

Pioneer Farming

By: Mike Maki

Tilth

Winter, 1977

A couple of issues back Skeeter wrote an article on farming in the Okanogan, and asked if others would write about their own regions. Mike Maki picked up on the idea and started in on an essay on the agriculture of the Chehalis Valley. It turned out to be a much more ambitious project than he had anticipated. This paper is the first part of the story, covering the period from 1840-1890.

We'd like for this to be part of a continuing series on agricultural regions of the Northwest, and would welcome contributors. The Chehalis River, and its numerous tributaries, drains an area of more than 2,000 square miles in the central Pacific Coast region of Washington. Although much of this watershed consists of timbered (and clear-cut) hill lands, the various creek and tributary river valleys have provided an agricultural livelihood for settlers and farmers since the mid-1840's.

The climate of this region, which includes the southern flank of the Olympic Mountains, a section of the west slope foothills of the Cascades, the west side of the Black Hills and a large part of the Coast Range known as the Willapa Hills, is considered wet and cool, with a long frost-free growing season that varies between 189 days (average) at Grays Harbor, to 154 days at Oakville and 178 days at Centralia in the inland heart of the Chehalis Valley. Rainfall varies from 40 inches per year (average) at Grays Harbor to 120 (including perhaps 30 inches of snowfall) on the south flank of the Olympics, drained by the Satsop, Wynoochee and Wishkah Rivers. Other agriculturally valuable tributaries are the Black, Skookumchuck and Newaukum Rivers, and Cloquallum. Independence, Bunker, Lincoln, Hanaford, Steams, Elk, Lake and Scatter Creeks. The soil in much of the Chehalis Valley, as well as the lower sections of the Satsop and Wynoochee, is Class I and II: "fine-textured, fairly well-drained, deep, and holds moisture well." (Agriculture in the Counties of Washington, Washington State Department of Agriculture).

The First Farmers Early settlers in the Chehalis River Valley found an extensive, densely forested region, with fertile river bottom lands covered with virgin spruce, Douglas Fir, Red Cedar, Cottonwood, and Big-Leaf Maple. At a number of places they found gently rolling open gravelly prairies, left by receding glaciers, which were covered with native grasses, some scrub timber and brush.

Here is where the Chehalis Indians carried on their only primitive agricultural activity, the regular burning of these prairies to encourage growth of wild berries, the camas, and native grass forage for their horses. And this is also where the white settlers began growing their first crops of red wheat, oats and native hay, and grazed their own horses and cattle. At first the native people readily accepted the hard-working pioneer farmers and, in the vastness of the land and resources which they inhabited, did not feel encroached upon by the land-clearing, pastoral settlers. However, the swiftness of settlement in the main Chehalis Valley soon brought increasing demands on some of the areas which the Indians utilized most--- the prairie lands and river mouths.

Early attempts to locate all the various groups of the Chehalis Indians on one reservation (the present Quinault Reservation) proved unsuccessful, as the tribal leaders argued that the coastal and inland groups had cultural and personal differences, as well as well-established living, foraging and fishing areas which they did not want to give up.

An unsigned treaty and generally amiable relations with the white settlers left the Upper Chehalis Indians free to continue living along the sparsely populated river valley. Indeed, they gave much technical and manual assistance to newly-arrived whites. In some cases the easy-going native was taken advantage of, as noted by one early prairie-land home-steader: "They didn't know the value of time and would labor hard all day for a button and were contented with the reward of a cheap shirt for a week's work."

The Chehalis, like most hunter-gatherer peoples of North America, did not, for the most part, settle down to farming beside the whites. Rather, they chose seasonal labor as best suited to their temperament and culture, and thus became hired land-clearers, day laborers, and harvest workers, the latter most notably in the hops harvest which was the major cash crop in the Territorial economy in Western Washington for both white grower and Indian picker.

The Indian Uprisings of the mid-1850's found the peaceful Chehalis gathered into confinement settlements where they had their weapons checked, their heads counted daily, and their time occupied with land-clearing, fence building, and general farm labor by white settlers and garrisoned army recruits. After the failure of the movement, led by Leschi of the Nisqually tribe, to drive the whites from Washington and Oregon Territories, the Chehalis were re-located on permanent reservation lands, which for the Upper Chehalis consisted of 4,214 acres at the confluence of the Black and Chehalis Rivers. Although not the finest farmland in the Valley, this location was acceptable and strategic for these native people in that the Black River provided canoe passage to within 10 miles of navigable waters of lower Puget Sound, and thus it was an important trade route between the Pacific Coast and Puget Sound. On this reservation agriculture and village education and industry began in earnest, under the administration of a Federally appointed Farmer-in-Charge. The idea was to assist the reservation Indians to develop self-supporting farm communities, like the whites. But poor administration and exploitation often left the natives and their stock hungry through the winters. The first white settlers of the region were mostly Yankee and Northern European farmers. Self-sufficiency was the immediate goal of all, and early crops of red wheat, red oats, potatoes, peas and native grass hay proved quite successful.

