

# Clover Valley? Where's that?

**W**e were making small-talk, like "How do you like living in Clover Valley?"

A puzzled look and a pause. "Clover Valley? Where's that?"

The Navy Chief had lived there for three years. He had never seen any clover, he said. The Naval Air Station is located in Clover Valley? Another amazed pause. "Fantastic!"

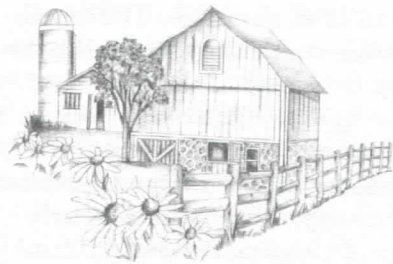
His friend, the First Class, had never heard of it either. Neither had their friend, the Commander. They were interested, but not very. Shrug. Everything has a history, even the Navy. So what's so great about a place called Clover Valley? A good spot for a run-way or two.

Clover Valley! Whattaya know!

**Back in** the prehistoric days before World War II the Valley was selected by the Navy because there was less fog in that area than any place else hereabout. It is a low place that runs from the west side of Whidbey Island to the east side, where Dugualla Bay indents the land.

A few thousand years ago it was a through-waterway; as few as 70 years ago Dugualla swept in past where the highway is now located, with water deep enough for boats and barges. Tumbling creeks ran into the Dugualla, creeks large enough for trout.

"Dugualla" means "haven" in the Indian language, and was a familiar rest stop for paddlers. They'd have a hard time finding a haven at Dugualla now when the southeast wind blows! The creeks with trout gave up long ago, and the bay



itself was successfully diked and drained to produce lush fields.

**Then came** the 1890s and a flood of new settlers arrived including many nationalities. They were to a large extent Hollanders from the Dakotas and Michigan looking for farmland. And where they could be free from the age-old fear of sea-water born in every Dutchman.

It is said many of the Hollanders investigated the rich farming areas of Skagit Valley, but found the river flooded yearly. In those days the Skagit had not been contained with satisfactory dikes. So they came to Whidbey Island which had no rivers and was protected from tidal flooding.

San de Fuca, Clover Valley, Swantown and Crescent Harbor, rich lands under a generation or two of backbreaking work.

**They worked** in pole camps and anywhere they could find employment, in order to pay for their land. Slowly they cleared such places as Clover Valley with horses and by hand, and slowly the rich bottom land emerged from standing timber and deadfalls in time to produce potatoes and wheat and clover and oats.

Charlie Nienhuis' small sawmill produced lumber for

neat homes and barns, and these United States citizens from Holland took their place in government and business, built their own churches and their children grew up without a trace of accent in their speech.

**Then came the Navy**, and the country in crisis! Some of the houses built by Dutch pioneers still stand on the outskirts of what became the Navy base. Some were moved, they were built that well. Families who had lived in Clover Valley for generations pulled stakes without many backward looks.

They were "Americans." The country needed their land if there was to be any land for anyone. The war was upon us and them, and Whidbey Island.

**History is not** all great causes and noble deeds. History is heartache and tears and sacrifice. And mostly change. Change may come as it did to Clover Valley in 1941, or it may come gradually without hardly anyone noticing. And people forget, especially those who experienced no heartache. New people move in and start new lives, new traditions, new history.

It has always been thus. But in years to come, someone browsing through dusty books on a hidden shelf may come across "Clover Valley" and find that underneath the hangars and the runways, apartment houses, schools and barracks and great paved areas in an archaeological "dig", there was once a place, like Camelot . . . called Clover Valley! ✈



# First the Dutch . . . then the Navy

**Dutch settlers** who came to Clover Valley on North Whidbey did not find a primrose path. Instead, they found acres of forest to clear by hand and with horse power, crops to plant on the cleared land, cabins to build, and their families to care for.

When Klass Nicolai came from the Netherlands to Canada, he stayed there two years before moving to North Whidbey. Mrs. Dick Van Rensum, born Dena Nicolai, was four when she came with her parents.

