

# The Historic Pacific Highway in Washington

<https://www.pacific-hwy.net/lacenter.htm>

## La Center

The town of La Center is located on the East Fork of the Lewis River 16.5 miles north of Vancouver and 4 miles southeast of Woodland. It is situated at the head of navigation on the East Fork, though smaller boats could make it up as far as Stoughton, which was about 2.5 miles upstream from La Center, but only if the water level was not too high or not too low. Before the arrival of the Europeans, the Lewis River was called the Cathlapotle by the Chinook. The river was renamed later for the first European settler, Aldolphus Le Lewes.

The Lewis River has 2 forks, the North Fork and the East Fork. The East Fork has been called the South Fork on some early maps, but in 1929, the name was officially changed to the East Fork. The East Fork has a narrow and shallow channel and is more like a slough. Most of the riverboat towns along the Columbia and Cowlitz rivers had to worry about flooding, but La Center had the opposite problem, and had to worry about low water, which would cripple their supply chain.

## The Early Settlers

The first Europeans would not arrive at La Center until 1849, when John Pollock came and homesteaded on the south bank of the East Fork at the "S" curve. He filed his claim on August 1, 1865. Settlers had to live on their claims for a minimum of 4 years before filing. John Pollock sadly passed away in 1868 and today, his gravesite is located next to the old Pacific Highway at the bottom of the hill just after the "S" curve.

In 1852, John H. Timmen, Aurelius Wilkins and E. C. Wilkins arrived and took claims on the north side of river where the town would begin. Timmen filed his claim on July 2, 1866. There was no record of the Wilkins' brothers filing a claim as they may not have stayed long. Also in 1852, Jefferson Kinder arrived and made his home near the mouth of the East Fork and stayed for the rest of his life. Kinder was a senior member of the Kinder & Hobert General store at Kinder Rock and was one of the most respected citizens of La Center. Andrew and Marium Brazee arrived that same year and the Brazee's had said that they were the 3rd family to locate at La Center.

The following are some other early settlers who lived around the general vicinity of La Center in the 1850's and 1860's, and the date they filed for a claim; Marium Brazee, July 2, 1866; Frederick C. Banzer, August 15, 1866; Reuben T. Lockwood, December 20, 1867; Riley Bartlett, July 20, 1869; Andrew A. Brazee, August 1, 1869; Michael Kane, (arrived 1859) August 1, 1869; John U. Banzer, August 1, 1869; Joseph Kelly, August 1, 1869; and Peter Cade, August 20, 1869. This is not a complete list, only those who were found in the BLM-GLO records for the 1860's. Magilbra and Caroline Anderson arrived at La Center in 1864 and stayed the rest of their lives. The Anderson's filed for their claim on June 20, 1872.

### The East Fork Settlements

At the beginning, there were no roads into the area and the residents used the river as the highway. Before 1866, the nearest trading post was at St. Helens, and supplies were brought up river by canoe or row boat. In 1861, Reuben Thurston Lockwood established the first settlement on the East Fork that was called Lincoln. This settlement was located about a mile upstream from La Center. Lockwood was an Abraham Lincoln admirer and named his village after him.

In 1866, the steamer *Rescue* while on its route between Monticello and Portland, would make a stop at the new Kinder & Hobert store that opened in August of that year. The store was located at the mouth of the East Fork at a place known as "Kinder Rock." This was on the north side of the East Fork, just beyond the mouth. The freeway now runs right through about where the old store and homestead used to be.

It is said that the first steamer to travel up the East Fork was in 1868 when Captain Henderson brought the steamer *Eagle* upstream to Lincoln.

On June 12, 1869, school was let out for the summer on the East Fork. The children earlier had selected *Lucinda Pollock as Queen of the day*, and *Lydia Timmen as the Goddess of Liberty*. The children then formed a procession and marched to the picnic grounds with the girls two abreast and the boys, visitors and the parents of the children following behind. Arriving at a small grove about a quarter of a mile from the schoolhouse, everyone then partook of a nice meal that was spread out by the ladies of the district.

The children and adults who took part in the activities during the picnic were; Lydia Timmen, Lucinda Pollock, Laurinda Pollock, James Pollock, Catherine Powell, Lorenzo Brazee, Alzoda Brazee, James Anderson, Charles Anderson, Alice Bartlett, Edward Bartlett, Eliza Bartlett, Thomas Bolen, Frank Horn, Charles Horn, and Emma Horn. Their teacher was J. C. Longwell.

In June of 1870, the steamer *Swallow*, piloted by Captain William Weir, made its first trip up the East Fork. John Timmen, who lived next to Reuben Lockwood, built a steamer landing on his property that was about 1 mile

downstream from Lincoln. The place then became known as Timmen's Landing. It is said that the place was originally known as "Podunk." The *Swallow* would make stops at the farmhouses along the way selling basic groceries. Those who didn't have cash could trade for the things they needed. In 1872, Captain Weir and the *Swallow* made regular trips between Timmen's Landing and St. Helens. When a **general store** was **established at La Center in 1873**, the *Swallow's* owners, Arnold and Fayne from Portland, abandoned the riverside service.

