THE BIG BOTTOM (LEWIS COUNTY) 1833-1933

An important desideratum of Washington's first white settlement at Tumwater, was a direct route across the Cascade Range to The Dalles.

In the spring of 1854, two Tumwater pioneers set out on an exploring expedition to locate a low pass to connect Puget Sound with the Oregon Trail.

Their names have since become emblazoned in Washington's hall of fame: James Longmire, discoverer of the springs in Rainier National Park now bearing his name; and William Packwood, for whom a postoffice, lake and mountain saddle in eastern Lewis County have been named.

Led by a trio of Nisqually Indian guides, the pioneer pair skirted the stream known as Skate Creek southward from Mount Rainier, and came out upon a huge bottomland bisected by the upper Cowlitz River.

At that time, according to the statement of Jim Yoak, aged patriarch of the Cowlitz tribe, Longmire and Packwood found a thriving Indian village on the banks of the river, with several hundred members of the Cowlitz tribe living there.

The two trail-blazers returned to Tumwater with the word that they had discovered the long-hoped-for low pass to The Dalles. A subsequent trip of course proved this belief was erroneous, for the summit was still many miles to the eastward.

Even to this day, man has not pierced White Pass with a road; but this will soon become an actuality.

Although failing in their original purpose, Longmire and Packwood did not make that exploring trip in vain, for they were the first white men to glimpse the "Big Bottom" country.

Beginning at Tumwater Falls, the rapids where the Cowlitz enters its canyon, the Big Bottom extends northeasterly to the Clear Fork of that river. It contains roughly 19,000 acres of land, being some thirty miles long and averaging a mile in width. The mean elevation is only one thousand feet.

William Packwood's interest in the new-found Big Bottom was centered on the coal beds which he discovered south of the Tatoosh Range, and which he visited for twenty-eight consecutive years thereafter.

This coal, despite the geological infancy of the Cascades, is of the anthracite variety and is said to be comparable with the better grades of hard coal found in eastern mines. It has not yet been developed commercially owing to lack of transportation facilities.

Indirectly, white man's connection with the Big Bottom can be traced back a full century. In 1833, the Indians from the bottom took their furs to the old Hudson's Bay Company trading post at Jackson's Prairie. At that time, the country abounded in wolverine, marmoset, lynx, beaver, bear, deer, and other fur-bearing animals.

Isolated from the rest of the state by its mountain barriers, the Big Bottom had to wait three decades after its initial discovery, before the first white settler arrived.

We find an account of a group of white men chasing an Indian war party into the region of Packwood Lake in 1862; but it was twenty years after that, in the spring of 1882, that white man actually began to make history in the bottom.

To William Joerk (now spelled York), a German merchant, goes the distinction of being the Big Bottom's first white settler. He had located in the gold fields on the upper Sacramento River in California, where he catered to the miners' needs. A season of financial reverses made him seek a new locale, and his trail led to Washington.

Packing on foot into the far reaches of the Cowlitz Valley over rough, little-used Indian trails, York found the Big Bottom almost totally depopulated of Indians, by a smallpox epidemic of unknown date. Of the hundreds of natives who trapped for the Hudson's Bay Company in the 'thirties, now only two Indians and their families remained—George Washington and Columbus Kiona.

York found a wide meadow, lush with grass—the only clearing of any size in the entire bottom. It now bears the name of Chapman's Prairie. Not being familiar with soil conditions, York made the grave mistake of assuming that since the clearing was not filled with Douglas fir and maple, it must be deficient in fertility.

Accordingly, when he returned to the Big Bottom valley the following year (1883), York settled and spent a lifetime grubbing out the tough maple forest which marked the site of the present Evans Blankenship cattle ranch. It is said that York later lived to bitterly regret his early mistaken judgment.

But the prairie attracted the eye of a pioneer named Brockway, the following year. He did not settle, but his cleared farm was later possessed by a Frenchman known as Louie. Louie became almost a legendary figure, after going insane as a result of an altercation with the Indians over the shooting of a saddle pony.

1883 also saw the arrival of Thomas Dalton, who squatted on a claim near the present J. C. Dempsey ranch near Randle. In 1884, John Kehoe, a Canadian adventurer fresh from the Mother Lode country of California, arrived to stake out a claim.