She remembered that her father found plenty to do in the fertile valley where trees produced lumber for homes and where home grown fruits and vegetables were the Hollanders' staff of life.

In an interview in 1970 Mrs. Van Rensum recalled that her mother was the midwife for the Valley, and people came from all over North Whidbey to have Mrs. Nicolai help them with cuts and bruises. When a baby was due in the area and the one doctor found that she was with his patient, "he knew she would be all right until he got there."

Klass worked as a farm hand in Clover Valley and cleared his own land as he could. Stores in Oak Harbor remained open later at night so farmers could buy provisions after the long work day. Klass walked to town at night and carried groceries for the family in two gunny sacks across his shoulders.

Dena recalled hearing him coming from the top of the hill, singing and whistling. "He was a happy man," she said.

**Highlight** of the week was Sunday, when young people walked twice a day from the



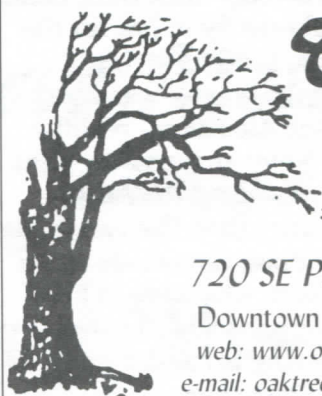
Nienhuis family grew huge potatoes on their Clover Valley farm.

Valley to church in Oak Harbor. Dena's first husband was Dick Gerritson who worked for Antone Muller on his Crescent Harbor farm, referred to as the "Gould Ranch." When Gerritson died, his widow married Dick Van Rensum.

Dena told how many of the Hollanders on North Whidbey came with little money, but a great sense of survival. They worked for their neighbors to get enough money to feed and clothe their families, and before and after work cleared land of timber and planted, built homes and barns.

Some of the Dutch families who lived in Clover Valley were Riksen, Nienhuis, Ronhaar, Kammenga, Kamps, Abrahamse, Beeksma, Harsch, John Smith, Tjeerdsma, Jongwaard, Andrew Smith, Hiram Smith, Koetje, Van Nieuwenhuizen, Balda, Perersma, Nicolai, Heller, Ploegsma, DeWilde, Faber and Eerkes.

The old homesteads have vanished into the Navy runways, schools, barracks and administration sites of Ault Field, but many of the succeeding generations still live and work on North Whidbey.



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# Little Chicago never really got started

by Dorothy Neil

The ferry from Port Townsend approaches its Whidbey Island moorage to take on the long line of cars making the trip across the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Tired tourists wait patiently, gazing out toward the Olympic Mountains to the southwest, wondering what might be on top of the hill to the right, just above the camping area.

One hundred years ago there was no ferry but passenger boats plied between the Island and Peninsula, when Port Townsend was a bustling pioneer settlement.

To the east of the ferry site sat Crockett Lake, a vast waterway, with a bridge extending from the salt water to the other side of the lake. When the bridge was built, there was a budding small town called Little Chicago on the sandspit, with a number of homes, a store and a hotel, being promoted as a future metropolis until the 1883 "depression" took its toll.

When the Crockett family completed the barn which still stands just outside the old gate to Fort Casey, a big barn dance was held and people came from all over Whidbey as well as from the Peninsula to partake of the Crockett family hospitality.

The "crash" of 1883 was mitigated in the Whidbey area by the news that a government fort was to be built at Admiralty Head, where Fort Casey now stands. Bids for excavation and concrete work were opened on Aug. 11, 1897 and workers got \$1.65 for a ten-



*Near Fort Casey: This strip of land between Crockett Lake and Puget Sound was in a strategic location for business and transportation to Port Townsend, until the Army put it off limits because of a fight in one of the taverns resulting in a man's death. Then Little Chicago, too, died.*

hour work day!

Fort Casey was on its way to becoming a reality, and Little Chicago residents were promised a living again.

**What happened** to Little Chicago? Because of a big fight in one of the taverns which resulted in "the death of John Dollar," the Army put the town "off limits," thus completing the "strip's demise."

