

Skagit Valley Herald

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Log Jam Removal Helps City Grow

Editor's Note: The following historical article about Skagit County was published 10 years ago in The Seattle Times

Strange are the quirks that sometimes dictate the destinies of a town or a region. Consider the Skagit Valley, where the removal of old log jams from the Skagit River hastened the death of one town and undoubtedly contributed much to growth of the thriving modern community of Mount Vernon.

The huge log barriers from time immemorial had blocked the river and affected early fortunes of the valley after the white man's arrival. Had it not been for the initiative and perseverance of pioneer settlers, who bent to the almost insurmountable task of eliminating the jams, the demise of Skagit City, then the area's principal town, would have been postponed, and Mount Vernon might not have become the sizable city it is today.

Only a Name

Skagit City now is just a name on the map. You can find it on Fir Island between the North and South Forks of the Skagit. The old townsite is divided into farms, the school in a community clubhouse and little else remains to show that here once was a thriving community.

The perilous and heartbreakingly slow removal of two great log jams in the river marked the turning point of the town's

fortunes, as well as those of the entire region. One jam lay a mile north of Mount Vernon and the other about half a mile below, presenting an obstacle to further settlement upstream.

According to Mrs. W.A. Hammack, Mount Vernon pioneer. In 1879 there were four trading posts on the lower Skagit: Skagit City; Mann's Landing (later called Fir), about four miles farther south; Mount Vernon and Ball's Landing, now called Sterling, near Sedro-Woolley.

Was Carpenter

Mrs. Hammack's father, Mangus Anderson, a ship's carpenter, came to the Pacific Coast by way of Cape Horn in 1869. Her mother, who came from Sweden a year earlier, married Anderson in Seattle in 1873. The young couple, the first Scandinavians to settle in the Skagit area, journeyed by boat up the Swinomish to LaConner, and homesteaded 160 acres, building what now is the only remaining log cabin on the North Fork of the Skagit River. Two of Mrs. Hammack's sisters were born in the cabin, which later was owned by Matt Bessner and now is the Miller property.

The desire for closer neighbors and access to trading posts caused the Andersons to move in the spring of 1878 to the Fir district, five miles below the site of Mount Vernon. Their belongings were transported by rowboat and barge.

Establish Post

The farm they moved to had been owned by W.H. Sartwell, who with two other men established the Sartwell, Todd & Kincaid trading post.

Mrs. Hamack recalls that her father had the first team of horses in the Skagit area and drove the first team across Pleasant Ridge from LaConner. Her parents were the first couple, too, to drive with horse and wagon from Fir to Mount Vernon. This was no pleasure trip, but hard work. They made their way along a river trail, cutting undergrowth.

“There was always too much going on for anyone to be lonesome in those days,” Mrs. Hammack says. “Indians were always underfoot. Even at that time they lived on reservations. We used to give them clothing and fruit. They would sell us clams; we paid ‘two bits’ for a bucketful. We had good friends among the Indians. I remember especially Old Lame Annie. And I have watched the Indian medicine man performing his ritual.

See Salmon

“As for the salmon, you never have seen them as we did in the early days. My aunt, Mrs. John Swanson, who lived two miles south of us on the river used to come to visit us by rowboat, arriving ‘on the tide.’ She would tell of seeing such schools of salmon that she was afraid they would jump into the boat and of being afraid for fear of hitting them with the oars. “There were frequent public gatherings at Skagit City. In the 1870’s, people coming in canner and towboats, as the trails had not yet become passable for conveyances of any kind.”

Mrs. Hammack recalls that the arrival of the steamboat from Seattle was the main event of each month, with the inhabitants down to the smallest child, gathering to see it land at Skagit City.

She added:

Boats Whistle

“The boats whistled at Fir going north, and at the bend of the river going south – this was a half mile north of our farm.”

Perhaps it was the mutterings of their fathers, when the floodwaters of the Skagit so frequently threatened crops and homes, that caused the youngsters to chant in mimicry: “Damn the Skagit, damn the Skagit!” to the tune of chugging river boats as they raced the vessels along the trails lining the river banks.

The epic of the great log jams in the river is remembered now by only a few. Indians said the big jams had been in existence as long as their forefathers could remember. The logs were packed so solidly the river could be crossed in their vicinity at almost any point. Upon this mass of rotten debris grew moss, undergrowth and groves of trees reaching two and three feet in diameter. The torrents of the Skagit forced their way-through in some places in furious cascades. In other spots black pools would. . . filled with fish.