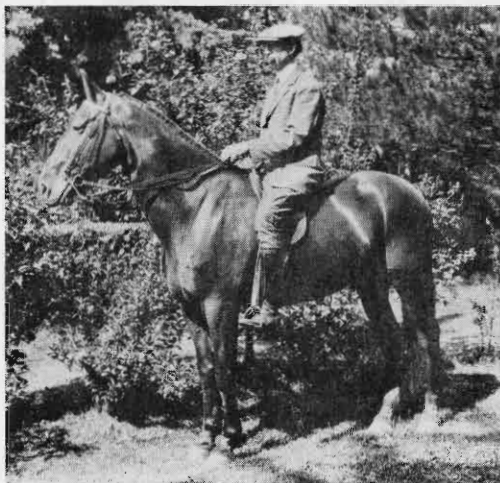


STEILACOOM HISTORICAL



MUSEUM QUARTERLY

Volume 22, Number 3

Fall, 1993

Steilacoom 1920-1940

This issue of the Quarterly is dedicated to the two decades between the world wars, 1920 and 1940, and to the people of Steilacoom who lived through it.

Steilacoom looked forward to a promising era as 1920 arrived. The war was over, a new business, Cascade Paper Company on Chambers Creek, was employing many townspeople, the McNeil Island prison had just built a dock at the foot of Union Avenue, and it was time to enjoy life in the small community of 564 people. However, Steilacoom never remains tranquil for long.

While the new Oberlin choir director W. E. Morris was bringing in additional members, the Town Council was grappling with requests to extend electrical and water services through town and demands to improve the streets. In exasperation the clerk was directed to write Mr. Doering that a

(continued on page 4)

The Steilacoom Historical Museum Quarterly is issued as the official publication of the Steilacoom Historical Museum Association. Mail correspondence to the Editor, Box 88016, Steilacoom, WA 98388. Telephone: (206) 584-4133

Joan Curtis, Bette Bradley—Editors

Bob Volkmer.....President Arline Brightman..... Vice-President
Jeanne Birney Secretary Wolf Fletter.....Treasurer
John WatsonPast President Patricia Laughlin Registrar/Collections
Trustees: M. Clinton Cannon, Anne Daubenspeck, Milt Davidson, Dave Hudson, Jane Light, H. L. Shellabarger, Sandy Strother, Doug Wing

Front page photo: W. E. Morris, Mayor of Steilacoom, 1926-1930 and 1936-1948. See story on page 10.

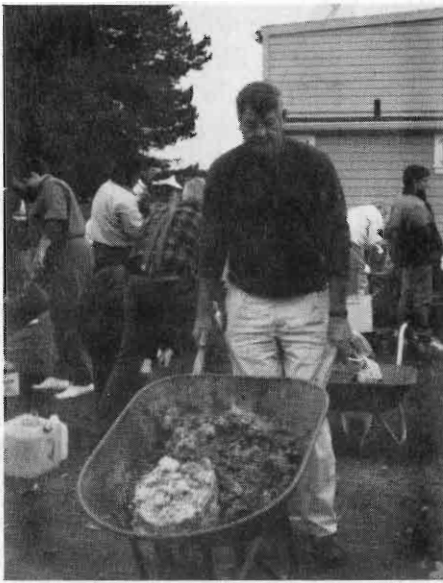
Back page photo: Nancy Hellyer

President's Letter

In case you haven't noticed, summer's over. I'm not sure when it ended. The Salmon Bake is over, too. We made two thousand dollars. We will continue to pursue ideas for other fund raisers. We have no intentions for discontinuing the bake. It is too much of a tradition. Research disclosed it has averaged two thousand dollars profit for several years now. We are increasing our gift shop operation to help generate a stable income. You may now do most of your Christmas shopping at the museum or the Bair.

We are waiting for cost estimates on the Orr Home. Repairs will be expensive. We are going to have to hunt the big grants and will be needing volunteers for that enterprise. We are contracting for a new roof for the Bair. The store needs a new door and window, too. This shall be done before the rains.

I am devoting this final part of my letter to thank the following: Susan and Milt Davidson and Bob Hollister for an exceptionally pleasant wine tasting party at the Davidsons' in August; Dave Hudson and Lyle Dunkin for doing the interior of the Wagon Shop; Marianne Bull and Arline Brightman for doing most of the work at our Wagon Shop sale; Marianne Bull and Trish Laughlin for getting us another grant; our Town government and its staff for all the help they have given us over the years and our school district for the assistance they



have provided to our two fund raisers for years. Lastly I want to thank all our volunteers without whom we would promptly perish. Incidentally, remember the Apple Squeeze is October 17. Bring your money and checkbooks. We do not accept plastic.

