

Yachats History Since 1875

A Presentation by Bill Hall to the Yachats Academy of Arts and Sciences

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Introduction

When I was asked to be a speaker on this historic occasion, I was deeply honored. Although I have never called Yachats my physical home, I've considered it my spiritual home for most of my life. It is here that I feel closest to the earth and the forces that animate it. I suspect that's true for most, if not all, of you as well.

The Oceanview Post Office was established in 1887, but in 1916, confusion with other post offices bearing that name led to a decision to adopt the Indian name that had already been given to the river here—Yachats. And what a great decision that was. There can be a thousand Oceanviews, but there can only be one Yachats.

This year marks not only the centennial of this community adopting its present name, it's also the fiftieth anniversary of the vote to become an incorporated city. Waldport incorporated all the way back in 1911, and while the idea kicked around Yachats for decades, it wasn't approved here until 1966.

I hope you will indulge me. This will not be a comprehensive history. It will be episodic, anecdotal, and to a degree, personal.

Although I first set foot here in 1964, I can claim Yachats roots that go back to the late 1940s. My mother was a business college dropout working as a legal secretary in Portland. She had dropped out before finishing because a law firm asked for the best student in the class. She and a friend visited Yachats a couple of times. She had several memories that remained vivid decades later. These included—

--eating the world's most famous Chicken and Dumpings at the Sea View Inn, prepared by Beulah herself;

--visiting the home where the Yachats telephone switchboard was located in the living room, and meeting the woman who ran it;

--and a story many of us seem to have in our family histories—passing on the opportunity to buy an oceanfront lot for one hundred dollars.

This will not be a scholarly or comprehensive history. It's selective, but I've done my best to recognize some of the significant places and people that have shaped the Yachats we know and love today.

The Arrival of Outsiders

The Homestead Act of 1862 was the beginning of the western land boom. For 200 dollars—a lot of money then—anyone could secure title to 160 acres if they lived on it for six months and made certain improvements.

The Alsea sub-agency was abandoned in 1875 by an act of Congress. For the first time, this region was opened to outside settlement.

Who were the first pioneers who came to this area? Many of them were immigrants to the United States, looking for an ability to carve out a place for themselves in the world. They were a hardy lot, willing to forsake the comforts of nineteenth century life for a degree of self-sufficiency they couldn't achieve otherwise.

It was a hard life, and not all made it work. Many of the early settlers ended up selling their claims to timber companies or back to the government.

In the beginning, Yachats was at the western edge of Benton County, but in 1893, the Legislature approved the creation of Lincoln County, thanks in large part to the efforts of a State Senator from Toledo named Ben Jones.

But the natural abundance was a source of sustenance for many. In about 1930, the Reverend Virgil Howell wrote a history of the area. He described the conditions that greeted the newcomers:

“The Yachats is a river with a very fertile valley, good dairy ranches, the finest berry land, nearly in its entire length...There was plenty of game then such as bear, deer elk.”

Although the region was still isolated as the new century dawned, tourists were starting to discover Yachats. A few hearty souls camped on the beach or built cabins, but in 1905, the city's first hotel opened in a converted warehouse. Later attractions for visitors and locals included a pool hall that opened in 1929, and a skating rink that came a few years after that. The rink remained open into the 1950s.

Construction of roads and bridges steadily brought more visitors to the area. Even before it was easy to get to Yachats, though, some people were dreaming grand dreams for the community's future.

In 1913, the Yahutes-by-the-Sea development was platted. William Willsey of West Coast Construction Corporation penned a promotional brochure that read in part:

“For years this beautiful beach has been regarded by the visitors to Yaquina and Alsea Bays as the most superb scenic beach on all the Oregon coast. Every condition makes it ideal for the establishment of a resort unequalled in the Northwest. “ The brochure touts a proposed Oregon coast rail line that never materialized, extols the fishing, hunting and agate gathering in the area, then goes on to say: “All the streets in this tract have been carefully platted...so that several miles of streets connecting with the ocean drive give accessibility to any part of the ground. Good water in abundance, and sanitary conditions are looked after....A boulevard walkway along the coast is planned.”

A grand vision, but that was all. Like many development schemes, this one remained unrealized, and the plat was abandoned in 1917.

