

A visit with Miss Janet Tait
Presented by Margaret Humm Wilkinson

My name is Margaret Humm Wilkinson. I have been a part of Steilacoom's community for many years. During that time I have encountered hundreds, if not thousands, of people, but not another person quite like my teacher, Miss Janet Cornwall Tait.

The first thing Miss Tait taught me is the importance of Country and to be proud and thankful of where I lived. In that same spirit, I would like to call the Class to order, and as Miss Tait had us do at the beginning of every school day, stand and say the Pledge of Allegiance. So, will you please stand and say the Pledge with me? (All stand and face the flag. Note: A fabric sculpture of Miss Tait is displayed in the Steilacoom Historical Association's Museum)

When I first met Miss Tait, she like many of her peers of that Era, had an austere appearance. Although she wore dark clothing, she wore no make-up. Her salt and pepper hair was pulled back and worn in a "bun". She always carried a handkerchief, usually placed in the sleeve of her blouse. She had warm, gray-blue eyes, but her facial expression was usually very stern.

On the first day of school Miss Tait told her students: "I am here to teach you, and you are here to learn." She quickly added that: "if any student needs more assistance I am willing to help you after school." Miss Tait was a woman of her word, and she stayed after school many days to help those who were willing to learn.

(Miss Tait kept close tabs on her students' progress. One young man, who was failing, was given the opportunity to complete extra work during a holiday recess in order to catch up with his classmates. He took advantage of that extra work. Miss Tait never did learn what happened to that young man after his family moved out of the area).

The expectations of a woman, especially a teacher in the 1950s, were much different than now. The standards and social norms that Miss Tait embraced were those of a modern woman. She emphasized equality for every man and woman. One of the most valuable lessons she taught our Class was about the Bill of Rights, and that we should feel fortunate to live in the United States where the human, social, moral rights and property of every citizen was valued.

Miss Tait taught us to take pride in everything we did, including our penmanship. Once I wrote the wrong kind of "R's" and Miss Tait quickly pointed out the proper formation for a hand-written lower-case "R". She emphasized that our penmanship is our permanent mark on the world, and how you leave that mark for others to see will reveal to them your strength of character.

During the years after I left Steilacoom School, I remained in contact with Miss Tait, often visiting her at her home. She would always serve tea and Ms. Howie's recipe for cookies (Mrs. Howie shared the home with Miss Tait) when I visited. We shared many memories about her years as a teacher. She always said that her students were "her children."

Miss Tait also shared parts of her personal life with me during those afternoon visits. One afternoon she showed me the items that were most dear to her. When she moved from England to Darby, PA in 1911, and then from Pennsylvania to Steilacoom, she brought along a trunk filled with linens, china, plum pudding molds and other personal items.

On top of the linens was a stack of letters, neatly tied with a yellow ribbon. Those letters were from her fiancé, a World War I soldier, who was killed in action. His picture was in a lovely, gold frame, and a small box held a beautiful diamond ring, which, on that day, she slipped on her finger. A tear rolled down her cheek.

As I stated before, my first impression of Miss Tait was that she was a very austere woman. In reality, she had a gentle, thoughtful and humorous side, as I learned as I became better acquainted with her.

Through her grey-blue eyes she saw her students as like her own children, and she gave us her guidance and wisdom that has remained with me through the years.

During her teaching career Miss Tait also kept a roster of all her students.

She held herself, as well as her students, to very high standards. Her coaching, teaching and encouragement has had a lasting effect on my life. She taught me the meaning of integrity, honesty, loyalty, strength of character, and to have respect for others' opinions. Miss Tait, thank you. You always will be fondly remembered in my heart and mind.

How fortunate I felt to have had Miss Tait as a teacher, mentor and friend. She sparked my enthusiasm, impressing upon me, a very young girl, that a woman could be anything she wanted to be. She told us never to "settle for the moon when you can reach the stars."

To this day, my 8th grade classmates: Myrna Arbuckle (Gluck), Sandy Stucky (Bellamy), Julie Peck (McFarlane), Karen Dunkin (Stram) and I get together many times each year to catch up and reminisce about our days at Pioneer and Miss Tait,

In her 39 years of teaching in Steilacoom, Miss Tait influenced many students. She came to town in 1919 and taught until she retired in 1958. In 1924 she took over the 7th and 8th grades, a position she held for the next 20 years. She also was principal during this period, but turned the position over to Blair Taylor in 1946. (Blair Taylor was the sole male teacher at the school. He became Principal and then the district's first superintendent) Miss Tait continued to instruct the 8th grade students until she retired.

Miss Tait was born in Berwick-upon-Tweed, Northumberland, England, on July 31, 1892. She died at Des Moines, Washington on November 3, 1980.

Clenda Teevin Davidson
By Susanne Davidson

The program about Clenda Davidson was presented by her daughter-in-law, Susanne Davidson.