In 1872, Captain William G. Weir, arrived at La Center to start a home. In the book; *An Illustrated history of Washington* by Rev. H. K. Hines, printed in 1893, says; "Captain Weir had many years of experience in both canal and river navigation in Ohio before coming to Portland in 1872. He at once interested himself in river navigation, and for 18 years, plied the Lewis River. He was instrumental in the founding of the village of La Center, and in 1873 was the prime mover in securing the establishment of a store and a post office at this point."

"His life was an uneventful one viewed in the light of thrilling adventure, but deeds of charity and loving kindness have blossomed all along his path, conducing to his own comfort and happiness. Abandoning the river, Captain Weir at La Center, opened a **restaurant**, in the management of which he is ably aided by his sons Cassius and Peter. and he also ran an attractive **lodging house**, where the weary traveler may find rest and comfort."

From the December 4, 1875 issue of the *Vancouver Independent*; "To Captain Weir belongs the honor of founding this town, if, a town it can be called. Until he came (three years ago) no one could be induced to embark in a business enterprise on this river above Pekin. After merchandising a while he disposed of his stock of goods, and has since devoted his time to steam boating on the Lewis River. A few more men of the Captain's caliber would be of vast service to the country."

Sometime in the fall of 1872, Captain Weir took over command of the *Swallow* and would run a service between La Center and St. Helens, connecting with the Portland steamers. Not long after, Timmen's Landing would become the "center of commerce" for the villages further upstream and farther east that were now sprouting up. The farmers from Yacolt, Amboy, Battle Ground, Chelatchie, Lewisville and others, would bring their produce to the landing and have it sent to St. Helens where it was then transferred to the Columbia River steamers for the Portland markets.

In 1873, Joseph L. Gaither and John K. Gaither arrived at La Center. John Gaither along with local resident John C. Miller, established the **Miller & Gaither store**. Gaither built his beautiful home at La Center in the summer of 1877. In the December 4, 1875 issue of the *Vancouver Independent*, it said that; "Less than two years ago these two gentlemen began selling

goods here, and by fair dealings and a strict adherence to business have built up a large trade. Verily integrity hath its reward." This new store put the *Swallow's* riverside service out of business. The new landing and general store was most likely the reason for Lincoln's demise.

On August 9, 1874, women's suffragette advocate Abigail Scott Duniway, paid a visit to La Center for a meeting, where spiritualists, with characteristic liberality, had kindly invited them to go and lecture upon any subject which they might feel disposed to select. After reaching La Center, the party walked a quarter mile to a campground in a meadow where they would have the meeting. Caleb "Uncle Caleb" Woods, the father of James Woods of Pekin and George Woods who became Governor of Utah, led the group to the campground. They got lost on the way, but after some backtracking, found the meeting place and the anxiously waiting people. Duniway said this about the event;

"The attendance at the meeting, though good, was not so large as was anticipated, owing to a panic about the **small-pox** several miles away, but we have never anywhere seen a more harmonious gathering. All were anxious to hear from us upon the "Woman Question," and we did the best we could to prevent them from being disappointed. Dr. Cleveland, the noted trance speaker, gave some excellent addresses, but he only partially succeeded in making the masses believe that it was Michael Servetus or some other dear departed, and not Al Cleveland himself, who was regaling us by the hour with history, ancient and modern, sacred and profane."

### The Post Office

The post offices of the early settlements happened to be wherever the postmaster lived. If there was a store, usually the store owner would also be the postmaster and a town would develop around it. Most of the early settlements began as a single cabin, that would also be the store, post office, meeting place, church, school and lastly a residence. The other members of the settlement would be spread out over a few miles, since everyone received a half mile square under the donation land act.

The earliest post office on the East Fork was established in July of 1866 at the settlement of Lincoln. Lincoln was one of those settlements that never grew beyond the one cabin. This was because La Center overtook it. Reuben Lockwood was the postmaster at Lincoln. The post was officially called "Lewis River" and only lasted for a year. Lincoln was also the name of the voting District.

On April 5, **1873, a post office was established at Timmen's Landing.** This post was also named "Lewis River" and **Captain Weir** was the **postmaster**. In the early summer of 1874, the Lewis River post office was temporarily closed. The residents quickly petitioned against the closure and

the office was reinstated on August 17, 1874. This time John H. Timmen took over as postmaster. The Pioneer post office would be established in 1874, and the Stoughton post office was established in 1876.