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In 1997, the Alsi Historical Society honored Frank Carpenter as its pioneer of the year. Carpenter told the News-Times that his arrival in 1916 marked the first white birth in Oceanview. His parents purchased 80 acres near Cape Perpetua in 1906. They spent summers there, then moved closer to the community in the winter months so Frank could attend school. In those days, every student walked to school, but the distances were great and the children's shoes sometimes literally fell apart from wear. Carpenter remembered his father and two friends going to the county seat in Toledo one day and coming back with the first school bus and driver for the community.

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The Federal government addressed the Great Depression with many strategies, including creation of the the Civilian Conservation Corps to provide jobs for some of the 13 million people who were out of work. A temporary camp was established at Cape Perpetua in June of 1933, and construction of a permanent camp was their first task.

The campground, many of the trails, and the west shelter at the top of the Cape are all legacies of the CCC.

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The completion of Highway 101 in the late 1930s helped stir visions of a greatly expanded tourist industry, but those hopes were checked by the outbreak of World War II and the restrictions on gasoline and tires, as well as the halt to production of civilian passenger cars that came with it.

The war did bring a fresh wave of federal activity in the area; the army established a radar station at Cape Perpetua, which was later moved to the hill behind the community for better reception.

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Transportation and Communication

It's hard to imagine how isolated the early settlers of Yachats and the surrounding area were. In the closing years of the nineteenth century, this area could only be reached by boat or by barely improved wagon trails. Travel was by foot, horse or mule. With no newspapers, telephones, radio or television, or World Wide Web, the early settlers of Yachats truly lived in a world of their own.

The post office was the only regular link with the outside world for a long time. Getting the mail to settlers wasn't easy. One of the early carriers was Cy Cooper, who served forty-five families who lived between Yachats and Florence in a 1918 Model T equipped with a special jumbo transmission—13

forward gears, and eight reverse. When the tide was coming in, he needed all of them—the folklore is that he started in Yachats in first gear and was in gear 13 by the time he reached Florence.

Roads

Long before Highway 101 was a gleam in anyone's eye—in the years from 1912 to 1914 or so—the Forest Service blasted the first trail around Cape Perpetua.

The first vision for 101 came a few years later, with the entry of the United States into the World War. There were fears of a German invasion of the west coast and a coastal highway stretching from the Canadian to Mexican borders was proposed. The idea was to be able to move troops and equipment quickly, but the Armistice soon brought the War to End All Wars to a close. However, the idea was not forgotten.

The war also brought the railroad to Yachats—almost. During the teens, rail had linked Portland and the Tillamook beaches; there was talk of an Oregon Coast rail line, and in 1916, a Coos Bay line was completed, but it missed Yachats by about thirty miles. The war provided a new impetus for rail construction, however. Lincoln County was a prime source of Spruce, which was used in airplane production, and a railroad was built from South Beach to about four miles north of the community.

In 1919, Ben Jones—remember that name?—spearheaded the effort in the Oregon Legislature to create what became known for a time as the Roosevelt Highway, before later being christened US 101. It was funded through a state bond issue, local contributions and federal dollars. Progress on the road was slowed by the rugged terrain, expense, and the depression.

Ben Jones had a very personal belief in the value of good roads. He was orphaned at age sixteen when his mother died, leaving him alone on the family's 160 acre homestead. One of his first jobs was delivering mail from Toledo to Corvallis, sometimes on foot and sometimes on horseback, along very muddy roads. He was among those who approached Benton County officials with a request for road building materials in the early 1890s, but after being told that some old railroad ties would be good enough for the clam diggers on Yaquina Bay, the fight to create a new county was on.

The wooden bridge that was built across the Yachats River about the time the trail was constructed around Cape Perpetua was replaced by the first steel bridge, in 1926, at a cost of 23-thousand dollars.

In 1929, the 700-foot tunnel through Devils Elbow was completed, and in 1929-30, the road between Waldport and Yachats was finished. A couple of years after that, the only gaps were several large bays, including Alsea Bay, where travelers had become accustomed to long waits for ferries. The first ferries were private, but the state took over the business in the 1920s. The ferries carried their last passengers in 1936, when the Alsea Bay Bridge opened.

Communications

The first telephones came to Yachats in 1905, with about a dozen settlers buying battery telephones and stringing half a mile of line. The Yachats Telephone Company was established in 1910, and two years

later joined the Waldport system. That old switchboard my mother saw wasn't consigned to history until 1963, when Pioneer Telephone Cooperative brought dial telephones to Yachats. But if you wanted to place a long distance call, you still had to go through an operator until 1969, when direct dialing began.

