

Interviewing the Past – South, Central Puget Sound and Montesano

I. INTRODUCTION

I interviewed 17 people, all over 50 and most of whom remember what it was like to live on the Kitsap Peninsula, Seattle, Tacoma and Montesano in the 1930's and 1940's. I generally recorded only changes that had been noticed. The interviewee's responses were anecdotal. In some cases they weren't absolutely sure about their responses, but in other cases they were. Multiple opinions that are in agreement add validity to responses. I did not include their remembrances of ethnicity; although all noted a change in the composition of the population, but I wasn't concentrating in that area.

II. INTERVIEWS

Nadine, born in 1922 in Hoquiam, believes winters are milder than when she was growing up. She remembers playing in "deep snow" a number of years. Her father was a gladiola grower who moved to Montesano in 1931. It seems like it got dryer during the 1930's and 1940's (Montesano seemed dryer than Hoquiam). Hoquiam may have been cloudier than Montesano. She doesn't remember ever seeing eagles when she was growing up. She remembers picking wild blackberries (indigenous), especially in recently logged areas, and a few Himalayan blackberries (invasive), evergreen blackberry, red (and sometimes blue) huckleberries and salal. They caught lots of razor clams. She remembers old growth trees, but doesn't remember geese or ducks. She's a gardener and she thinks she plants about the same time every year. There were far fewer people around then (there were 50 seniors in her graduating class at Montesano in 1940). The only different diseases she remembers are whooping cough, polio and tuberculosis (TB). She never knew what allergies were, and doesn't remember people with asthma. People walked a lot more back then. There were few cars and she thought nothing of walking a few miles to the store, school, etc. They had chickens and they tasted different than they do now, but they could not afford beef or pork. They had no refrigeration. The only fertilizer was bone meal for the gladiolas; for their food garden they had a compost pile. All planting was done by hand.

Joyce (1938) moved to Port Orchard in 1941. She remembers winters as being much more severe in the 1940's and up to about 1955. There was definitely more snow. She remembers people driving out onto the freshwater ice on the Gorst tidal flats on a regular basis. The ice would rise and fall with the tides. In 1944 the snow was over the then 6 year old's head. She remembers the Gorst skating rink collapsing from a snowfall, and there was outdoor ice skating on the lakes and ponds every year. 1949 and 1950 were extremely cold, with lots of snow, as was 1955. They didn't have, and never needed air conditioning in the summer. It doesn't seem like it rained as much then. It rains harder now, and for longer periods of time. The air was less polluted. She does not remember seeing any eagles. Fishing was way better. "You could walk across the backs of salmon in Blackjack Creek". Her brothers fished for food regularly, and it was effortless. There seem to be lots more deer, coyotes, raccoons and mountain lions around now than before. There were more wild blackberries (in the clear cut areas) and Oregon grape. Gardens seemed to grow about as well as they do today and she plants the same foods her family did then. The population was much, much smaller. She remembers TB and polio, but said "people didn't have allergies like they do now." Obesity is much more common now. People walked a lot more back then. "Chicken tasted like chicken" back then, and beef and pork tasted better too.

Avonelle (1929), grew up on Beacon Hill in Seattle, near a forest. There are far fewer forests in the area. It snowed more and there was more ice skating on ponds in West Seattle in the winter. Summers seemed warmer to her back then. She remembers little wild blackberries, but not the Himalayans,

huckleberries (red) and salmonberries. She never saw possums growing up or raccoons. She thinks there are more coyotes around now. They caught catfish on Lake Kathleen in Renton, which is now nitrified and full of green goo - no longer swimmable. She doesn't remember so many crows and there don't seem to be nearly as many bats. She hardly ever heard of allergies, but she did hear of polio, TB and rickets. Obesity is much more common now.

Jean (1927) is Avonelle's sister. She thinks winters are colder now, but notes that, at 83, her body is colder. She's not sure about snow. She doesn't remember flooding events when she was growing up. Summers seem the same too. Growing up, they lived by a forest on Beacon Hill, and there are far fewer forests now. More people have allergies now. She remembers polio and TB. She thinks they ate the same food then that they do now.

