

It seemed like a good idea at the time

by Jerry Bates

IT WAS during the heart of the Great Depression; investment and employment opportunities were bleak. However, during that time of the early 1930s, 600 acres of scrubby stump land on South Hill offered some hope. The Puyallup Packing Company had plotted this land for what they said would be “a new profitable industry for the Pacific Northwest...the development and production of rabbit meat and fur.” Rabbit meat? Rabbit fur? To the modern ear one would question how those two items would generate much interest among investors or those looking for a livelihood. But at that time, if you could afford meat on the table, rabbit meat was as popular as chicken. And for those who could afford high fashion, the female garment industry was in huge need of alternatives to an expensive and vanishing fur supply.



No, these are not ladies of South Hill, but expensive fur trimmings were once a requirement of high fashion. The Rabbit Farms on South Hill could have provided a less costly and plentiful alternative.

Barring recent times, fur has been essential for women's high fashion. The well-dressed lady displayed lots of fur used for hats, coats, stoles and dress trimmings—most supplied thanks to the fox, chinchilla, mink, ermine, seal, beaver, and muskrat. Less high-quality fur was also needed for hat felt, gloves, coat linings and collars, etc.

Some of the high quality fur species had been hunted to near extinction or in limited supply while the demand kept increasing. Rabbit fur could “fake” many of these high-quality furs because different types of rabbits were bred to have fur that resembled more exotic furs. Along with other processing, rabbit fur was nearly impossible

to distinguish from the real thing. A great opportunity awaited the American rabbit industry. The United States was meeting only two percent of its rabbit fur demand — the rest being imported.

Besides fashion, people had to eat. Rabbit meat was promoted as better than chicken. No chicken existed of all breast meat but the rabbit was all white meat. Rabbits were easier to raise in hutches and multiplied quickly — one of the most efficient forms of meat production known.

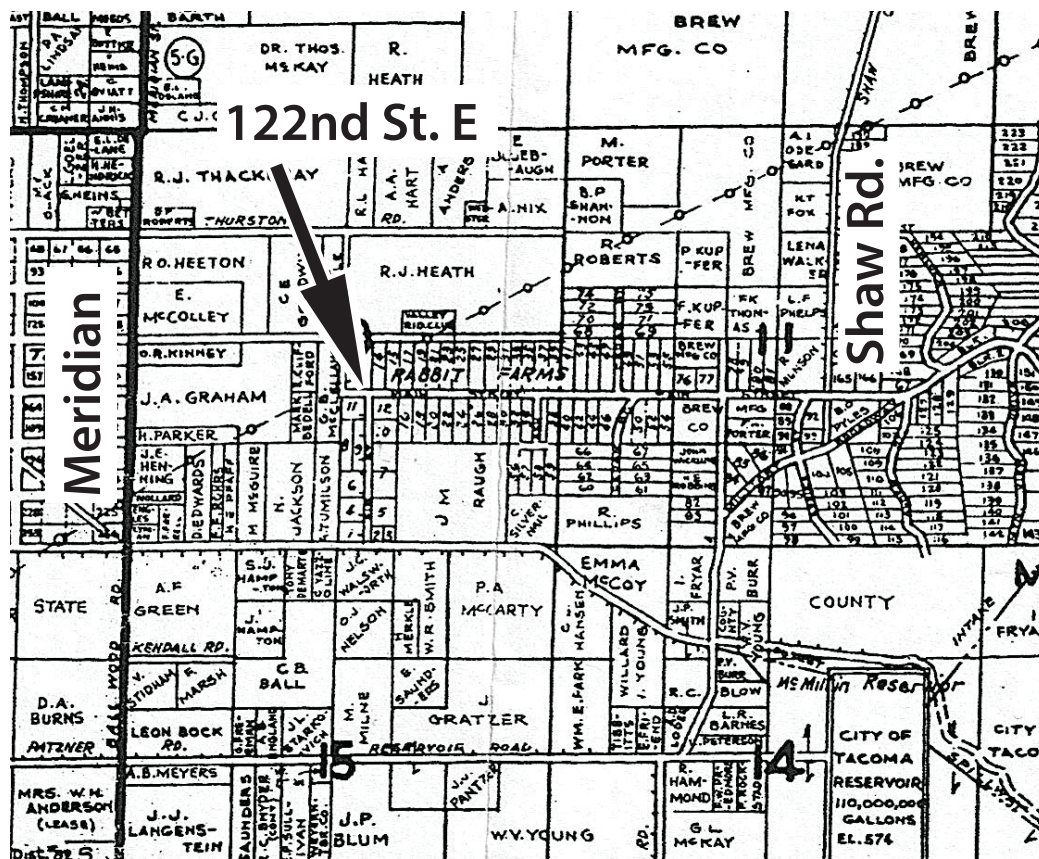
Bring on the rabbits

The proposed new enterprise on South Hill promised to supply the missing ingredient for successful rabbit farming — a large-scale packing plant. The packing plant/tannery would provide fur pelts and high-volume meat processing with uniform size and modern packaging and distribution. Even a fertilizer plant was planned (rabbit fertilizer was highly prized then.) Independently owned farms on the same property as the packing plant would fill the rabbit supply. Roads were cleared, water lines laid, and mapping of one hundred five-acre plots each to include “a three-room bungalow, watertight with heat.” In addition to the little farmhouse, each property would

include rabbit hutches to accommodate 100 rabbits—the independently owned plots forming a co-op of rabbit farms.

Farms were built and sold, rabbits raised, expectations high, but the venture failed. Investors didn't meet expectations; most of the farm lots remained unsold plots on a map without buyers. There were many reasons things didn't work out, among them the improving economy. The nation began ramping up military hardware production prior to and during World War II. Good paying jobs for unskilled workers were to be had in the Tacoma-Seattle shipyards and Boeing plants—no need to raise rabbits. Synthetic fur was developed as the fashion and food industries evolved.

All that remained of the promised “new Pacific Northwest industry” was a small number of the completed rabbit farms and empty plots on a map. The most enduring legacy of this venture was the name “Rabbit Farms.” In the following decades, it literally meant what we call South Hill today. Local maps labeled the large area south of Puyallup *Rabbit Farms*.



This is a section of a 1951 Metsker's Map showing the Rabbit Farms and the individual farm plots. The name 'Rabbit Farms' remained on maps for many years after the original venture failed. For decades a common reference for what we call South Hill was 'Rabbit Farms.'

Today's 122nd ST. E was then called Main Street.

From the Treasurer

by Ben Peters

Welcome to New Member
Douglas Overton

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.**

Have Something For The Newsletter?

We accept anything relating to South Hill history. For example: family history, a current event, an announcement, or old photographs.

We're glad to assist with writing or editing.

Contact Jerry Bates
mail@southhillhistory.com

All society meetings will be canceled until further notice due to the coronavirus pandemic.



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History On The Hill is published quarterly
Editor Jerry Bates, Editor-at-Large Debbie Burtnett
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