When the Big Guns were first fired on Sept. 11, 1901,

Fort Casey recorded an event that shook the island! It was reported from Coupeville that John LeSourd's horses ran away at the unexpected noise, and as late as the 1920s occasional bursts of fire from the big guns of Casey shook the Island and its inhabitants.

Forty-some years later a new "fort" was established on North Whidbey when the U.S. Naval Air Station was installed.

Coupeville is still complaining about the noise.



## Still more Island history "The Dutch Book"

Dorothy Neil traces the Island's Dutch Heritage in  
"The Dutch Book, Celebrating 100 Years On  
Whidbey Island, 1894-1994."

The "Dutch Book" is available at Island stores, or call (360) 675-2844. Price of \$8.58 includes tax; \$10.00 mailed anywhere in the U.S. Make checks out to Island Images, 651 SE Bayshore Dr. C102, Oak Harbor, WA 98277.



# Mount Vernon has changed a lot, too!

Mount Vernon, that bustling small town on the banks of the Skagit River in Skagit County, was first settled in 1870 by two men, Jasper Gates and Joseph F. Dwelley, Gates preceding Dwelley by some months and thereby becoming the "Father of Mount Vernon" in historical circles.

By 1872 there was a number of settlers who arrived, and enough children for the settlers to demand a school. A hut originally built for a barn was the school site, and after one year the district built a log cabin schoolhouse. The first teachers were Ida Lanning, G. E. Hartson and L. M. Wood.

Although there were settlers and a school, the actual founding of the town of Mount Vernon wasn't until March of 1877.

Messrs. Clothier and English laid out the new townsite and named it after George Washington's home, a ten acre site purchased by Jasper Gates for one hundred dollars!

These two men were the pioneer businessmen of the new little town, locating a little store on the bank of the Skagit. The merchants laid out the townsite, consisting of two tiers of blocks, the one on the river being named Front Street, and the next one Main.

The entire townsite was densely covered with brush and timber

In 1877, Clothier was appointed Postmaster, succeeded four years later by his partner. The little town began to grow, with restaurants, hotels and saloons. The first hotel was built near the store on the east



side of Front street, at a cost of \$150!

There was very little money in circulation, and Clothier and English dealt mostly in furs and hides. Sometimes forty dollars worth of beaver skins would be received at the store in a single day.

The big log jam on the Skagit interfered with steamboat passage, and mail carriers had to go from Mount Vernon to Skagit City in a canoe. Jasper Gates was awarded the contract in 1877 to carry the mail weekly on this canoe route.

In the next few years, a few homes were built by loggers, and through the influence of the Ruby Creek mines development began slowly. On Jan. 21, 1881 there was a permanent population of 75 people.

By the time the population reached 1,000 in 1890, the city was incorporated with C. D. Kimball as mayor. Things were moving fast.

In 1906, the Pacific Coast Condensed Milk Company's plant was nearing completion, and by the first of the year the Carnation Company began operation, with the milk cow

becoming the queen of the Skagit Valley.

Mount Vernon became home of the largest and most modernly equipped milk condensing plant in the world!

In 1902 the big family of William and Mary Colvin Harris came from Missouri to Mount Vernon with three boys and six girls. Mary Colvin Harris had been raised in the family of Jasper Gates after her mother died when she was three, and the Gates family asked them to come to the new little town on the Skagit.

Grandpa Harris and his three boys were brick layers at a time when brick buildings and chimneys made a profitable living.

Arriving in Mount Vernon he took a quick look at the town's location and bought a small acreage at the "top of the hill" that had a two story frame farmhouse and room for orchard and garden.

He bought as far away as he could from Main Street, saying that he wasn't about to have his girls "walking the streets!" Especially in a town where ►



# Dorothy Neil remembers how it was

every other business was a saloon.

Mother's sister Rose was ill and so she took her to Mesa, Arizona for recovery and there she met my father, who was working at his first job out of college as a Pharmacist in the Mesa drug store. They were married, and in 1910 migrated up north to Mount Vernon where her family had put down roots.

**I was one year old** and my early days were spent there. Dad couldn't find a job as pharmacist so he took the job as chemist for the new Carnation Milk Company.

