

Builder of the Wagon Road

by Jerry Bates

THE story of the Naches Pass trail and the 1853 crossing of the Longmire–Biles wagon train is one which most South Hill Historical Society members are very familiar—a story revisited many times in this newsletter and published annually in the *Puyallup Herald* by member Carl Vest. It's an important part of Washington state history that directly involves South Hill. As we all know, our Heritage Corridor follows the path taken by those 1853 pioneers when they crossed South Hill 164 years ago.

Those in attendance at April's general meeting learned more information than expected through "uncovered" history on the building of the road through the Cascade Mountains!

Guest speaker for April, Dennis Larsen, co-author of a book with Karen L. Johnson, *A Yankee on Puget Sound*, presented new details only recently published on the Naches Pass trail. The book weaves together fascinating documents, letters, and dispatches written by Edward Jay Allen from 1852-1855. Among his adventures and accomplishments covered was the assignment to build a wagon route for the pioneers crossing the Cascades to Puget Sound. This story is

missing from other history books. *A Yankee on Puget Sound* (published in 2013) represents an impressive amount of research, detective work and extensive travel by Dennis and his wife, Pat. Important for us is the untold story of building the wagon trail.

Dennis Larsen's presentation featured an impressive slide show of almost 90 images of trail sights, illustrations, rare photos, monuments, maps, and prominent characters involved in the road's construction (the presentation is available on DVD for those who couldn't attend.)



Naches Pass on the north fork of the Oregon Trail.



Edward Jay Allen

Yankee on Puget Sound / Elizabeth & Larry Cahill

Dennis informed us that only three routes were available to pioneers heading to Puget Sound in the 1850s—"All bad."

The Cowlitz Trail was a muddy slog from the Columbia River north to Olympia almost impassable during the months of October and November (when most overland immigrants arrived in the Northwest.) The other option was to board a boat at Portland and follow the coast up to the strait and down Puget Sound to Olympia, an ocean route with hazards including the Columbia Bar and bad weather seas. The last and most direct

alternative was to cross the Cascades at Naches Pass. Prior to 1853, this route was basically a pack trail for centuries used by Indians and later followed by The Hudson's Bay Co. and Catholic missionaries.

Dennis showed views of the trail route today from Connells Prairie to Fort Steilacoom with markers erected along its path, including our own efforts and those of the Bonney Lake Historical Society. Before the current signage, a few old stone monuments were set in place along the route concluding with the large stone displayed at today's Brookdale Golf Course in Parkland; this location was the 1853 wagon train's final camp. Dennis's slides also contained photos of the Naches Pass that is mainly a jeep trail today—a familiar site to many of our members who have explored the route. The cliff section of the trail is the only protected section.

Settling Washington Territory—an Overview

"In the 1850s when Washington Territory was formed, the Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis, decided to promote options to get people out here," explained Dennis. Washington's population in 1853 was 3,965. An exploring party was sent to determine a route for a transcontinental railroad. Davis appointed Isaac Stevens to head this effort, reporting to him Captain George B. McClellan. Stevens later became WA's first territorial governor and McClellan was the future infamous Civil War general. Stevens assigned McClellan the job of building a road through the Cascades, and short of that, he was to at least survey a route. McClellan made meandering half-hearted attempts—frustrating Stevens by not completing his orders.

Meanwhile the folks in Olympia were not going to wait for the federal government and were intent to complete the route themselves. They were scurrying to accommodate what they expected to be an eminent flood of wagon trains heading to Puget Sound over the Naches Pass trail.

Edward Jay Allen

At age twenty-two, Allen migrated west from

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, as a treatment for his bronchitis. "This may sound unusual but when he got here his bronchitis was gone?" laughed Dennis. In 1852, he followed the Cowlitz Trail to Olympia, established a donation land claim on Bud Inlet, and built a cabin.

Olympia Group Organizes

In expectation of immigrants arriving by wagon trains in the fall, a planning meeting for building a road met in May of 1853.

Young Edward Allen joined this committee. Along with four others, he was chosen to start surveying the route. The party set out to cover the pass to confirm its feasibility. During their hike up and over the mountain, Allen, paying attention to his compass, questioned their Indian guide's

southerly direction. The Indian confessed he was completely lost. While researching the Allen archives, Dennis said, "I've actually had the privilege of holding this very compass in my hand." Once the party got back on track, having covered the trail, Allen and one other member returned to Olympia excited—they found a route!

