

The History of The Johnson Farm

Adopted from “The Johnson Farm Story” documentary by Rick Anderson



In the mid 1800's emigration from northern Europe reached a fever pitch. Many factors played a role in this, including rapid population growth, unemployment, social and political oppression, and improvements in communication and transportation.

Among the people groups leaving their homelands was a population known as the Swedish Finns, who lived mostly along the Baltic in what is now known as Finland.

Unbeknownst to each other, two young Swedish Finns left their homes for America in the 1880's. Alma Maria Boman was born in the Åland Islands in 1864, the second of 8 children. Eventually, her entire family left for America, but Alma Maria was the first, arriving in Tacoma in 1887.

Meanwhile, a few hundred miles to the north, John Johannsen, born on a Farm near Purmo in 1863 and the second of 6 children, came to the same decision and made his way across America to Tacoma in 1889. As he informed his family from Chicago, he would henceforth be known as John Johnson.



Coming from pious families, the two young people immediately joined the Swedish Lutheran Church in Tacoma, and in the course of time were married in 1891.

Two children were born to them: Alida in 1894 and Oscar John in 1896. Before long, John and Alma Maria concluded that they preferred farming to city life and began looking around for land to settle on.

Bengt Johnson, a member of the same church, had established a woodyard and a dock on Anderson Island, from which he provided cordwood and water to fuel the steamships that plied Puget Sound in those days.

Realizing that he needed manpower more than he needed the extra land, Bengt offered to sell the newlyweds 80 acres of forestland on credit. John and Alma Maria would clear the land and provided Bengt with cordwood to sell to the steamers. This deal was concluded in 1896, whereupon John and Alma Maria Johnson moved their young family to a two-room cabin they built on their new property.

The years passed quickly for John and Alma Maria. A third child, Ruth, was born in 1897, followed by a son, Rudolph, in 1903. John and Alma Maria continued to clear their land, putting up sheds and barns, raising livestock and poultry [pictures]. Gradually, through delivering loads of cordwood to Bengt Johnson, they paid off their debt. The children grew and attended the new one-room schoolhouse which was dedicated in 1905.

Tragedy struck in 1907, when Alma Maria died at the age of 43. Alida, the oldest, was compelled to drop out of school and care for her younger brother Rudy, until he was old enough to attend school. It must have been a relief to the family when John's sister, Katterina, newly widowed, arrived from Russian Finland in 1908 and lived with the family for several years. John's sister Hannah, who came at the same time, eventually married Carl Petterson, the son of Nels Magnus and Anna Petterson, who had settled on East Oro Bay.



As the Johnson children grew, they were more and more able to help with the farm chores and the farm prospered. A typical entry in Alida's diary [picture], dated July 1, 1911, states "I did my Saturday's work besides plucking four spring chickens. We are going to have eight for the fourth of July."



A new house was built in 1912 to accommodate the growing family (and that



house still stands today as the Johnson farmhouse). In 1917, John and his sons built a large pole barn, which also still stands today. Besides chickens and cows, the farm was home to pigs and horses, which did much of the hard work of plowing and hauling timber, hay and produce.

Oscar was 21 when the United States entered World War I. In the spring of 1918 he was drafted and sent to France as an infantryman. Unfortunately, Oscar's service records were lost in a fire at the national archives in 1962, but it is known that he was wounded in battle and returned from France on a hospital ship in early 1919. Through his teenaged years, Rudy served as his father's right-hand-man.



Meanwhile, Alida entered nursing school in Tacoma, graduating in 1922. Ruth, who was working in Tacoma, met and married a navy man, Alexander Laing, in 1926. Their daughter, Alma Ruth Laing, was born in Bremerton in 1932.



John Johnson died in 1924, leaving his two sons to carry on the work of Johnson Farm.

The young brothers worked together for the next 50 years, gradually expanding the farm and adding new pasture and buildings as time permitted. In 1930, they built two of the modern "Schoup" chicken houses, designed by George R. Schoup of the Washington Extension Service and expanded their poultry flock to around 2000 chickens. Through the years, they assumed the role of providing the community with fresh milk and eggs, selling both at prices far below what the market would bear on the mainland.



The Johnsons were well known and respected on the island. They took part in community activities, as had their father, and toiled long hours to improve their farm.

Oscar Johnson passed away in 1969, leaving Rudy to carry on the work of the farm with the help of a few young men. The last of the chickens made the trip to Swanson's in 1970, and the community's last dairy herd dwindled to a few elderly cows.

Among the first residents of the newly established Riviera was a retired Tacoma furrier named Lois Scholl. In addition to her incomparable skills as a seamstress and leather-worker, Lois possessed a seemingly unlimited well of optimism and energy. Her friendship with Rudolph Johnson, steward of the last operating pioneer farm, gave birth the idea of transforming Johnson Farm into a museum. Lois and her friend Ruth Henry, another transplant from Tacoma, prevailed upon Rudy to allow them to convert his last functioning chicken house into "The Chicken Co-op," an outlet for antiques and crafts in 1973. Insiders report that Rudolf, who had no direct heirs, used to chuckle at the notion of his farm becoming a museum.



With Rudy's passing in early 1975, however, enthusiasm for the establishment of a museum took root in the entire community. A series of public meetings revealed support for the creation of a historical society with the purpose of acquiring and preserving the farm. Lois's nephew, Tacoma attorney John van Buskirk, drew up the articles of incorporation, and the Anderson Island Historical Society came into existence in July, 1975.

Rudy and Oscar's only surviving heir to Johnson Farm was their sister Ruth's daughter, Alma



Ruth Laing, who lived in Tacoma with her father, Alexander Laing. Born in Bremerton in 1932, Alma had moved around the country with her parents before returning to Tacoma following Ruth's death in 1962. Alma Ruth and her father visited the farm every week to assist Rudy and Oscar with their chores.

Well known to the community, Al and Alma Ruth were intrigued with the proposition that the farm become a museum dedicated to honoring the memory of the Johnson family. After discussions with leading islanders, they made the decision to donate 7 acres including the original homestead with its collection of outbuildings to serve that purpose.

Their gift was acknowledged at a community dinner in October, 1975, with the proclamation of Johnson Farm as a museum dedicated to island history and entrusted to the care of the Anderson Island Historical Society.

The transition from a barely functioning poultry and dairy farm to a thriving museum and cultural center has taken many twists and turns over the intervening years. The one constant has been the continual refreshing of the volunteer work force with newly retired islanders armed with the skills and energy to preserve the farm and nurture certain traditions which have evolved during this time.