

Skagit River was an early area highway

Before there were roads or railways, the rivers were the highways from the coast to the interior. In Skagit County, Island's "sister county," the site of Mount Vernon was somewhat hampered in that the Skagit River was dammed by log jams below and above the site.

The log jam below had been in existence since before the oldest Indian could remember. It was so solid that a forest grew on it and the river could be crossed on foot at nearly any point. The upper Skagit log jam was a half mile above the lower, and was a mile long, growing in size with every high water.

By 1863 a cabin had been built on the South Fork of the Skagit about five miles south of the present town of Mount Vernon. And in 1865 another cabin was built on the North Fork. The cabin on the South Fork became a trading post for Indian trappers, but failed because of Seattle merchant competition.

The first families to arrive came by steamboat in 1870. The little sternwheeler *Linnie* was the first recorded to have gone upstream on the Skagit as far as the south log jam.

The town of Fir was established. The log jams made it impractical to locate anywhere but on the lower river, and families took claims in the dense fir forests. The lands were logged to permit farming, and in the rich moist soil grew the most prolific yields of potatoes and oats. Potatoes were often used as legal tender, and the sloops and steamboats that chanced by Fir bought the farm products.

By 1871 there was a logging camp on the lower Skagit, and

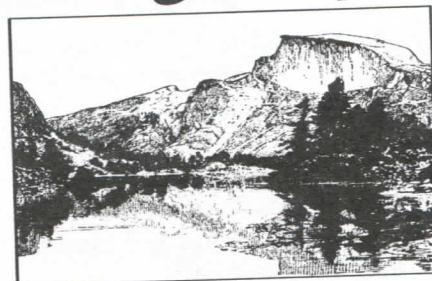
by 1875 hundreds of men were making a livelihood by logging. Most logs went to Utsaladdy on Camano Island because it was closer than Coupeville.

It was a big day in 1874 in Skagit City, the center of operations on the river, when Captain John S. Hill's boat, the *Fanny Lake*, began making regular monthly runs to Seattle. One can imagine the excitement of families who had lived for years at a time without seeing new faces or being able to "shop" for supplies. Everyone crowded the dock to see the *Fanny Lake* arrive, and on her came mail, supplies and new people.

Before 1875 there were only two settlers on the river above the log jams. One had settled at the site of the Great Northern Bridge, the other farther up near the site of Lyman, to engage in hop growing. Farther up the river prospectors had located coal and minerals including gold. The coal had to be hauled down river by canoe, portaged around the jams, then put aboard the *Chehalis*, a 90-foot sternwheeler of 1867 vintage. By this method as much as 200 tons a month were being shipped by 1875.

But towns are founded in spite of difficulties, and in 1877 Mount Vernon came into being. Settlers began the work of removing the lower log jam, and in two years a passage of sufficient width had been cut to allow the steamer *Wenant* and Captain Henry Bailey to make the first trip to Mount Vernon.

The settlers did not settle for this partial passage through a log jam. A petition to Congress asked for an appropriation of



\$25,000 to improve the river for navigation. The government estimated the cost at \$100,000, then did nothing. So the people continued to saw and work at dislodging the jams.

In 1877 a flood suddenly freed a 5-acre section and carried it out to sea. Within six months a 250-foot channel was created through the lower jam, and in two more years a 125-foot channel was cut through the upper jam. By 1879 sternwheelers navigated the course. It took eight more years to send the remaining logs out to sea.

Now the Skagit River was cleared for navigation, and news of gold strikes on Ruby and Canyon creeks brought prospectors, as many as 5,000 miners according to accounts.

Land claims were established above Mount Vernon with Minkler's sawmill begun in 1878 at Lyman and the first up-river post office at Birdsvew. Sternwheelers called at four fixed trading posts: Fir, Skagit City, Mount Vernon and Ball's Landing at Sterling. That year heavy snows brought high water all summer long and several steamboats went as far up the Skagit as the Portage, nearly 110 miles above Marblemount.