Kehoe still resides in his original squatter's cabin, being the oldest living pioneer in the oldest structure now extant in the Big Bottom.

William Ferguson of Chehalis, Pat and Frank Muldoon of Minnesota, and John Osborn and Richard Ormsby of Tennessee also came to the Big Bottom and became permanent settlers. Many transients visited the new country but moved on before the heavy snows of 1883-1884 set in.

Despite the fact that no roads approached the new inland kingdom, the Big Bottom had taken permanent root. Many things favored its growth. The Indians, many families of them moving back into the valley, were very friendly, providing the whites with seed potatoes and pelts. Nowhere in the bottom's century of history do we find a trace of Indian hostility.

Another condition in favor of the new settlement was the vast richness of the soil. Largely alluvial in nature, geologists also think various strata came from the summit of Mount Rainier, twenty miles north, when that volcano exploded in the dim beginnings of time.

The year 1885 saw the coming of Rufus T. Siler and his sister, Louisa, who was the first white woman in the valley. His arrival started a veritable exodus of his neighbors from Lowden County, Tennessee. Siler at present is one of the Big Bottom's most prominent and respected pioneer citizens.

The early settlers had to traverse sixty miles of grueling trail from Chehalis, but Siler brought in a herd of cattle, the first to arrive with the exception of a single cow owned by York. The herd was driven from Cowlitz Prairie, fording the river twice on the trip.

Andrew Johnson of Tennessee, and York's brother, Herman, of Germany, also came to the Big Bottom in 1885.

That year, William York petitioned for a road and two surveys were made during the next two years, one skirting the Tilton River, the other from the Klickitat region joining the present state highway near the site of Glenoma. Although these surveys cost Lewis County $3,000, no road followed them.

1886 was, perhaps, the most important year in the history of the Big Bottom's settlement. Jim McMahan and Will and John

Davis of Tennessee followed the Silers westward. The first man to bring his wife to the Big Bottom was L. A. Davis, an Indianan.

Joseph Moorcroft, and Harry Dowdle of Minnesota; William Stevenson and Charlie Young of Missouri; Enoch Chapman, Hi Barnes, Lute, Harley, Henry and Ed Davis; Ed Kilborn; Elwood and John Purcell; Pat Kehoe of California; Judge Pearson of Indiana; and James Haralson of Alabama arrived during the same year and became pillars of community life. The wide range of states represented attests to the drawing-power of the Big Bottom's fertile soil and mild climate.

Another notable pioneer to settle there in 1886 was James L. Randle, for whom the present village of Randle was named.

During this period, the Big Bottom was virtually a "bachelor's paradise," as many as eighty single men living there. However, these bachelors announced to the outside world that they would furnish their ponies to pack in, free of charge, the first white family applying for this favor.

Joseph Chilcoat, a hardy Texan, responded. Thus his family became the first to settle in the valley. His son, Roy Chilcoat, born in October, 1887, was the first white baby to begin life in the Big Bottom country. Chilcoat's tireless energy and boundless ambition made him one of the Bottom's leading figures, a position which his present residence in California has failed to dim.

Although the valley was served by no roads, mail reached the pioneers through two postoffices. The first was established southeast of Randle in 1885. Volunteer carriers brought the mail in by horseback from the Mossy Rock settlement farther west.

A year later Rufus Siler, through his friendship with Senator Zeb Vance of North Carolina, succeeded in making it an official postoffice with himself as the first postmaster and John Osborn the first paid mail carrier. The postoffice was named Vance in honor of the Senator.

About 1886, the residents of the upper Big Bottom established an official postoffice at Cora, since discontinued. Randle's first postoffice was established in 1890.

An important factor in the peopling of this region from 1884 to 1888, besides the pioneer urge which helped the course of empire fling its way toward the Pacific, was the report that the Northern Pacific Railway Company was planning to build a road from Yakima to South Bend, through the White Pass. Preliminary surveys were made for this project by Captain Jim Berry as early as 1884, but a railroad never materialized.

The early settlers found their time consumed with slashing, stump-grubbing and leveling their new property. Columbus Kiona and "Indian Jim" Yoak vied for the packing trade of the first whites. Lack of roads precluded dairying on a commercial scale, but livestock and poultry raising were profitable occupations.