On the second Saturday of December members of the town's historical association, Steilacoom Historical Museum Association, gather for the organization's annual dinner. Now in its third decade, the association pays silent tribute to its founders, one of whom was Clenda Davidson. Clenda was an inveterate "collector", and because of that habit of saving everything—including materials that once were deemed useless, countless contemporary historians and just plain "seekers of knowledge" are able to learn a lot about this small town that was established in 1851 (incorporated in 1854).

In her day, Clenda was known to as the "Unofficial Town Historian" (that meant that she didn't get paid). She made sure that all the mail addressed to a (at that time) non-existent Chamber of Commerce, mailed from all over the U.S., was answered.

She was the Church Historian, took track of all the Deaths in town, and saw that the flag was flown at half-mast on those occasions. She also was an avid headstone reader. The Masonic and Eastern Star organizations (of which she was a past Matron) turned over their research to her.

As a member of the Picture Committee for the Steilacoom Town Hall, she worked for several years, tracking down and seeking information so that the photos that were eventually displayed would be properly labeled. She served as Den Mother, and during WW II helped roll and sew bandages.

She was a church circle member who contributed and arranged flowers from her beautiful gardens—flowers that were given away to those who asked. She even took a turn at the Lookout Tower. Clenda gave talks at schools, youth organizations and women's clubs on every subject based on the historical background of her beloved Northwest.

Clenda was a Charter member of the Steilacoom Chapter of the Daughters of the Pioneers of Washington of which she was President from 1956-57. She was the State Board Chairman of the committee on Historic Sites and Markers, State Parks and Recreation Commission for Miss Elliot, Publicity Chairman and on the Education and Legislature Committee.

In 1937 Clenda and her husband, Clyde, purchased the historic 1858 Philip Keach Home. Clenda had remembered the house as a child and always wanted to live there, and so they purchased the two-story frame house not far from the Sound. For five years they tirelessly worked on the house that people thought they were crazy to buy. They dealt with holes in the roof, blackberries through the floorboards, and until the house was livable they slept in what is now the dining room.

At the time the house was built no one in town had formal addresses. The houses, instead, were given names. She was the one who named it "Rolling Hill" since it seemed to here that the lawn rolled down to Steilacoom Bay, which is the name given to the part of the Sound in front of their home. Milt, their son, says. "Once you've mowed the lawn you can understand how it got its name."

The team of "Clyde and Clenda" was known from one end of the county to the next. They lived in the lovely old house, Rolling Hill, that overlooks Puget Sound from Steilacoom Bay to the snow-capped Olympics.

When the couple were well into their 80s, they slept on the upstairs porch in sleeping bags. (just in the summer). She was tough as a nut, as active as a flea, and impossible to keep up with or to pin down. She was an out-of-doors camper, a woodland roamer and an end-of- the-road-seeker. She was always to be counted on if she took over a project for you.

In 1970 Clyde, along with some of his friends, began discussing how the Town should have a Museum. But where to put it was the question? They spoke to Mayor George Faulkner, and he suggested

that the newly formed association could use the basement of town hall in the room next to where the Boy Scouts held their meetings. They began planning, and the organizing went forward.

In the organization's early days, Clyde often would bring things from their home into the front door of the museum. Clenda, who wasn't eager to give up those antiques, would take them out the back door, saying she wasn't yet ready to give them up.

Eventually a compromise was reached. In appreciation for their efforts, the Town treated the Davidsons to a train trip to Canada.

Clenda died May 11, 1989, shortly before her 90th birthday.

Visitors to Town, who've had an opportunity to spend time at the Museum, (now relocated to its new site on Rainier Street) will come away with a keener appreciation for the history of this community on the shores of Puget Sound: A Place of Firsts.

**Two “Firsts” for Steilacoom Women:
Councilwoman Joan Curtis
Steilacoom Mayor Janda Volkmer**

This past August, Steilacoom’s first woman council member and first woman mayor met informally, in a “Steilacoom garden” to discuss their accomplishments and ways in which they made unique contributions to the Town on the Sound. Nancy Covert was the moderator for this summer afternoon conversation.

In a community that prides itself on being a “Place of Firsts”, Joan Curtis and Janda Volkmer have earned their places on that list.

Both women arrived in Steilacoom in the late 1960s, and like others before them, they found ways to make distinctive contributions to their community through the many volunteer opportunities available here. Their accomplishments during the past 40 years are listed below. Volunteer work opened the way to other ways to serve their community.

Eventually each was elected to town offices: Joan was elected in the 70s to a position on the Town Council, while Janda, who also served on the Council, was elected in 1988 as the community’s first woman mayor. She was re-elected for two more terms.

After moving to the community in 1968, Joan immersed herself in a variety of town volunteer activities in both the Museum Association and in the Town of Steilacoom, from coordinating and planning a variety of museum association traditions such as Steilacoom Dines Out events, to editing and writing the Town on the Sound and the SHMA Quarterly as well as serving as curator of the Nathaniel Orr Home.