Bob (1928) and Jo (1930) who grew up in South Park in Seattle, think winters were different growing up. Jo skated outdoors every year between 1941 and 1945, and there was lots more snow then. Summers seem colder and wetter now. Bob says he never noticed the weather much. As an adult, he went into the garage, got in his car and drove to the office - he didn't spend much time outside. There are far fewer fish in the Sound now and it's harder to find clams. The Duwamish was already polluted back then. The air is cleaner in South Park now, because that's where the dump was, and they burned the garbage in the open. South Park and Kent were all truck farms. They remember TB and polio, but they didn't even know the word "allergy". People ate less meat and walked a good deal more. Jo's grandmother moved to South Park, Seattle, with her three children around 1900, after her husband died in a logging accident. She walked five miles to work at Frederick & Nelson in Seattle. There is definitely more obesity now; Bob thinks television changed people's habits to a great degree.

Bill (1926) grew up in South Park in South Seattle and Dolores (1931) grew up a few miles east of Renton. They think winters may have been warmer in the past, but they're not sure. They think there's less snow now, which makes them both wonder about their first statement. They don't remember much about how often ponds and lakes froze over. They both think it rains more now and, when it rains, it rains harder. Summers seem cooler and shorter. Forests were to the west of South Park and they're all gone now, and there are far fewer forests where Dolores grew up. There's way less of salmon and every other type of fish, like steelhead (Bill fished a lot). They used to pick wild strawberries at the ocean, but they don't see those any more. They used to clam, shrimp, crab and get oysters, and they saw all of those populations decline before they stopped. They don't see skunks (usually as road kill) any more. There were more whales in the 1930's. There are more possums and crows now. They don't recall eagles in the '30's. The air is worse and the water doesn't taste near as good; they don't think it's just the addition of chlorine, although that is worse. They knew of polio, measles, whooping cough and they'd heard about rickets. People walked more in the 1930's. Bill's mother, around 1912, walked from South Park, Seattle to Three Tree Point (about 8 miles away) for a dance, and then back, and that was not uncommon. More people have allergies now (they didn't know about them in the 1930's). There is much more obesity now. They eat less meat now, and "chicken don't taste like chicken no more".

Phil (1926) and Bev (1931), who grew up in South Tacoma, remember that 1949 and the 1950's winters were colder. Lakes froze over more, but they think the intensity of cold periods is greater now. They think that summers are definitely warmer now. There is more rain now, and the rain is heavier, more intense and more sporadic. They think there may be more clouds now. There are far fewer forests. The shoreline has changed dramatically, in shape and in the amount of houses. Phil swam in Steilacoom Lake, but now they have algae blooms regularly. There are lots fewer salmon in the Sound now, more seals. They don't remember otters. There are more raccoons, possums (they don't remember them) and

deer. Fresh fruits and vegetable are more available now. They remember polio and TB, and stomach flus were more intense. They'd never heard of allergies, although Bev remembers a girl in the 6th grade (1943) who had problems with scotch broom (invasive). Obesity is much more prevalent. People walked more. Chicken tasted way better then. It was a delicacy and now it tastes like mush. Beef and pork seem the same.

Bobby (1958) grew up in West Seattle and swam in Lake Kathleen (Renton) every summer from birth until 2005. Snails began appearing in the lake in the 1990's and now nitrification due to runoff and all the surrounding houses on septic has turned it into a pond. Ear infections are now pretty much a guarantee for a swimmer. Growing up in West Seattle, he sees far fewer forests there now. He remembers whales off the Fauntleroy docks in the 1960's. Rainfall seems more intense in the winter, but he's not sure about summers. He remembers seeing dead skunks on the road, but hasn't seen that in years. He recently ate a locally grown, true free range chicken from the local butcher and was reminded how much better chicken tasted in the 1960's.

Bill moved to the Seabeck area in 1954. He follows birds on the Hood Canal. There are not nearly as many ducks in the winter, no more western grebes, about the same number of loons. Migratory song birds have plummeted and the western tanager has disappeared. Scrub jays and a certain type of hummingbird (I forget) are appearing further north these days. He tends to see the same winter birds, no more mountain beaver and less deer.