Timmen did not last long as postmaster, maybe because he handed it over to John Gaither after he opened his store. **Gaither** would become the **postmaster** of La Center in November of **1873**, just after his store opened for business. Gaither held the job for the next **40 years** until he retired on March 9, 1915. He missed only one term of office during that time. When he took over the position in 1873, there were only 4 patrons who subscribed to newspapers. In **1915, Patrick M. Kane**, took over the job as **postmaster**.

### La Center is Born

On November 12, **1875, John Timmen** laid out a town at Timmen's Landing and called it "**La Center**," this may have been to honor the early French settlers of the region. On November 19, **1875**, the La Center Hall and Store Company of the Patrons of Husbandry, built a spacious **grange hall** in the new town. On December 3rd, a grand ball was held to celebrate the dedication of the new building.

La Center news January 1, 1876; "The first day of the new year was observed in a becoming manner. No unusual demonstrations were made and everybody kept sober. Lewis River has again been swollen by late heavy rains. Mr. Chas. Banzer killed a large black bear near here a few days since; his head, the bear's, not Charles, will soon grace the office of Dr. Davis."

On January 1, 1876, an anonymous writer said; "The La Center school has closed for the winter, not as much on account of the want of funds, as the want of a house suitable to teach in. We have a nice church building belonging to the **United Brethren** church, and a magnificent Grange Hall, but don't feel just able yet to build a school house. We aim first to get religion, then be a granger, and finally learn to read."

"A chapel was built because the little old log school wasn't a fit edifice for Christian worship; a hall was created because the aforesaid log building wasn't exactly the place for the fathers and mothers to meet and discuss self protection and agricultural questions. The tender child is then sent to the ancient school house and compelled to sit all day upon benches that do not support the back. The pupil can't tell how it is that a house that is not good enough for father and mother to spend an hour or two in, once a week, is good enough for him to inhabit five days a week."

On October 4, 1876, the grange hall held a meeting that created the La Center Lodge, and it was established with 22 charter members. The officers were; John C. Miller, Mary J. Miller, Charles Cagle, Thomas Bolen, Lydia

Timmen, Burt Johnson, A. J. Rense, Charles Anderson, M. K. Espy, and John Egan.

In the fall of 1876, James Woods and John Caples of Pekin, who owned stores at Pekin and Toledo, built the *Hydra*, a small steamer for use on the Lewis River. In November of 1876, Mr. A. J. Culbertson opened La Center's **first saloon**, George W. Woodham started grinding wheat in his new grist mill on Cedar Creek and William Bolen purchased interest in a sawmill that will be built at the mouth of Jenny creek on the East Fork.

Also in the fall **1876**, a **bridge** was built over the East Fork of the Lewis River at Stoughton. Actually it was 3 bridges that spanned the 3 branches of the river that were there at that time. It was known as the Reed Bridge, named after James Reed who had a farm near the crossing. The county decided to build a bridge at that spot instead of at La Center as it was less expensive at Stoughton, and they figured it would serve more residents if built there. By May 5, 1877, the bridge was already failing and calls for repairs were being made. This was the early wagon road into La Center from Vancouver.

On November 11, **1876**, W. B. Wilson and A. R. Cook were appointed to examine a new bridge that was constructed over the Lewis River near James R. Hall's place that was constructed by H. H. Gridley. They were to report back immediately to the county auditor to make sure the bridge was completed in accordance with the contract. The north end approach to the bridge required a fill that was separate from the bridge contract. Gridley was paid \$720 in gold coin from a special fund. This was known as the **Hall's bridge**. Today, this is now the SR 503 bridge at Lewisville.

At a regular meeting of the La Center Grange on January 27, 1877, the following officers were installed for that year: John H. Timmen, Frank Bonser, Ellen Gerow, Joseph Bonser, E. J. Coville, J. Chambers, William Bowland, J. McNab, M. Titus, Mrs. Chambers, Mrs. Timmen, Amanda Colvin, Mrs. Mc Nab, and John S. Bozarth.

On April 4, 1877, H. L. G. writes; "We have been allowed to take a glimpse of La Centre as it will appear in 1880. Hotels of mammoth proportions and unheard of scientific attachments are in course of construction. New bricks are daily projected--through the air. Street cars pass Miller & Gaither's store every five minutes, for the back fence. Churches are numerous and flourishing. The mayor, on the steps of the courthouse can be heard reading a long piece of poetry, singing it in a monotonous key--the refrain of which is 'La Centre'."

"During the business hours the streets are thronged with vehicles and foot passengers. The wharves are 'scenes of confusion and creature complaints.' Yet, above all the din and turmoil of an immense traffic, can be heard the thrilling shriek of the *Hydra* as she comes up the creek, once a week laden to the guards with a box of tobacco, a keg of nails and a ream of paper for your valuable correspondent. On the morrow she will leave there carrying a veal calf, the remainder of last year's egg crop and a half bushel of potatoes."

