

STEILACOOM HISTORICAL



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Ed and His Steilacoom Aquarium

Editor's note: The following article was adapted from one written earlier by Edna Light Dyer, a resident of Steilacoom for over half a century. She shares her reminiscences of the aquarium with us.

There is a sign 48 X 62 feet in my garage. It is there because of sentimental reasons and the memories it brings back. My daughter bought it at a garage sale. On the upper part of the sign on a blue-gray background a finger points to the words written in large letters: DEEP SEA AQUARIUM STEILACOOM. Below the letters on a beach where green-blue and white waters of the Puget Sound roll in, there is a shark, some fish, an octopus, shell fish, jelly fish, eel and sea anemones. It is the work of a patient from Western State Hospital.

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Front page photo: Ed Bair advertised his deep sea aquarium on the side of his seascap painted Model T Ford. All photographs in this issue are from the Steilacoom Historical Museum collection.

President's Letter

Greetings, once again:

Your Board of Directors decided this spring to appoint a Task Force, drawn from the membership, to work on recommendations for long term planning for the next decade for the Association. We tried to create a mix of long-standing members and brand new members and those that have been with us for a short time. We think we have achieved that nicely. The TF members are Dave Hopkins, Initial Chair; Lindson Evanson; Nancy Covert; Gidge Campbell; Don Yoder; Lenore Rogers; Jack Watson; Jean Dyer Swanson; and Sandra Menter-Berry. They will meet and work on their own schedule. We ask only that they give us a progress report prior to each Board meeting between now and October and in November be prepared to present us with the recommendations—which we, in turn, can present to the membership at the December general meeting. Long range plans and a clear sense of purpose in conjunction with your mission statement is essential to obtain grants, and a revision was in order. This is not an easy job, and we are grateful that all concerned consented to do the work.

For those of you who bought a brick or plaque in 1991 and wondered if you would live long enough to see it come to

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Descendants of pioneers celebrate the Centennial in 1952. They are Gertrude Johnson Baker, Lena Carlson (?), Dorothy Gale, Janet Judson Russell, Frank Runquist, and Glenn Orr.

Come Join the Celebration

Steilacoom will celebrate its 140th anniversary as the state's first incorporated town on the Fourth of July. Festivities will include a parade, street fair, fun run, decorated bike contest, fire works, and much more. The Association will serve birthday cake at the Wagon Shop, and Jack Sage will conduct walking tours of the historic area with antidotes of early Steilacoom—not to be missed.

In 1854 the first territorial legislature passed "An Act to Incorporate the City of Steilacoom." This joined Balch's Port Steilacoom to Chapman's Steilacoom City with Union Avenue between them.

Steilacoom, always ready for a party, celebrated four centennials in the early 1950s. The first, in 1951, celebrated the founding of the town, the second honored descendants of pioneer families and leaders of nearby institutions and the establishment of the first post office. In 1953 the creation of Washington Territory and the first Protestant church built north of the Columbia were remembered, and in 1954 the 100th anniversary of the incorporation of the town was celebrated.

Steilacoom Aquarium

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The Steilacoom Aquarium was the brain child and hard work of Ed Bair. He was born in Canton, Ohio, in 1856. When a young man, he went to Kansas, then Colorado where he engaged in mining engineering. He went from there to San Francisco, planning to go to Alaska, but was shanghaied on a whaler and spent six months working on the ship. Arriving back in San Francisco, he set out for the Puget Sound country and eventually came to Steilacoom. During those years, he had become interested in sea life, especially deep sea life, and began collecting specimens.

Ed was the first of the Bair family to come West, and he wrote his brothers glowing accounts of the area urging them to leave their home in Kansas and come to Pierce County. Three of them came West; Frank, Warren Lafever, known as W. L., and John.

W. L. and his wife, Hattie, the parents of Godfrey (Cub) and Eudocia, moved to Steilacoom in 1891 and purchased a drug store. In 1895 W. L. built the present Bair Drug on Lafayette Street.

W. L. also bought an old building where there were several fresh springs. It had been built for a brewery in the middle 80's, but had never made a success. The Bair family named it "The Iron Springs Sanitarium" and turned it into a spa where Hattie served her famous chicken dinners.

In 1910 W. L. sold the Iron Springs to Ed, who set up his aquarium in it. When electricity came to Tacoma, Ed obtained the glass globes used for the gas street lights to use for the aquarium, filling them with sea water for his specimens.

At late night after the street car quit using the electricity, Ed pumped water up the hill from the Sound into barrels, then hand dipped it to fill the globes and tanks. Keeping fresh salt water was quite a job, and Ed sold the Iron Springs and moved his aquarium to a house on Martin Street on the bank of a gulch. Water from the Sound came up the gulch when the tide came in, making the water problem easier.