When it came time to plan the Town’s 150th anniversary, Joan served on the 2004 Sesquicentennial Celebration Committee.

Included among her numerous honors are: Steilacoom’s Distinguished Service Award, Who’s Who in the West, The Washington State Historic Preservation Officer’s Award for Outstanding Career Achievement in Historic Preservation, the SHMA Merrill Award for Service and as the community’s Citizen of the Year.

Joan’s interests are “far ranging, her energy constant, and her skills varied. A love of history and for the town where she has made her home, a talent for journalism, an interest in education and an ever-inquiring mind have directed her pursuits, according to remarks made in April at a reception honoring her.

“Few people make such an impact on their communities and fields of interest, and Joan is one of those people. Steilacoom is fortunate to have her, and we all are delighted to know her.”

Although Joan “retired” from her curator role, she continues to volunteer at the Museum where she catalogues the endless donations of historic items.

Janda’s, who also came to Steilacoom in 1968, began her route to the town’s highest office in the late 1980s, after participating in a variety of community activities: helping at the annual salmon bake and apple squeeze and taking part in the Fourth of July celebration. Janda also served on a variety of town committees and commissions.

Her achievements include serving as a board member and vice president of the Washington Museum Association, past president of the Heritage League of Pierce County. Other professional affiliations include memberships in the National Association

of American Museums, Association of State and Local History as well as in four Pierce County heritage associations.

In addition to her museum experience, Janda also spent 10 years in fund development at the University of Puget Sound. She has worked in government and community relations.

She is a strong proponent of historic preservation, cultural diversity and protection of natural environment.

During a busy period in the town's history, Janda presided over the completion of several studies, including a comprehensive plan for the 2.1 square mile town on the edge of Puget Sound. Plans also were drawn up during her tenure for the disposition of Farrell's Marsh—a 62-acre-wetland area that lies between the Cherrydale and Oldtown areas.

A major achievement during her mayoral tenure included the renovation of Sunnyside Beach—a large, public access beach along Chamber's Creek Road, the route along which the old Tacoma-Steilacoom trolley once traveled.

Following a major restoration of Lafayette Street, Steilacoom's main thoroughfare, work was begun on the restoration of Union Avenue: a two-mile area which extends from Cormorant Passage to the Sound, terminating at the Ferry Terminal.

Ground was broken for the Steilacoom Library, originally housed at Town Hall—and dedicated in 1995. That year was the same one in which the County Ferry "Christine Anderson" was formally christened to serve as a link between the mainland and Anderson Island.

Other memorable town events during Janda's tenure include re-dedication of a plaque honoring town residents who had served during WW II, followed by dedication of a plaque honoring Steilacoom's mayors beginning in 1871 with William Wallace (also Idaho's first territorial governor). It also included the town's colorful Fourth of July parades—in which the Mayor often donned a costume and walked along the parade route, adding a homey touch to the national celebration.

Although the women are retired from highly visible roles in the community, they continue to take part in its daily life. From their vantage points of having been involved in all aspects of town government, and desiring to leave a positive legacy for its citizens, ever mindful of the rich legacy of Steilacoom's history, the women continue to draw on their expertise and provide insight on a variety of on-going town issues.

At the conclusion of their "afternoon" discussion, Joan said that, "*There's always going to be change, but the water, the mountains, the view will remain.*"

Dr. Mary Perkins, M.D.
Presented by Lenore Rogers

The following are excerpts from a conversation between Dr. Mary Perkins, M.D., and an aspiring young woman physician. They visited on the porch of Dr. Mary's home on the grounds of Western State Hospital in the late 1920s.

“I was born in the great state of Kentucky, just a few years before the start of the Civil War—1859 to be exact. We moved to Missouri, where I became a nurse and worked at Community Hospital in St. Louis. I then became a supervisor of Nurses at a private hospital, also in St. Louis.

Becoming a doctor had been a long-time desire, which was fulfilled when I attended medical school in Ann Arbor, Michigan. There I met my husband, Luther Perkins, who was a professor at the University of Michigan medical school and a physician. We returned to Missouri where we had three children: two boys and one girl.

Dr. Luther corresponded with a former student who lived in Steilacoom, Washington, and spoke of a desperate need for doctors in the area. We made the move, arriving in March 1902 and renting a house in Steilacoom. My husband also served as a ship's physician for a company that traded with the Orient.

My early years of medical practice were rather interesting and unusual ones. Upon our arrival I was unable to practice immediately since the state board of licensing examinations were given only once each year, and had taken place earlier that year. I was able to treat patients, however, but I was unable to write prescriptions. Fortunately, a physician from nearby Tacoma, rewrote them for me, and they were filled at Bair Drug in Steilacoom.

Some of my more memorable cases included the treatment of Santa Claus, for burns he received when he reached across a candle-lit tree while distributing gifts as an annual town-wide gathering. I was often called out to go to nearby Anderson Island, which involved locating someone to row me there and back. I also was fortunate to work with my sister-in-law, Alice Fletcher. She was a nurse who operated a birthing center for women in Steilacoom.