During the summer of 1877, Julius Proebstel, who had been operating the Grange Store in Vancouver, pulled up stakes and moved to La Center on June 6th. He came up on the *Hydra*, and opened a new store with J. D. Banzer called Proebstel & Banzer. Also that summer Mary Miller was running a millinery establishment.

In the fall of 1877, the wagon road down La Center Hill to the river opposite the town was completed. On February 14, 1878, Julius Proebstel and others petitioned for a ferry to be established at La Center. The county approved the petition and \$116.58 was paid out of the county treasury for a ferry to be kept at La Center for the use of the public. It was said that; "the people showed their appreciation by allowing it to float off at high water." This ferry was in service for 3 years until the bridge was built.

**At the beginning of 1878, La Center had a steam flour mill, a blacksmith shop, wagon manufacturer, church, millinery shop, wharf with warehouse, saloon, dry goods store and a drug store with a doctor. On April 11, 1878, it was reported that J. D. Banzer of La Center said that his town was the liveliest place on the Lewis River. There were now 2 boats running between La Center and Portland, the *Hydra* and the *Rescue*.**

On August 11, 1878, at 4pm the *Latona* was launched at La Center as the replacement for the *Hydra* on the La Center-Portland run. The excitement about the new steamer brought many people from the area to see the launching. William Mullin was the superintendent of the Lewis River Transportation Company that was located at La Center. Long before the designated time, people from Lake River, Pekin, Cedar Creek, Chelatchie, Union Ridge, and the country along the forks, began to line the banks of the river to see the new steamer.

About 200 people had gathered and anxiously waited to see the successor of the *Hydra*. When the time came 2 flags were raised from her deck and on each was written in large capital letters, *LATONA*. The ropes were severed, mauls applied to the wedges, and with about 50 people aboard, and amid the cheers of the excited crowd, she glided swiftly down the stream.

Since she was built at La Center, the launching was a special day as this boat represented growth and welfare for this section of the country. "She is Ours" was the cry, as they witnessed the launching of the *Latona*. The wood works were finished by September when she was taken to Portland to be fitted with her machinery. The *Latona* was 91 feet long, 18 foot beam, with 5 feet in the hold. She had a capacity of 80 tons.

In the spring of 1879, the new schoolhouse was completed and Miss. Lida Brown was teaching 40 children. **Dr. R. S. Davis was expanding his drug store** and George Barr of the La Center Grist Mill was busy grinding wheat into flour for the Portland markets. W. S. Ward built a new home near the grist mill and the steamers *City of Quincy* and the *Latona* were in competition for the business at La Center. They ran on alternate days, (probably to avoid each other) and it was said that the *Latona* had the "inside track" on the Lewis River and was taking 80% of the traffic. Since it was her home port the *Latona* was the popular boat.

By the end of 1879, an anonymous writer said this about the place; "La Center is a terminus, it is the terminus of the Portland and Lewis River steamer line, they making their home port here. The town is yet small. The La Center house is kept by John Timmen; George Barr operates the steam flouring mill; John C. Miller runs the dry goods store, and Dr. R. S. Davis is the proprietor of the drug store."

"The butcher shop is operated by Harry Wood and John Lishan; the wood yards are owned by John Timmen and J. D. Banzer. A. J. Culbertson keeps a very good saloon here, though the country does not furnish a very great run of spirits. Andrew Laws does a pegging business in his boot and shoe shop, while Ralph Lyons does a ringing business in his blacksmith shop on the hill. Lastly there is the warehouse. This represents the principal businesses of the village."

"About a quarter of a mile to the north, and on a pleasant and sightly spot, by the roadside stands a fine new two-story school building and Lida Brown is the teacher. On the following day I visited the school in the Bartlett neighborhood. This is a new district cut off from La Center only last winter, yet they have erected quite a neat and comfortable school building and are now holding their first term of school. It is taught by Miss Vanbebber of Cowlitz county."

"From here I went to the Spencer district, on the south side of the river, and about three miles south-west of La Center. Crossing the river at the Ceroly farm I was soon on the hill and for the first time I got a view of this beautiful claim. Mr. Peters is teaching a six months school here; he is also attorney at law for this place and the surrounding country."

La Center During the 1880's - 1890's



The beginning of 1880, was one of tragedy. First on January 16, 1880, About 20 children were in the schoolhouse at La Center, most of them eating their lunch. The 4 children of John W. Bartlett were seated together near the stove, when a huge tree came crashing down, demolishing the building. The tree fell directly over the Bartlett children. A boy aged 9 and a girl aged 11, were instantly killed. Nearly every bone in the body of the boy was crushed.

The oldest child, Miss Ruth, aged 16, had several ribs broken, and suffered severe internal injuries, which she did not recover from and sadly passed away. She lay wedged under the tree for nearly 2 hours before she could be extricated. The 4th child, a boy aged 13, received a cut across the forehead, and his scalp was torn off from an inch above his eyes to the crown of his head. Notwithstanding his severe injuries he survived without longstanding issues. The 2 children of Joseph Gaither were severely injured, as was also a son of Frank Briggs. The remainder of the children, as well as the teacher, Mrs. Loper, escaped with slight bruises.