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The town saw its first electricity in the 1930s; service was erratic until the formation of the Central Lincoln PUD in 1943.

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Lincoln County's first radio station was KNPT, which went on the air in Newport in 1948. Television arrived in south county with the first cable system in 1954, just two years after the first stations in Oregon began operation.

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For most of its history, Yachats has been without its own newspaper, but in 1938 Dave Hall came to town and launched the Yachats Times with this promise: "We shall at all times try to give you real clean news." The battle between Newport and Toledo over the location of the county seat was on, and Hall got the backing to start the paper by promising to support keeping the Courthouse in east county. You could buy a years' subscription for one dollar, 25 cents.

About 1940 or 41 Hall moved the paper to Waldport and renamed it the South Lincoln Times. He died in 1965, and not long after the Newport News bought it, merging the two to form the present News Times.

When I first came to Lincoln County, some old-timers asked me if I was related to Dave Hall; I am not, but I wish I had known this very colorful character. According the legend, he was selling encyclopedias in Portland when he came to the south county to take a job milking cows, planning to stay only long enough to save for a trip to Los Angeles, where he would make his fortune. The story goes that he stopped in a Waldport tavern before catching the bus to Los Angeles...and spent all his money.

The lead story in the first edition of the four-page paper was about a visit from Dr. Francis Townsend, who gained coast to coast fame during the Depression with an old-age pension plan that predated Social Security. Most of the paper was filled with notices of local meetings and gossip. Hall found his voice in Waldport, where he launched a column called Ramblin' Around that was said to be a mix of about one-third local gossip and two thirds Playboy party jokes.

Yachats Landmarks

Yachats School/Yachats Commons

The Upper Yachats School, located about two miles upriver, was a log building with a stone fireplace, was built in 1886. There was a schoolhouse in Yachats proper as early as 1904, established in an abandoned homestead house. The Lincoln County School District built the present Yachats Commons

building in the 1930s, and it was expanded twice in the decades that followed. Yachats couldn't sustain a high school curriculum for very long—the final twelfth grade graduating class in 1937 consisted of five students. Nevertheless, the elementary school thrived for decades, but by the 1970s shifting demographics and changes in education were making it clear that the final tolling of the Yachats School bell was not far off. The district raised the prospect as early as 1976, causing one citizen to lament that such a move would cause the town to “turn into just one big nursing home.”

The school survived, but the inevitable decision could only be postponed. In May 1983 the school board approved the shuttering of the Yachats, Depoe Bay and Rose Lodge schools. By this point, the Yachats enrollment had dwindled to just 35 students. The building sat largely unused for a time, but it wasn't done serving the community yet. Not by a long shot.

When the School District declared the property surplus and granted the city a right of first refusal to buy it, voters stepped up to support the purchase by a two to one vote, and that agreement was completed in the summer of 1990. The purchase price was 195-thousand dollars, and the mortgage was paid off eight years later. The Yachats Commons Foundation was incorporated the next year, and as they have with so many other projects, citizens of the community banded together to provide the resources—both human and financial—to turn this building into a vital community resource once more. In 1993, City Hall was moved into the building, and in 1994, the Yachats Youth and Family Activities Program was launched, and as you know, is still going strong more than two decades later.

The Little Log Church

Until the 1920s, Yachats' spiritual needs were met by traveling preachers. In 1927, one of those ministers, Reverend Rolla Phelps and his wife Stella settled full time in South Lincoln County. Construction of the cross-shaped building we know today as the Little Log Church began in about 1929 or 1930, with donated logs that had been hauled down the Yachats River. Volunteers raised the walls and cut cedar shakes for the roof. ; it was formally dedicated in August of 1930, and the Phelps survived for many years on the generosity of their parishoners, who furnished eggs, chickens and vegetables rather than money.

It was originally an Evangelical Church before its transfer to the Presbyterian denomination about 1949. By 1968, the congregation outdrew the rustic building, and services were held in the Ladies Club while the new church was being built. The building was sold to the Lincoln County Historical Society, which in turn donated it to the city in 1986.

By the early 1990s, the fate of the historic structure, which had served as a museum and chapel, was in question due to decades of storm, dampness and rot. But just as it was doing with the Commons and would do a few years later with the Ladies Club, the citizens of Yachats stepped forward to preserve a piece of their heritage. Thousands of hours were donated by volunteers, some of whom were in their late eighties. The building got a cement foundation for the first time, new logs replaced the crumbling originals, new electrical system was installed, new trim, new paint, and a new forced air heating system.

