

PRESS RELEASE
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Garden Club Returns to Park Stewardship

Camas-Washougal, Washington – The Community Garden Club’s decades of service in Parker’s Landing Historical Park ended in 1999 with a granite plaque placed in the grass near the garden volunteers’ garden shed and a dogwood planted nearby. The expressions of gratitude to the club was most likely initiated by Rosalee MacRae, park advocate and founder who was also a Community Garden Club member. Rosalee served as the Parkersville Site Development Committee Secretary, continuing her service as a Parkersville National Historic Site Advisory Committee to the Port member until her passing.

Rosalee, who would never share her age, was born on August 12, 1930, and passed away five days after her birthday in 2019. She was the first woman to serve on the Camas City Council, a member of the American Association of University Women and two mountaineering clubs. When living in Seattle, she worked for Boeing and was always a park lover and advocate. When she arrived in Camas in 1964 she was surprised to find no public parks along the Columbia River or along the Washougal River.

In 1971, she attended a shower hosted by Mary Van Vleet in her guest house (formally the “little green milk house” that had been converted into living quarters by Louis and Nina Chevron in 1942 when they discontinued their Parker’s Landing Dairy, also called Chevron and Sons. They closed their dairy due to the cost of pasteurization and wanting to move out of the rented Van Vleet home to move in their son Vernon and his family.

Cecil Van Vleet lived in the home earlier with first wife, Elsie, both local teachers. After Elsie died, Cecil and his second wife, Mary, returned to the home in 1952. Mary used the previous milk house as a guest house and for her bridge parties. She planted a rose arbor and tended to a twenty tree apple grove. During a remodel of the home, she and Cecil lived in a trailer on the property. She told Rosalee that her husband wanted his mother’s property to become a public park.

His mother, Louisa, in her early twenties became the first woman doctor in the area, riding side saddle in a long skirt to tend patients, indigenous and settlers, as far north as Yacolt. She also served on the Camas School Board for 12 years. Her father, Louis Van Vleet, Sr. had become the estate administrator for the David C. Parker donation land claim after Parker died in 1858. Van Vleet moved from his homestead in Fern Prairie to the town of Parkersville, started by Parker in 1854, the first township in Washington. Van Vleet, Sr. doubled the town size in 1878, hosting large parties in the town’s Catalpha Grove. His daughter, Louisa, bought land and moved there after retiring. Cecil grew up in Camas and held his mother and grandfather and their significant history in high esteem.

In 1973, Cecil was in a serious car crash which incurred unexpected medical bills necessitating the sale of his property to the Port with a condition that he could live there until his death. Rosalee and others began advocating for a historical public park on the property. And, in 1976,

the Van Vleet property was placed on the National and State Registers of Historic and Archeological Places. Cecil died in 1977. In 1978, Mary Van Vleet invited Rosalee to her home just before moving out. She had heard of Rosalee's interest in seeing the inside of the 100 year old main house. That year the paper reported others had asked the Port to make the Van Vleet site a park which was denied.

At a American Association of University Women (AAUW), Dorothy Pionek put Rosalee in contact with Bernice Pluchos. In a public meeting, called by AAUW, they pitched the idea of forming a historical society which resulted in the Camas-Washougal Historical Society (CWHS). In 1978, Mary passed away in August and in October the Van Vleet home was burned to the ground by an arsonist with suspicions around a Port Commissioner's desire to use the property for income producing condos.

In 1980, a petition of nearly 1200 names was submitted to the Port requesting the site become a park in perpetuity. In 1985, notices were published in the newspaper inviting all interested citizens to join a committee named Parkersville Site Development Committee (PSDC). A month later a preliminary site plan with a 50-page park plan prepared by the PSDC was presented to the Port with estimated costs to start the park. Grant funds would be sought and the PSDC and others would seek donations. The first step was mounting the Department of Interior Bronze Plaque on a 25-ton Basalt boulder from Fisher Rock Quarry. Then, on Saturday, June 1, 1986, the Port hosted the Dedication of the Parkersville Site and opening of the Parker's Landing Historical Park. In attendance was elementary school student Jeff Buchholz, grandson of the PSDC Chair, John Buchholz. Jeff currently serves on the Parkersville National Historic Site Advisory Committee to the Port (PAC) and the Parkersville Heritage Foundation (PHF). He lives in his family home on the Washougal River next door to his grandfather's previous home.

Susan Tripp, a California credential elementary school teacher worked with her husband in veterinary businesses and that led to their move to Vancouver, Washington in 2012. Susan retired in 2018, and soon afterwards found a file that showed her paternal grandmother was born in 1889 on a 160 acre homestead near Mt. Norway in Washougal, the 10th child of Norwegian immigrants. In researching her family story, she fell in love with Washougal history and notable families known by her grandmother. When walking the dog at Parker's Landing Historical Park, she discovered her great grandfather didn't have an engraved brick with the other homesteaders. The Port directed her to inquire at a PAC meeting where she met Rosalee MacRae.

At the Camas-Washougal Garden Club ("Garden Club") September meeting, Susan will share more about the park history and how Rosalee recruited her to join the PAC which led to being a PHF Director when Rosalee died. Her presentation kicks off a new dedicated Garden Club team that will continue the club's important history in the park. Learn more at the Camas-Washougal Garden Club meeting in the Camas Community Center on Wednesday, September 27, 2023, at 1 pm.

For more information contact Diana Hogg, President at dianahogg@yahoo.com, or visit <https://gardenclubofcamaswashougal.org/> and <https://www.facebook.com/CommunityGardenClubOfCamasWashougal>

