Sequim and the Sequim-Dungeness Valley -- Thumbnail History

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The thriving town of Sequim, the nearly deserted village of Dungeness, and the valley between them, located in Clallam County, are linked historically, culturally and economically. Sequim's present (2008) population is 5,330, or some 15,000 counting the surrounding valley. Before Sequim became a town, there was Dungeness, about five miles to the north, on the Strait of Juan de Fuca. One of the earliest Puget Sound ports, it made possible the development of inland Sequim. Long before either town existed, however, this narrow stretch of forest and prairie between the Olympic Mountains and the Strait of Juan de Fuca was the domain of the Klallam (S'Klallam) Tribe. Klallam is said to mean "strong people". The name Sequim (pronounced Skwim) comes from a rather poor approximation of the S'Klallam word for "hunting ground," although several published sources mistakenly claim that it is either the Indians' word for "quiet waters" or the traditional name for a local wild onion that supplemented their diet of clams, crabs and salmon. All that remains of the busy little shipping port of Dungeness (originally named New Dungeness) are a few buildings and a line of pilings from its long pier. Most of the dairy farms of the Sequim-Dungeness Valley have given way to the new homes of a massive influx of retirees drawn by the climate and scenery. Local agriculture has reinvented itself as the lavender capital of North America.

Early Days

The area is a fan-shaped alluvial plain created by the Dungeness River, which flows out of the Olympic Mountains. It was repeatedly covered by glaciers and ice sheets, the most recent of which was the Cordilleran, which covered Puget Sound and the Strait of Juan de Fuca south to the foothills of the Olympic Mountains. The retreat of this ice sheet about 14,000 years ago left a fertile, well-drained plain. A combination of climate, soil conditions and strategic burning by Indians maintained the prairie. The rain shadow cast by the Olympic Mountains provides the sunniest climate in Western Washington, with an average of only slightly over 16 inches of rain a year. However, timber was also present in abundance, especially on the slopes of the Olympics and on ridges scattered about the prairie. The tillable land was expanded as early settlers logged off this timber and grubbed out their "stump farms."

The most notable feature of the shoreline is Dungeness Spit, a narrow, curving natural projection of sand, rock, and driftwood extending over five miles into the strait and occasionally submerged during storms. On July 4, 1790, the Spanish mariner Manuel Quimper was the first European to sight this area. He named the bluff behind the spit Puerto de Quimper. On July 8 he claimed the bay protected by the spit for Spain and planted the usual cross. The next European to arrive was British explorer George Vancouver (1757-1798), who, ignoring any Spanish pretensions to ownership, on April 30, 1792, named part of the area sheltered by the sand spit New Dungeness after a similar projection on the Dover Channel on the southeast coast of England. A later town, also called New Dungeness, was actually near Cline's spit, a smaller projection within the shelter of Dungeness Spit.

The Strait of Juan de Fuca was dangerous enough, and Dungeness Spit, dubbed "Shipwreck Spit," was an additional hazard to navigation. Quimper and Vancouver had been lucky. A lighthouse, the second oldest in Washington and the first to operate in the Puget Sound/Strait of Juan de Fuca area, began beaming its rays from the end of the spit on December 14, 1857. Its first fulltime keeper was Henry H. Blake (1837-1871), who kept the light for 10 years. (The name William Henry Blake, which has appeared in print and on the Internet, is an error. The 1860 and 1870 United States Census, the Dungeness Light logs in the National Archives, and other sources confirm the name of Henry H. Blake.) The Dungeness Light has been automated since 1975, and the last keeper was withdrawn in 1994. The U.S. Coastguard maintains the light and foghorns, and volunteers with the New Dungeness Light Station Association keep up the buildings and grounds and provide tours for visitors. The Dungeness Light Station was placed on the National Register of Historic places in 1993.

Settling, Logging, and Farming

In 1850 the first settlers arrived in the Dungeness-Sequim Valley via Cape Horn and the California gold fields. They were a mixed lot -- European immigrants, plus Americans from New England, the South and the Midwest. The actual settlement of New Dungeness dates from 1851, two years before Washington Territory was formed and three years before Clallam County was carved from Jefferson County. Not surprisingly, its first settlers were mostly of an entrepreneurial spirit and profited from the capabilities of their modest port. "They found a forested land rich with trees they could log, haul to the bay and sell to the wood-hungry markets of California" (June Robinson, Al Courtney, 2000, 8). In addition, agricultural products -- mainly potatoes, but also wheat, oats, peas, apples, and dressed meat – were shipped from New Dungeness to other Puget Sound ports. Hops grown in the valley supplied Port Townsend breweries.