Allen was sent up into the mountains with about 30 people to build a road on the west side of the mountains. They were well supplied with food and equipment from the merchants of Olympia—including beef cattle from Chief Factor Dr. Tommie at British Fort Nisqually. "Now

think about that," said Dennis, "Thirty guys to build a road over the Cascades in one summer?" They didn't meet their goal.

Meanwhile, Captain McClellan had yet to start a wagon road or survey the route. Andrew Moore, Secretary of the Olympia Road Committee, met up with McClellan east of the mountains and gave the unmotivated Captain "his out," said Dennis. "McClellan put the Olympia team on the government payroll to complete the road." McClellan later joined with Stevens in Northeastern Washington Territory who was busy working his railroad survey. Stevens, hearing of the Longmire wagon train, ordered McClellan to guide them over the pass. "McClellan didn't want to do it and



Author Dennis Larsen

he had many excuses,” related Dennis.

That summer, the pass of 1853 was a very busy place with dispatch riders from Olympia; Allen’s work crew and McClellan’s men; and even a tourist, Theodore Winthrop (Author of *Canoe and Saddle*) visited Allen’s work camp at Greenwater River base camp. He wrote a brief chapter in his book about Allen and the road builders. “Up to this day (before Larsen’s and Johnson’s findings), that’s the only historical evidence about what the road builders actually did,” said Dennis.

Captain McClellan made his way to Olympia to spend the winter. In his letters to his mother, he expressed his dislike of the rain, mud and lack of sun. “The Pacific Coast is vastly overrated in every respect,” he wrote. While McClellan was in Olympia, Stevens gave him new orders to check the pass on the western slope. It was wintry and snowy but McClellan reluctantly set out. Long before reaching the pass, McClellan reported—incorrectly as Stevens would discover—that it was impassable and turned back to Olympia. “That was the last straw for Stevens; he fired McClellan and sent him back to Washington D.C.,” said Dennis.

Edward Allen would continue to improve the road after 1853. He built a buttress, including hand-rails, to ease the crossing at the cliff area. Dennis displayed a rare photo showing this structure.

Myths

While working with Karen L. Johnson researching *A Yankee on Puget Sound*, Dennis discovered that “a lot of things we thought were factual that are in the history books are not facts [at all]—they’re wrong!” Dennis discussed three myths regarding the 1853 pioneer crossing, primarily the conflicts between accounts of Longmire, George Himes, and Ezra Meeker.

Of the three myths, the biggest one that “won’t die,” said Dennis, “is the George Himes story of killing oxen and using their hides to extend rope needed to lower the wagons over the cliff above the Greenwater River.” Dennis added, “The Himes story [Himes, a boy of nine at the time] just didn’t happen. However, the story made for good read-

ing. It gained popularity with the help of showman Ezra Meeker’s embellishments and James Longmire used it for a *Tacoma Ledger* writing contest titled “Who could tell the best Oregon Trail story?” It became firmly fixed in Northwest history. The Himes’ version was strongly denied

by Van Ogle, an “adult” member of the wagon train. Dennis continued making his case: if three oxen were slaughtered, why the accounts of the near starvation coming down the western slope? The Himes’ diary has been proven inaccurate by the recent research of Ray Egan. All wagon trains carried large amounts of rope as a basic necessity. The wagons didn’t go down the cliff, but a more gentle decline not far from it. Dennis furnished more and more evidence in an attempt to ‘kill’ this myth. However, it will no doubt live on.

Dennis summed up his presentation listing the history of traffic over the Naches Pass trail:

1853

Two wagon trains come over—Longmire-Biles and Mitchel.

1854

Four to six more wagon trains.

1855-1860

Indian wars; soldiers and Indians used the trail—too dangerous for civilian travel.

