

THE RUN FROM FARM TO FARM

As Fort Steilacoom Becomes Western State Hospital

By Hilda Skott

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Where woolly sheep once grazed across Puget Sound prairies, Western State Hospital now stands. The hospital today, serving the mentally ill in western Washington, stands amid native firs and flowering ornamentals, looking like a college campus. This transformation has its roots in the days of the first white settlements in the Northwest.

In 1844, during the days of the Joint Occupancy Agreement between Great Britain and the United States, Joseph Thomas Heath arrived from England at Fort Nisqually, a Hudson's Bay Company trading post. He settled on Steilacoom Farm, an area now divided amongst Western State Hospital, a county golf course, Fort Steilacoom County Park, and Pierce College.

By 1847 Heath's livestock included 206 sheep, 18 horses, and 78 cattle, 10 of which were husky oxen used for pulling loaded farm wagons. Oxen also drew the plows that broke the virgin sod in preparation for planting.

Heath grew about 100 acres of such crops as wheat, peas, and potatoes. His cows produced enough butter for export. The rolling hills of his 640 acres served as acreage for crops and pasture land for animals. Timberland supplied lumber needed in farm buildings, threshing floors, fence posts, and butter casks.

Nearby Indians of the Steilacoom, Snoqualmie, and Skokomish tribes provided needed labor for the farm. Heath also bartered with the Indians. For deer, duck, salmon, and trout he offered blankets, shirts, needles, and medical help. Barter included payment for labor.

Heath died in March 1849. In August of that year Captain Bennett Hill and his army artillery company arrived in the area to establish a military post to protect settlers in what had by then become Oregon Territory. In late August 1849 the American army agreed to rent the buildings and 373.75 acres of the farm for \$50 a month. Fort Steilacoom served as a supply depot and refuge from 1849 to 1868. During the Indian wars of 1855-56, the garrison served as headquarters for the Ninth Infantry.

Local settlers, when they feared Indian attacks, packed their belongings, hitched up their oxen-drawn wagons, and sought refuge at the fort. Ezra Meeker, prominent Puget Sound pioneer, recounted one such gathering: "A sorry mess . . . Women and children crying, cows bellowing, sheep bleating, dogs howling...utmost disorder." During this period Washington became a territory (in 1853) and Oregon a state (in 1859).

April 22, 1868: On the parade ground in front of the commanding officer's home, probably accompanied by a cannon salute and drum roll, the lowering of the last flag at Fort Steilacoom took place.

The last military unit to hold Fort Steilacoom was Battery E, Second Artillery, with 5 officers and 124 men, Captain Charles Pierce, officer in charge. Elwood Evans, a leading citizen from Olympia, secured the flag as it came down the shaft. This flag, badly frayed and holding 37 stars, rests today in Historic Fort Steilacoom's Interpretive Center on the grounds of Western State Hospital.

Legislation introduced in Congress in 1868 to give Fort Steilacoom to Washington Territory did not pass. Dorothea Dix, a 19th-century social reformer, arrived in Portland in 1869. After investigating treatment of the mentally ill in Washington Territory, she wrote to Governor Alvin Flanders, that "provision and care are both inadequate and unsuitable." She urged, "in the interest of humanity," that the governor remove patients from their Monticello (modern-day Longview) location and take them to Portland.

Dix also wrote to Elwood Evans and to the *Daily Pacific Tribune* of Olympia. She described housing as barren as a barn, cell-like rooms, sanitation that left "sinks never washed" and "very dirty bedding." In November 1869 a legislator presented the letters to the House Select Committee. He declared "the present system for the government and care of the insane wholly inadequate...and as an expensive failure." He feared that this "will detract seriously from the rising reputation of our Territory."

On January 15, 1870, Washington's territorial legislature bought the garrison buildings for use as an "Insane Asylum for Washington Territory." Construction of the fort cost \$200,000; the territorial legislature paid \$850.

On August 19, 1871, 21 patients (15 men and 6 women) transferred from Monticello where they had been cared for by James Huntington and W. W. Hays for one dollar per patient per day.

Three years later, on April 15, 1874, Congress approved the donation of 373.75 acres of Fort Steilacoom to Washington Territory for "an asylum for the insane and for no other purpose." Over the years, the institution's acreage increased, mainly by purchase, eventually to equal, and even exceed, the size of Steilacoom Farm. In 1921 the total was 670 acres; by the 1940s the total had become 860 acres.

In 1875 the legislature renamed the institution the "Hospital for the Insane in Washington Territory." During the first days of the hospital's operation patients occupied old barracks. As the hospital grew, Officers Row, on the north side of the parade ground, housed doctors and staff. The commanding officer's quarters became the superintendent's residence. In time, trellised vines enclosed the veranda, flowers graced the front lawn, and a picket fence added to a homelike atmosphere.

