

SOME HISTORY OF FERN HILL

Interview of Cyril B. Witham 30 August 1990 by Larry Rea

Fern Hill got its name from our home place. When we were clearing the place there were several kinds of ferns growing there. Mother said, "let's name this Fern Hill Farm." Dad thought that was a pretty good idea so he had the name registered at the county court house in St. Helens as "Fern Hill Farm".

When my folks moved down here from Portland in 1912 the boundary line between Apiary and Stehman was our road. We kids would have had to go to the Stehman School. The Carrigan kids that lived just above us on the other side of the road would have to go to the Apiary school. Dad couldn't see us doing that so Dad and Carrigan got together and combined.. took a portion of the Stehman and Apiary districts, and formed the Fern Hill District.

When they organized the school Dad was on the school board. They had to give the school a name — there were all sorts of names suggested: Beaver Valley, Grandview, Ferndale — I don't know what all, but Dad suggested "Fern Hill School" and they named it that.

The first school was just a shack of some kind, it was just a small building down by the creek, near the crossroads. They didn't have enough desks for all the kids so they used apple boxes. My sister Vivian had a box for a desk and a box to sit on. They used the old building just one year. Then they built the new school in 1915. I don't know who the carpenter was but the Stehman's had a lot to do with it. I think it was a standard design for schools at that time.

I started school in 1916, in the new building, the one that Pat (Carl) Zimmerman made into a store. My first grade teacher was Lucille Clark; A. B. Owens was the first man teacher I had at Fern Hill.

When they organized the grange in 1920, Dad was its first secretary, they called it the Fern Hill Grange. Since then the community has been known as Fern Hill.

The original grange hall was a church building that sat up by where the fire district building is now. That area was known as Grandview then. They put skids under the building and brought it down across the Skean's place. That was before the land was cleared. They had to move the building between stumps, over logs, and everything else.

They used a stump puller for power to bring it down. They set it up by the old rock pit. That building was the old Grandview church.

Dad (Bertram Charles Witham) first came to Columbia County in 1903. He was from London, England, where he worked for the railroad building trestles. Dad suffered several "spells" and the doctors in London told him he had heart trouble. They told him he had mitral disease.

They told him to not to do anything strenuous, never run for a train or anything like that. He might live one year, he might live two, but he would never make “old bones.” Dad lived to be 97. If that’s not “old bones” I don’t know what “old bones” might be.

Albert A. Witham, one of Dad’s brothers, came to America as a medical missionary. I think he lived in Washington first but then he moved to Paisley, Oregon. Later he was a cardiologist in Portland. When he heard about Dad’s heart problem he advised Dad to come see him so Dad came to America.

After he came over Dad was feeling better. He thought the sea voyage had helped his heart condition. So instead of going to see his brother Albert, Dad came down to Rainier and went out to Hudson where his brother Herbert Witham was living. Herbert was track foreman for Yeon’s logging operation near Hudson. Dad worked cutting wood for the locomotive for several years.

Dad worked on the Incline, when Yeon built that. When they let the railroad cars down the incline it would drive the rails ahead of it so it would leave a gap in the rails. They cut pieces and added them in at the top.

When Yeon built the Incline he got on the first car to go down. They let down three cars at a time and he got on the first car. His Dad told him to get off. He said, “No, I’m going to ride it down. I’ve got \$80,000 sunk into this and if it goes to Hell I’m going with it.” Yeon was quite a man. He wouldn’t ask his men to do anything he wouldn’t do.

Dad was at Hudson a couple of years before he had another spell so he decided he better go down to Paisley and see his brother Albert. We kids always called him “Uncle Doctor.” Uncle Doctor had a farm at Paisley and Dad worked for him a couple of years. Then he came back to Columbia County.

When he came back to Columbia County from Paisley he came by horseback. He said at times he would ride all day and not see another person. Dad got delayed coming back, he stopped to help a fellow hay — put up hay. He was going to come through by Mt. Hood but the snow set in so he came down to the Columbia river at Biggs. He came down the Columbia on a sternwheeler, the “Bailey Gatzert,” to Portland then continued on horseback to Rainier.

Dad went back to England in 1908 to marry Mom. They got married on January 22, 1908 at the Trinity Church in London. They stayed in England just a couple of weeks and then they sailed for the United States.