After my husband's company closed its Pacific Branch, we moved to Tacoma and operated our offices at 11th & K streets. We continued to maintain summer homes in Steilacoom, which presented a challenge to movers who, had to move our large piano from Tacoma to Steilacoom and back again each year.

Our children, having two parents as busy physicians no doubt experienced challenges. Both my husband and I would be called out at night to care for the sick. We were fortunate to live across the street from a family who ran a neighborhood grocery store. On nights when the second one of us was called out, we would let our neighbors know that both of us were gone. If there was any problem, our children were told to raise the shade in the dining room as a signal for the neighbor to call the police.

On one occasion after both of us had been out all night treating patients, we were informed by the principal that our children had been late for school. They had eaten no breakfast, so they stopped at the store and bought donuts, which they ate along the way to school. A note was required for their tardiness to be excused. My husband quickly dashed off a note saying, “My wife and I were out all night and weren't home to get the children off to school.”

Well! The principal was horrified, and that required yet another note from home. In this one, my husband informed the principal that both parents were physicians, and it was then signed Dr. Luther Perkins, M. D. and Dr. Mary Perkins, M. D. At this the principal excused our children's late arrival at school.

My husband's health began to fail, and he finally died in 1911. That left me, at age 52, to continue raising our three children, supporting them and maintaining a career. After daughter Ida was old

enough to drive I engaged her to take me around on my various calls. As those sometimes turned into rather lengthy visits, we always maintained a supply of books in the car for her to pass the time. She was very well read, and later became a teacher in the Tacoma schools.

In 1914 I became a physician for the Tacoma Public Schools where I worked until 1918 when I accepted a position as the first woman physician caring for women patients at Western State hospital. Happily both sons returned from WW I around this time. Here I am able to live in a home on the lovely grounds of the hospital. Daughter Ida was married here. I am happy to be here, but will someday retire and return to Steilacoom where I have so many fond memories and dear friends.

Epilogue: Dr. Mary Perkins was a true pioneer in her chosen field. She joined with other career women that met informally at the Tacoma Hotel. There were at least six women who formed the local Business and Professional Women's Club.

Mary did indeed retire from working at Western State Hospital, but not until 1939, at the age of 79. She had a home built in Steilacoom on Rainier Street, with a large weeping willow tree in the front yard, and a view of nearby Puget Sound and the Olympic Mountains. Her home was built by a man named Milgard, which is now well known and associated with windows. Mary died in 1941 at the age of 82.

In 1972, she was honored when her son, Melville, donated land: the site of the family's summer home, to the Town of Steilacoom, to be used as a park. A brick marker on the corner of Union Avenue and Martin Street introduces visitors and newcomers alike to Dr. Mary Perkins.

Mary was noted for her sense of humor as well as her medical skill and dignified demeanor. She maintained her soft Kentucky accent and youthful appearance, even in her later years. She was easily recognized by the black velvet ribbon she wore around her neck. She also was remembered for baking apple dumplings and square biscuits.

The Women of Steilacoom

Steilacoom “has charm”—the words, coined by the community’s first woman realtor—echo into the 21st century, and serve as inspiration for a program “Women of Steilacoom” that focused on the contributions not only of that woman, but also of other women who made a significant difference in the life of the state’s oldest incorporated community.

As Washington State’s oldest incorporated community (1854) Steilacoom has long been celebrated as a *Place of Firsts*. While its many “Firsts” have served as the reason behind many of its community festivities, one aspect of its identity—the contributions of its women—has rarely been formally acknowledged.

The Washington Women’s Suffrage Centennial that begins in 2009, sparked plans to showcase the efforts of a group of 20th century Steilacoom women who made significant contributions to their community

For purposes of the Women’s History Month program (which included lectures and displays) “The Women of Steilacoom” focused on half a dozen key personalities including a realtor, a businesswoman, a physician, a museum founder, an educator, as well as the town’s first woman council member and its first woman mayor. The fact that the 2008 presenters were personally acquainted with each of these women added to the presentations.

As Washington State’s former First Lady Jean Gardner noted in 1997 during the launch of plans for the State’s Centennial Celebration, the accomplishments of Washington’s women have all too often been glossed over. Steilacoom’s recent commemoration of women’s’ achievements has helped to change that misconception.

Gladys Parker
Presented by Jean Dyer Swanson

Gladys Parker was probably in her 30s when I knew her as a young girl and then for the rest of her life. Gladys did not impress me as being someone who was beautiful or good looking.

After all, she was merely a teacher.

She was just what I thought a teacher should look like—not like some movie star.

In the 1930s a woman's wardrobe usually consisted of: one black dress, a good summer dress and a winter dress coat. Flaps on shoes were the rage then; most women wore plain, one-inch-high heeled shoes. Miss Parker had a pair of white ones, I remember. Stockings, either cotton or silk—nylon came in the 1940s--were usually rolled and worn either below the knees or over them. Lots of times Gladys' slip straps slid down her shoulders—and you could tell they'd slipped because the hem of her slip was often longer on one side.