Some of the earliest farmers employed Chinese laborers, especially to clear land and to help grow potatoes. The Chinese also developed their own small potato farms and some had laundries. Many of them returned to China with their meager earnings. With the series of Chinese Exclusion Acts beginning in 1882, there was also a brisk trade in smuggling Chinese into Dungeness harbor, then on to Seattle. A story passed down by several early settlers is that many Chinese drowned when the crew of a smuggling ship threw them overboard to avoid discovery by an approaching government revenue cutter.

New Dungeness and Dungeness

In 1860, Elliott Henry Cline (b. 1820) was elected representative to the Territorial Legislature. In 1862, Elijah H. McAlmond (b. 1829), who had arrived in 1853, built what was regarded as the finest mansion in the Puget Sound Country. That same year, New Dungeness became the Clallam County seat. However, in 1890 there was a bit of a flurry when the county seat was moved to Port Angeles. Local residents argued that such a move was illegal, since the county owned the property on which the records were housed. A mounted posse from Port Angeles staged a raid on New Dungeness to capture the records. However, the raiders discovered the residents there to be peacefully resigned to the transfer, and the county records were handed over without incident.

In 1890 New Dungeness was relocated a mile east, at the mouth of the Dungeness River, and renamed Dungeness. During 1890-1891, a dock extending almost three-quarters of a mile into deep water was built by Charles Franklin Seal, president of the Groveland Improvement Company and owner of the Farmers Mercantile Company. According to local historian Virginia Keeting, "The town of Dungeness grew with the dock that became for years the main outlet of shipping for the county" (Keeting, 9). In advertising for settlement 1892, Seal touted the Sequim-Dungeness Valley as "the most prosperous place on the Sound, surrounded by the richest farm country" (Keeting, 9). A fire in 1914 destroyed most of the buildings on the west side of Groveland Avenue. In 1925 the Port of Port Angeles bought the dock. Its last use was in 1941, and now all that remains is a long row of decaying pilings.

Settling Sequim Prairie

Slightly south, on the prairie, many settlers had filed donation land claims and begun farming. The Donation Land Claims Act of 1850 gave up to 640 acres in Florida, New Mexico, or the Oregon Country to all white or mixed-blood settlers who arrived before December 1, 1855. Among them was John William Donnell (b. 1822), the first permanent settler on Sequim prairie, who received a claim of 320 acres northwest of Sequim near the river. It was not until the 1860s that surveying of claims started on the Olympic Peninsula, making it possible for these settlers to gain legal claim to their land. On March 6, 1866, Donnell was the first local homesteader to be granted a government patent to his claim, and he raised the first wheat in the valley. Another early settler was John Bell (b. 1828), who arrived from Victoria, B.C., in 1853, with a boatload of colonists from England. His farm stood at what is now the main intersection of Sequim. His daughter Marie Jane, born January 29, 1857, was the first white child born in Clallam County.

Douglas Bruce McInnes, who grew up on a farm in the Sequim-Dungeness Valley, speculates that a number of English settlers who pushed inland rather than remaining in Dungeness were sailors who had jumped ship: "Their choice of Sequim may possibly have been influenced by British gunboats on the prowl for wayward British sailors" (McInnes, 105). Another immigrant settler was a German, George Henry Lotzgesell (b. 1828), who arrived in Sequim in 1859. These pioneers handed down or sold farms to their numerous progeny, and many local roads still bear their names.

Watering the Land

These first farmers soon discovered, however, that the mild, sunny climate resulted in summers that were too dry for successful farming on a large scale, promoter Seal's claim not withstanding. It soon became obvious to local people that the Dungeness River could provide irrigation. On July 20, 1895, the organizational meeting of the Sequim Prairie Ditch Company was held at the home of James William Grant (b. 1852). Walter Grant, one of his descendants, writes:

"Plans, surveys and state permits were obtained all through the 1895-96 winter, volunteer workers met at the Grant home and, with their teams and tools, worked early and late. It was all done without pay. During April 1896, the irrigation system of open ditches and wooden flumes was finished. A

celebration was indeed appropriate, and the community planned a picnic for May Day ... this gala affair [was] the first of what became known as the Sequim Irrigation Festival" (Walter Grant, "James Arthur Grant Family," *Sequim Pioneer Family Histories,* Vol. 1, 117).