Jimmy (1929) grew up on Bainbridge Island, and now lives in Kingston. He remembers winters when he was 4 or 5 as being much colder. Green Lake froze over at least once. Forest fires on Bainbridge were more common, which could mean warmer summers or just that there was more logging. Intense rainfalls are definitely more common now. There seemed to be a more regular pattern in the summers (1 hot day, a rainy day, a better day, a hot day, etc.) than now. Fishing was much better. He thinks bear, raccoons, coyotes and especially deer are more common now. He never saw a possum growing up (didn't even know what they were). He remembers blackberries ("both kinds"). There were harbor seals then, but he never saw sea lions, orcas or otters, and he lived on the water. The quality of lumber was better. "Seconds" - castoffs from the lumber mills - were of higher quality than the best lumber now. There are more raptors (like eagles) now. He didn't see cormorants until 1988 or so. There were no starlings in the 1930's. Chicken was rare on Bainbridge Island - they ate beef every day. There are a "hell of a lot more people" now, there's much less forest and more roads. The water's different now (chlorinated). There is a lot less driftwood (lumbered and wild) than when he was growing up. He thinks there are more clams now, because fewer people dig them and they're banned in so many areas due to pollution. People didn't eat mussels back then. He remembers TB, polio and whooping cough, but he never heard of allergies back then (maybe hay fever). He notes that people didn't go to the doctor nearly as often either. Obesity is strikingly more prevalent now. He thinks breasts are bigger too, but maybe women are just showing them off more. There was more walking - there was never a thought about walking to the store, a mile away - they might make that trip a few times a day back then.

Bill (1940's?) grew up in Port Orchard and has always worked on the waters of the Sound. The fishing was much better on the Sound in the 1950's, and they never saw Orcas, but gray whales came into the area every year. There was much more lumber and driftwood on the water back then and into the 1960's.

Carmen moved to Port Orchard in 1956. Winters seem warmer (there were more snows every winter before), but the snow events seem more intense. It rains more now and there are more intense rains.

Summers seem cooler and don't seem to last as long. It seems like she's planting her garden later these days - springs seem cooler and wetter. No more skunks around (they used to get run over a lot). There are more possums and raccoons than before. There are more eagles, less big redheaded woodpeckers. The city water used to taste great, but not anymore.

Carl moved to Port Orchard in 1941. Winters were colder and snow was deeper in the 1940's and early 1950's, especially in 1949 and 1950. Long Lake froze over and they'd drive their cars on to it, ice skate and stay warm by 55 gallon burn barrels that were placed on the ice. Winters are getting warmer, winds are stronger. There used to be a lot more snow. The fresh water runoff into Sinclair Inlet, especially near Gorst, would freeze over, sometimes all the way to Port Orchard [about a mile]. Steel plates were put on the forward hull of the Port Orchard-to-Bremerton foot ferry to get through the ice in Sinclair Inlet. Carl says it's hard to tell about the rain, but maybe there used to be less. Summers were longer back then and just plain different the way they worked. There were lots more fish ever where. Long Lake was lots clearer back then. There are far fewer forests now. Game got harder to find over time – you had to go further and further away to hunt before he stopped. South Kitsap has more bear, deer, raccoons and possums (he'd never seen a possum, even while hunting as a kid). There are more crows, eagles, big cranes and starlings. There are more seals, fewer gray whales and more orcas. He hasn't noticed a change in shellfish. There are more cars now. People are heavier now. Food tasted better because the vegetables were from gardens and the meat was home grown. The water tastes worse. There are fewer people – “you knew everybody in town..”, “never locked the doors before”. People were closer and did things together more. People seem sicker now, but they did have a little TB, polio and rickets (Carl's brother got rickets while in an orphanage). They walked or rode bikes or horses. He doesn't know if allergies are different.

