

(Transcribers' note: The following is a 12.28.19 transcription by Lower Columbia Preservation Society (LCPS) volunteers of the original, published article recently discovered by an LCPS volunteer in the archives of the Astoria Public Library. The text has been lightly edited to correct typos and punctuation.)

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ASTOR EXPERIMENT STATION STARTED

By Robert Birdsall

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A chunk of money in the kitty when Astorians completed their centennial celebration fifty years ago has now written a new page into the history of this land and people,.

Events have since shown that local leaders of those days did, in fact, hold in their hands a ten thousand dollar-nest egg that would multiply many times over in progress and economic gain for the entire coastal belt of Oregon and Washington.

This unspent sum from the Astor Centennial Fund of 1911 was the cornerstone of the John Jacob Astor Branch Experiment station--one of the nation's busy crossroads of agricultural science.

Nestled along the Walluski River, six miles southeast of Astoria, the station has been a source of new findings in agriculture for visitors from all points, scientists and officials from this country and foreign lands.

"At times I felt as though we were running a boarding house," fondly recalls Mrs. Elsie Engbretsen, wife of the late Albert Engbretsen, who supervised the station from 1910 to 1934.

MANY FOUND WAY

"As near as I can remember," she says with a twinkle, "we were married for two years before we had breakfast alone--just the two of us."

It was a long haul out to the station in those early days--mud up to the wagon wheel hubs along the tidelands. But people found the way and stayed awhile to learn of Astoria bentgrass, big trefoil, and a host of other new crops and practices developed at the station.

This trek began back in 1913 when the station was founded, and it's understandable that the 150-acre John Jacob Astor station will throw open its gates even wider during Astoria's one hundred fiftieth birthday celebration this summer.

Another name - Herbert Howell, present superintendent of the station - stands out in the long procession of scientific progress.

Both Engbretsen and Howell were born and reared in Astoria, went away to Oregon State College for “book learnin’” on farming, then came back home to help lead a local revolution in agricultural practices.

Mrs. Engbretsen still lives in Astoria with a treasured collection of memories, photos, and history of those years when she and Engbretsen supervised the farm, swamping out the tidelands and clearing cut-over hillsides.

Howell came on the scene in 1934 when the Engbretsens moved into Astoria to start their seed company founded on the famous Astoria bentgrass.

GUERNSEY HERD FAMOUS

Howell, now nearing retirement - he'll be 67 in October - has brought national recognition in the station's tideland herd of top-producing Guernseys through a feeding and management program tailored to coastal conditions.

Historically and naturally, Clatsop county was destined to be dairy country with earlier settlers capitalizing on the lush grasslands.

Astor's trading post records of 1821 showed an inventory of one bull, eight cows and 15 Heifers. 20 Years later, Solomon Smith, who settled on Clatsop Plains, had what was believed to be the first dairy farm in the area, stocked with a herd of cattle brought in from the Willamette Valley.

In 1847 one Tow Owens brought 60 head of “Spanish cattle” to the area and by 1850 some 24 farms in the county had milk cows.

Today, there are 60 Grade A dairy farms in the county, grossing farmers about \$1 million a year.

Bringing dairying and pasture management from its “native state” to present advanced practices was a responsibility clearly spelled out in the branch experiment station's charter laid down in 1913 when the station was created by legislative act.

ORIGINAL TRACT RAW

What agricultural leaders wanted to know, specifically, was what could be done through research to boost productivity of tidelands and logged-off hill-lands that form the base for most of Clatsop county's dairy industry.

The original tract of 70 acres purchased with money from the Astor Centennial Fund was in a raw state.

“Month after month, year after year, we pulled logs and brush out of the tidelands and cleared the hillsides of stumps and brush,” recounts Mrs. Enbretson.

The clearing work got underway in 1914 under the direction of late Harry A. Lindgren, first superintendent of the station, from 1913-15. Lindgren was later a longtime animal husbandry specialist for Oregon State University Extension Service. He died at his home in Corvallis last January 1st at age 72.

A committee of Oregon livestock industry representatives are now planning a Lindgren Memorial to be installed in OSU's Withycombe Hall Auditorium commemorating the man who began his agricultural leadership at Astoria a half century ago.

Initial work and development of the station tract was financed by Clatsop County: \$10,000 to dike and clear the land, bring water from Astoria the pipeline, and provide buildings and roads.

ONE OF THIRTEEN STATIONS

State funds were earmarked in the legislative act to supply three thousand dollars annually for maintenance and support of the station.

Title to the branch station lands and buildings was held by Clatsop Co. until ten years ago when it was transferred to the Oregon State Board of Higher Education to be held as long as the property is used as an experiment station. It is one of thirteen branch stations located in various climatic areas of Oregon and operating as part of the Oregon State University Agriculture Station.

These were some of the physical and financial elements involved in getting the new branch station “off the ground.”

But it was the human side of the story--struggle, imagination, and foresight--that brought the station from swamp land to high producing pastures with new, improved grasses and legumes.

Lindgren's records show that a contingent of prisoners from the Oregon State Penitentiary were brought in to clear the lands, snaking out logs and debris with horses shod with 2 x 12 “shoes” to maneuver in the mudflats.

HIKES SIX MILES DAILY

Two other superintendents are listed in early records. Glen H. Roberts, 1916-17, and Harold R. Taylor, 1918-19.

Albert Engbretsen, fresh out of “Ag school,” was a forty dollar-a-month hired hand at the station when he went off to World War I. Back to Astoria after the Armistice, he took his new bride, the former Elsie Youngstead, also a native-born Astorian, and went out to the station as full-fledged superintendent.

Elsie has signed a contract to teach school in Astoria and fulfilled her contract, hiking six miles through the mud into town and back again.