Although somewhat curtailed during World War II, this festival has been held to the present time and it is the oldest community festival in Washington State.

This early irrigation system was called flood irrigation, with water carried in wooden flumes to main ditches, then by lateral ditches to individual farms. The system was administered by "ditch companies," the first of which was the Sequim Prairie Ditch Company. By 1930 there were 21 such companies on both sides of the Dungeness River irrigating 12,000 acres. Irrigation made possible the growing of alfalfa and other crops essential to the dairy industry, which soon became the dominant form of agriculture in the valley. After World War II, pipe and sprinkler systems replaced the old method and eventually 25,000 acres were under irrigation. Now with much of the farmland replaced by houses, far less acreage is irrigated.

Dairy Farming

The Sequim-Dungeness Valley was for decades one of the major dairy regions of the state. The first cows were brought from Victoria, British Columbia, in 1860. By 1925 there were 5,200 mature dairy cows in Clallam County. In the 1940s, there were 949 farms with milk cows in the county. In 1959 the Olympic View Farm of Howard and Eunice Cameron was the largest dairy operation on the Olympic Peninsula, with 140 milk cows. More typical farms had between 20 and 60 cows. Some were even smaller operations in which the husband would supplement the family income by logging, milling, or fishing, and the wife kept a few cows for family use and to sell cream to the creamery. Silos and huge, handsome barns dotted a bucolic landscape set between the snowcapped Olympics and the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

The cows, mostly Guernseys and Jerseys, supplied rich milk and cream to the Dungeness and other creameries that shipped butter, cheese, and ice cream throughout Puget Sound from the port of Dungeness. Later, Seattle became the main market for Sequim milk, and the local producers had to meet Seattle Health Department requirements. Pasteurization and bottling took place in Seattle where the high-butterfat Sequim milk was blended with cheaper, lower-fat milk from Holstein herds. As low-fat milk became more popular, Holsteins replaced the Guernseys and Jerseys almost entirely. Today there are only two commercial dairy farms in the Sequim-Dungeness Valley.

Memoirs of farm lads who grew up during this period reflect not only the idyllic nature of life in the valley, but also the boredom and drudgery of twice-daily milking and other chores. Some Sequim High School graduates of the 1960s and 1970s said they "couldn't leave town fast enough after graduation" to earn a living in other ways (Oppenheimer, 14). Doug McInnes recalled, "My dad milked cows most of his life. His hands were huge, his fingers looked like stuffed sausages. And those fingers had arthritis, too" (McInnes, 56). Roger Petroll remembered: "Not all that many years ago a family could make a living by running a 20-cow dairy herd ... I can remember the quest for

more tillable land [that] brought in the bulldozers, tractors, huge burning stump piles and hours of backbreaking work picking up the stray sticks and roots" (Petroll in Fish, *125 Years*, 13) The introduction of electric milking machines, the replacement of workhorses with tractors, and other modernizations lessened the burden somewhat.

Economies of Town and Farm

During the 1930s and 1940s there was a pea industry in the valley. Initially, a few farmers grew their own peas, but soon a large multi-state pea producer began leasing land from farmers. In the late 1940s, the harvest employed about 300 local workers, mostly women and children. Because the planting was staggered, the harvest lasted a month, enabling a worker to earn $200 to $300 during the season. Baskets of peas interspersed with shaved ice were packed into boxcars and shipped to East Coast cities. The record year was 1941, with 65 carloads sent to the Eastern market. An even shorter-lived enterprise that involved farmers was a mini-oil boom from 1955 to 1957. Farmers leased land to Standard Oil for oil and natural gas exploration, but the rigs were dismantled when nothing was found.

There was no clear division between town and farm folks. Sequim prospered in providing the businesses and services necessary to support the dairy farmer. In 1947 the town still had fewer than 800 people. Community life centered around the school, church, grange, county fair, and Irrigation Festival. Local families intermarried. Some of their progeny remained in the area and others left for the cities. During the post-World War II boom in civilian goods, Sequim families bought new farm equipment, cars, and household appliances.