In 1920 Ed built a new aquarium and museum on Saltar's Point, often called Green's Beach because Mrs. Green owned a



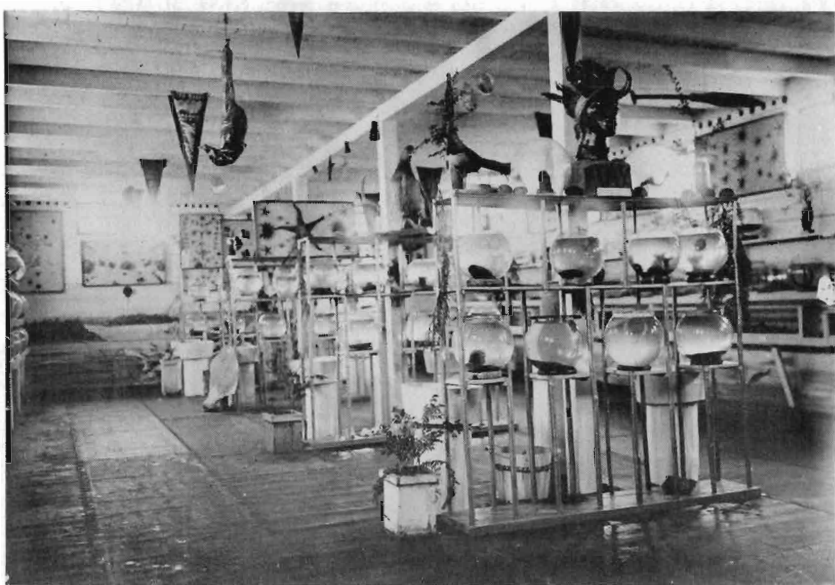
Ed's new aquarium at the water's edge resembled a ship's superstructure.

marina there. The new aquarium was a long, two-story building on a knoll a few feet from the water's edge. As you approached the aquarium, it resembled a ship's superstructure. The total appearance was of a ship moored along side the bank of the Sound. Ed also built a few dressing rooms along the side of the aquarium, where he rented bathing suits. He charged a dime for their use.

The aquarium was much easier to maintain. When the tide came in, barrels set at the foot of the aquarium were filled with salt water and dipped out by bucket.

The center posts were used to hang and display dried specimens; star fish of many colors, one with 21 arms; a whale's jaw bone with teeth; puffed fish; and tropical fish.

The glass globes were set on shelves around the room, filled with seaweed and sea life, unusual shapes and sizes, many colors, brilliant and beautiful, green and purple sea urchins, purple and mottled sea stars, acorn barnacles, delicate ostrich plumes, red sea squirts, anemones of many kinds and colors. He had many species of fish from Puget Sound.



Glass globes were set on shelves around the room, filled with seaweed and sea life of unusual shape, size and color.

The square tanks were set along the wall under the shelves, filled with formaldehyde to preserve the fine collection of dead specimens. Ed searched the high and low tide zones, the beaches, the middle tide zones, mud flats, rocky shoals, and the deep water. His searching yielded its treasures. I marveled that one man could have such a collection.

The price to go through was 25 cents. Ed had a half-hour lecture he gave as he guided people through. His lecture was interesting, educational, humorous and witty. Standing in front of a globe, he cautioned that if you told a lie, the anemones knew it and would close their blossoms. (Of course they always did.)

In 1911, Ed married Louise Lewis, who died in 1918. Some time after her death, Ed's health began to fail, and he hired a widow, Mrs. Egen, to take care of the aquarium. She hired a young man, Moody Bacon, to help her, and in 1940-41 my son, James, helped.

The fellows kept the aquarium clean and took a boat with tubs, siphons, and long handled rakes and worked the deep waters, the beaches and around the islands of Puget Sound, replacing old sea life and collecting new, along with showing people through the aquarium and giving Ed's lecture.

You would often see Ed driving his 1923 Ford around town. He removed the back seat and made a light truck out of it. Then you would find him, more and more, sitting in a chair along side of his brother, W. L., at the drug store, dressed in shirt sleeves and vest. He was a good conversationalist, and people stopped to talk. The children in town loved him, and when they went by, he often reached into his vest pocket and slipped a piece of hard candy into their hands. Ed died in 1936.

The aquarium was maintained until World War II started. It was not long after that vandals broke in and destroyed everything. Some of the displays were dumped into the deep waters of Puget Sound. Eventually the building was torn down. Ed's aquarium was said to be the first collection of its kind in the country, if not in the world.

President's Letter

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fruition—you made it! We are planning to dedicate the walk at the Wagon Shop site on June 26th—see flyer enclosed in this issue. We hope that you will plan to at least stop by and see your brick, enjoy the art exhibit, have a little ice cream, and listen to the Old Time Fiddlers. Without you this day would not be taking place.

Summer is almost here, and if we don't see you prior to July 31st, come see us at the Salmon Bake and bring the family and your neighborhood. We promise to have a PA system that won't blow out on us and a bull horn to let you know how the canoe races are coming along. Don Rehbürg promised us a nice sunny day and *not too hot*.

One last item: Remember the garage sale at the Wagon Shop on the 13th of August—see insert in this edition.

Have a happy, safe summer and come out when you can to take part in our festivities.

Arline Brightman



The Albert Balch house is ready to be moved forward during renovation.

Historic Homes Preserved

Historic restoration has been a part of the Steilacoom scene this spring. Two structures, the Albert Balch home on Rainier Street, built in the 1850s, and the Captain William Webster home on Commercial Street, built in the mid 1850s, are being carefully preserved by their owners.

