

# STEILACOOM HISTORICAL MUSEUM QUARTERLY

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Fall, 2004



## Steilacoom Celebrates

**S**teilacoom's party to celebrate its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary took place on August 21, 2004. And what a party it was as residents and visitors relived the past through entertainment and demonstrations! Music filled the air with the sounds of barbershop quartets, fiddlers, drumming, and jazz, added to by the voices of the melodrama and storytelling.

Demonstrations focused on spinning, blacksmithing, bee-keeping, archery, basket making, quilting, rug braiding, and soap making. Children enjoyed old-time games, scavenger hunts

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## President's Letter



How many times have you heard the expression "It's all a matter of perspective?" Well, I had a good example of that again after talking with Joan Curtis about one of her articles in this issue. It's about another of the Town's Founders' attempts to find a wife. From a 2004 perspective, advertising and courting by mail may seem archaic, but as I later realized, Lemuel Bills was using the tools that

were available to him.

The next night on *60 Minutes* there was a story on singles in NYC trying to meet possible mates. At one place they progress from table to table to have "meaningful" talks and get to know one another in 3 minute increments!

Even more bizarre (even from my 2004 perspective) was singles group dinners in a restaurant where all the lights were out. They had to eat and get to know one another completely in the dark while the waiters wore night vision goggles so they could navigate the room! From the 2004 singles' perspective, they were using the tools and techniques at their disposal just as Lemuel had 150 years ago!

So the next time I read about some strange occurrence in Old Time Steilacoom, I won't tut tut about their actions without remembering that they didn't have night vision goggles available!

Understanding history—it's all a matter of perspective!

Patricia J. Randall



## Welch Wins National Award

Dave Welch, SHMA member and longtime volunteer, was given a national award at the Oregon-California Trails Association national convention held in Vancouver, Washington, last month. The award for Meritorious Achievement is given for outstanding contributions to the Association in achieving its purposes and for bringing to all Americans a greater awareness of the identity and significance of the trails and landmarks of those pioneers who accomplished the "westerning" of our nation. This is the highest honor awarded a member of OCTA.

OCTA is a national organization with about 2,000 members. Dave has served as vice-president and president and is now the Preservation Officer and a member of the board of directors. As OCTA's Preservation Officer, Dave works with land developers, ranchers and energy companies to mitigate impacts on surviving remnants of the 19<sup>th</sup> century trails. He was instrumental in the production of a CD called "Emigrant Names" that lists the names and years traveled of 64,000 pioneers on the Oregon and California trails from 1830 to 1900.

Dave had twelve ancestors who traveled the Oregon Trail before 1860. He carries on the family tradition of being interested in history. His grandfather was president of the California Historical Society and a leader with the Native Sons of the Golden West.

Dave has been a strong and committed volunteer for SHMA, also, and has served on the board of directors as well as serving as president of our Association. He is co-chair of the Capital Campaign for the Nathaniel Orr Pioneer Homesite and has written many grants for funding for the campaign. Congratulations, Dave, for your contribution to history and for this well deserved national recognition.

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### Steilacoom Celebrates

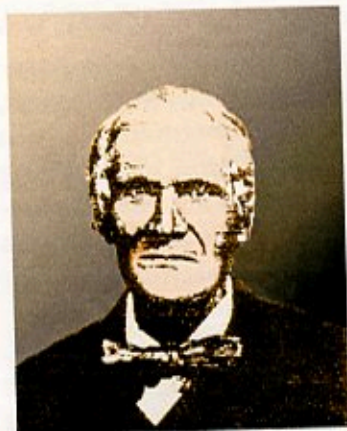
*(from page 1)*

and the petting farm. "A Time Walk" featured events that took place during the same chronological periods in Steilacoom and other places. Added to these were tomahawk throwing, walking tours, pie eating contests, spelling bees, an ice cream social, a picnic lunch and much more.

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## Lemuel Bills



Lemuel Bills

Lemuel Bills, a name unknown in the Steilacoom of today, was an enterprising New Englander who filed a 320 acre Donation Claim next to that of Lafayette Balch in March of 1852. According to Bonney's *History of Pierce County*, Bills platted a portion of his claim for a town site as the "Town of Steilacoom," entering into competition with Balch and Chapman in the sale of lots. Thus he became the third founder of Steilacoom.

Bills' migration west was typical of many seeking opportunities in the mid 1800s. He was born in Chittenden County, Vermont, in 1802. He married and, with his wife Lydia and three sons Worthington, Cincinnati, and Lexington, moved to Huron County, Ohio. While in Ohio, three more children were born. By 1850 the family was in Fountain, Indiana, where Bills was listed as a pump maker. That year he traveled over the Oregon Trail to Portland. His wife's name is not included in the list of those who came that year. There is some question as to whether she came west at all, though one source indicates she died in 1853 and was buried in Steilacoom.