An interurban ran from Mount Vernon to Bellingham, along the Chuckanut route, and at least one weekend during the summer, members of the family took tents and camping gear via interurban to Chuckanut for a weekend outing.

The old wooden viaduct over the railroad tracks was a special place from which to watch the passing trains sending up billowing black clouds of smoke.

We remember the PowWow Days in Mount Vernon, with floats, clowns and bands in parade down Main Street. One Fourth of July, my little friend Dorothy Hildebrand and myself (aged about 11) dressed in red crepe paper dresses, walked beside the Carnation Company float the length of the parade route, and were taken to have ice cream sundaes by Jim Thompson, superintendent of the milk company!

We also remember vividly the year our grandfather William

Harris, was honored in the parade as "The Last Civil War soldier" in Mount Vernon.

**We started school** at Roosevelt school, then transferred to Lincoln in the fourth grade. Lincoln was a two story wood frame building, and we remember vividly the Principal playing "Columbia the Gem of the Ocean" for us to march in to class after recess or noon. We never found out if she could play anything else!

**Growing up** not far from Grandma and Grandpa's home "on the hill" we recall the family picnics held at "the smokehouse" on the river where Grandpa's rowboat was tethered, and where he smoked the salmon he caught.

There were the holiday gatherings at their house during the winters, when the big wooden water tank on Tenth Street leaked gallons which froze into a solid block of ice, and where we hacked off enough to make homemade ice cream at Grandma's.

We went to church at the Christian Church downtown, a big wooden church where Grandpa was a Deacon, and where, as a three year old we sat between our mother and father in the church choir (there were no nurseries in those days).

We lived on Division Street where a garage and woodshed plus a chicken coop was built on the alley, but we had no car, so the garage became the site of the summertime "Play House" or theater. We marshalled the neighborhood kids together to perform plays,

dances, etc., for the neighborhood mothers who bought tickets at five cents each to see their offspring perform.

This too was the site of our very own flower garden, where we raised sweet peas which we sold by the bouquet to downtown meat markets in the summertime!

And the big hump of soil over the septic tank became a garden of poppies in the summer!

A big front porch graced the house where mother and dad sat in the summer to play the mandolin and guitar during the evenings. Those passing by (there were few cars) would stop or walk slowly by to hear the music!

**We remember** our Dad who was a hunter, who got up early on a Saturday and Mother got breakfast for him and his hunting friend, Johnny Nelson at 5 a.m.! And how old Jack, the pointer hunting dog who raised us kids, had a warm place to sleep beside the kitchen stove during hunting season! And we kids had strict instruction not to bother him!







*Island County's first courthouse at San de Fuca is now a private residence.*

## The Hanging Tree at the old Courthouse

The old courthouse building which still stands at the head of Penn Cove, was built during the administration of Isaac Stevens, Governor of Washington Territory. It became the site of the first and only execution to take place on Whidbey Island.

An Indian killed a Mr. Church who had settled and built a small trading post in Crescent Harbor. He was killed

for his watch and gold rings that he foolishly displayed.

The Indian was sentenced to death, and a scaffold built just south of the courthouse. A great crowd, mostly Indians, gathered for the event.

Thomas Hastie was one of the guards assigned to a large unfinished storehouse, which made a good place for them to keep an eye on any possible disturbance.

But the Indians came forward and with arms upraised to heaven chanted a prayer to the Great God. They kept this up for an hour or more, then the Sheriff gave the signal and the hanging took place.

A hundred years or so later, a fir tree growing by the shore was designated by some as the "hanging tree," but according to Hastie's account the hanging took place on a scaffold.



## More Island history!

# "The Irish Book"

(we were here first!)

Dorothy Neil's most recent book. Available at local book stores or from Island Images, Inc., 651 SE Bayshore Dr., Oak Harbor, WA 98277, for only \$10, which includes tax.

360-675-2844

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# Crescent Harbor history bits and pieces

Caleb Miller, who settled Miller's Point (now Polnell) in Crescent Harbor in the 1850s, was appointed the first Oak Harbor Postmaster in 1862. He held the position for only about six months as he found he could not lease or buy a place in Oak Harbor for the office.