When Lou and Lyle Dunkin read that the Balch house had been placed on the "10 Most Endangered Properties" list and that a demolition request was pending, these seasoned preservationists took action and purchased the property. "We couldn't see it bulldozed out," said Lou. In the past three months the house has been shored up, moved forward, and has had a foundation poured.

The house was built for Albert Balch, merchant and brother of founding father, Lafayette. Originally it was close to the street and followed the typical architecture of Balch's homestead in Maine. It has single wall construction with planks extending from the ground to the roof line. All the trim is planed, probably at Byrd's Mill which stood at the head of Chambers Creek. The mullion boards (divisions between the

window panes) are very fine and fragile. Only one pane of the wavy glass shattered when the house was moved. Marks left by a spoke-shave can still be seen on the balusters of the staircase. The exterior was originally all clapboard, but the upper section was shingled by a later occupant.

Possibly the same resident moved the building back, damaging the fireplaces so they had to be removed. The Dunkins have found the location of one of those fireplaces. A back porch was torn off during the present work, and plans call for an addition of a kitchen and a garage in back with the side porch changed to a bedroom suite. The house will be painted gray and the large, old rhododendrons will be moved to fit into the landscape.

Recently, Lou and Lyle received the State Historic Preservation Officer's 1994 Annual Award "For Outstanding Achievement in Stewardship" in recognition of their ongoing work in the restoration of furniture, old buildings at Fort Steilacoom and Steilacoom, and work in Pierce County for the preservation of the past.

Jean Dyer Swanson has found that you can go home again as she and her husband, Herb, settle into the old family home on Commercial Street—the home where she grew up and where her mother, Edna, lived for over 60 years. Not "wanting to change it," only necessary work was done. The Swansons directed a foundation be poured, a pantry turned into a bathroom, and an outside stairway enclosed.

The property was owned by Lafayette Balch in 1854-55 when the house was built. The lumber may even have come from Maine as a "pre-fab," according to family accounts. The house has single wall construction with rough sawn boards 14 to 16 inches wide and 12 feet long, complete with square nails. The doors and windows came around the Horn while the fireplaces were made from Steilacoom brick.

Though there is only one chimney, a second walled-up fireplace was discovered in the kitchen, much to the delight of the Swansons. The design and detail match the brickwork of the fireplace on the adjoining wall in the dining room. An extensive amount of dirt was excavated from underneath the



The Captain William Webster home, built by Lafayette Balch in 1854-55, is under renovation.

house, exposing the original underpinning of rocks and stumps, common supports at that time.

The dirt was used to level up the yard. Soon Jean will be working in the rose garden her father had. She plans a "Deep Sea Aquarium" patio back of the house, complete with one of the large pictures originally at the aquarium at Saltar's Point where she spent so much time.

The house has seen many uses in its 140 years: a private residence; a boarding house when Catherine Webster's sea captain husband deserted her; a refuge when she married E. R. Rogers and they had to move back from the huge home next door that he had built and lost; a store in the early 1900s; a home for the McCandless sisters who raised lilies to sell; and a home for the Dyer family, who rented it from Miss Murray who taught in Tacoma and would come out on the streetcar to spend weekends in her separate apartment upstairs. When the Dyers bought the house in the 1930s, they paid \$1,200. According to Jean, the house has always been a haven for everyone. Welcome home, Jean.

Salmagundi

- ☆ Don Rehburg's Secret Salmon Sauce has become a popular item throughout the Northwest. The familiar sauce has a new bottle and a new label, still promoting the Salmon Bake. It is sold locally at the Bair Store and at four locations of Johnny's Seafood Company, as well as being distributed in Oregon, Alaska, and Washington. Don has developed two new products, a barbecue sauce and a special Apple Chutney Dressing for the Apple Squeeze. Stop by the Bair Store and pick up a few bottles for your summer menus.
- ☆ School tours kept docents busy during the month of June, including five classes of eighth graders from Pioneer Middle School touring the Balch and Webster homes.
- ☆ Many people have contributed to the improved appearance of the Orr Orchard and its gardens this spring. The scouting unit of the Lakewood Stake of the L.D.S. Church, under the direction of Gary Reese, has cut and cleared trees, removed underbrush, and built protective wire cages around the young fruit trees as a deterrent to the deer. The garden committee—Sue Davidson, Jenny Hollister, Sandy Strother, Joan Curtis, Jane Light, Marilyn and John Siemens, and Barb Carey—have cleared flower beds and improved garden areas.



Calendar of Events

Dedication of the brick walkway, Ice Cream Social,.....	June 26
and Art Show	
Celebration of Steilacoom's 140 years	July 4
Annual Salmon Bake	July 31
Town Wide Garage Sale	August 13
Apple Squeeze	October 9

24th Annual Salmon Bake

July 31, 1994, 12-4 p.m.

Sunnyside Beach

Canoe Races

Adults \$7.95 — Children \$3.50



Chairman Don Rehburg
*Creator of Steilacoom's
Secret Salmon Sauce*



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