During the short-lived Ruby Creek gold rush six steamers plied the upriver route, carrying passengers to mine and farm. This travel resulted in a de- →

mand for way stations and stores, and the demand was answered at pioneer sites which became Sedro Woolley, Hamilton, Birdsvew, Concrete, Rockport and Marblemount, with the largest established at Goodell's Landing. The fare upriver from Mount Vernon in 1880 was \$12 and the trip took 2½ days.

By 1883 there were 15 logging camps in the upper Skagit. Log booms were made up to be towed downstream by the sternwheelers, and managing a log tow became the most exacting and skillful of operations on the river.

Hundred of horses and oxen were used in logging, and heavy shipments of hay and oats from the Skagit flats to the logging camps made big profits for farmers. Gill-netting in the river also prospered, and boats went upriver and loaded the barrels of fish, then hauled them to canneries in La Conner and Anacortes. Many local men turned from logging to fishing.

There were several steamer disasters in 1883. The *Gem*, loaded with hay, burned and sank in deep water through carelessness in operation. The *Fanny Lake* ran into a rock on Dead Man Riffle and sank in a few minutes. The *Josephine* under Captain Bailey blew up and flew in two directions. The crownsheet went up, carrying the pilot house and deckhouse; the rest of the boiler went down taking most of the boat's bottom along.

The hold was full of wood which kept the shattered hull afloat, bottom up, with eight of the crew and passengers dead.

What was left of *Josephine* was towed by another steamer, *Polly*, to Tulalip Bay to be

righted, patched, pumped and rebuilt.

Frequent flooding and dislodging of the log jams at Mount Vernon resulted in great amounts of drift and snags at the mouth of the Skagit. The government finally appropriated \$20,000 for removal of navigational barriers, but the building of the snagboat *Skagit*, 114-feet long with a beam of 31-feet, so depleted the fund that there was no money for operation. It did, however, make a first trip and was hailed with delight as it removed dangerous snags from the river's mouth up to Lyman.

Residents of the valley were beginning to make their needs known in regard to mail and passenger service. It took a week to ten days for mail to travel from La Conner to Mount Vernon, but a change in postal service came when the *City of Quincy* began carrying the mail, joined by the *Glide*, an 80-foot Seattle freighter.

The *Henry Bailey* began the run upriver in 1888. The manifest of trip No. 1 to trip No. 93 showed cargo made up of



shingles, boom chains, a cow and calf, hides, flannel, tobacco, whiskey, mill supplies, candy, sewing machines, boots and shoes; all basic needs of the pioneers. On her first trip she earned \$190 from passengers and the same from cargo.

Joshua Green, later a Seattle banker, was 19 when he began his career as purser on the *Henry Bailey*, and the possibilities in transportation so impressed the young man that the next year he persuaded the other officers of the *Henry Bailey* to join him in the purchase of a steamer.

They borrowed \$5,000 and bought the *Fanny Lake*, the little boat which had been wrecked and repaired. She was ideal for work on the lower river and La Conner flats.

Sternwheelers would often go into sloughs off the river when the tide was in, to pick up hay, grain, hops and potatoes. Three blasts of the whistle signaled the farmer, even in the middle of the night, and deckhands worked feverishly to get back into the channel before the tide left them stranded.

Fanny Lake worked so successfully that within a year she enabled her owners to pay off their loan. Joshua Green was launched in the shipping business on Puget Sound and soon owned a fleet of steamers. *

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The story of Eerkes Hill

When we came to Oak Harbor in 1925, the town's main street, then called Barrington Avenue, extended from "downtown's" two blocks of stores on the east along the waterfront where about six homes faced the water. At the end of that was "Eerkes Hill" (Victory Homes), where stood a big square two-story house which was the home of the Eerkes brothers, Herman and John.