In the first issue of *The Oregonian* published on December 4, 1850, there were many advertisements for the new city of Portland. Among those was the following: "Lemuel Bills, pump and aqueduct builder. Prepared to mold candles at reasonable prices and offers cash for tallow. Location Water Street between Jefferson and Columbia." He would appear to have been a versatile man—from building aqueducts to molding candles.

Tales of the Pacific Northwest quickly drew him to the Puget Sound area where he filed his claim. Since the claim was for 320 acres, rather than the 640 acres a married man with a wife was entitled to, Lydia may not have been with him. A diagram attached to the land records indicates that his home was across from present day Sunnyside Beach northeast of Bob Anderson's



home. A large garden is also drawn, which is appropriate since in the 1860 census Bills is listed as a farmer, age 58. The property extended from the water to Shepard Street, over to Roe Street, across Steilacoom Boulevard into the Madrona Park area. By 1854 his son Worthington had joined him. He is listed in the census as a whipmaker.

Lemuel is mentioned frequently in Bonney. He ran for the first Washington Territorial Legislature in 1854, but was defeated. During the Indian Wars he was a volunteer in Company E of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment from February to May 31, 1856. When a fire in 1859 destroyed the records at the County Auditor's office, the Pierce County commissioners ordered Auditor Bradley to place on record "a certified copy of the original plats of the Town of Steilacoom, as recorded by Lafayette Balch, John Chapman, and Lemuel Bills.

Bills requested that the county commissioners approve his proposal to build a wharf at the foot of Puyallup Street in 1859. According to Bonney, it was placed over for consideration, with no further reference to it. That same year the commissioners appointed him to the position of wreck master. This was a very responsible job, being in charge of volunteers to go out to rescue those shipwrecked and to oversee salvage of ships at sea. This would cover any wrecked ship in the waters of Puget Sound under the jurisdiction of Pierce County. He was familiar with ships and in some records he was referred to as "Captain Bills."

In 1861 he again ran for the legislature, unsuccessfully. That same year he was paid \$21.25 for hauling 14,172 feet of lumber at the rate of \$1.50 per thousand for the repair of the county jail. Finding a variety of jobs, he was paid for services on the road which passed by his home from Schmeigs' Brewery on Lafayette Street to the Chambers Creek mill.

Lemuel Bills died on August 9, 1875, at the age of 73 in Steilacoom. There is no record of where he was buried.

As the third founder, Lemuel Bills stayed in Steilacoom longer than the others. Besides leaving his name on Steilacoom's map as the Bills' Addition, he named the streets of Worthington, Lexington, and Cincinnati for his sons. Lemuel Bills definitely deserves his place in the history of Steilacoom.



## Time Was . . .

### The Steilacoom Grocery

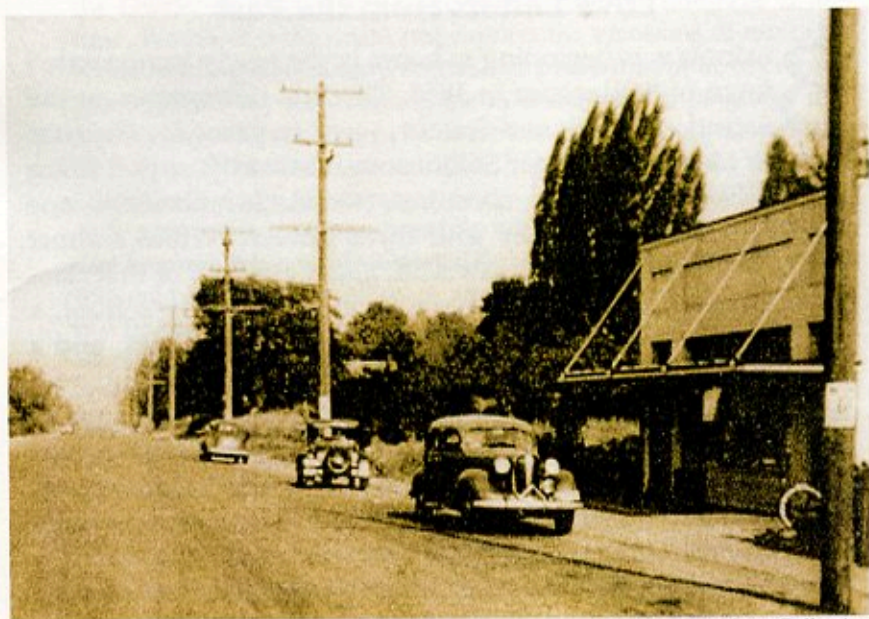
**O**n October 17, 1937, the grand opening of Smith's Food Palace took place. Jake Smith, who had been serving Steilacoom customers since 1905, built his new store on Lafayette Street directly across from where he had been doing business in the Old Masonic Temple.