As a result there was no post office in Oak Harbor as late as 1875.

Coveland, at the head of Penn Cove where San de Fuca is located today, had the nearest post office to Oak Harbor, and James Buzby of Crescent Harbor served as Postmaster there part of the time.

The mail was delivered to Oak Harbor by Thomas Nunan on horseback and later by his son George.

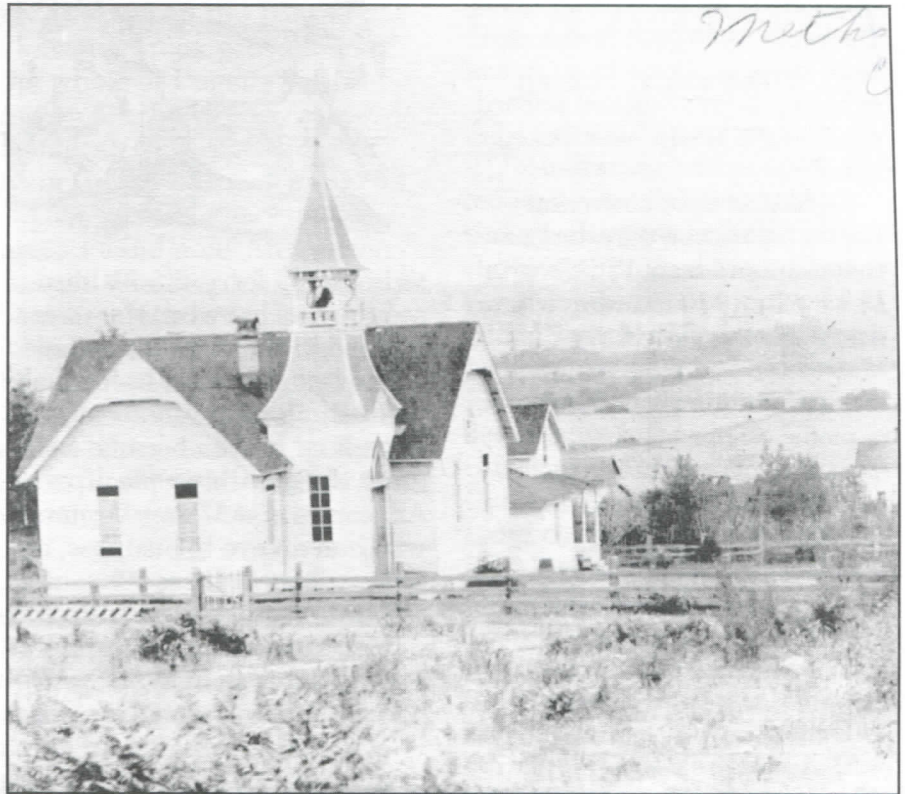
Beyond Crescent Harbor, Silver Lake settlers in the Strawberry Point area, got their mail at Utsalady on Camano Island, or at La Conner, as the trip to these places was shorter and easier by canoe than the hazardous 8 to 10 miles by horseback to Oak Harbor.

**Another interesting** settler in Crescent Harbor in 1868, was John Gould, who was a neighbor to John Izett. He was a farseeing businessman and became very wealthy by early day standards.

Gould came from Pennsylvania where he was a millwright, had traveled to the California gold fields where he made his stake, then came to Whidbey Island.

He owned land on Ebey's Prairie and in Mukilteo as well as his Crescent Harbor farm.

Gould married an Indian girl



*First Island Methodist Church & Parsonage at Crescent Harbor.*

by native rites and Indian custom, and they had one son, Dan.

Dan was sent to Pennsylvania to school where he learned the printer's trade. His mother died, and his father married her sister, Sallie.

Two girls, Sarah and Mary were born to that marriage.

Mary Gould and Henrietta Izett Frostad became close friends, and Henrietta gave us this insight into the problems of those pioneer families.

**When Gould's** family was grown, Jerome Ely of Oak Harbor suggested to Gould that he make a will for his family and "marry Sallie to make the will legal."

