Skagit Valley Herald

FIRST SETTLERS BEGIN MOVING INTO SKAGIT

By John F. Conrad, Historian, Skagit County Pioneer Association

The first white person to see the shores of Skagit County is believed to have been Lt. Salvador Fidalgo of the Spanish Navy in 1790 on one of Spain's claiming expeditions which had begun 20 years previously.

The English reached our county two years later in 1792 when Capt. George Vancouver made such a thorough exploration of the whole Sound area and contributed so many lasting names such as Puget, Baker, Rainier, Townsend, Bellingham and Whidbey.

Looking back to the Territorial year, 1853, we can see many events taking place that had their effect on Skagit's development.

March's Point, where history is being made today by the oil industry, is reported by good authority to have been first settled in 1853 by Enoch Compton and John Carr on what later became Munks' place. But due to dangerous Indians they were forced to move to Whatcom where Carr died. The Indian war came to a head with Compton enlisting. Then in 1859 he returned to find William Bonner on his old place.

That same year Josiah Larry had squatted on a place on the point, built a shake cabin and departed, expecting to return. In the meantime, however, Compton thinking Larry had abandoned his claim took the place and established permanent residence on it.

Larry did return two or three years later, found his place occupied and quietly retired, settling some time later on the mainland at the mouth of what is still called Joe Larry Slough on Samish Flats.

In April of 1853, Lt. A.V. Kautz of the U.S. Army stationed at Steilacoom took 10 men, a guide and a month's supplies in a sailboat to capture an Indian murderer on Whidbey Island and also to stop the sale of liquor to natives.

The prisoner later escaped and they proceeded on through Deception Pass and Swinomish Slough to Bellingham Bay. The lieutenant wrote in his diary as he passed the LaConner area: "White men have not yet thought of settling on these rich flats."

Stopping on Camano Island on the return, he heard of the presence of the slayer on Kikialis Slough down on Fir Island, but weather and tides at the mouth of the Skagit River caused him to give up any further attempts. The settlers later caught and executed the Indian murderer at Penn's Cove, now Coupeville.

That same year, 1853, Lawrence Grennen, a logger from Wisconsin, purchased the timber and mill site at Utsalady, but it took five years to get the mill going. He died in 1869. His partner, Tom Cranny, carried on alone, then in the winter of 1875 a ship sank in a collision off Cape Flattery with the loss of nearly all aboard, including the mill manager and much of the cash and credits of the company.

The firm never recovered and the next year passed into the hands of Puget Mill Company which had come to Port Gamble in our Territorial year. Several early employees of the mill crossed over the bay in canoes at various times to the Skagit side exploring the possibilities of settlement there.

One mill man William Bonner, went to March's Point in 1859 and settled on the place vacated by Compton and Carr five years earlier, then sold his rights the same year to William Munks

for $60 and a silver watch. Munks was the first postmaster at the post office called Fidalgo and is still credited with being the first permanent settler.

Another early March Point settler was Robert H. Davis, lieutenant in the U.S. Army and a nephew of Jefferson Davis, president of the Southern Confederacy. Lt. Davis later left to take an illustrious part in the Civil War.

Charles W. Beale was another neighbor squatter of 1859. H. A. March, namesake of the point, homesteaded in 1863.

Two other Utsalady mill workers, Mike Sullivan and Sam Calhoun, were attracted across Skagit Bay to the rich tidelands of LaConner Flats and both settled in 1868 in neighboring places to become the first to dike and develop the valley farmland.

Whidbey Island, however, was the main stepping off place in the Skagit settlement of that period with its Hastie's, Ovenell's and Corneiluses, all Whidbey pioneers of the 1850s, many other families contributed much to our county's development.

Alonzo Low started the first trading post in 1867, called the Swinomish Post Office, but J. S. Conner bought it in 1869, and changed the name to LaConner to honor his wife, Louise Agnes.

Today we find the history of our state well recorded and there are several museums with hundreds of historical relics preserved, notably in Seattle, Bellingham and Olympia. But much remains to be done.

A good start had been made on the marking of historical spots by the state, but we are far behind many other states especially in the East and the South. Out in the west, the markers in New Mexico, Utah, Montana and California are outstanding.

For several years, some individuals have advocated a museum for Skagit County. The Daughters of the Pioneers have now taken it up, but it is a project that cannot be hastily conceived. Most members of pioneer families have old keepsakes or relics that would add up to a very interesting collection, but the care and

maintenance of such an exhibit would be expensive.

Whatever group or organization wanted to undertake it would have to solve the financing of it. Some counties or cities incorporate exhibits in public buildings, even Skagit Courthouse has a tiny show in its lobby.

One party a few years ago advocated that Mount Vernon should construct a replica of George Washington's home on the Potomac as a civic center and such a unique structure could very well tie in with a museum, too, even our new county fair could consider it.

But the one thing most old times can do is to prepare material on hand for identification in the days ahead. Many valuable and interesting old pictures from early days will cease to have any value if the subjects of photos are unknown. Also articles, large or small, that date back many years should have a written history attached to same, keeping alive the story of the relic.