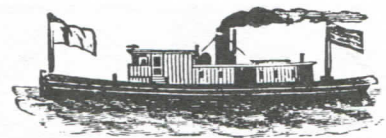
John was married and had a family, and his brother was a bachelor. Their father lived with their two younger sisters and brother just a stone's throw down the road.

Eerkes Hill was a wind-swept vista of pasture with trees here and there, a place where shooting stars and dogtooth violets bloomed in the springtime. The farm was a going concern as much as any farm was in those days just before the "Great

Depression" of the late 1920s and the '30s. The road continued from the Eerkes house on east to the narrow spit that connected Maylor's Point with the mainland. And from the spit northward along the beach was the "Big Spring" that had been there since primeval days, where the Indians used to stop for fresh water.

Before the Eerkes family came to Oak Harbor in the mid-1890s with the first wave of Dutch immigrants, a man by the name of A.W. Bash had taken land and built the big square farmhouse and buildings there in the 1880s. The Bash home was where the Navy "gate" to the Seaplane Base (now Skagit Valley College) is located.

Bash was an internationally known figure. He was a collector of customs at Port Townsend and lived there as well as



in Oak Harbor. After the Japanese-Chinese War, Bash decided to go to China to introduce American ideas about railroads. He was acquainted with Secretary of the Treasury John W. Foster, who was a good friend of Li Hung Chang, the Chinese statesman.

Li Hung Chang thought that the United States had only one statesman, and that was President Grant, who had been entertained by the Chinese in China. Chang was mostly impressed with Grant's whiskers, and A.W. Bash grew his whiskers in the same manner as did the president. That made them equally famous.

Bash and the great Chinese became fast friends, and when Bash was a guest in Chang's home, the Chinese had him sit in the seat occupied by Grant when he was a guest in his home!

Chang was supportive of Bash's ambitions to build railroads in China, and Bash spent much time between Washington, D.C. and the East Coast and China. An article in the Seattle Times predicted that Bash, if he realized his ambitions, would soon become a millionaire!

In the meantime, Mrs. Bash, when not accompanying her husband in his journeys half-way around the world, lived at Oak Harbor. An article in the Island County Times of Sept. 20, 1895, read: "Mrs. Bash, who was with her husband in Seattle for a few days, returned to her home in Oak Harbor."

We often wondered what the lady did with her time. There →



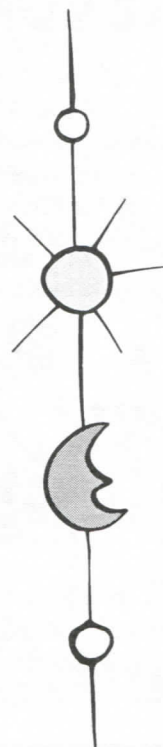
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was little in Oak Harbor to keep her busy. Perhaps her Port Townsend home was a little livelier, with the ships coming and going in that frontier harbor town.

Oak Harbor had fewer than 100 people living inside its boundaries. L.P. Byrne maintained a hostelry and store just down the road toward the other part of town where Maylor's Store was the principal building.

If the Bashes had children, they may have been grown, for no mention is made of them in available information.

One happening which dropped Bash's standing on Whidbey Island was his importation of Chinese pheasants which he turned loose to propagate and become "natives" of Whidbey. The farmers were angry, saying the birds would eat valuable grains and become a nuisance. But once loosed, the birds bred and became plentiful, and finally the farmers accepted the amount of grain they ate as negligible.

Fully occupied with his railroad building, the Bashes sold the big square house in Oak Harbor to the Eerkes family and left, never to be heard from again.

When the Navy came to North Whidbey, the Eerkes Hill property and the Eerkes farm were the first to be taken over by the government, and the Eerkes brothers and their family moved to Skagit County.