So, while much of the Log Church is relatively new, the history remains, and the spirit remains. Take a moment, next time you're there, to gaze at the 1907 pipe organ that Stella Phelps brought with her. They said she could play it beautifully, despite having only one leg.

The Yachats Ladies Club

The Ladies Club, which began life as the Swastika Club, has been a vital part of Yachats since 1927. I imagine most of you know that the swastika was then known as a Native American symbol of good luck. The name was changed, not surprisingly, during World War Two. Fourteen women launched the club, and membership dues were 10 cents per meeting. They held social events and fundraisers in the dance hall, and in 1929 the State Highway Commission offered to sell the building to the club for one hundred dollars. The deal was sealed with a fifteen dollar down payment. The biggest expense wasn't the purchase of the building itself, or the new site, which was donated, but the 500 dollar expense to move the structure from state parks property to its present location.

Not only has the building housed the Ladies Club throughout its history, at various times the Lions Club, Chamber of Commerce, American Legion, Odd Fellows and various churches met within its walls. The Ladies Club has contributed to the betterment of the community in many ways, including sponsoring scholarships, starting the town's first library and helping to purchase the community's first ambulance, a 1947 Packard. A major renovation project in 2007 helped assure the Ladies Club will continue to be a community hub well into a second century.

Beulah's Sea View Inn

Long before travel writers had put Yachats on the map—probably long before travel writing was its own speciality—Beulah's See View Inn, perched on the north side of the Yachats Bay, put the community on the map. A cookhouse was established on the site in 1911. In 1934, Beulah Swigert came to Yachats from Portland to take over the business, and for the next quarter century, until Beulah's death in 1959, people came from all over not only to enjoy her signature chicken and dumplings, but also her bran muffins with tomato preserves and many other specialties.

Local historian Leigh Green said Beulah was a beautiful redhead who never married. She was engaged once, but her fiancé died before the wedding and she never found another to fill that place in her heart. Green said that although Beulah never had a family of her own, she loved children, and twice a year—at Christmas and at the end of the school year—she fed all the children at the school burgers and milkshakes.

As you all know, Highway 101 curves right in front of what was once Beulah's. Late one Saturday night in the spring of 1957, a sedan failed to negotiate the curve and went crashing through the front of the building and ended up sticking out the other side, dangling above the rocks below. The driver and passengers walked away, and Beulah, who was in her bedroom below, slept through the whole thing. Nevertheless, it was an incident remembered in Yachats for decades afterward.

Beulah's gained new fame in the 1970s and 80s when new owners added the On The Rocks Lounge and brought in national entertainment including the Coasters, the Drifters and the Ink Spots. In 1989, new owners changed the name of Beulah's to the Landmark, and it soldiered on until a few years ago when it fell victim to the recession. Some say Beulah's spirit has never left the building...perhaps she will awaken once more to once again put this landmark back on the map.

Adobe Motel

Does anyone remember the old advertisement, "They laughed when I sat down to play the piano?" I thought of that when I read how many locals were laughing in the winter of 1951 when Larry Smith and his 16 year old son Lauren continued to pile adobe bricks on the ten-acre site Smith had purchased not long before. It was a particularly stormy winter, and many expected the bricks to soon dissolve into mud. They didn't know that Smith had investigated the site thoroughly before he made the deal, and determined the right clay for his project sat beneath the topsoil. With the right sandy loam from a site a few miles away, production of the brick was soon under way. Father and son worked 14-hour days.

What the skeptical locals couldn't see was that father and son were also steadily making progress inside the small workshop they had built, cutting the lumber that would form the skeleton of their creation. Spring arrived, and the unique motel rose rapidly, opening its doors in August, 1952 with 12 units, 22 bedrooms and 17,020 adobe bricks, all molded by the Smith family.

Sherwood Lodge/Shamrock Lodgettes

The life of Sherwood Lodge and Yachats was relatively brief, but during the time it stood on the south side of the river it was Yachats' largest hotel. The big log cabin structure was originally put up in Southwest Oregon, but around 1940, it was disassembled with each piece being numbered, then rose again at Yachats.