The residents along Puget Sound were startled during this period by the droves of half a thousand turkeys which the farmers of the isolated Big Bottom country would drive down to Spanaway and Tacoma for marketing. Since the fowls insisted on roosting in the forest at sundown, frequent overnight stops had to be made en route.

In the meantime, settlers were arriving in a steady stream, undaunted by twisting, log-fallen trails and heavy snows. The period between 1888 and 1890 witnessed the coming of such prominent personages as Barney Blankenship, Ed Owens, Jud Siler, John Cunningham, Will Owens, Ed Campbell of New Jersey, James Butler of Indiana, Charles Hampton of Pennsylvania, Frank Turney of New York, John George, S. A. Skinner of Kansas, and August Larson of Minnesota.

Settlements began to push deeper up the valley. Tom and Harry Owens of Canada; August Snyder of Indiana; Ed Dixon of Arkansaw; John Blankenship of Tennessee; Henry Hager of Wisconsin; John Smith of Missouri; Al Gilliland of Texas; Charles Brightenstein, George Spencer, Mr. Johnson, Charles Hall of Utah, Finn Dodge of Kansas, Fred Sethe of Germany, Jim McAndress, Jack McCall of Pennsylvania, surveyor, Wesley Beech of Pennsylvania, and others arrived, most of them taking out claims as far eastward as Tatoosh Mountain.

A group composed of Joe Chilcoat, Rufus T. Siler, August Larson, and John George made an important step in bringing civilization to their settlement when, in 1887, they purchased a grist mill from Anton Hillock of Forest, for $100. It was erected on Miller Creek, and later was owned by Chilcoat.

A portable sawmill was brought into the bottom in 1899, but lack of water-power doomed it to failure. The district was without a real sawmill until after 1900, when two mills were in operation, one owned by Rufus Siler.

Pioneer settlements depend upon the cooperation of their members for existence. This splendid American spirit was not lacking in the Big Bottom. With axes and brush hooks, the hardy pioneers blazed a road through 36 torturous miles of tangled forest, until they met the road at Mossy Rock.

In the summer of 1893, a memorable event occurred—a wagon was driven into the Big Bottom on its own wheels. Previously, a mowing machine and two wagons, dismantled, had been packed in via horseback.

The first money Washington ever appropriated for road building, incidentally, was expended on No. 5, leading to Randle.

Two years later the road was continued as far as the budding town of Lewis, at the "far end" of the bottom. Thus it can be seen that only in comparative recent times has the Big Bottom been accessible to travel.

The new road, linking the valley with the outside world, was a great stimulus to the infant community.

The Big Bottom, like all frontier settlements, went forward along three channels of civilization—industry, education, and religion. Although some of the original pioneers were themselves illiterate, they wished for their children the advantages they had been denied.

Accordingly, in 1893, a school was startd near the junction of the Vance road. For lack of a schoolhouse, the hall built in 1890 by the Farmers' Alliance was utilized. Miss Mary Siler was the first teacher.

There is considerable local argument as regards the first school in the Big Bottom; but an analysis of the facts shows both factions to be partially correct.

The first school was held at Vance; but the first schoolhouse was built of hand-hewn cedar by donated labor, on the Joe Moorcroft place near Mountain View. The two schools operated contemporaneously.

For several years previous to this, Clifford Orr had instructed pioneer children in the three R's as a private venture.

The first students enrolled at the school near Vance were as follows: Ernest and Leona Chilcoat; Mickie Dunn; John and Annie Dalton; Dora, Birdie, and Dixie Stevens; and Pearl Brown.

The Mountain View scholars, instructed by Miss Zona Dodge, included Clara, Alice and John Haralson; Clifford, Charles, Albert, Addie and Ora Blankenship; Walter, Leona, and Leila Young; and George, Charles, Bird, Walter and Florence Stevenson.

It is satisfying to historians to note how the church has grown hand in hand with the development of pioneer communities. The Big Bottom was no exception. At first, church services were conducted under trees, or in pioneer cabins. The first building to house public worship was built and dedicated at Randle in 1889. It was Methodist by denomination.