1860-1880

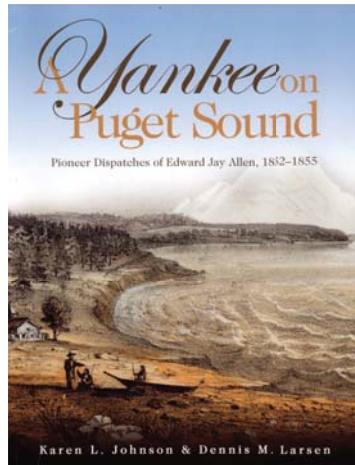
Primarily a stock trail; David Longmire herded cattle over the pass each summer and fall to the Puget Sound markets.

1950-2017

The route is now used as a Jeep trail.

Some of us came away from the April general meeting with an autographed book, but all of us left with more knowledge and a renewed appreciation of our local history.

Perhaps more importantly, an awareness that pioneer memories, recollections, writings and letters often result in many conflicting accounts of the same event. Only by hard work by researchers cross-referencing, sifting, comparing, playing detective, and finding new information can we learn what really happened.



Memories of Willows Lumber Co.

by Jerry Bates

For many SHHS members, Willows Lumber Co. brings back fond memories of a time when things were a little less hectic on South Hill—before the big box stores, the South Hill Mall, and the Meridian corridor constantly choked with four lanes of traffic.

In the 1950s, 60s, 70s and 80s, Willows Lumber was a main source of building materials for those living on South Hill.

Members Maybelle Hoehous and her son, Alan, were our March speakers. Willows Lumber Co. began in 1950 when Maybelle's late husband, Chuck Hoehous, took over the management of a C&E

Lumber outlet on South Hill. They become part owners; the name changed to Willows Lumber Co. and they ran the business for 45 years.

Maybelle, (or "Grandma May" as she is used to hearing nowadays), started by telling us that she and her family moved to Puyallup in 1945. Maybelle recalled, "As far as South Hill is concerned, about the only thing I remember was we had to go through it to get to Lake Kapowsin where we fished—it just seemed like it was all woods." In 1950, Chuck Hoehous got the offer from C&E Lumber of Randal, Washington, to run the South Hill outlet. He accepted and Maybelle kept the books in the evenings—"That's when it all began," said Maybelle.

Maybelle narrated a series of slides showing the first store on the south side of Meridian. The facility grew as sheds were added with the help of her carpenter father. The business became successful and expanded. They purchased land across the street and started a U-Haul Cement business. Customers could haul home various size loads of cement in specially designed trail-

ers attached to their vehicle. In 1974, Willows Lumber Company bought the Reynolds' Grocery store across the street from the existing lumberyard and adjacent to the cement operation. The former grocery store site allowed for merchandise expansion and a second story was added to the ex-grocery store for office space. The old Willows Lumber across the street became a nursery and craft store managed by Alan.



Maybelle & Alan Hoehous



The original Willows Lumber

Maybelle passed the mic to her son who continued the presentation with his earliest memories. To put us into his childhood time frame, he quizzed the group—"Who was the 34th president?" the answer quickly came—"Eisenhower." During that era, he and his brother Joe

played in the woods and fields behind the store. The boys grew up as the lumberyard

grew, "piece by piece by piece," said Alan.

"I headed to college in Spokane in 1974 and came back with a lovely wife. We established the nursery and gift store in the old building; I was running the store," said Alan. He continued with his childhood memories—among them a gas station on the northwest corner of Meridian and 128th Street that still used gravity fed fuel pumps. Fuel was hand pumped to a reservoir at the top of the pump and gravity fed it into a car's tank. It was an oddity that stuck in a child's mind as all pumps by then had gone electric in Puyallup and more populated areas.

The house his family built on 132nd St. bordered the Starkel Turkey Farm. One morning Alan remembered finding their yard full of a thousand turkeys escaped from a hole left in the fence by poachers the night before.

“How to herd so many birds back into the farm?” Alan wondered aloud.

“Simple,” said Mr. Starkel, “you just walk and they follow.”

They walked up the road escorting a thousand turkeys through the farmyard gate. “The turkeys joined their friends,” commented Alan.

