

Historic Brownsmead

This quiet country village east of Astoria awaits

Some 20 miles upriver from Astoria is the ghost town of Brownsmead. Or so says something called the Pacific Northwest Photoblog. It seems impossible to obtain population statistics for Brownsmead — the U.S. Census doesn't even know where it is — and there are those who may think it's a ghost town just because there's no place to get a cappuccino. Or anything else: Elk antlers adorn the dusty walls inside the only store, closed years ago. The nearest "thing to do" on Yelp is the Columbia River Maritime Museum in Astoria.

None of which means that nothing happens in Brownsmead or that nobody lives there. Dirk Rohne, Clatsop County Commissioner and dairy farmer, lives there. So does KMUN Station Manager Joanne Rideout and arts maven Carol Newman. Lots of people live there. They even have their own band, the Brownsmead Flats.

Jon Westerholm served as my guide to Brownsmead, and if he's a ghost he's a pretty lively one. A retired commercial fisherman and the son of a fisherman, Westerholm has a finger, or both hands, in a lot of pies: grange, historical society, and editor of the

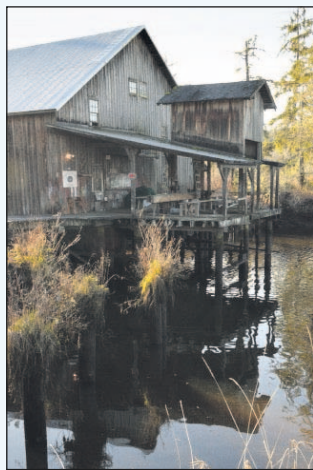
Columbia River Gillnetter. His family has been in Brownsmead so long that it's said Noah dropped them off on the way to Mt. Ararat. That can't be true, though. Westerholm told me that Brownsmead was originally home to the Cathlamet, Chinook and Clatsop peoples. It wasn't until the 1870s that Europeans arrived, Finns who fished the Columbia.

Westerholm also said, "Bring a map, and know where you're going. You could very well get lost." Good advice.

To explore Brownsmead, drive almost 16 miles east on U.S. Highway 30 from downtown Astoria, turn north on Ziak-Gnat Creek Road and take the first right, Aldrich Point Road. From here, you might turn right again on Sylvandale Road, near the end of which is

hidden the old Sylvandale School, a single-room schoolhouse now privately owned and gradually being restored.

If you continue on Aldrich Point Road a few yards past Sylvandale, you will see on the left a wide spot in Gnat Creek. This was a holding pond for one of the logging companies that worked the canyons of Brownsmead from 1890 through 1930. The



This 1928 netshed, dubbed "the warehouse" by Brownsmead locals, sits at a wide spot on Gnat Creek.



Built in 1918, the Brownsmead grange has been the center of local social life since then.



Lines hang in the warehouse.

present structure is a net shed that locals call "the warehouse," built on the site in 1928.

If you look closely just below the warehouse, you will see a tide box. The first dike and tide boxes were completed in 1917. Cross dikes were finished in 1928 that cut across Blind Slough, which meanders through farms and Sitka spruce swamps, opening onto the Columbia's Prairie Channel above Knappa. The farms came after fishing and logging, and the dikes made the farms possible. Roads arrived in the first decades of the 20th century; until then many people lived in float homes, and transportation was mostly by boat.

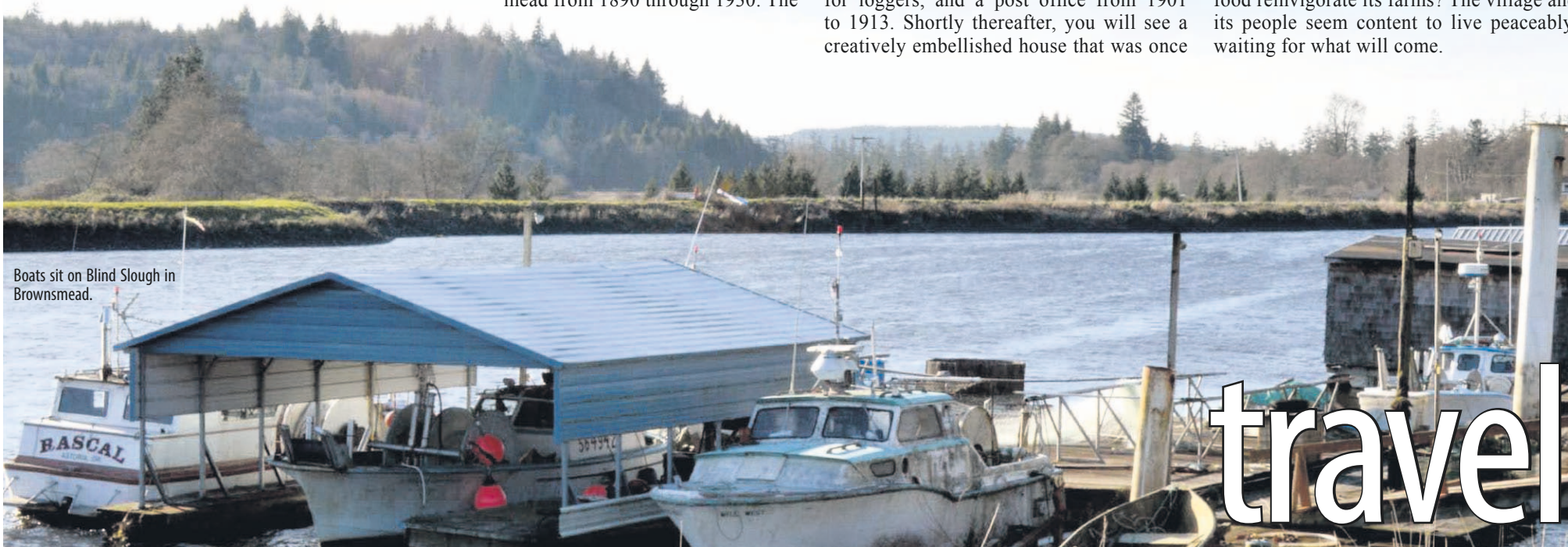
When you arrive at Aldrich Point, you are at the northernmost speck of Oregon. There were once floating bathhouses here for commercial fishermen; now there is a ramp for recreational anglers. If you aren't going fishing, turn your back on the river and retrace your steps until you arrive at Brownsmead Dike Lane, where you turn right.

Immediately look to your left and you will see a large house, all that remains of Albert, Oregon, which had a store, a hotel for loggers, and a post office from 1901 to 1913. Shortly thereafter, you will see a creatively embellished house that was once

inhabited by one Barefoot Bill, and is now occupied by a man named Strawberry. Continue on Brownsmead Dike, and you will find yourself crossing the still-intact tracks of the mighty Spokane Portland & Seattle Railway, which came to Brownsmead in 1898 and became part of Burlington Northern in 1970.

You have arrived at downtown Brownsmead: a tiny train station, the empty store that was once a school, and the substantial Hall of The National Grange of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry, built in 1918. The Grange has been the center of Brownsmead social life since then, including a stint as basketball court for the school across the street. The hoops and court remain, but are no longer much used. Nowadays, the Grange plays host to the annual Corn Feed, the Rummage Sale, country dances, and whatever else the community requires. The hall is clean and brightly painted, seemingly waiting to be filled by the next lively event.

In fact, Brownsmead gives the impression of a place quietly waiting for the next thing to happen. Will commercial fishing return? Will the demand for fresh and local food reinvigorate its farms? The village and its people seem content to live peaceably, waiting for what will come.



Boats sit on Blind Slough in Brownsmead.

travel

Story and photos by DWIGHT CASWELL