A small log cabin with stick-and-mud chimney, on the Siler homestead, housed the first preaching service, the first social functions of the pioneers, and was the polling place, in 1886, of the first general election.

The genesis of a town was springing up at Randle. John McMahan erected a shack which housed the first business enterprise in the valley, in 1892. Jim Randle sold a few stores from his home, and Joe McAllister, in 1897, erected a competing establishment. The first justice of the peace was Dr. George H. Dow.

Although Mrs. Josie Siler was the first bride to invade the phalanx of bachelordom, the distinction of being the first couple actually wedded inside the valley proper goes to Miss May Randle, daughter of James L. and Dicy C. Randle, who in 1891 was wed to Jim McMahan by Rev. Edward Brown. Mr. and Mrs. McMahan still reside at Randle.

The pioneers whose names stand out among the incoming settlers around 1890 include John C. Snyder of Indiana, Al Brown, Dr. George H. Dow, Wilbur, Bob and John Peters.

As we have previously noted, all of the Big Bottom's earliest settlers obtained their land by squatters' rights. In 1892, President Benjamin Harrison signed homestead papers, and during Grover Cleveland's first administration many other homesteads were issued to the settlers who had squatted on them.

The first official United States Government survey was completed in 1892. The Big Bottom sent its first representative—Phil Smith—to the State Legislature in 1896.

Fire and flood brought the Big Bottom its first catastrophe in 1896. On November 10th of that year, a serious flood of the Cowlitz River occurred, which cost six lives at Riffe, floated away numerous homes (including the first house, built by William York), devastated crops, and killed an uncounted number of livestock. Forest fires have also menaced the thriving farms.

To borrow a current slogan, the history of the Big Bottom to date has truly been "a century of progress." Today finds the valley peopled with some two thousand energetic, industrious souls. The hospitality of the blue grass country of old Kaintuck and Tennessee lost nothing in the transplanting. Schools, churches and modern business are in sharp contrast to the early days. State Highway No. 5, which is fast being pushed across the rugged Cascades to Yakima, connects the Big Bottom within short driving distance of Morton, Chehalis, or Seattle.

The United States Forest Service maintains stations at the only two towns in the valley, Randle and Lewis. The postoffice at the latter place was renamed Packwood in 1931, to avoid confusion with Fort Lewis, Washington.

A table of the derivation of Big Bottom geographic names reveals a close parallel with the country's early history:

Butter Creek—store of butter lost there by Survey crew.

Clear Fork—north branch of Cowlitz, usually crystal clear.

Cispus—vast burned-over area; name of Indian origin.

Coal Creek—rises in coal beds of eastern Lewis County.

Cora Bridge—named for Mrs. Cora (L. A.) Davis.

Cougar Creek—panther killed at its headwaters.

Cougar Rocks—stratified cliff wall near Lewis, so called because cougars are said to den there.

Creeks—the following streams draining into the Cowlitz River were named for the homesteaders through whose land they flow: Burton, Cunningham, Dixon, Garrett, Hager, Hopkins, Johnson, Kilborn, Owens, Sethe, Siler, Surrey, Smith, and Willame.

Dixon Mountain—named for Ed Dixon, who homesteaded there.

Hager Lake—discovered by Henry Hager, early pioneer.

Kiona Peak—for Columbia Kiona, old-time Cowlitz Indian.

Lake Creek—drains 1,000-acre Packwood Lake.

Muddy Fork—south branch of Cowlitz, usually full of silt.

Ohanapecosh[3] springs and creek, named by Indian hunters.

Packwood—Lake and town; for co-discoverer of Big Bottom, William "Billy" Packwood.

Purcell Mountain—for the Purcell brothers, pioneers.

Randle—principal Big Bottom town, for founder, Jim Randle.

Silver Creek (formerly Rock Creek)—for clearness of water.

Skate Mountain—probably of Nisqually Indian origin.

Skyo Mountain—small rock mountain, named by Indians.

Snyder Lake—for its discoverer, August Snyder.

Tatoosh Mountain—Indian term for "woman's breast."

Tumwater Falls—Indian word for "falling water."

Vance—postoffice named for Senator Zeb Vance, North Carolina.

WALKER ALLISON TOMPKINS