The second tragedy occurred on March 12, 1880, when Albert Banzer, fireman of the *Latona*, was drowned in the Lewis River, near La Center. One of the passengers discovered him in the water swimming toward shore. It was not known how he fell overboard, as he was not missed until seen swimming. A boat was lowered, but before it reached him he sank. His body was recovered on a sand bar about half a mile below the scene of the accident. He was a son of James Banzer. Albert was only 23 years old and unmarried. He was buried at Columbia City.

In 1880, Lettie Lyons was teaching at the school, which was now open for 9 months of the year. The Miller & Gaither store, Dr. Davis' drug store, Ralph Lyons Blacksmith shop, George Barr's Grist mill, the Bzazee House, the Timmen House, and Culbertson's saloon, were all still in business. Some of the new businesses established that year were; John Pieper's Dry goods and Grocery store, Mr. Yadkin's cabinet shop, and the James D. Banzer and son wood yard. Mr. Titus started a logging camp near Hall's bridge at Lewisville.

In 1881, some of the businesses were; the Bolen Bros. La Center Sawmill, Mr. Godkins furniture shop and the still going strong Brazee House and La Center House. Ralph S. Lyons had a house built by Perley Sheldon, E. M. Beard was the teacher and John Pieper built a sidewalk from his store to the river.

In 1882, a new bridge at La Center was being planned. The north end of the structure was between the 2 warehouses on the La Center side of the river, and the south end terminated, about 40 yards to the left, facing the village, from the house of M. Titus. The drawbridge had a clear space of 40 feet and was completed in January of 1883.

On August 19, 1882, a deer was chased into the river by dogs at La Center. Everyone ran for their gun or pistol and then out onto the almost completed bridge in front of town, where each had a good shot at the poor deer. Everyone missed it, and some even missed the river. After everyone had spent their ammunition, the deer got up on the bank unhurt, and looked in astonishment at the crowd, and then jumped off into the brush.

On December 21, 1882, the East Fork flooded and Hall's bridge was washed away. There was some minor damage to the almost completed bridge at La Center. By 1882, the Reed bridge had fallen into disrepair and was unusable. Travelers using that road had to cross the river at the old ford. The Reed bridge would never be rebuilt and the old road was abandoned in later years.

The year 1883 brought continued growth to La Center and a writer of the time said this about the town; "John C. Miller, the merchant prince of this section of country, still 'holds the fort' at the old stand of Miller & Gaither. Mr. Miller, with his able corps of assistants, is driving business right along. Mr. John K. Gaither, the former business partner of Mr. Miller, owns the old Pieper stand on Main street. Mr. Gaither has fitted up this store in good shape, and has laid in a fine stock of goods. A. J. Culbertson just opened a real estate agency."

"Mr. A. J. Culbertson is also constable for this precinct, and I have noticed the boys are beginning to 'look a leedle oud.' Mr. O. A. Barnard, the pioneer saddle and harness maker at this point, has enlarged his shop to meet the demands of the trade. He has a fine stock of such goods as are kept in his line. A few steps above Mr. Barnard's shop I found Pat Fay pegging away as usual. Mr. Fay has a neat little shop, and can do as good a job of repairing or making of boots and shoes as one could wish. Pat is a master hand at the business."

"In June of **1883**, Kerron & McBeth of Portland bought out John C. Miller and took over operation of the store. Miller moved to Portland and partnered with Mr. West and opened the Miller & West store selling groceries and dairy. John, assisted by his eldest son, is doing a good business, and has hosts of friends. John H. Timmen, the father of La Center, is looking hale and hearty. He still keeps the La Center House, open for the reception of guests. This house is on Front street, facing the river, and but a few steps from the steamboat landing. The **Palace hotel**, kept by Culbertson & Jessen, is on Main street. Messrs. Culbertson & Jessen are not behind the times in the matter of keeping a good hotel."

"The village blacksmith is here, and in force at that. Messer's. Caskey & Harold, a new firm, have just erected a shop on Main street, close to the emporium of J. C. Miller. Ralph Lyons, the pioneer in the smithing business at La Center, still keeps his blacksmith shop on the hill at the upper end of

Main street. The ring of his anvil is just as musical as ever. Dr. R. S. Davis still keeps the drug store in first-class order, with a stock sufficient for the wants of all in this community. Edward Pratt began teaching in August."

On September 9, 1883, Philip Shintaffer leased the Timmen House to run as a first class hotel. On December 12, 1883, There was a great rush to the Ball at Shintaffer's place on Christmas night. There were 52 people including Judge Moore and family, who came from St. Helens. Many came from Sauvie's island and other landings, and there was hardly any standing room on the boats. The 2 halls were filled with dancers and the evening climaxed with a magnificent dinner. On August 29, 1884, fire broke out in a flue at the Timmen House which damaged the building, though it wasn't a total loss.

