

# OYSTERVILLE

## THE PENINSULA'S LOVELY HISTORIC DISTRICT

**T**he fictional Shangri-La is an idyllic mountain valley where life is frozen in time and protected from the rough changes occurring elsewhere in the world. Real-life Oysterville may not be so lucky as to completely escape the ravages of time and politics, but strolling around it will restore your faith that a kind of immortal grace is possible.

The 80-acre Oysterville National Historic District and the areas immediately adjacent to it are the heart of Oysterville. With Willapa Bay as its backdrop, the historic district feels like a movie back lot version of a 19th century coastal community. In fact, some structures actually are from the 19th century. Eight houses, a church, the Oysterville cannery and a one-room schoolhouse are on the National Register of Historic Places.

Though Oysterville is a ghost town, it has life. Oysterville's post office is the oldest continuously operating post office in Washington state. The Oysterville Store sells groceries, souvenirs and gifts and is open year round. Oysterville Sea Farms sells seafood from its farms.

The Oysterville Church is open every day of the year. The Oysterville cannery and all eight of the houses listed on the National Register of Historic Places create almost constant activity as they are maintained and repaired by their private owners. Similar efforts are made by nonprofit organizations to maintain and repair the church and one-room schoolhouse.

The Oysterville Church Summer Vespers are presented at 3 p.m. every Sunday from Father's Day through Labor Day. The services are open to everyone. The Water Music Festival's most popular concerts are the Oysterville church concerts, held in late October.

Old for a West Coast town, Oysterville is brand new in geographic terms. Oysterville could be the only place in the United States that has always had human occupants. Native American people probably settled Oysterville as soon as it was created. Chinook peoples came to the area that is Oysterville at seasonal intervals for untold centuries to harvest its bountiful oyster beds.

Oysterville was first settled in 1841 by John Douglas, who married a local Chinook woman.

It was the California Gold Rush of 1849 that drew significant numbers of settlers of European descent to Oysterville. Gold miners loved to spend their gold on Willapa Bay oysters. Settlers and Chinook Peoples gladly filled schooners with oysters to be shipped to San Francisco. By 1854, a community of several hundred, called Oyster Beach, existed here. On April 12, 1854, I.A. Clark filed a 161-acre land claim that encompassed all of what is now the Oysterville National Historic District. It was on Aug. 5, 1854, that community leaders decided that Oysterville was a better name than Oyster Beach or Shell Beach to represent their town, which grew to a population was about 800.

Like all extraction businesses, the native oyster business came to an end. Hotels, saloons and a college all disappeared as people left. Eventually, even the county seat was removed to South Bend on the east side of the bay.

Oysterville exists primarily as a state of mind. A walk through Oysterville can reveal the supremacy of nature; evoking connections to generations goneby, while subtly forecasting the folly of generations present and future. Visitors often find themselves seeking sanctuary in the peace and insight they discovered here, long after they have left Oysterville.



Oysterville's historic church host Christmas carolers and a popular series of summer concerts and vespers services. It also is one of the Long Beach Peninsula's many famous wedding venues. — SYDNEY STEVENS PHOTO

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