Logging, sawmills and mining were also important to the local economy. Long before the arrival of white settlers, the Indians had discovered the versatility and usefulness of local cedar for dugout canoes, clothing, baskets, drums, masks, medicine, and totem poles. For the settlers, logging provided work but not much income. In 1909 loggers in the area worked 11-hour days for $2.25 to $4 per day and paid 75 cents for board. The now-abandoned Tubal-Cain Mine at the headwaters of the Dungeness River, and other mining claims on "Iron Mountain," extracted low-grade manganese and copper beginning in 1901.

Nor should the famous Dungeness crab be overlooked. This delicacy is harvested from the Aleutians to San Francisco. Especially during the 1920s and 1930s, there were many commercial crabbers, including Klallam Indians, in the Dungeness area. Crab harvests have declined for many years, and typically they fluctuate in 10-year cycles. This is a problem at times for both commercial and recreational crabbers as well as for tourists who dine at The Three Crabs restaurant, a local landmark since 1958.

Off the Farm

Education was important to the early Sequim-Dungeness community as long as it did not interfere with farm work: The one-room schools dotting the valley were in session only three months of the

year. The first was Abernathy School, built of logs at New Dungeness in 1861. The two-story, multi-room Dungeness Schoolhouse, built in 1892 on the main road between Dungeness and Sequim, was the pride of the community. There was a two-story addition in 1921. It closed as a public school in 1955 when the Dungeness School District was consolidated with Sequim. The building now hosts some classes of Peninsula College and serves as a rental facility for community events. It was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1988.

Beginning in 1911, Sequim students attended the "Big Box" school, which was demolished in 1952. In 1915, Sequim held its first high school graduation. In 1928, high school student Eunice Robb drove the school bus for her five younger siblings and other students along their route.

Although he was not the first settler in the town of Sequim, if anyone could be called the founding father, it was Joseph L. Keeler, who arrived in 1903. He was a saloonkeeper, sawmill operator, had the first cash grocery, and in 1908 built the Hotel Sinclair, considered the hub of the community. Moving on to bigger things, he founded the Sequim Light and Power Company, later sold to Puget Sound Power & Light, with Keeler as district manager. He also established the Independent Telephone Company.

Sequim was incorporated in October 1913 as a fourth-class city, with Jilson White as the first mayor. In 1922 the town installed a water system, in 1936 a sewer system, and in 1967 a modern sewage treatment plant. A more refined civic improvement was the library. In 1936, the Clyde Rhodefer Library was built with Public Works Administration funds on land donated by the Progressive Club of Sequim. It was the culmination of years of effort by women of the community who first started a circulating collection of 300 books in 1915. A much larger library, built in 1982 and part of the North Olympic Library System, is now bursting at the seams.

War and Cold War

The Sequim area lost young men in both world wars. The home front impact of World War II was unusual. Immediately after Pearl Harbor, troops were detailed to patrol the Strait beaches and install machine gun nests. Some slept in the high school gymnasium. The only casualty was a cow that refused an order to halt. Local civilians served as airplane spotters, and Sequim even had blackouts and air raids wardens.

The early Cold War brought one of the strangest episodes in the history of the Sequim-Dungeness Valley. In January, 1952 the State Department began proceedings to acquire almost 1,200 acres of farm land as the site for a Voice of America broadcasting station to beam its programming behind the iron curtain. All buildings, pipes, wiring, fences, etc. were removed and the area was leveled in preparation for the installation of antennas and their supporting towers. However, a year later the project was abandoned as expensive and ineffectively located. Disrupted families had a chance to buy back their land, minus its topsoil, but many did not. Part of the area now sprouts houses; another portion is a county park accessed by the Voice of America Road.

Roads and Rails

Transportation was never easy in the early days. Most access through the area was by water, first with canoes, then by ship, including ocean-going sailing vessels and steamers, as well as the venerable Puget Sound mosquito fleet, which called at Dungeness for many years.

Rail service came to Sequim in 1915 with the Seattle, Port Angeles and Western Railroad, a subsidiary of the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific. It provided passenger and freight service west to Port Angeles and East to Port Townsend, with freight cars barged between Port Townsend and Seattle. This route underwent several changes of name and ownership, most recently to the Seattle & North Coast Railroad Company, which failed in 1985. The roadbed is now part of the Olympic Discovery Trail system.

