

NASELLE

A Finnish village with history, character and hidden treasures

A river wends its way through the Willapa Hills, down its valley to bottomlands, and finally joins Willapa Bay. Along the way, it passes a small village; both village and river are named Naselle, after the Nasil tribe of Native Americans. The Nasil were a Chinookan people obliterated by smallpox in the early 1800s; six surviving families made their home near the location of the modern village that bears their name.

“Nasil” means “hidden” or “sheltered,” the name is appropriate. Early trappers and traders bypassed the valley of the Naselle, protected as it was by dense forest that could only be approached from Willapa Bay by a maze of small rivers and creeks. The first European to live

in the area was a French-Canadian trapper with his Cree wife; they lived among the Nasil for the next 25 years.

Americans had entered the area by then, mainly bachelor loggers or fishermen, working a job and moving on. In 1879 Jaakko and Sofie Pakanen and their daughter, Mary, became the first Finnish family to settle in Naselle.

Perhaps it was the fishing or the lush grasslands waiting for cattle and the plow, or perhaps the place reminded them of home. Or they may have been seeking others like themselves, people who had fled the yoke of Russian oppression and welcomed the hardship of freedom on the frontier. For whatever reason, Naselle was an almost entirely Finnish community before Washington was a state.

Forest so dense that, settler Katarina Pakanen said, “You have to look straight up to see the sunlight,” assured that logging was king. And there was fishing, and some sheep and dairy farming. A 1925 photograph shows 100 children standing in front of the schoolhouse. 89 are identified as Finnish, and four as half-Finnish; only seven students were not Finnish.

To get to Naselle, take Washington State Highway 401 east for 11.2 miles from the north end of the Astoria Bridge. The town boasts a post office, a Timberland Regional Library, Okie’s Select Market, and three churches built in the 1920s. Turn right immediately after the market, and immediately right again. You will see on your left the handsome Evangelical Lutheran Church, and on the right an unexpected discovery, Hoff Brothers Enterprises.

“When we moved to town a year ago,” says Nicole Hoff, laughing, “people told us our family increased the population to 424.” Her two sons, Lewis and Royce, are the “Hoff Brothers” of the name.



Nicole Hoff, center, stand with her two sons, Royce, left, and Lewis, who serve as the namesake for Hoff Brothers Enterprises, a combination cold-storage locker for hunters and a liquor store in Naselle, Washington.



You can learn all about the logging history of the Naselle area at the Appelo Archives Center.

Nicole and husband, Randall, are new owners, but the store is much the same as it has been for many years: a meat locker for local hunters and a liquor store. The changes the Hoff’s have made are to include a small but select assortment of beers (with growler fills as low as \$6), wines and spirits that are virtually unobtainable elsewhere. They also carry exquisite espresso and alder roasted coffee beans. Fred’s Homegrown Produce is also in Naselle, and you can buy his organic beef at the Hoff Brothers.

Return to Highway 401, turn right, and a mile later right again onto Washington State Highway 4. After almost 2 miles, on your right, you will see the Archive Café and next to that the Appelo Archives Center, a trove of historical information about the area, with logging industry displays and a room of traditional Finnish clothing, instruments and reading materials.

Next to the café is Hunter’s Inn, which invariably has several pickup trucks parked in front; the restaurant is justifiably famed for its broasted chicken.

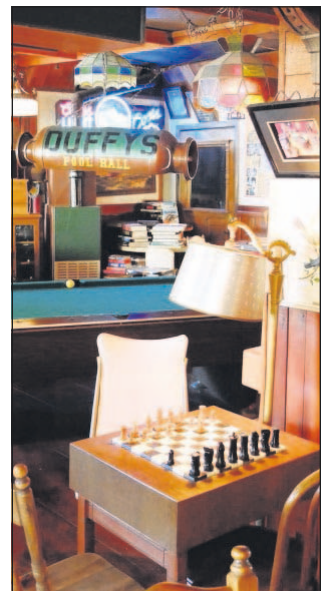
Take a few more minutes and go another 3.9 miles to West Deep River Road. Turn left and take a scenic drive up the river. The road intersects East Deep River Road in a couple of miles, and you can go back to the highway on the other side of the river.

Today, only a third of Naselle’s population is of Finnish ancestry, but it remains in any other important way a Finnish village. Naselle is home to Emmy-winning cinematographer and historian Rex Ziak. There is also local pride in Oscar Wirkkala, who lived in Naselle. Wirkkala had a profound effect on industry in the Pacific Northwest; he invented both the “high lead” method of cable logging, suited to logging on steep slopes, and the ubiquitous choker hook.

In 2006 a staged version of Jennifer L. Holm’s 1999 Newbery Honor-winning novel, “Our Only May Amelia,” set in pioneer Naselle, was presented at FinnFest USA, a national festival that

Naselle co-hosted with Astoria that year. Since 1982 Naselle has hosted the Finnish-American Folk Festival every other year, a three-day extravaganza of all things Finnish. The free festival will next take place at the end of July 2016.

Before you leave Naselle, take another short trip, seven miles or so east on Highway 4. You’ll enter Wahkiakum County and find the vanishingly small hamlet of Grays River. There you’ll see Duffy’s Irish Pub, which looks funky enough to be extolled by Matt Love. Inside it’s a traditional Irish pub with friendly people and good food. You’ll also see signs to the Grays River Covered Bridge, built in 1906 and worth the short trip, before you return from Willapa’s misty hills.



Duffy’s Irish Pub in Grays River, Washington, is a mere 7 miles east of Naselle.

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