The buildings, when nearing 60 years old, were torn down and where dog-tooth violets grew housing sprouted, and where the house and farm buildings stood, the gate the Seaplane Base stood. *



This pre-1900 photo of what was then the main business district of Oak Harbor was taken from the roof of Maylor General Store, with the Ely orchard at left. Looking east, it features the L.P. Byrne complex that burned in the early 1920s, causing the town to move west. At right in the distance is the Bash house, which later became the Eerkes Farm.

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Memories of an old Freeland house

Memories of the past were revived when the old Millman house on South Whidbey was torn down to make way for a new way of life, and new memories.

The log house, built by Robert and Octavia Millman in 1900, had been through the years almost completely covered with ivy, with only a small patch of roof showing between the vines.

In the days when South Whidbey was sparsely settled, the Millmans came to Whidbey Island from Missouri following a dream. The dream was a small Socialist settlement on Holmes Harbor called Freeland, where the main attraction was a logging camp.

Soon after their arrival, however, the Millmans became disenchanted with the Socialist organization and withdrew, building their home on what has been known since as Millman Road, between Double Bluff Road and Useless Bay Road.

The logs that built the house came from the forest, and the cedar shakes for the roof were split by hand. Many of the log beams were hand-hewn. But to Octavia, used to the framed houses of the east, the log house was not a thing of beauty, so she planted ivy to cover the logs. Long before the house was torn down the ivy became its outstanding feature.

The two pioneers from Missouri, with their three sons, soon became the nucleus of the South Whidbey community. In Puget Sound, where a doctor might be two days away by Indian canoe, and where hotels were unknown, the Millman house became the refuge of travelers. Octavia became the midwife for the area and

delivered hundreds of babies over the years. Robert Millman had a knack for doctoring and was frequently called upon to set broken bones and pull teeth.

Hunting accidents were frequent as were logging accidents. There was always a patient or two at the Millman home, as well as travelers.

Robert not only was skilled in doctoring but in carpentry. Their house was the first in the area to have plastered interior walls. The plaster was made from beach sand and mixed with horsehair as a binder. People came from miles around to see the plastered walls that held fast for over 80 years.

The family planted an orchard of apple, pear, cherry and plum trees that still bear fruit, and according to James Millman, youngest son of the couple, who was 11 years old when the family came to Whidbey, the fruit was dried for winter use. James was interviewed in 1982 by Lorinda Kay of the South Whidbey Record.

Growing up in Freeland just after the turn of the century, James and his brothers often took the noon boat from Langley which carried them to La Conner and then back to Seattle. Traveling around the Island people either walked or canoed. There were no roads between North and South Whidbey.

Lucile Millman Roberts, granddaughter of Octavia and Robert now living in Seattle, told about moving to the Millman farm after her father died from an injury he received in Canada. She lived with her grandparents for six or seven years and remembers well the old log house, climbing the steep staircase to the upstairs

bedrooms and playing in the orchard. She was told that Indians had helped build the house. Her grandmother told her that when she was pregnant with her fourth child, Indians would bring her smoked salmon to eat. Her baby died and so Octavia adopted another baby girl and named her Eva, the youngest of the Millman clan.

The Millman house was used for some time by Seventh Day Adventists congregation before they built their church. Robert Millman was chairman of the local school board and was also one of a group to start the Bayview Cemetery. The Millmans were always active in the community.

When the homestead was bought by Howard Sievers who developed the Useless Bay Colony, he allowed James Millman to continue to live in the house for as long as he wished.

Despite efforts by the Historical Society to save it, the Millman log house was destroyed. It was said the ivy overruled any effort to save the structure.

"Many held the old log home in high regard, it symbolized a way of life now gone. Even in its heyday people said there was something special about it, perhaps because the Millmans never turned away a stranger in need."

James Millman, asked why it was such a special house, quoted an old Swedish woman who said, "There is a feeling of goodness about this house." He finally observed, "People came there, babies were born there, people died there . . . it's been lived in." *



Above: Coupeville's Front Street about World War I.

Below: Oak Harbor's main street about the time the Navy arrived in 1940.