Heavily advertised in the *Lakewood Log*, it was constructed by Steilacoom builder Cornelius Karman. It was built of heavy fir with a cedar roof. The new store was reputed to be the first new business in town since 1923 and it was a "compact version of a big city store." New features included the latest in refrigeration for the meat department and a new delivery wagon for home deliveries.

The little store would change hands many times in the next sixty years. Clyde Davidson would go into partnership with his brother Bill in the early 1940s. He later bought him out in 1948, paying \$7,000. Running the store until 1959, Clyde sold it to Jim Grondahl for \$17,000. Fourteen years later Jim sold the store to Steve Pearsal for \$63,000 in 1973.

Fast forward thirty-one years to May 2004 when Robyn and Jim Murphy became the new proprietors of the building now owned by Darcy and Bruce Tinsley. The Country Mercantile is an updated version of the 1937 model. Where once there were fruits and vegetables and a meat market, there is now a variety of gifts and groceries. A kitchen produces delectable wraps, sandwiches, soups, etc. Outdoor seating allows the customers to enjoy the street scene.





from the Davidson Collection

*Jake's Food Palace on Lafayette Street in 1937*



*The Country Mercantile today with its outdoor seating.*

## Love Letters from the Past

**B**usiness was beginning to boom in the newly incorporated town of Steilacoom in 1855. The first newspaper on the Sound, *Puget Sound Courier*, went to press for the first time on May 11, 1855. Of Steilacoom it stated "...upon it are seventy dwelling houses, six stores, two blacksmith shops, one tailor, one cabinet maker, and three hotels. Within a short distance of town are three sawmills, and a gristmill of first class in process of erection. We have a church, a daily school, a public press, and a billiard salon, two bowling alleys, and a wharf (Webber) has just been completed that affords berths for large vessels at all stages of the tide; and we hope ere many days, as Congress has also appropriated thirty thousand dollars for constructing a military road from Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River to Puget Sound—which will give us a large portion of the Oregon travel."

Readers were quick to buy advertising space in the new paper, among them Lemuel Bills of Steilacoom who persistently ran an ad for seventeen weeks seeking a wife. Following is the plea headed "Delegate for Matrimony":

"The undersigned being a candidate for the (s)election of delegateship to the halls of matrimony, has condescended after long persuasion to run for said high post of honor. Believing his qualifications to be good, having a sufficient command of oratory to propose at the right time of good age, and standing high in his shoes, he advances his claims.

All he requests on the other side of the house, will be a maiden not over sixty-five years of age, nor under sixteen; not to be over seven feet six in hight (sic), not less than four foot three; and not too good-looking, nor humbler than himself.

Any person desiring further requirements will please call at his office, or address him, post paid, at his place care of Pap.  
Steilacoom June 14, 1855 Lemuel Bills

Mr. Bills' perseverance was rewarded when a response was printed in a November issue of the *Courier* by a Miss Brooks which read:

My Dear Sir—

Please forgive the presumption of a poor lone woman in thus unceremoniously addressing a stranger. Perhaps your request in



the *Courier* of August will somewhat excuse my boldness at this time. Words of mine could not express the emotions of my heart while reading that simple request. A presentment at once took possession of my mind telling me in unmistakable language that my destiny was ere long to be united to that of another, and that one, none other than Lemuel Bills! I speak of you as a stranger! Oftentimes, have my mesmeric eyes beheld your noble form. I fully appreciate your commanding talents and noble-heartedness. Oh! Lemuel, it seems almost sacriligious to attempt to place upon this cold sheet the sentiments which are now awakened within my breast. To say I love you is too common-place. To say I worship you is not enough. I will not, I dare not—express my emotions. Be assured, my dear Lemuel; that since the event above mentioned transpired, my heart has beat strangely wild; O, my Lemuel. How often have I imprinted upon your noble brow a burning kiss, and, oh, how has your warm embrace thrilled my every nerve with more than electric power. How often in imagination have I officiated as matron of your humble domicile. How often have I prepared the frugal meal and how often has our humble repast been sweetened with domestic bliss!