The early Indian and pioneer trails and the rural lanes following section lines gave way to rudimentary roads. Soon a "well developed road net [was] a response to the necessity of picking up the milk from the farms for the daily shipment to Seattle" (Carter, 83). A new highway was built in 1920, now called the Old Olympic Highway. Beginning in 1931 State Highway 101 linked towns on the Olympic Peninsula. The opening of the floating bridge across Hood Canal on August 19, 1961, greatly reduced travel time to and from Seattle. For years, Highway 101 was also the main street through downtown Sequim.

A four-mile bypass, opened to traffic on August 18, 1999, now skirts the town, but without the negative impact on business that so often accompanies such bypasses. Unfortunately, it also intercepts a migration route for the Roosevelt elk that wander down from the Olympic Mountains. The leaders of the herds have been equipped with radio collars that emit a signal when they get too near the highway, activating flashing road signs warning drivers to slow down and avoid collisions with these large animals. The private Sequim Valley Airport three miles west of town provides facilities for small planes.

Sequim Today

Today Sequim retains little of its rural character. Most of the barns are gone and each year more farmland is subdivided for houses, many of them the oversized "McMansions" typical of affluent new suburbs. A Wal-Mart now stands on the site of the beautiful Alfred Robb farm. A *Seattle Times* article of January 16, 1962 gets the credit (or blame) for initiating the stampede of retirees and others to Sequim. Thomas Collins wrote a regular column entitled "The Golden Years" in which he asserted that one could not go anywhere in the United States without encountering violent weather at some point. Alexander Lindsay, a Sequim volunteer weather observer, refuted this claim by extolling the climate, as well as the low cost of living in Sequim. This column was syndicated in 150 newspapers. Letters of inquiry came in to Sequim at a rate of 500 a day, and the Chamber of Commerce had to recruit volunteers to answer them. The migration to Sequim had begun.

Doug McInnes muses:

"[T]he number of Americans that might like to move to our area is virtually endless ... . today's Sequim typifies the national decline in rural living in America . ... The rapidly rising price of land and housing is a constant shock. Forty years ago our 160-acre family farm, with a half mile of no-bank waterfront, sold for less than a 100 foot waterfront lot sells for now. Our old farm now has about 40 homes on it with several new ones going up every year" (McInnes, 126, 127). ... It is a strange feeling to look at all these homes on our old farm and remember blowing stumps, haying, hunting ducks and herding cows where these houses now stand" (McInnes, 90).

Organizations such as the local Friends of the Fields and the Farmland Trust of the Puget Consumer Co-op in Seattle are working to preserve some of the remaining farmland by means of land purchase and conservation easements. A few residents, at considerable personal expense, are preserving the historic barns still standing on their property.

Lavender

With the decline of dairying, Sequim agriculture has had to reinvent itself. A committee under the umbrella of the Chamber of Commerce, calling itself Sequim 2000, began meeting in early 1995 to consider ways to "spark the economy and create new tourist possibilities for the town" (Oppenheimer, 75). After researching various options, the group realized that the soils and microclimate of the Sequim-Dungeness Valley were ideal for lavender, a purple flowering herb known for its seductive scent and wide variety of uses -- therapeutic, culinary, and cosmetic.

In 1996, "Fields of Flowers," a spin-off from the original committee, enlisted the advice of Curtis Beus, an extension agent from Washington State University. Because he feared no one could make a living simply growing and selling lavender, he introduced them to the concepts of "agritourism" and "value-added products" (Oppenheimer, 81). In May 1996 this group started the Open Aire Market, open every Saturday from May through October. It is still popular with locals and tourists.

July 1996 saw the first harvest of the lavender planted in 1995. By 1997, there were seven farms with a total of 10,000 plants, and the community celebrated its first lavender festival. Today (2008) the festival attracts 35,000 tourists from all over the world during the third week of July for farm tours, a street fair, art and craft shows, musical events, and, of course, the opportunity to buy a wide variety of lavender-related products. According to Betty Oppenheimer, "This is agritourism at its finest. Local farmers augment their livelihood by inviting the public to visit the farms, learn about the crop, and take home products, knowledge and memories of a wonderful visit" (Oppenheimer, 87).

Sequim lavender has produced "value-added" employment for tourist facilities, marketing firms, printers, web designers, and others. The harvest requires seasonal Mexican labor, and some of these expert agricultural workers are now employed year-round. Today (2008) 30 farmers belong to the Sequim Lavender Growers Association.

Sources:
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Note: This essay was modified on July 10, 2010, to correct the Klallam Indian definition of "Sequim."

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