### Sawmills and Railroad Ties

On May 31, 1897, it was reported that in the northern part of Clark County, near La Center, a man had invented an electric saw. The saw worked on steam that was generated by the use of a boiler burning wood that ran a dynamo which powered the saw. From the dynamo a long wire was stretched out and attached to a motor which operated the saw. It could cut 100 cords a day.

One of La Center's early industries in addition to lumber, was railroad ties. Upwards of a dozen sawmills were located at different points along the Lewis River for sawing ties. They would raft the ties downriver to La Center to be loaded onto barges that were towed to Portland. In February of 1899, La Center had a contract for 200,000 ties for the Oregon Short Line. Ham Nickum & Co. of Portland operated a barge that brought the ties from the mill to the incline on the east side at Portland, where they were loaded onto cars. 5,000 ties fit on a barge and it took 40 barge loads to complete the contract.

In the spring of 1901, the Columbia Lumber Company completed building a 5 mile flume to float lumber and ties from its mills to the Lewis River.

On November 23, 1909, The sawmills in the area were; the Star Mill which had a capacity of 50,000 feet; Wilson's mill, with a capacity of 50,000; Dator mill and Harney mills, on Cedar creek. J. W. Brothers mill, and the Oakdale Lumber Company's mill at La Center.

### Fire at La Center

Dr. R. S. Davis, who was originally from Maine, was the doctor and druggist for La Center since its founding in the 1870's and was an admired person in the community. The residents there and some from farther away sought him out for advice as he was an intelligent man. It was said that he was so far ahead of his neighbors in intelligence that they thought of him as a wizard. He was a botanist and taxidermist who loved science and antiques.

It seems that over the years Dr. Davis began to suffer a mental breakdown. On November 29, 1900, Dr. Davis, who was now 83 years old, was arrested and brought to Vancouver for examination of his sanity. This all began around mid November of 1900, when the Doctor became enraged at some workers who were building a boardwalk in front of his drug store. He ordered them to make some changes upon which they refused, and he then became angry and threatened to shoot the workers.

As result of the examination before the superior court, the charge of insanity was dismissed, but the judge ordered the Doctor to pay \$500 and not get into any more trouble. He was allowed to leave on his own recognizance.

On September 29, 1902, Fire swept through La Center and destroyed 5 buildings as a result of Dr. R. S. Davis setting the fire that took his own life. It all began when a competitor, Sarah White opened up another drug store in La Center. This made the now 85 year old Doctor quite upset, so he went over and set fire to White's drug store. He then went back to his own store and torched it as well allowing himself to be burned to death. The fire at White's store ignited the residence of J. W. Bennett, where it then spread to a shoe shop and a photo gallery.

On October 13, 1904, a fire broke out in La Center that destroyed half the business section. The fire started in the joint butcher and harness shop of J. W. Brothers. No one was known to have been in the building for the last 2 days. The losses to the town were' Dr. John Smith's, drugstore; a building owned by Fred Knepper; the Edward Elund, building; Forest Riegel's, butcher shop, and J. W. Brothers', harness shop. There was some minor damage to the building owned by Mrs. J. P. Ward; Mr. Bingham's tin shop and the **Palace Hotel**.

At the beginning of 1906, La Center was prospering. With 2 steamboat lines giving a daily service, 6 stage coaches running into town from every point of the compass, and I. W. Bachurn's the *La Center Clipper*, which was published in the metropolis of the Lewis River country was busy printing the news. The steamers from Portland were loaded to capacity with passengers and cargo whereas a little more than a year ago only one boat handled all the traffic. La Center was now shipping out greater quantities of produce than ever before and the boats did not have to leave the town empty anymore. La Center now was supplying Portland with apples and other produce.

On September 27, 1907, fire again swept the town of La Center, now home to about 400 people. The fire was confined to one block of the town and it destroyed the dock, warehouse, a residence, a portion of the county bridge, several business houses, and the building that contained the post office. Nothing was saved from the post office.

The individual losses were: Kane Bros., general merchants, \$10,000; Jacob Kamm, warehouse and transportation company's dock, \$7000; Knighton barber shop, \$1000; Post office building and contents of office, \$2000; Headley's blacksmith shop, \$2500; residence of Mrs. Knighton, \$2000; the Office saloon, \$2000; county bridge, \$2000. Insurance did not cover their losses. Other damaged businesses was the Spencer saloon and 2 shoe shops.