In 1953, the first six of what became the Shamrock Lodgettes were built adjacent to the Lodge, mirroring the log cabin motif of the main building. Around 1960, time, insects and the elements took their toll, and the Sherwood Lodge came down. A seventh cabin was built to serve as office for the Lodgettes, and additional units were added in the 1980s. But once again, nature caught up with the place, and the Lodgettes closed at the end of 2009, making way for the KOHO development.

The Long and Winding Road: The 804 Trail

The history of Yachats could be told through the story of the 804 Trail. The controversy over what was once county road 804 stretches back to 1974, but to understand this saga, we have to travel back in time thousands of years.

Long before the Roosevelt Highway was a gleam in an engineer's eyes, the Native Peoples traveled by foot along the beach, until they came to places where rocky outcroppings blocked their way, so they turned inland. Archeologists say the first use of what became the 804 traces back some three thousand years. Some say it's the oldest human pathway in North America.

When outside settlers arrived, they continued to use the path, and soon wagons, and eventually automobiles, were rolling over the same ground. Its first official recognition in 1890 when Benton County identified the “Waldport and Yahutes Road,” later to be rechristened County Road 804. Traffic shifted to the Roosevelt Highway and the old path, never fully developed, disappeared under brush and grass—and from some official maps.

Fast forward to 1974, when a portion of 804 was officially vacated to allow the city to install water and sewer lines. The Committee to Save Yachats 804 Trail was born, and the battle lines were soon drawn between property owners and advocates for public access. I can still remember picking up a copy of the News-Times at the Stop and Shop Market a summer or two later and seeing a photo of a sign declaring the 804 to be a “phantom” trail that was affixed to a gate a homeowner had placed across the path. That sign was riddled with buckshot. Had you told my fifteen year old self at that moment that I would be a Lincoln County Commissioner forty years later, and dealing with the same issue, I probably would have laughed.

To make a long story very short, the battle over 804 North wound its way to the Oregon Supreme Court in 1986, which ruled that the road had never been legally vacated. In 1990, the walking trail we enjoy today was opened. And there was peace—for a time.

The leadership of the 804 Committee continued to look at decades of plat maps, and contended that what became known as 804 South—the stretch running to the mouth of the Yachats River—also still legally existed. The county initially took a different view, contending that it had a less defined history of past public use, and that new subdivisions had obliterated the right of way. However, later legal research by the county determined that the right of way still existed and could be vacated. When the Commissioner s voted to vacate in 1997, round two of the legal battle commenced, and once again the rights of the public were pitted against the rights of property owners, who had their dreams and fortunes tied up in homes that in some cases were built directly across the 804. This time, the battle was resolved without Supreme Court intervention. Instead, Governor Kitzhaber and the state Land Conservation and Development Commission sponsored a mediation process that led to an agreement that left existing homes untouched and established a settlement fund to improve other access paths. The City, County and public watchdog groups continue to oversee projects funded through that agreement.

Conclusion

What do these stories—only a few threads of out of thousands—tell us about the character of Yachats today?

It seems clear to me that the nature of the land and sea has always had a huge impact on those who are drawn to this special place.

In the early years, the rich resources of this land offered sustenance and hope to people looking to start a fresh chapter in their lives.

Today, family farms remain, and trees are still producing lumber, but modern industry and transportation has made this area less self-reliant, but they say everything old becomes new again, and the sustainability and local food movements are already starting to lead us back to more self-sufficient communities.

As time passed, and modern civilization advanced, more and more visitors were drawn here, and many have chosen to make it their permanent home. For some, waking up beneath these hills and trees and in front of this vast ocean is their reward for a lifetime of labor. For those of an artistic bent, these vistas are a great draw; but whether you can express your appreciation in painting, drawing, prose or poetry, or whether like me, you can simply say, "Wow," everyone who ever sees this place is moved by it, and changed by it, for the better.

This leads me to perhaps my key conclusion in thinking about this small, fragile spot on the globe and its people. This may be one of the places left on earth where the people are shaped more by the place than the other way around. May it always be so.

During the more than half-century I've loved Yachats, I've always been a little wary, hoping that it wouldn't lose its special character. Who wants to see high rise condos, strip malls, franchised fast food and all the other trappings of bigger cities? While everyone who cares about this place should always be vigilant, I have to say my fears have lessened with time. When Yachats celebrates its bicentennial, I'm confident it will still be a small village, surrounded by nature's spectacular beauty, cherished by all who visit or call it home.