You do not ask for beauty. You do not ask for wealth. I am not possessed of either qualification. On me, Nature has not lavished her charms with a prodigal hand. You may consider this epistle as sickly, sentimental and unworthy of notice; if so, forgive and forget. Of myself, perhaps it is foolish to speak. Suffice it to say, I am thirty-five, and homely. I am not in this country husband seeking. I came here on an errand of mercy, not even wishing to change my state of single-blessedness, as it is termed. You are the only gentleman who has ever made an impression upon my hard heart, but you have succeeded and that too, in a very singular and indirect manner.

Should you consider this brief, simple but sincere effusion worthy of reply, please direct a letter to

Cowlitz Farms, Lewis Co. W.T.

Ellen Brooks

P.S. "I love you, and you can't help it

Oh! Lordy, how I love you." Byron

In the same issue of the *Courier* Mr. Bills' reply was printed.

Steilacoom, W.T. November 1, 1855

My Dearest Ellen—

Your very kind and affectionate letter of October 6 was received; and as soon as I could collect my scattered senses, hasten to reply. You will, I have no doubt, appreciate my feelings

and forgive the familiarity of my address, for although when you see me, you will find me a man of some years, and somewhat bronzed with care and time, yet your kind, patient, kind penetrating preception will discover to you, *that the heart never grows old*. And I am now convinced that even in the decline of life—when the form is stooping with the weight of years—the eyes dimmed, and the ear full—even then the heart is capable of loving with a clearer, firmer, warmer, though perhaps with less brilliancy than in youth. Then believe me, dearest Ellen, that I love you with all the strength of mature manhood; with that love tempered with judgment—the firmer and everlasting—because never placed upon unworthy objects. I know you, yes know you well; I have read your letter over and over again—studied every line—every word—every syllable, throughout the whole—everything arranged in taste, and taste of the most perfect character, such as can not be got up for the occasion, but must be a part and parcel of the writer. Must have grown with their strength: such I feel—such I know is the case with you in regard to the qualifications of neatness and taste, two of the most essential qualifications, after good temper, that woman can possess.

You will confer a great favor by answering this, as soon as convenient. That I may hear from you again, "my love, my dove," at an early day; I will defer writing anymore at this time.

I subscribe myself,

Yours, with a heart overflowing,  
With love and domestic affection  
Lemuel Bills

P.S. "The rose is red, the violets blue,"  
Etc, etc.—Shakespeare

Subsequent issues do not indicate whether the flowery correspondence concluded in matrimony. Hopefully, Mr. Bills found someone to share "the other side of the house."

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### Steilacoom Celebrates

(from page 3)

Thirty-six community and county organizations participated to make this event truly memorable. The festivities were quickly terminated with a sudden rain storm around 3 o'clock, with the two planned concerts in the park being rescheduled to the Community Center. The planning committee deserves a vote of thanks for their hard work.



## *Salmagundi*

- ☆ **Raffle:** Have you bought your raffle ticket yet? Don't miss the opportunity to win an all expense trip to Williamsburg, complete with air fare, lodging, and car rental for one week for two. Experience this historic village all dressed up for the Christmas festivities. Second prize is a Spirit of Washington Dinner Train brunch for two, and third prize is dinner for two at the E. R. Rogers restaurant. Contact Marcia Smith, 581-0109, Barbara Studebaker, 584-5824, or Gloria Wing, 584-0716, to get the winning ticket. The drawing will be October 3 at the Apple Squeeze.
- ☆ **Braided rug:** A lovely rug, hand braided by Lorraine Nichols, was raffled off at the Steilacoom Festival 150. Lorraine raised \$243 for her efforts. She has been braiding rugs for nearly fifty years. She received a blue ribbon at the Puyallup Fair in 2003.
- ☆ **Wagon Shop:** George Philips and Russ Cable have put in long hours sorting, organizing, and identifying the tools and memorabilia in the Wagon Shop. During the Festival many interested visitors toured the shop and some were able to further identify items. It will be open during Apple Squeeze.
- ☆ **Photo exhibit:** A photographic exhibit is on display at the new museum. The photos cover the time period from 1870 to 1937, from a booming Steilacoom to a fire which almost destroyed the entire business district.
- ☆ **Congratulations:** Lenore Rogers and Barbara Studebaker with their energetic crew pulled off a most successful garage sale on August 14. According to Treasurer Charles Upshaw, over \$1,400 was the profit for the day.
- ☆ **Dates to save:**
  - Apple Squeeze ..... October 3
  - Road Show – Herbs of the 1850s ..... October 10
  - Christmas at the Orr Home..... November 11-14
  - Annual Christmas Dinner..... December 4
  - Children's Gift Making..... December 11



## Apple Squeeze

October 3, 2004



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

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