Bob Volkmer

Bob Volkmer asks you to volunteer your help with the Apple Squeeze.

Museum Awarded Special Grant

A General Operating Support Grant Award of \$11,835 is to be made to the Steilacoom Historical Museum. Ours is one of the ten museums in the state to receive this award.

The Institute of Museum Services, a federal agency in Washington D.C. which offers support to the nation's museums, awarded this grant to help offset a portion of the museum's operating fund. The museum has been a recipient of this prestigious award for several years.

Calendar

Apple Squeeze - October 17, 1993

Bair Store Benefit Dinner - October 30, 1993

Annual Christmas Dinner - December 4, 1993

pot hole had not been filled on Lexington Street as instructed and, if it was not done in a reasonable time, a warrant would be issued for his arrest. A petition was initiated protesting the filling in of the railroad trestle over the Fifth Street Waterway, and a request for vacation at the foot of Montgomery Street was denied. (Some things never change.)

Citizens looking for ways to promote the town organized the Steilacoom Chamber of Commerce and established a Tourist Bureau. The Chamber, along with the Library Association and the Tennis Club, began a drive to have a town hall built.

To accommodate the increasing number of cars, gas pumps were erected in front of the Bair Store and Nathaniel Orr's old wagon shop. It had not only a pump, but a service area run by Gordon Toole. Mr. Rassussen enticed customers to his new grocery store at the foot of Rainier Street with another pump. However, horses were still a definite part of the Steilacoom scene. In the spring teamsters Jess Baker and Tom Lester would plow the gardens around town in preparation for the growing season. In the fall they would deliver the wood needed to fuel the many wood stoves used for cooking and heating. At other times Nick Doering's teams would be pulling stumps, grading the streets and hauling dirt.

The current movie was seen in the old Court House building down on Martin Street with Charlie Mann as the projectionist. The youth would look forward to the Tom Mix serials while their parents could see Janet Gaynor being wooed by Harold Lloyd. Other family activities included picnics on the beach or at American Lake, ice skating on Light's Swamp in the winter, and camping on the nearby islands.

Prohibition was a time of pronounced activity for many. Home-made stills were known to exist on many properties, and the old Iron Springs Hotel on Starling Street was rumored to be a bootlegger's place. Residents on Anderson and McNeil islands were noted for their illegal pursuits and the "Dry Squad" cruised the waters looking for boats hauling liquor. *(Editors' Note: At that time the prison occupied only a small part of McNeil Island.)* One well known citizen in Steilacoom could be

relied upon for a bottle of whisky. A customer would pay for his purchase and then pick it up hidden in a certain scotch broom bush. One enterprising dairyman not only delivered milk, but also his home-made brew in white painted milk bottles. His "route" included homes around American Lake. One day a bottle was delivered to the wrong house—and the truth was out.

In 1930 the new town hall was dedicated by Mayor McClelland with the Tennis Club sponsoring the first dance. Steilacoom's population had increased to 722, but the decade which had begun with so much promise ended with the rumors of businesses closing and the hard times to come. The Steilacoom Sand and Gravel Company was the first to close, then the Cascade Paper Company. Work was difficult to get, though some were fortunate to find jobs at nearby McNeil Island Prison or Western State Hospital. When Nick Doering laid off his seasoned teamster, Tom Lester, because business was slow, Tom found work at Western State for \$88 a month. With a change in government in Olympia, his pay was cut to \$33. Steilacoom residents "made do" and helped each other. Grocer Jake Smith extended credit, and Miss Graham asked the Town Council to reduce Oberlin Church's light and water fees.

Other changes were occurring as vintage landmarks were being torn down. First to go was the Iron Springs Hotel, once the Northwest Railroad Brewery, demolished with the lumber recycled into the Grondahl home. Next the Steilacoom Court House, once the county seat built in 1858, which was declared unsafe. The O'Donnell building on Lafayette was razed. It had served many purposes—business, boarding house, saloon, pool house, and for a brief time the location of a Pentecostal church which surprised residents with its singing and music at the dock and baptismal immersions at the beach. In its place Jake Smith built a new grocery store in 1938.