“But we were young. I could walk a mile in 15 minutes, so it was only a 1 ½ -hour hike, “ she recalls.

But it takes Herb Howell to relate the full story of the famous tideland dairy herd, clicking off facts on every animal.

“We don’t like to keep a cow that produces less than five hundred pounds of butterfat a year,” says Howell. Most testing associations work hard to get their average up to four hundred pounds.

This year the herd of fifty milking cows rated honors, receiving its second Gold Star Guernsey Breeders Award for production in 1960 - averaging more than 12,000 pounds of milk and 650 pounds of fat.

AIDS GET CREDIT

This placed it second in the nation among Guernsey herds for fat production, only 3 pounds lower than the first place herd, and 8th among all herds for milk production.

Record making performance by tideland cows is never “old hat” to Howell, who views their honors not as personal achievement but as a team effort of the branch station staff based on sound research.

He’s always quick to give credit to his station herdsman Sydney Pryor and his relief man Jake Wadrop who help carry out the entire management program based on careful selection of animals, increasing improvement in production of quality forage, and balanced feeding with special attention to mineral requirements peculiar to the coastal area. Some so-called “trace minerals” are deficient in vegetation of the area and Howell had taken a scientist’s approach to correcting this through careful formulation of rations and testing the results.

The “aristocratic lineage” of the tideland herd is a story in itself, and Howell knows the multiple generation of names better than many folks can call names of first cousins.

He traces the herd back to two foundation cows selected from a group of six Guernseys given to the station in 1916 by W. B. Ayres, Foothills Farm, Carlton.

The male side of the herd is based heavily on the Chicon line developed by A. L. Gile, Chinook, Washington, who loaned the station three of his herd sires over a 9 year period starting in 1935.

The Chicon bulls were a direct line from Langwater Traveler, one of the all time great dairy animals.

Howell doesn't try to conceal his pride when he says the station herd is probably the most closely bred herd to Langwater Traveler in the United States. Later the station purchased a Chicon bull from Gile. Still later, Fred Rudat, Jr., of Brownsead loaned the station a Gold Star sire, Cla-Ore Knight's Ludlow, that also traced back to the Chicon line.

MUCH RESEARCH DONE

"Firsts" in dairy production are only one side of the coin at the Astor station. Fully as noteworthy is research through the years in developing forage crops best suited to the high rainfall strip of the west coast.

The station has tested hundreds of grass and legume varieties, and thousands of strains under a wide range of fertilizer and harvesting practices to find a relatively small number that stand out as a superior for the area.

These selection processes are time consuming - too much so for most farmers to gamble on them.

"It's important at the station that we learn what not to do; this way it saves a lot of other people time and money," explains Howell.

A discerning eye for promising varieties is a valued ability in the crops researcher. Both Howell and Engbretsen demonstrated that touch.

"Albert always had his eyes peeled for something new and different in forage plants," says Mrs. Engbretsen. "People were afraid to ride with him in the old Model T, because his eyes were always on the side of the road."

"We were driving up the Columbia Highway to Portland one day when he came to a screeching halt, leaped from the car, ran up a hillside and began picking plants," she recalls.

Turned out to be marijuana plants. Seems some entrepreneur from south of the border had picked the hillside as a launching pad for a little illicit business. Engbretsen's quick eye resulted in a visit by officials who ended the venture.

One of the west coast's important forage plants, big trefoil or lotus major, was confined to a little patch at the Astor station until Howell sized up its virtues. A native of south central Europe, big trefoil had been introduced to the station in 1923 for trial.

In 1935, Howell noted that one small patch had persisted under adverse conditions of the low wet tidelands, heavy grazing and other pressures. He and Harry Schoth, USDA agronomist stationed at Oregon State University, harvested one pound of seed from the plot - approximately one million seeds that required fifteen man days to gather. Present seed stocks of all locally produced seed of this variety have come from this original source.

Other widely-used forages that were introduced through the Astor station include meadow foxtail, used especially on wet bottomlands; New Zealand white clover introduced about 12 years ago and now a heavy yielder on Clatsop soils; and, in recent years, S-143 orchard grass for use on upland pastures.

Records for fertilizer test plots, especially lime for the acid coast soils, go back more than 30 years at the station. Testing for improved soil fertility is still a major part of the program.

MINERAL NEEDS TESTED

The branch station has conducted feeding trials for beef animals, primarily for mineral requirements, for some twenty years.

A recent development that typifies the broad based research program is the introduction of a new hay-drying building that can also be used as an experimental feed barn for calves during the winter.

Slat bottomed hay trailers with tight sides are driven into the dryer shed. Canvas hoods are then clamped tightly to tops of the trailers and hot air is forced down through the baled hay.

Howell says the system produces artificially dried grass-legume hay of excellent quality that is as acceptable to cows as good grade alfalfa.

Another important program at the station that touches all of Clatsop Co. and western Oregon is the recent establishment in 1959 of a forest management demonstration areas.

A forty acre tract of timberland on the station was set aside as an "outdoor classroom" for forest management. One of the main uses of the area is the annual sixth grade tours when about 500 boys and girls from all over Clatsop Co. visit the area to learn about the county's main resource

- timber. Foresters and other technical men instruct the students in many aspects of forestry and wildlife during the tour.

Dairying, cropping, forestry - these are the things that still grow from the 1911 Centennial "nestegg" set aside by local planners looking to the future of Clatsop Co. and Oregon.

Herb Howell and Mrs. Engbretsen speak of annual field days at the station when 200 to 500 and more visitors flocked to the research center on the tidelands to see what projects were on the front burner.

With Astoria slated as a mecca for visitors this summer, Howell is hoping that their curiosity brings them down the road along the Walluski.