Dad bought a round trip ticket to England on the “Lusitania” but they ran into such a storm it had to go into drydock for repairs so they came back on the “Ibernia.” They came to New York and then across the country by train to — when Dad went back to England the train went through Omaha; He met a fellow on the train that was going to Omaha so they separated on the

platform there. When Mom and Dad were on the way back they met the same man on the platform at Omaha, right where Dad had left him. He got on the train and rode out to Portland with them. He was a jeweler in Portland.

At first they lived in Portland where Dad worked on the street cars. He thought Portland was a real progressive city because of those street cars. He was disappointed when they discontinued their use.

They came down to Columbia county to visit Uncle Herbert at Hudson and finally they bought the home place in Fern Hill. [Dated 16 Feb 1912: From Frank J. Helliwell and Winifred Helliwell to Bertram C. Witham and Florence E. Witham for the consideration of \$3,500; the west half of the SW 1/4 of section 31 in township 7 north, range 2 west; excepting five acres sold to George Carrigan by Frank Wilson on the west side whereof and excepting a roadway 16 feet wide running on the west side of said land.]

The reason that five acres was cut off the place was to give George Carrigan access to the road.

When Dad got the place there were buildings from a shingle mill down on the creek. He used lumber from those buildings to build a barn. The house was quite new but it was swampy down there; it was so wet that Dad said he wouldn't live another winter on the creek so he moved up on the hill. They tore down the house and used the lumber to build two buildings on top of the hill. After he built the new house in 1921 he used those two buildings for a chicken house and a granary.

When my folks first arrived they had to clear the ground of logs. There were logs five or six feet through and as solid as could be. So they cut wood, some cordwood and some 16 inch, and hauled it to Rainier, using a horse and wagon. They made two trips a day hauling a cord and a quarter per trip. That made for long days. Dad hired two or three men to cut wood — Paul Boysen worked for him quite a while, cutting wood with a crosscut. Dad finally got a dragsaw and cut wood with that.

Dad farmed and did work for neighbors — he didn't work in the woods. He made his living as a farmer. He sold vegetables, potatoes, and meat at the stores in town. Eventually he had four or five acres of spuds, he raised grain, he had from six to twenty milk cows. During the last years he went into strawberries.

The road to Apiary was originally known as the Doan road. It's called the Hammond road now and it no longer connects through to Apiary. Ever since I can remember the road from the Wilder place came down through the canyon, through Mercer's and down through Ed Rea's place, the road came through about where his driveway is now, the old driveway. From the Wilder place down to the Mercer's, all those places, came out that way. Then from Pete Mauris' place up the other way they came out over the hill to the Doan road.

The road by our place — used to be called the Girt road, then the Fern Hill road, now it is called the Lentz road — is still about where the original road used to be. It was just a plank road then — plank and puncheon. There was a gate at everybody's place — where the road crossed their property. There were a half dozen gates across the road, so you had to stop and open/close the gates when you went through.

When I was a little kid and my folks wanted to call Portland they had to go into town. Later on they got the Farmer's line but there were only eight on the line. Wilburn's had one so we used to go down there all the time.

When we built our house in 1921 the road was so rutted they had to build an access road to get the brick and lumber up to where we built the house. It was improved enough that in the summer they used a truck to haul in the sand and gravel. The lumber came from Howard's mill and the brick came from Reid's mill over on the Beaver Springs road.

Our new house was considered pretty fancy. We had gas carbide lighting. The house had a light in each room, a two burner gas light attached right on the end of the stove; Mom even had a gas iron.

Dad used the material from the gas carbide plant to spray the trees in the orchard. He always kept his trees painted up. That's what he used to paint as a fungicide too. He even used it to whitewash the barn. He painted the inside of the barn until it just glistened.

There used to be a big mill, Wilson's mill, over by Don Nys' place on Pellham road. Dad bought an old bunkhouse for its lumber, it was made out of 1x12. He tore that down and got enough material to build a barn. He worked for Chan Wilson, and took the lumber as pay. Pellham road used to be called Wilson's road.

I don't remember exactly when electricity came out our way but I was in high school, I think it was about 1926-27. Most people got a telephone before electricity.

Source:

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