She had a heavy head of dark hair that she wore curled and brought up in the front, with a bun of some sort tucked under in the back. That bun was usually held in place with a large bobby pin—which she usually brought out at different times and used to scratch her scalp. She never had what I called a “trim” figure; hers was pudgy.

Does that description sound like a schoolteacher? She wore no make-up; there was no need since she had a one of those lovely “English” complexions. One of the most distinctive things I can remember about all my teachers is the variety of perfumes they wore—each one had a lovely scent. Violet, carnation, camellia—even talcum powder—was nice smelling: when you got a whiff of one of these scents you could tell who was around.

One year we had to move—that was before my folks bought the house in which my husband, Herb, and I live. We rented one of the houses known as the “Three Sisters” for a year. It was the one across the street from The Columns. I think I was in the 9th grade.

As I have talked to people who were my age, funny stories about Gladys have come out: the one thing we could do to earn spending money was to clean houses and help people where needed. We all had our turns working for Gladys Parker.

My sister, Virnadeen, tells about the time that she was cleaning Gladys' bedroom. On the dresser was a long fingernail file. Vir picked it up and started to file her nails. Gladys walked in the room just then and found Vir using the file. A lecture followed. “*You do not touch or use someone's personal belongings!*”

Jeanette Bell told about the time she worked for Gladys. “*One day the phone rang at the house.*” Very few people in those days had phones. Jeanette picked it up the receiver and heard a voice ask, “*is Gladys there?*” Jeanette said, “*No,*” and hung up. Gladys found out that someone had called and taught Jeanette how to answer the phone.

Of course, Gladys operated the Jasmine Tearoom in this house. At that time teachers never did not make big money, nor did they have medical coverage nor retirement funds. Perhaps this was Gladys' way of solving those problems. Jeanette said Gladys read people's tealeaves.

“Some times there was only one guest for Tea. Gladys served cookies, tea and read the guest's fortune. How she came about telling fortunes or hosting the teas I do not know. Nor ever learned.

Work ethics were strong. Teachers were expected to always be healthy, to behave properly, and women teachers were not allowed to marry if they wanted to continue teaching. So most women teachers had to find a way to make extra money. Gladys was a gifted person: she taught business, typing and shorthand. She started her teaching career at Stadium High School and then went to Lincoln High School in Tacoma. She always had a car. For a woman that was something.

Steilacoom's Theater Group

What did Gladys ever do for the town? I've brought some photos of the Minstrel Show she directed. Appearing in the cast are many of the great people of Steilacoom, showcasing their talents. None of us knew in those days just how good they were. Bernie Schools taught classes in ballet, tap –whatever. That is how she earned her college money. Freida Whitacre Jack could really whistle—her whistling tunes

always were a favorite with the audience. My mother did funny readings. I can still remember her practicing by standing in front of a mirror.

In those days there were never any colored people in Steilacoom, not until after WW II. Since the program was a Minstrel Show—some of the cast members blackened their faces with burnt cork—Gladys was one who did.

Dr. Tollefson was the leader of the band; his costume was funny and a shocker at that time. He often took nips from a bottle in between numbers, and as a result became funnier and funnier.

What was the purpose of this minstrel show? To earn money to purchase much-needed library books. Gladys also served as one of the town's librarians.

The whole town was involved in the project. The Friday before the show the older students walked downtown and met with the cast members to have a photo taken to advertise the play.

Later Miss Parker directed our Christmas Pageant at church. I was Mary—couldn't sing worth a dime, and forgot the words to "Away in a Manger". She later told my mother that she didn't care about the music. She only wanted a young girl for the part. But I bravely got through the play. See, I still remember.

Steilacoom has Charm

Gladys invented this slogan for her real estate business. As I remember there had not been any real estate people before her. People in town, such as Mr. Davies, owned a number of houses and rented them out himself.

When we first came to Steilacoom my folks rented "The Mattie" from Mr. Davies. Then we moved into the Second Sister. Finally we moved to the house where I still live.

At first my folks rented it for eight years. Then Miss Murray, who owned it, decided she wanted to move to Steilacoom and live there. So we moved to the First Sister, across from Miss Parker's home. After a year of living in the house alone, Miss Murray decided she could no longer stay there so she went to my mother and asked her to buy it. My father did not want to own a house. Gladys told my mother, "Just wait. I'll handle Jim." And she did. The house cost \$1,200—no down payment necessary--\$20 a month payment. What a sweet deal! Gladys helped many people to buy and rent homes. To close my time I am passing around a short trip around Steilacoom that Gladys wrote for prospective homebuyers.

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Later Miss Parker directed our Christmas Pageant at church. I was Mary—couldn't sing worth a dime, and forgot the words to "Away in a Manger". She later told my mother that she didn't care about the music. She only wanted a young girl for the part. But I bravely got through the play. See, I still remember.