The origin of the fire was a mystery. It was initially reported that it started in one of the saloons, but the reports were conflicting. Some began whispering rumors of arson. When the fire was first discovered, an alarm was sounded and the whole town turned out to fight the flames. Bucket brigades were formed and brave efforts were made to check the fire. The combined forces of the townsfolk and farmers who had gathered from the surrounding country proved futile. The opening of the draw saved further damage to the bridge and there was a vacant block that prevented the spread of the fire to the residence portion of town.

What actually happened was; The fire started shortly after 4am in the Kane brother's store, and within a few hours, it had destroyed the entire block of buildings and about 300 feet of the approach to the county bridge. What inclined the authorities to believe the fire was started by burglars was the finding of large quantities of merchandise stowed away on the unburned portion of the bridge. Communication with the town was made by means of a ford over the Lewis River about three miles below the town. The Kane Brother's warehouse was owned by Frank Hobart of Portland.

### The La Center Bridge

At the beginning of 1894, plans were made to replace the bridge at La Center. Sidney Smyth and Hugh Perham took measurements and made the drawings for the long trestle and drawbridge across the East Fork. On June 1, 1900, the construction contract for the bridge was awarded to the Pacific Bridge Company of Portland for \$3,125. The drawbridge had an opening of 60 feet in the clear and had a motor that could open the bridge in 5 minutes.

On June 9, 1900, Captain Langfitt of the United States Engineers, objected to the present draw on the bridge on the grounds that it is of such a character as to obstruct navigation on the river, it being of the old style "lift" pattern. The contract for the new draw required that it give a clear space of 60 feet for boats, against about 40 feet allowed by the old draw. Since the letting of this contract Captain Langfitt had made objection to the location of the bridge, recommending that it be moved at least 100 feet up or down stream.

This recommendation, if insisted upon, would not only have been unsatisfactory to the residents of La Center, the present bridge crossed the

river from the principal business street of the town, and to move the location would have necessitated an outlay of not less than \$3,000 by the county for purchasing the right of way and constructing a new bridge. The move would have also required an additional expense for a bridge tender.

During the summer of 1900, 20 tons of steel were shipped from Portland to La Center for the new bridge. The bridge was being replaced at the expense of the county for the benefit of navigation. There was an immense number of railroad ties being shipped from La Center, and barges as well as boats of the Cowlitz River Transportation Company, had often gone above the bridge. The steam barge *Eugene* had difficulty passing through the bridge that summer, and the company halted operations until the new bridge was completed before going back up the river.

On July 22, 1900, the War Department had approved the construction of the new drawbridge, at the site of the current bridge. Upon notification the County Commissioners at once began construction of the new drawbridge. Shortly after work commenced, the Commissioners were again notified that another objection was made by the United States Engineers to the present site of the bridge, and recommending that the new bridge be constructed at a different point.

The Commissioners had presented a report showing the Engineers that construction of a bridge at any other site than the present one, would be unsatisfactory to the people of La Center, a detriment to the public using the bridge, and entail considerable additional expense to the county. This report, together with plans of the proposed new bridge, were forwarded to Washington. The War Department overruled the engineers and consented to the construction of the bridge at the present site.

On September 5, 1900, County Commissioners and the Pacific Bridge Company, the contractor of the new drawbridge, were having considerable trouble arriving at an understanding as to whether the construction was going according to the plans and specifications. The Commissioners, in company with County Surveyor Webster, inspected the bridge, and refused to accept the work on account of faulty construction.

On September 6, 1900, another bridge inspection was made, and the result was that Commissioner Gary and Surveyor Webster still refused to accept the work, while Commissioners Schuele and McBride announced their willingness to accept the bridge as it was, upon the understanding that the contractor would agree to keep the bridge in repair for a period of 3 years. No official action was taken, and the board decided to meet the following day for the purpose of attempting to arrive at a satisfactory settlement.

On September 7, 1900, the county commissioners again refused to accept the completed bridge. The reason was that the truss rods and truss beams

did not correspond in length as they should, and the mistake was in the cutting of the timbers. The bridge company promised to remedy the defects. The repairs were made and the bridge was accepted by the county on September 9, 1900.

In 1906, after just 6 years of service, the wooden trestle had become rotten and was unsafe to cross. The county condemned the structure and started plans for a new drawbridge to replace it. It would take 3 more years for this to come to fruition.

On July 24, 1909, the new drawbridge across the Lewis River was completed next to the old bridge. When the structure was ready to be handed over to the county and the public, the old bridge toppled over and fell into the stream. There were a number of people who had just walked off the old bridge just before it went down. The new \$4,000 bridge was 1,664 feet long with the span on the south side at 1,260 feet with a draw span of 160 feet. The span on the north side was 244 feet.

#### Law and Order in La Center

La Center was a town of morals, that did not tolerate rowdy, disruptive or drunken behavior. Though they did enjoy throwing parties and social gatherings as many were held throughout the years.

On June 14, 1883, Miller & Gaither were both arrested for violating the "Sunday Law." The "Sunday Law" was one of the so called "Blue Laws" that would be passed by a town to insure that businesses would remain closed in observance of the Sabbath day. Both Miller & Gaither posted bond and were to appear at the district court later that October.