Big Changes

The development of the South Hill Mall led to many changes for the Hoenhaus family. Before its construction, agents were buying up land for the future mall. Alan’s unexpected negotiations with a mall agent resulted in a \$900,000 offer for their property. “The answer to a prayer,” he said. These were hard times during the 1979 recession. Businesses had tanked and the Hoenhaus’ had a huge 25% bank loan for their recent expansion. With big box stores discovering South Hill, Alan and Chuck felt it was a good time to end the Willows Lumber Co. and use the money for their retirement. Although Chuck had already retired, Maybelle and son Joe wanted to continue the business at another location. “That’s when divorces generally happen,” Maybelle chimed in. That wasn’t the case.

However, Alan said, “Dad and I felt family was more important than cash.” They relocated the business to the former O’Leary Construction site on 98th ST. in 1987. In 1989, the property owners also decided to sell out to the mall (the site would be used for the expansion that included the current Sears store). Willows Lumber needed to move again.

An important event occurred to Alan’s life during this period. He suffered a serious accident. During a snow-covered morning, he fell from high on a lumber rack—injuring his leg and ankle so badly that he was told he would never work on his feet again. Fortunately, he could still walk but now worked a desk job. During his six-month recovery and after returning to the scene of the accident, he realized how close he had come to being killed. Confronted with his own mortality, he asked himself: “If I had died, what would I have told God I had done with my life...run a lumber yard? I really didn’t have much to offer.” He made a decision, while still in his early forties, to go into the ministry. For the last twenty-two years, he has been a pastor. “Absolutely marvelous experience, best thing I’ve ever done with my life!” said Alan.

After leaving the business, Alan and his family traveled the country, home-schooled their daughter, and saw all the “sights you read about.” His plan was to travel in mid-life before the aches and pains of getting old arrived—the thing ‘they’ don’t tell you about your ‘golden years,’ he added.

The Last Move

The last location for Willows Lumber was on Canyon Road at the old site of Custom Craft Fixtures. With the advent of a new McLendon’s Hardware store not far from them and the big box home centers, it was tough for small family businesses. It was time to call it quits and the store closed in 1995.

Maybelle closed by showing us a series of old newspaper ads she ran for the store—some were very creative! “I loved doing ads,” said Maybelle.

We loved hearing the memories!

DVDs Available

We have a vast library of VCR tapes that have been individually converted to DVD discs. They can be viewed on televisions or home computers with CD/DVD players/drives. Most General Meetings are video recorded by Bob Ballou. Our speakers receive a free DVD of his or her presentation. Additional DVDs can be purchased for \$3.00 each.

Our DVD archives also includes many years of interviews with South Hill people of interest. All DVDs are available for borrowing by SHHS members.

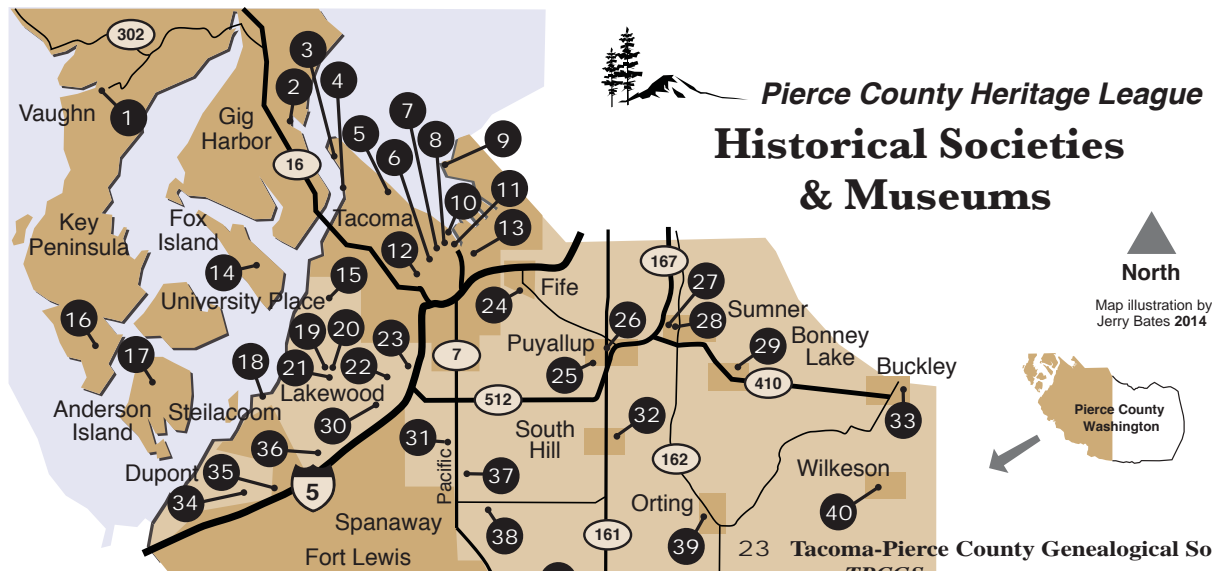
For a list, contact Bob Ballou
mail@southhillhistory.com