Larry (1934) grew up in Colby, east of Port Orchard. Winters were definitely colder in the 1930's, 1940's and 1950's. It seems like they'd get 2.5 – 3 inches of snow every year at least. They drove Model T's all over the ice on Horseshoe Lake and Long Lake. It rains more now, and the rain events are more intense. They didn't have floods like we do now. He thinks there's too much development, and the rain can't soak into the ground. Summers lasted longer, but heat waves are more intense now. It seems like it might be less cloudy now. He hasn't noticed any change in the spring and fall. The little wild blackberries were much more common and they used to collect and sell cascara bark as a laxative. In South Kitsap there seem to be more bears, cougar, deer, raccoons and possums (which he never saw as a kid); Larry thinks it's because there are far fewer forests and those that remain have nowhere else to go. He says there used to be some elk in the area. There are fewer skunks and porcupines. There are far fewer fish. He used to catch 10-12 silver salmon after school when they were running. The hunting is poorer now. He hasn't noticed a change in the amount of sea mammals, or a change in the bird population. He thinks shellfish were more plentiful. The water quality seems poorer, but he doesn't get in the lakes any more. There are definitely fewer people. Everybody used to walk more and there were more bikes and not as many cars. It was safer – you didn't lock your doors because everybody knew everybody. He can't tell if there's any difference in the quality of Port Orchard's air. There was a separate high school next to South Kitsap for kids with TB. There are far more allergies now. People were lighter than before. Food was fresher with all the gardens and meats don't taste as good as they used to.

III. SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

Those who lived in more rural areas tend to have more specific knowledge of the weather, flora and fauna. Those who hunted, fished, foraged, hiked and spent more time outdoors tend to be better, more informed interview subjects.

Climate

The majority believe winters are becoming warmer with less overall snow, but some believe that, when snow events do occur now, they are often more intense. The 1940's and early 1950's winters were exceptionally cold. Lakes, ponds and even Sinclair Inlet appear to have frozen over much more often in the '30's, '40's and '50's, but not all said so. Almost all feel strongly that it rains more now and that rainfall events are generally more intense. They are mixed about changes in summer weather, although many feel they were milder and lasted longer in the past. One gardener thinks spring has become cooler and wetter.

Flora and Fauna

Deforestation has been dramatic in the last 80 years, as has been the population growth. Deer, raccoons and possums seem more prevalent in urban areas, but there may be fewer deer in rural areas. Nobody recalls seeing possums or eagles in the 30's and 40's. Skunks seem to have largely disappeared in the area, as has the mountain beaver on Hood Canal. The fish population has been dramatically reduced; perhaps devastated is a better word. Otters seem to be more prevalent. Gray whales may have been more common in Puget Sound in the past, but orcas were rarely, if at all, seen. There have been changes in the bird population. Starlings weren't here in the '30's. Some species have declined or disappeared and others have become more prevalent (e.g. eagles, cormorants and, many believe, crows). The Sound is more polluted, and there is less free timber drifting in it. With the exception of wild strawberries and the native tiny blackberries, little change in the local flora (other than forests) was observed.

Human Population

Nobody had heard of allergies in the 1930's. There is unanimous agreement that obesity has increased dramatically. All agree that people walked a great deal more than they do now. Tuberculosis, polio, whooping cough, measles and rickets were something to worry about. People walked much more than today and, many believed, socialized and spent more time together than in the age of television and, subsequently, computers. Many feel certain that chicken tastes nothing like it used to, but fewer have noticed a change in pork and beef. Although there wasn't the variety there is now, many feel that fruits and vegetables tasted better in the past. All agree that the increase in population has been astounding (even though many of the interviewees many produced large families). Most feel that it was much safer in terms of crime.

Everyone involved in this project enjoyed the process, including the interviewer. Overall the general feeling of warmer winters and more dramatic weather events supports the meteorological data for the area. Nature is obviously suffering at the hands of civilization in terms of the decline of our wild environment; we have been consuming it at an unsustainable rate, our decline in health seems to be related to it. My feeling from the interviews was that times were tough during the depression. There was less to eat and people were poorer. Then came The War and with it, rationing and suffering. After that prosperity reigned and people tended to feast and consume with a vengeance. The "Greatest Generation" often talks about how succeeding generations don't appreciate what they went through, but we were born during the party, and by and large we only knew of the post Depression/War extravagance that our parents and grandparents brought us into. This makes curbing our excessive consumption even more challenging.