As Oberlin Church celebrated its 50th anniversary with special services guided ably by the Reverend West in 1933, the ending of Prohibition was either celebrated or lamented by others. Through there was little money, Steilacoom residents kept busy with a variety of activities. The baseball team was



On May 12, 1934, Steilacoom staged a minstrel show. It was truly a big day. A "boom" came in the afternoon. At the conclusion of the parade everyone lined up in front of the town hall for a dinner in the town hall, and at eight o'clock, the curtain rose before a packed house to raise a purchase fund of the Steilacoom Library Association. However, those who remember the days of the great Depression.

coached by Herman Gaul, and Harold Balabanoff and Frederick Rosevear directed the forty piece band. After two years of practicing, a musical festival was held on August 11, 1935, at the Steilacoom School baseball field. Five thousand attended to hear music through the afternoon and evening. New organizations were begun, including the William C. Thompson Jr. Post of the V.F.W., known for its annual Saltar's Point salmon barbecues; the Steilacoom Garden Club, formed for "the purpose of garden study and enjoyment of home gardening"; and the Steilacoom Book Club dedicated to "reviewing good books with attendant discussion and to keep its members informed on current affairs."

The sense of drawing together as a community during the difficult depression years would hold the residents of Steilacoom in good stead as the decade ended.



booster" parade, a tradition when a minstrel troupe hit town, was conducted by Barney of the Bair Store for a picture. That evening the ladies of the Library Association gave a use in the school auditorium. Proceeds of the performance were contributed to the book the day recall that another purpose was simply to have a good time and brighten the dark

A Relaxing Browse

In the '20s the library was located in an old store building on the corner of Lafayette and Main, directly across the street from its present day location. Staffed by volunteers, the library was open at least one evening a week and served as a social center for the community. Folks would stop in for a chat; a group of older men met regularly to play cards. Some browsed through the book collection reported to be 2,300 volumes in 1921. But the highlight of the evening was the serving of refreshments—sandwiches, cake, coffee—prepared by members of the Library Association. A modest 25¢ per person was charged and the money used to support the library. Membership in the Library Association, which was widely supported by the town's residents, was reportedly 50¢ a year.

Watrous Helps Steilacoom Survive the Depression

In the 1920's financially troubled Steilacoom needed a "white knight." One arrived on the scene when H. O. Watrous was appointed town treasurer in June, 1926. During the next seventeen years his financial expertise kept the town solvent and prospering during the difficult Depression years. Harry O. Watrous, an attorney from Pennsylvania, moved to Tacoma, and then in 1922 to Steilacoom. Setting up an insurance office at his home on Lafayette enabled him to also be available to customers paying their utility bills. As treasurer he had a phone, rather rare in town at that time. Business was conducted at a large roll top desk, which is now in the mayor's office in the town office building. It was used by his granddaughter's husband, Bob Anderson, when he served eight years as Mayor of Steilacoom.

After the Town Hall was built in 1930, Mr. Watrous and his secretary opened the office there once a month to collect monies for the utility bills. If residents did not pay on that day, they had to go to his home office. The Tollefson grandchildren, who lived next door, were sometimes allowed to assist in sending out the utility bills to town residents. It was considered "good training."

Preparing utility bills and collecting money was a small part of the treasurer's job. Before "infrastructure" became the in-word, Steilacoom officials were addressing plans to extend streets and to hard surface every graded street. This was all done during Watrous' term as treasurer, paid for with public funds in cash. At the same time wooden sidewalks were being exchanged for concrete.

The water system was transformed from being privately owned with wooden pipes to town controlled with a 45,000 gallon reservoir, a new well, and a 38,000 gallon steel tank erected on the hill. The council's frustration at lack of water and pressure was seen as they imposed sprinkling hours 5-10 a.m. and p.m. during the summer months. When it appeared citizens were not abiding by them, a night patrol was instigated. If a second offense occurred, a meter was installed.



Picture L. to R.: H. O. Watrous family shown in front of their home. H. O. Watrous holding granddaughter Janet Tollefson, daughters Ruth, Irene, wife Miriam, daughters Noa and Janet in front with granddaughter Mary Jane.

The town's electric line, originally put up in 1914, was rebuilt, extended and modernized to accommodate the use of electric stoves, water heaters, and other household items. This improvement was a great relief to Henry Gaul, dairyman, who had come to the council in August, 1929, stating the electric current was so weak his milking machine couldn't work.

Mr. Watrous resigned from his position in 1943, having served as town treasurer for seventeen often difficult years, in his words, times of "financial panic, depression, unemployment, want, and war." It was with appreciation that Mayor Morris and the Council accepted his resignation. His retirement was brief. Harry Orlanda Watrous died on December 10, 1945, having served his community well.

Sources: Information from Granddaughter Nancy Tollefson Anderson, Esther Spreen, and *Lakewood Log*, April 23, 1945.