Sallie had never thought she was not legally married, because according to the custom


of her people "we went to everyone's house and told them we were to live together."

However, Henrietta recalled that when the children were small, she told her friend Henrietta that she had begged John Gould to marry her "like white folks."

Later, when through the advice of Ely, Gould finally decided it was expedient to legalize the marriage according to white man's laws, Sally had her inning.

"I let him wait, now he wants to marry me!"

They finally agreed to get married legally, thus making the marriage legal according to "white man's laws."

Sally, Dan and Mary all died of tuberculosis, the white man's disease that was such a scourge among the Indians. 



**'Dad' Smith  
saved many  
oak trees by  
donating park**

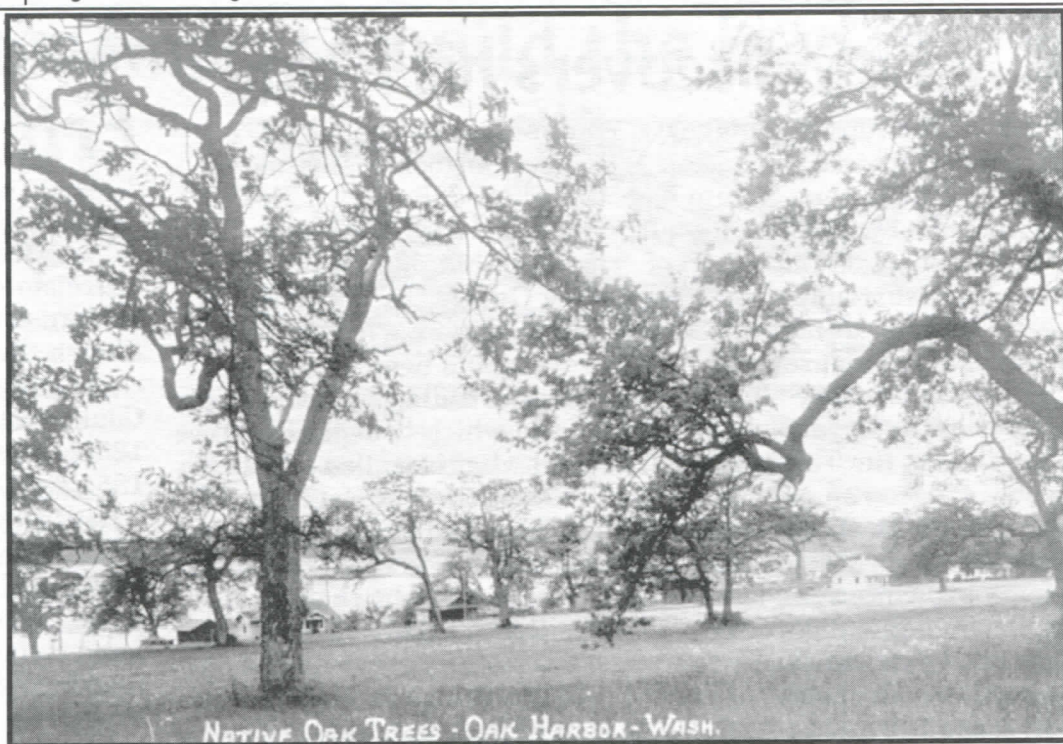
Smith Park was donated to the town of Oak Harbor by Frank "Dad" Smith, an early resident. The park is mostly a large stand of Garry Oaks, for which the town is named.

The oak tree grove was used for many years by Indians and pioneer families as a gathering place for picnics and celebrations; the

white families bringing their picnic baskets and Indians cooking salmon and clams by traditional methods, and all enjoying the outing.

Foot and horse races, band music and speeches by a "Boston" VIP and the local Indian Chief, contributed over the years to the festivities under the Garry Oaks.

As late as the 1940s, Smith Park, locally known as Oak Tree Park, was an unmown springtime medley of shooting stars, dogtooth violets, tiger lilies and buttercups . . . all native Whidbey Island wild flowers.



## *A Great Gift Anytime*

### **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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