Steilacoom has Charm

Gladys invented this slogan for her real estate business. As I remember there had not been any real estate people before her. People in town, such as Mr. Davies, owned a number of houses and rented them out himself.

When we first came to Steilacoom my folks rented "The Mattie" from Mr. Davies. Then we moved into the Second Sister. Finally we moved to the house where I still live.

At first my folks rented it for eight years. Then Miss Murray, who owned it, decided she wanted to move to Steilacoom and live there. So we moved to the First Sister, across from Miss Parker's home. After a year of living in the house alone, Miss Murray decided she could no longer stay there so she went to my mother and asked her to buy it. My father did not want to own a house. Gladys told my mother, "Just wait. I'll handle Jim." And she did. The house cost \$1,200—no down payment necessary--\$20 a month payment. What a sweet deal! Gladys helped many people to buy and rent homes. To close my time I am passing around a short trip around Steilacoom that Gladys wrote for prospective homebuyers.

Harriet (Hattie) Elizabeth Godfrey Bair
Presented by Jane Bair Light

Before beginning her presentation Jane Bair Light, in the role of her grandmother Hattie E. Bair welcomed the guests to the Waverly.

Harriet Elizabeth Godfrey Bair, better known to Steilacoom residents as ‘Hattie’ or “Grandma,” was born in Hutchinson, Kansas on a farm on Sept. 29, 1860. She was next to the oldest of nine children. Her family moved to Salinas, and it was there that she met, and on June 28, 1887, married Warren LeFevre—always known as “W. L.”

W. L., a pharmacist, was one of 7 brothers. Although his practice was in Salinas, after he received a letter from his brother, Ed, he decided to relocate to the West. A cautious man, he advised his wife to “stay here. I’ll go and see if Ed is telling the truth. When I get settled, I’ll send for you.”

Hattie tried to talk him into letting her come along, but he was very determined that she stay and help her parents with her younger siblings.

“Don’t worry,” W. L. said, “it won’t be long, I promise you.”

Well, Hattie waited patiently for word from W. L. but as the days turned into weeks and the weeks into months, and still no word from W. L. she made up her mind to pack her satchel, put on her best hat and coat, and head West. When she stepped off the railroad in Steilacoom in early 1890, W. L. was standing nearby. W. L. turned to a friend and said, “If I didn’t know better, I’d think that was Hat’s hat getting off the train!” He was more than a little surprised to see his wife. “I guess this is just a good illustration of my independence,” she remarked.

W. L. and Hattie moved in with her mother-in-law, Mary Bair, in her house on Rainier Street. In 1895 the barn on Starling Street, behind the house, was converted into their first home in Steilacoom.

Their son, Godfrey LeFevre, was born August 3, 1890 in Tacoma. His sister, Eudocia, came two years later. Eudocia was known as “Dosh” or “Susan” while the only ones who called Godfrey “Godfrey” were his dad sister and Hattie—to everyone else he was “Cub.”

W. L.’s first pharmacy was in Tacoma. Soon, though, he realized that Steilacoom was **the** place to be, so in 1893 he moved his operation to Commercial Street, between Main and Balch. He built the current Bair Drug and Hardware store on Lafayette and Wilkes in 1895. He chose that location because the terminus for the Tacoma-Steilacoom Electric Railroad that came along Chamber’s Creek was at that corner. W. L. wired the store into the electricity from the railroad, and thus, the store was the first building in Steilacoom to have electric lights.

Hattie was really busy in those early years. Aside from raising those two children, she cooked at the Iron Springs Sanatorium—later a hotel, located on the corner of Starling and Pierce streets. Ed and W. L. bought it in 1903. It was famed for its iron springs: mineral baths, pure water, and on Sundays Hattie’s renowned 50 cent family-style chicken and biscuits dinner. It had 8 bathhouses, a saltwater swimming pool with water pumped up from the Sound (Godfrey’s job was to man the pump), plus billiard and card rooms. The Iron Springs Hotel was a highly desirable vacation destination for prominent Tacomans. Also, many of the residents were workers building the north/south railroad.

After the Iron Springs Hotel closed, Hattie opened a bakery in the building adjacent to the drug store. Butch Chelius’ meat market was between the two buildings. Pies and donuts were her specialty, but she also baked bread, made cakes and cookies and, of course, anything anyone wanted to order.

W. L. and Hattie were active in other organizations and endeavors, too. W. L. was a member of Steilacoom Masonic Lodge No. 2 and was Grand Master for many terms. Hattie was the first Worthy Matron for Acacia Chapter #39 Order of the Eastern Star, and held the office for a number of years. Social

activities were a large part of the Masons and Eastern Stars' activities so, of course, she often prepared fried chicken, made clam pie, sugar cookies, George Washington's cream pie, churned ice cream, and a host of other goodies. Hattie had the reputation of being an excellent cook. People say, "If you want something really good, ask Hattie to bring it."