Of the original 25 buildings acquired from the fort, four structures still remain. Three officers' quarters and the chaplaincy have been placed on the National Register of Historic Places and serve today as the center of operations for the Historic Fort Steilacoom Association.

Two early structures built by the hospital also remain: a bakery, built in 1901, and the old morgue, built in 1907. They stand together, surrounded by newer structures, looking like shriveled grandparents encircled by recent generations. (Both buildings are also on the National Register of Historic Places.)

The arrival in 1880 of Dr. John W. Waughop as hospital superintendent signaled a new era for the institution. Waughop remained at his post for 17 years. His influence is still in evidence even today.

The territorial legislature, in 1886, passed a bill to establish a permanent territorial hospital for the mentally ill, appropriating \$100,000 for its operation.

Formal opening, "one of the most brilliant events in the territory," took place December 15, 1887. Governor Eugene Semple, along with legislative representatives and members of the press, arrived from Olympia by boat. One hundred Tacomans also came by water. Four hundred people joined the governor for dinner. A concert opened with the hospital's band playing the "Grand March" from Tannhäuser.

A number of solos, duets, and quartets—vocal and instrumental—were followed by a "laughable farce." "The music of bewitching waltzes" resounded through the halls, and some celebrants remained until dawn.

In 1888, possibly in anticipation of statehood, the territorial legislature officially named the institution "Western Washington Hospital for the Insane."

Dr. Waughop instituted a building program, adding wings to older structures for new wards and erecting a central kitchen and powerhouse. New landscaping beautified the grounds. A Chinese empress tree, its purple bloom spread across its crown, continues to blossom every spring.

Dr. Waughop's attention to patients, while concentrating on custodial care, convinced him they needed occupation. Some farming took place from early days of the institution. Waughop expanded agricultural pursuits, building new barns and adding a dairy herd to supply milk as well as patient activity. Meat came from hogs and chickens, the latter also providing eggs. At the turn of the century, farm produce "provided one-third the cost of subsistence" at the hospital, according to Clara Cooley, author of a Western State Hospital history. Patients also assisted in the carpenter, tin, and blacksmith shops, and in the laundry and the kitchen. Work became therapeutic occupation for patients.

In recent years a hospital employee, poking around in dark corners of the hospital commissary, discovered a dusty plaque honoring Waughop. Signed in 1906 by Governor Albert Mead, it reads:

In memory of Dr. John W. Waughop, Superintendent of this hospital from 1880 to 1897. He was the practical creator of the institution as it now exists. Through his professional attainments, his executive ability, and his intelligence as a man, the institution was built up and took high position among those of the country.

Dr. William Keller, a vigorous leader known for his tendency to support the underdog, became the hospital's next notable superintendent in October 1914. He supported more humane patient

treatment, eight-hour workdays for hospital attendants, and legislation to allow voluntary admission for people with psychiatric problems. Chairs replaced benches for patients in halls and day rooms. China, rather than earthenware, appeared on ward dining tables. Cut flowers from the greenhouse graced tables in lounges, reception areas, and dining rooms.

In 1915 the Washington State Legislature changed the institution's name to the one it still holds, Western State Hospital. Dr. Keller extended farm operations and developed a top-notch dairy herd. Sadly, when Washington's Department of Agriculture began to require that all milk cows in the state be tested for tuberculosis, all but five cows in the hospital herd tested positive. Farm herds in the entire state were hit. In some quarters rumor ran that authorities, arriving on farms to destroy tubercular livestock, came face to face with farmers wielding pitchforks and shotguns.

Keller huddled with state officials to devise a plan. Rather than slaughter the state's dairy cattle, the hospital would accept some of the diseased animals, isolate them, and give special attention to newborn calves. Immediately after birth, before nursing, a calf would be removed from its mother. All milk was to be boiled before use.

In this manner, newborn calves were tuberculosis-free. The state's best farm herds were saved. Among those saved, a future wonder cow among the hospital herd appeared.

A registered purebred Holstein cow named Steilacoom Prilly Ormsby Blossom achieved a world record. In her lifetime, 1921-38, she produced 258,210 pounds of milk containing 9,558 pounds of butterfat. The hospital dairy herd, "famous over the nation," produced cows that brought home blue and red ribbons from the Western Washington Fair. The hospital farm exhibit—its flowers, fruits, and vegetables—also snatched their share of prizes at the fair.

Joseph Heath's cows produced casks of butter for export; hospital herds won prizes and fed all the patients. Just like the old Heath farm, the hospital farm—until its closure in 1965—took its place as a productive agricultural enterprise.

Hilda Skott was a Pierce College instructor who lived in Steilacoom for over 30 years. In retirement she became a free-lance journalist and an active member of several local historical organizations. She died in April 2000.