

CLARENCE GARNER'S IMAGES OF NORTHWEST LOGGING

By Lynette Miller

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Logging and art—today this combination of words evokes images of chain saw sculptures. But for Clarence L. Garner, both activities were in his blood. He grew up loving to draw, and he worked in the logging camps of western Washington. Born in 1880, he came to Washington Territory by stagecoach from Kentucky in 1886 with his parents and brothers. The family homesteaded on the Wynoochee River, 14 miles from Montesano, in the heart of southwest Washington's logging country.

As a child, Garner loved to draw, carrying a sketchbook with him to capture images of the animals and trees he saw around him. At the age of 9 he won his first school drawing prize. At 16 he traveled throughout the Puget Sound region with John Pierson, a noted English artist and member of the Royal Academy. Garner worked with Pierson for about 18 months and regarded him as his mentor, learning everything he could from the experienced artist. It was during this period that Garner began to paint with oils. Some of Garner's paintings were shown at the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition in 1909, winning an honorable mention.

As a young man, Garner worked at various jobs in the woods to pay for his schooling. He was a grease monkey, daubing oil on the skids over which teams of oxen or horses pulled logs out of the forest. Later, he drove an eight-horse team for Simpson Logging Company. He incorporated these experiences and others in his paintings.

Garner graduated from Montesano High School and went on to attend the University of Washington. After graduating in 1904 with a degree in civil engineering, art became a hobby for Garner. He first worked as an engineer for the City of Aberdeen. In 1916 he moved to Vashon Island to work on uniting the Vashon and Burton telephone systems into one agency. His original employer, Washington Coast Utilities, was bought out by Puget Sound Power and Light Company in 1933. Garner became the company's first manager on Vashon Island where he worked until he retired in 1947.

Although he had continued to paint in his spare time, retirement allowed Garner more latitude to indulge his love of painting and memories of his days in the woods. He painted a wide range of scenes, documenting the changes he saw in the logging industry. These paintings were made in the 1950s, but many of the subjects date from a much earlier period. Among them are a mill dating from 1867 and the big forest fire of 1902. His early experiences of man- and horse-powered logging are there, as well as scenes including steam locomotives and the modern gas-powered equipment still used today.

In 1963, the Washington State Capital Museum purchased a group of 25 paintings Clarence Garner had completed over a two-year period. The merger of the State Capital Museum with

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the Washington State Historical Society brought the collection to Tacoma. A selection of Clarence Garner's work will be on display in the "Inviting the Spirit" gallery at the Washington State History Museum through July 2006.

Lynette Miller has worked at the Washington State Historical Society for eight years. She is currently head of collections and works primarily on the society's art and Native American collections.