Oberlin Church was a big part of Hattie's life. Her culinary skills found another outlet there since she cooked more food on more occasions for the church than she cared to remember. She was honored when the church women named a Circle in her honor, and (by 2008) it is still active.

After Godfrey graduated from high school, he headed to the Alaska goldfield, while Eudocia went on to Ellensburg Normal School after graduation and later returned to Steilacoom to teach.

After World War I started in 1914 it gave Steilacoom's businesses and housing a boost. Over W. L.'s objections Hattie bought and rented out "Blink Bonnie," a small, one-bedroom house on the southwest corner of Starling and Frederick streets.

After Eudocia's marriage to Lt. Wm. I. Leech in 1918, they moved in. The joy of Hattie's life—her first grandchild—Jackson Warren Leech, was born in 1919. She admits that she spoiled him rotten. Eudocia, meanwhile, had gone to work in the post office, located in the back of the Bair Store, so Hattie watched Jack. Whatever he wanted—he got and more besides. Grandparents will understand.

When Godfrey married Mary Drew in 1920, they, eventually along with their four children, moved into Blink Bonnie. Eudocia and Bill moved in with W. L. and Hattie on Starling Street.

When the North/South Railroad came through Steilacoom in 1914, the tourists stopped coming, and businesses, including Hattie's, bakery closed. With time on her hands Hattie turned her attention to Real Estate and nurturing other children.

In 1928—again over W. L.'s objections, she bought the Waverly—built in 1891 by E. R. Roger—and turned it into a boarding/rooming house. For many residents the Waverly has been their first home in Steilacoom, especially during WW II when Ft. Lewis expanded. The Waverly also was home to many servicemen. A lot of McNeil Island employees also lived there for short periods of time. Hattie took great joy in fixing chicken and biscuits, fried potatoes and onions, steaks, cookies, donuts, etc. That's why she always wore a floured apron on!

Again, over W. L.'s objections, a 12-year-old boy named Bert Steng came to live with them. His mother wasn't able to care for him. He helped out at the store until he graduated from high school and moved on. He became a second son to the Bairs.

During these Depression Years many men—called "Bums"—would drop by the Waverly and stay for a day, a week or a month. The "Bums" were men down on their luck, without jobs, bumming a ride on the railroad from town to town—just looking for a handout. They would willingly do odd jobs: chop and stack wood, sweep, clean—whatever—in exchange for food and a place to sleep. There was a wood shed and storage shed next to the Waverly, and the "bums" would stay there. Never once did the Bairs have a bad experience with any of the "Bums."

Hattie's beloved W. L. died in 1930. The family carried on—Bill and Eudocia ran the store and post office—Bert helped out and as each of the grandchildren grew, they took their turns helping. Godfrey was in Alaska mining for gold.

In the 30's Steilacoom had a Drum and Bugle Corps, sponsored by the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars). Hattie was instrumental in forming the VFW Auxiliary, so, of course, she became involved with Drum and Bugle Corps. They were a talented and smart-looking group in their uniforms of Scottish kilts and spats. Hattie went along on their bus "Bonnie" to competitions in Aberdeen, Walla Walla, etc. All the members called her "Grandma." She'd help anyway she could (the parents would probably rather she'd stay home). The band won several competitions, and Hattie was very proud.

The young people in Town knew they were always welcome at the Waverly. Hattie set up a ping-pong table in the front parlor and they would come and play. Granddaughter Jane and young Kenny Light really were good. And, of course, there was always food.

In 1939 a terrible fire in Steilacoom destroyed the entire block-long building along Lafayette, between the store and the Oberlin Church. Luckily the Bair store didn't go up in flames, too. It was shortly after that that the three buildings attached to the store were dismantled.

World War II started Sunday, Dec. 7 1941. Hattie was at church and on her way home she noticed a solemn gathering in the store. They told her what had happened. Her three grandsons went off to war, and she worried a lot about them. Godfrey didn't go back to Alaska. Instead, he went to work in the shipyards as his war effort. Steilacoom's War Coordinator was Barney Drew—Mary's Brother. He appointed Hattie, at Age 81, as Chairman of the Red Cross War Fund. Five weeks after that appointment, Hattie reported that they had exceeded their goal of \$400—not bad for a town of less than 1,000.

To keep her mind off the war and give her something to do, Hattie bought the Colonial—Dr. Taylor's Mansion, across Lafayette Street from the drugstore. Its apartments were occupied with Army families that she took under her wing.

Hattie's youngest grandchild, Jane, graduated from the 8th grade during the War. Hattie hosted a party at the Waverly for the entire class—all 13 of them. They came for an evening of games and food. Unfortunately the party had just begun when the air raid siren went off, and all the youngsters scattered to their wartime stations. Jane was a bicycle messenger, stationed at the Leech's garage, with an air raid warden. Her job was to carry any messages between air raid wardens. Of course, there was a blackout, so it was pitch black. Even though it didn't last very long, it put a damper on the party.