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Summer's Coming Visit other Pierce County Historical Societies



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253-858-6722
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- 4 **Salmon Beach Historical Society**
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- 5 **Job Carr Cabin Museum**
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- 6 **Tacoma Public Library-Northwest Room**
253-292-2001 *Extension 1605*
- 7 **Knights of the Pythias Commencement Lodge #7**
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- 8 **Tacoma Historical Society**
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- 10 **Foss Waterway Seaport**
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- 11 **Washington State History Museum**
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- 17 **Anderson Island Historical Society**
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- 18 **Steilacoom Historical Museum Association**
253-584-4133
- 19 **Western State Hospital Historical Society**
253-756-2593
- 20 **Historic Fort Steilacoom Association**
253-582-5838
- 21 **Grave Concerns Association**
www.wshgraveconcerns.org
- 22 **Lakewood Historical Society & Museum**
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Pierce County Heritage League Historical Societies & Museums

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- 24 **Fife Historical Society & History Museum**
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- 25 **The Fred Oldfield Western Heritage Center**
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- 26 **Puyallup Historical Society at Meeker Mansion**
253-848-1770
- 27 **Heritage Quest Research Library**
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- 28 **Sumner Ryan House Museum**
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- 30 **Lakewold Gardens**
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- 31 **Scandinavian Culture Center**
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- 32 **South Hill Historical Society**
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- 33 **Foothills Historical Society & Museum**
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- 34 **DuPont Historical Society & Museum**
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- 35 **Lewis Army Museum**
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- 36 **Washington National Guard State Historical Soc.**
253-512-7834
- 37 **LeMay Family Collection Foundation**
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- 38 **Spanaway Historical Soc. & Prairie House Mus.**
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- 39 **Orting Historical Society**
360-893-5363
- 40 **Wilkeson Historical Society**
360-829-4281
- 41 **Graham Historical Society**
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- 42 **Chase Garden - Graham**
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360-832-6300
- 44 **South Pierce County Historical Society**
253-988-0904
- 45 **Elbe Ev. Lutherische Kirche**
253-847-2743

From the Treasurer

by Ben Peters

Welcome to New Member

Ron Pearson

Please call, e-mail or write any change of address to me, Ben Peters, 253-845-7028, poppa-ben2002@yahoo.com, South Hill Historical Society, Box 73582, South Hill, WA 98374.

Also, don't forget that we are a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. Dues, donations, etc., are fully deductible from your income taxes if you are able to do so. If you need a receipt for tax purposes, contact Ben.

Dues Reminder

I will attach a sticky note to the Society newsletter mailed closest to your renewal date. **No need to fill out the membership form unless there is a change of some kind.**

The South Hill Historical Society meets regularly on the **THIRD TUESDAY** of the month, 10:45 AM, (no meetings July and August) at The Highlands in the Community Center. This complex is located at 502 43rd Ave. SE, adjacent to and east of the Mel Korum YMCA.

We welcome you to our monthly meetings. For more information, contact Wes Perkinson at (253) 241-5397.

In Memoriam

The South Hill Historical Society
regrets the passing of

Les Huff
Marvella Massie
John Nordin
Sheila Rinker

Our Current Members

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Andy & Ruth Anderson	Dorothy Nelson
Elizabeth Anema	Juanita Nordin
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Katherine Bennett	Dr. Jerry Ramsey
Teresa Best	Robin Reich
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Signature _____ Date _____ Renewal, *check here*

Annual Dues: Society membership \$25.00

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South Hill, WA 98374**



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