The raising of cattle, for food and as beasts of burden, was an important part of pioneer agriculture. The first cattle in the region were purchased and driven overland from the Cowlitz to the south and Olympia to the east. Tidewater grasslands and the open prairies provided sufficient forage for these cattle in most years. With the clearing of upstream farmland and pasture a seasonal cycle was established. Cattle were taken down the Chehalis River on barges each fall to winter forage on the tideland grasses, embarking from the highest tidewater at Montesano.

The first school was started at the down-stream pasturage at the mouth of the Wishkah, where the mill and fishing town of Aberdeen was later built. The children of the homesteaders attended until the dairy cows freshened in the spring, at which time cattle and children barged back upstream to summer work and pasture. Red wheat grown on virgin bottomland averaged 25 bushels to the acre. The more easily cultivated prairies produced around 11 bushels per acre. The threshing and milling of the grain proved to be more of a problem than growing it.

In 1860, George Waunch, the first farmer in the upper Chehalis Valley, threshed his grain (almost 1,000 bushels of red wheat and oats) by spreading it on the swept floor of his horse corral. He then turned in his horses and, by driving them about, the grain and chaff were separated. Then, using a tarp and the wind (and later a hand-operated grain fan), he succeeded fairly well in cleaning his grain crop. His family later acquired and operated one of the first steam threshers in the area. The next problem was milling the grain. For a long time, the nearest mill was the Simmons mill at Tumwater on the Puget Sound side of the Black Hills. This commonly involved river travel by canoe or small barge, with necessary portage usually contracted with Indians. Water-powered grist mills were soon built, however, at Cosmopolis (at tidewater), Elma, and later at other locations. Transport of grain on the upper Chehalis was often achieved with special dug-out canoes, fashioned out of a single cedar tree. These were most often contracted to be built by skilled Indian canoe-makers. The German-born Waunch also made the first plow in the Chehalis Valley, which he forged with heat from vine maple charcoal in his home-stead shop. A remarkable and industrious farmer, he also produced many fruit trees for trade to new neighbors. He used the native wild crab apple as rootstock (well adapted to the often moist conditions) and scion-grafted domestic apple varieties, most notably the Bell Flower apple. He also bud-grafted cherry seedlings, the Royal

Ann being the first introduced variety and still a favorite in home orchards. Isaiah Scammon operated probably the first Chehalis Valley fruit tree nursery in 1864, and found many eager customers who purchased or bartered for apple, pear, plum, and peach seedlings. For several decades fruit trees flourished in the Valley without the problems we have now of scale, codling moth, or aphid, and a great future in fruit growing seemed likely for the hill and benchlands.

The importation of diseased trees, however, brought all the menaces of market fruit upon the region and would-be orchardists became discouraged with the prospects for fruit-growing for the still-limited markets. Every farm kept its orchard, though, which bore, and in many cases still continues to bear, good crops of fruit for domestic consumption.

Mrs. Waunch introduced the black locust to the Valley, where it has since found a climate suitable for self-propagation. They also raised crops of Jerusalem artichokes as a feed crop for hogs, which were turned into fenced sections of the edible tubers to root them out for themselves. Even with the thorough efforts of these hungry pioneer pigs, enough of the 'chokes always seemed to survive to reseed the plantings.

The addition of poultry and sheep, and the activity of the busy pioneer farmers soon found the Chehalis River Valley producing a small food surplus. As population centers were practically nil (logging and lumbering not yet having become major industries), the nearest market was to be found in Olympia. And so the first cash crops traveled the Chehalis and Black Rivers to the new Territorial capital. Butter, eggs and cured pork were early cash "crops," a typical canoe load marketed by Patterson Luark (early farmer and County Judge), in 1864, consisted of 400 pounds of butter, packed in wooden tubs, and 29 dozen eggs, for which he received \$128.00 in Olympia. One other notable aspect of pioneer agriculture in the West Coast region was the beginning of beekeeping. Although the western settlers of the Eastern United States were surprised and pleased to find that the honeybee preceded them from the Atlantic Coast to the Mississippi River, those reaching the Pacific Seaboard found that the Great Plains had proven a formidable obstacle to the migration of bee swarms, and they felt a sore need in their cultural "sweet tooth."

In 1855, William Buck (an early travelling companion of the remarkable Ezra Meeker, pioneer Washington farmer) loaded thirty colonies of honeybees on a sailing schooner bound for Panama, where they were portaged across the Isthmus to be shipped to San Francisco, thence by wagon to Oregon Territory. Of these 30 hives, 15 survived the oceanic excursion. In the next two years, from two more shipments, a total of 90 colonies made it to San Francisco. Many colonies, however, were lost to swarming and starvation on the rough wagon trek north. The home garden and orchard, of course, provided a large part of each family's diet, along with wild and domesticated sources of meat. Ready markets for truck farm produce did not develop until after the advent of the railroad, the logging camp, and the lumber mill town in the 1890.

The pioneer agricultural economy was for self-sufficiency, and surpluses were traded for goods and services mostly within the region of the Chehalis River Valley. Thus it was a very independent, though far from affluent, economy. The concentration of wealth into the hands of a few families and corporations was not seen until the era of the steam locomotive and the lumbering boom.