Hattie's last days were spent at the Waverly, listening to the radio and napping. She died on January 29, 1948, at the age of 88 and was buried at the Old Masonic Cemetery in Lakewood.

Dr. Mary Perkins, M.D.
Presented by Lenore Rogers

The following are excerpts from a conversation between Dr. Mary Perkins, M.D., and an aspiring young woman physician. They visited on the porch of Dr. Mary's home on the grounds of Western State Hospital in the late 1920s.

“I was born in the great state of Kentucky, just a few years before the start of the Civil War—1859 to be exact. We moved to Missouri, where I became a nurse and worked at Community Hospital in St. Louis. I then became a supervisor of Nurses at a private hospital, also in St. Louis.

Becoming a doctor had been a long-time desire, which was fulfilled when I attended medical school in Ann Arbor, Michigan. There I met my husband, Luther Perkins, who was a professor at the University of Michigan medical school and a physician. We returned to Missouri where we had three children: two boys and one girl.

Dr. Luther corresponded with a former student who lived in Steilacoom, Washington, and spoke of a desperate need for doctors in the area. We made the move, arriving in March 1902 and renting a house in Steilacoom. My husband also served as a ship's physician for a company that traded with the Orient.

My early years of medical practice were rather interesting and unusual ones. Upon our arrival I was unable to practice immediately since the state board of licensing examinations were given only once each year, and had taken place earlier that year. I was able to treat patients, however, but I was unable to write prescriptions. Fortunately, a physician from nearby Tacoma, rewrote them for me, and they were filled at Bair Drug in Steilacoom.

Some of my more memorable cases included the treatment of Santa Claus, for burns he received when he reached across a candle-lit tree while distributing gifts at an annual town-wide gathering. I was often called out to go to nearby Anderson Island, which involved locating someone to row me over and back. I also was fortunate to work with my sister-in-law, Alice Fletcher. She was a nurse who operated a birthing center for women in Steilacoom.

After my husband's company closed its Pacific Branch, we moved to Tacoma and operated our offices at 11th & K streets. We continued to maintain summer homes in Steilacoom, which presented a challenge to movers who had to move our large piano from Tacoma to Steilacoom and back again each year.

Having two parents as busy physicians no doubt experienced challenges for our children. Both my husband and I would be called out at night to care for the sick. We were fortunate to live across the street from a family who ran a neighborhood grocery store. On nights when the second one of us was called out, we would let our neighbors know that both of us were gone. If there was any problem, our children were told to raise the shade in the dining room as a signal for the neighbor to call the police.

On one occasion after both of us had been out all night treating patients, we were informed by the principal that our children had been late for school. They had eaten no breakfast, so they stopped at the store and bought donuts, which they ate along the way to school. A note was required for their tardiness to be excused. My husband quickly dashed off a note saying, “My wife and I were out all night and weren't home to get the children off to school.”

Well! The principal was horrified, and that required yet another note from home. In this one, my husband informed the principal that both parents were physicians, and it was then signed Dr. Luther Perkins, M. D. and Dr. Mary Perkins, M. D. At this the principal excused our children's late arrival at school.

My husband's health began to fail, and he finally died in 1911. That left me, at age 52, to continue raising our three children, supporting them and maintaining a career. After Ida was old enough to drive I

engaged her to take me around on my various calls. As those sometimes turned into rather lengthy visits, we always maintained a supply of books in the car for her to pass the time. She was very well read, and later became a teacher in the Tacoma schools.

In 1914 I became a physician for the Tacoma Public Schools where I worked until 1918 when I accepted a position as the first woman physician caring for women patients at Western State hospital. Happily both sons returned from WW I around this time. Here I am able to live in a home on the lovely grounds of the hospital. Daughter Ida was married here. I am happy to be here, but will someday retire and return to Steilacoom where I have so many fond memories and dear friends.

Epilogue: Dr. Mary Perkins was a true pioneer in her chosen field. She joined with other career women that met informally at the Tacoma Hotel. There were at least six women who formed the local Business and Professional Women's Club.

Mary did indeed retire from working at Western State Hospital, but not until 1939, at the age of 79. She had a home built in Steilacoom on Rainier Street, with a large weeping willow tree in the front yard, and a view of nearby Puget Sound and the Olympic Mountains. Her home was built by a man named Milgard, which is now well known and associated with windows. Mary died in 1941 at the age of 82.

In 1972, she was honored when her son, Melville, donated land: the site of the family's summer home, to the Town of Steilacoom, to be used as a park. A brick marker on the corner of Union Avenue and Martin Street introduces visitors and newcomers alike to Dr. Mary Perkins.

Mary was noted for her sense of humor as well as her medical skill and dignified demeanor. She maintained her soft Kentucky accent and youthful appearance, even in her later years. She was easily recognized by the black velvet ribbon she wore around her neck. She also was remembered for baking apple dumplings and square biscuits.