Indian camps and the Barlow Trail: a town steeped in history

By Joy Williams

[E]stacada, with a population of approximately 1,360 persons is nestled in the foothills of the Cascade Range in Clackamas County.

When the first white men came to this area they found it inhabited by the Indians as mentioned in the Lewis and Clark Journal of 1806. Tribes called Clark-a-mus had camps with headquarters near the mouth of the river and in nearby valleys.

In 1842 a man named Philip Foster, his wife and four children, and his brother Francis Pettigrove -- later one of the founders of the city of Portland -- took a 1,200 acre donation land claim at Eagle Creek. For many years Foster's homestead was a welcome refuge for immigrants traveling across the country.

Sam Barlow and Foster constructed a road for wagons near the south side of Mt. Hood so immigrants would not have to make the treacherous trip down the Columbia River by boat. The route came through Dufur, Tygh Valley, then over Barlow Pass. From there it followed the general route of the present Mt. Hood Loop Highway and over the hills to Foster's place at Eagle Creek, across the Clackamas River to Redland and finally to Oregon City by way of Clackamas Heights.

Portland General Electric (PGE) came to Estacada around 1902 and with it came the railroad. Some of the traveling settlers stayed in the Eagle Creek area instead of continuing on to Oregon City and in 1905 the City of Estacada was incorporated. The mayor at that time, J.W. Reed, was also a contractor and built many of the buildings. W.F. Cary and his brother Roger, operated a complete hardware store. Dr.

Haviland lived with his wife above the drug store and practiced medicine there. Estacada had four saloons at this time and each offered a free lunch with the purchase of a five-cent beer.

A city hall was built in 1906. A bell tower on top of that building called councilmen to session, firemen to meetings, sounded the fire alarm and served as a curfew to warn youngsters off the streets at 9 o'clock.

The first fire station was built in 1910 after a two-story business building burned to the ground.

By 1920, the town also had a blacksmith shop, a town newspaper, and a library.

The mail was carried over the old Barlow Road in 1847 by an ex-pony express rider, Robert Brown. In the 1880's, it was brought by stagecoach. Then in 1907 the first post office was constructed.

One of the most impressive buildings in the early days of the town was the Estacada Hotel. It was a two-story wooden structure built the same time the town was incorporated. The hotel had 45 rooms and a sweeping veranda with wicker rockers. The trains ran directly in front of the hotel so lodgers and visitors could watch the arrival of steam locomotives filled with people many who came from Portland for the day's outing.

Estacada Park with a bandstand was right next door. A boardwalk surrounded the block. In the back yard was an icehouse, electric generating plant, storage shed, woodshed, and chicken yard. For 31 years the hotel was a popular attraction. Then with the coming of the Model T and the development of highways to Estacada, the need for the railroad diminished and along with the railroad the hotel. In 1935 it was torn down and the present city hall was built in its place. The Safari Club, a popular night club

and restaurant, now stands where the woodshed and chicken yard used to be.

There are many stories as to how the town got the name Estacada. One story was that PGE placed names in a hat and the name drawn was Estacada. Another source said that a man by the name of Cadie had a daughter named Ester and Cadie combined the names into Estacada. Mrs. George Currin said the name was dedicated by Mr. R.W. Morrow in 1904 and it means in Spanish, "bountiful plain." In an article taken from the Oregonian by George J. Kelly, one of the founders of Estacada, he said that the naming of the town was left to the townsite founders after the plan was laid out in 1904. He scanned over a map of the U.S. and found in Texas a plain called Estacado so he put that name in the hat and it was drawn.

Les Kiggins of Estacada remembers the days when streetcars would run from Estacada to Portland. The cars made their final run in 1932. Less also remembers when he graduated from the eighth grade in 1935, when there were only 30 graduates.

"Ten or 15 years ago the population of Estacada was about 600 people. The biggest growth has been in the last five years with more people and more houses and businesses being built," said Kiggins.

The Estacada Hotel and blacksmith shop are gone now, along with the railroad and many other buildings that have been remodeled or torn down. But one can still follow the old Barlow Trail and there are still a few old buildings left if you look for them such as the Presbyterian Church at Springwater established in 1904, typifying an era fast disappearing, a reminder of less hurried times.

Photo by Joy Williams