A Mayor with Dash and Class

A familiar sight on the streets of Steilacoom was W. E. Morris, dressed in formal attire, riding his horse. Horseman, mayor, president of Steilacoom Chamber of Commerce, choir director, president at Pacific Iron and Steel Works in Tacoma, Willis E. Morris was an energetic and colorful individual. During his first term as mayor in 1925 the treasury had only 61 cents and a bonded indebtedness of \$30,000. That year the town budget was \$13,830 with \$1,000 allocated for Police and Health, and \$2,200 for Streets and Walks.

When a new road between DuPont and Steilacoom was opened in January, 1929, Morris performed a dual function that day. In DuPont as president of the Steilacoom Chamber of Commerce he cut the ribbon, after which he hurried to Steilacoom to welcome the dignitaries, including Governor Hartley, in his capacity as Mayor of Steilacoom.

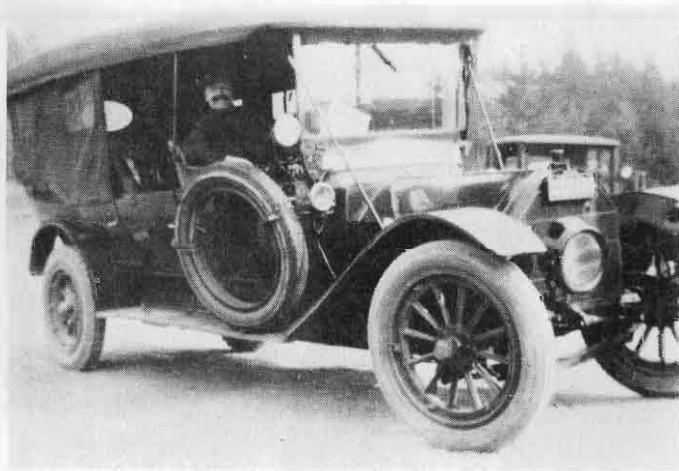
By the end of his term a town hall was built, electrical and water services upgraded and streets improved. During his second term, 1936-1948, a \$110,000 WPA project was awarded to Steilacoom. He was quoted as saying "...that the project had nine work sheets—so everyone was kept busy."

Large keys, made at his Pacific Iron & Steel Works, were presented on special occasions as the key to the "Historic Town of Steilacoom." One was given to Army General Lenaham in 1929, who was instrumental in promoting the Fort Lewis, Dupont, and Steilacoom highway. Another went to Will Rogers in 1927 when the famous humorist visited Tacoma. Mayors from Puyallup, Tacoma, and Steilacoom, dressed in formal clothing, top hats, and swing canes greeted Rogers, but Mayor Morris stole the day as being the only one to present a key to his town.

Special memories of Morris were recalled by Alma Hatcher when she was married to Nat in 1921. After the ceremony "the couple was 'kidnapped' by W. E. Morris in his automobile and followed by horn honking and shouting from 'Cub' Bair, Howard Doering, and Val Eisenbeis in another auto as they were driven round and round the town." In his story "The Sun Always Shone" Lynn Scholes wrote, "No one, not even Arthur

Murray or Fred Astaire, could have duplicated the combined fox trot and jig which he had imported from the Deep South. When he and his daughter, Gladys, took over the floor, everyone stood back to admire their flashing feet. And what mayor of any town had twin cub bears that we could pet? ... And was he ever ahead of his time! He had built what must have been the first motor home, fifty years before Winnebago. No wonder they kept reelecting him, for it is not often that a town like Steilacoom has a citizen with the dash and charisma he possessed."

Willis E. Morris and his wife Mable celebrated their 50th anniversary in 1952. After her death in 1953, he lived to be 82 at the time of his death in 1964. Steilacoom has never been the same since.



The Steilacoom-Tacoma Stage

The May, 1920, photo shows an eager driver waiting for passengers to transport in his touring car to Tacoma. A representative of the State Transportation Company later expressed a grievance against residents having automobiles picking up people who otherwise would have to patronize the bus. He asked that the practice be stopped. An alternate method of travel was to ride the street car.

See you at the Squeeze!



Steilacoom Apple Squeeze

October 17
10 a.m. - 4 p.m.

Wagon Shop open
Stop by and see the restoration.



Steilacoom Historical
Museum Association
P.O. Box 88016
Steilacoom, WA 98388

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Tacoma, WA
Permit No. 272

Address Correction Requested

Jane & Weldon Rau
3035 Edgewood Dr.
Olvmoia, WA 98501