposing. The new mayor was C. D. Kimball, with councilmen J. B. Moody, G. E. Hartson, L. R. Martin, M. McNamara and William Murdock.

1890 and 1891 were boom years for the state, but Mount Vernon moved slowly. However, a score of new businesses, mills, the Mount Vernon Electric Light and Motor Co. a new hotel, office buildings and 101 homes built at a cost of "about \$85,000," marked progress along with a \$25,000 street expenditure.

Highlights of the nineties included a fire which destroyed 15 businesses and two homes, the completion of the Great Northern railroad into Mount Vernon, failure of the city to establish a water system despite a citizens' vote, the exodus of nearly all male citizens to the Klondike Gold rush, and the disastrous 1897 flood. ♣

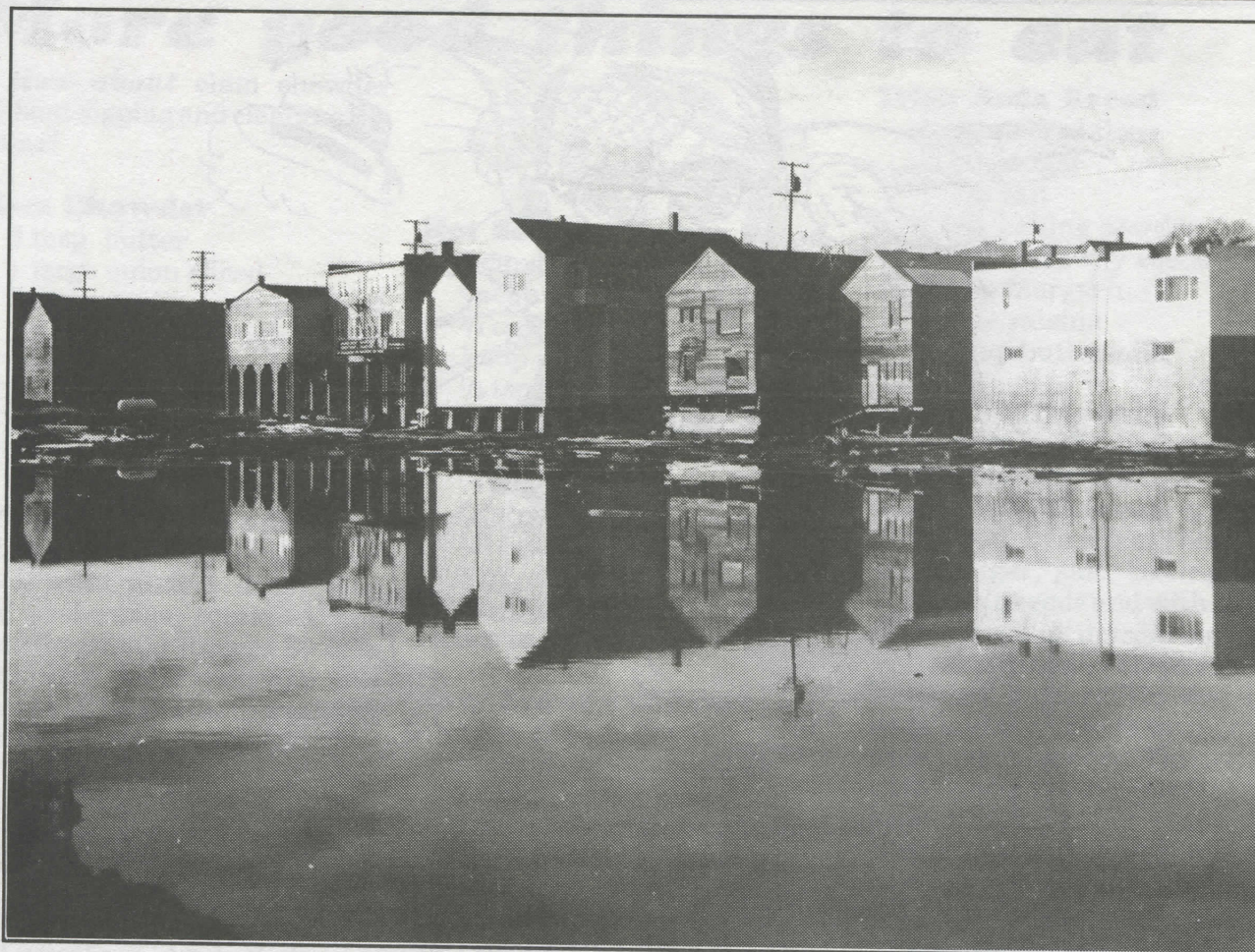


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The year 1965 was an exciting year of change for Oak Harbor. This photo was taken from the then uncompleted Flintstone Freeway (200 Ave. SW) looking toward the store buildings on Pioneer Way. High tide filled "the slough" which ran from today's junction of Flintstone with Midway, all the way to Freund's Hill west of town. The pioneer store buildings show the piling where the lower levels were warehouses. Boats unloaded freight here at high tide. Summer swimming and winter skating took place on the slough where muskrats thrived and minnows lived.

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Oak Harbor street scene in the late 1940s. Looking west on Pioneer Way toward the Oak Harbor Tavern, the movie theater is at right. Columbia Lumber Co. at left and Lindbloom Co. at right are both gone.

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**A History of Whidbey's Island
as told in story and photo by
Dorothy Neil and Lee Brainard.**

***"By Canoe and Sailing
Ship They Came"***

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