On November 2, 1909, City Marshall W. D. Wampler arrested Archie Shaupe for riding his horse on the sidewalk. Judge McCann fined Shaupe \$8 plus costs. Shaupe promptly paid his fine. On December 14, 1909, City Marshall W. D. Wampler was himself arrested for using profane language on the streets. Wampler's profanity cost him \$1 per word and he was fined \$5 plus costs by Justice of the Peace Brothers.

On June 21, 1911, a vote was held to decide if La Center was to go "dry" or remain "wet." The county went dry 18 months ago, when La Center was an incorporated town, after which some of the residents formed a unit which was "wet," No election was held, as it was known about how the election would go, as a canvass of the vote was polled. The "drys" had thought that they have gained enough strength over the few years and were willing to take a chance on a prohibition vote. The result was that La Center remained "wet."

On October 21, 1913, burglars broke into multiple businesses at La Center. It had been 3 years since a store had been robbed in the town. The total amount taken was about \$100. The crooks entered the hardware store of

the Myers & Harrison company, but took nothing of value. At the La Center mercantile store, they gained entrance through the warehouse and took \$5 from the till, \$35 worth of merchandise and 2, 5-gallon cans of gas.

The burglars then went to the Broadway & Poole pool hall and took \$30 worth of pocket knives. The stores that employed night watchers were unmolested. The thieves then ran down to the wharf and stole the launch *Pedro*, that was owned by Louis Harvey. They then used the stolen gas to power up the *Pedro* and then took it downstream.

On October 26, 1914, when John Fleming closed his saloon at Midnight that Friday, La Center took its place in line with the "drys." The passing of the last saloon in La Center made the occasion somewhat of a celebration for the "drys," although impromptu, but nevertheless enjoyable while it lasted, to those with liquor absorbing inclinations. Seekers for thirst quenchers came from View and Amboy, miles away. Kegs were tapped on the broad highway and liquor was free as air. The recently enacted prohibition law was now to be complied with, to all appearances at least. The "drys" were rejoicing as the booze was depleted ending an eventful day.

Well it didn't take long for the bootleggers to take over the business. As on November 3, 1914, the first case of bootlegging since the town went dry was brought to light, when several barrels of booze was found in an old building near the wharf. The liquor was immediately confiscated. It was thought that the illegal spirits were hauled up to La Center on a steamer from Portland.

On November 7, 1914, Captain Peter I. Moe, master of the *La Center*, appeared before customs officials to explain a report that came out of Ridgefield that bootlegging traffic was being conducted at La Center. The report did not mention any names, but said evidence had been collected from a building on the waterfront. Captain Moe said many people believed the report was directed at him, and he made an emphatic denial that bootlegging was being conducted on his property.

Captain Moe then said that after talking to the City Attorney and Marshal, there wasn't any confiscation or collection of evidence in the warehouse and he told the officials the report was false. Moe then further stated that there has not been any liquor carried on the steamer *La Center* since the town went "dry."

### Romance in La Center

On November 22, 1876, William Bolen was married to Athalinda Wampler. She was pleasing to the eye, and he laid siege to her heart, and after a long and arduous struggle he succeeded in persuading her to join hands and hearts with him, and travel the rough road of life together.

On February 2, 1894, an anonymous writer sent a message in the *Vancouver Columbian*; "that a love struck gentleman from St. Helens wishes to enter



the kingdom of connubial bliss with a maiden fair of La Center. Wonder who that St. Helennite is? Keep your eyes open, and it may be that on one of these fine "Sunset" evenings you will see him gliding along in a boat headed for La Center."

On December 3, 1905, one of the first married couples to arrive at La Center, Magilbra and Caroline Anderson celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary. The Anderson's have lived in La Center since they settled there in 1864. The family had a reunion and grandpa received a gold watch and grandma was given a large easy rocker. The Anderson's arrived in Portland on November 22, 1864, and settled at La Center the following month.

On July 30, 1910, to keep "the boys" from knowing that he was about to take a bride, Arthur Fleming, and May Hiatt of La Center, drove 24 miles in the early morning to Vancouver arriving at 8am. They left their homes before daylight, when "the boys" were sleeping. They secured a marriage license and took it back with them, and on the 31st they were married at La Center.

Fleming came to Vancouver last Friday with his witness, O. R. Hiatt, and made application for the license. The bride-to-be could not be present, and the witness could not come yesterday, so the license was partially filled out, to be completed when she arrived. When told that she could have signed the license in La Center, avoiding the long drive to Vancouver. Both immediately said that if they did that "the boys" would find out.

On November 20, 1910, John K Gaither and his wife, celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary. There was a celebration at the grange hall and 250 people attended. Gaither had been the postmaster of La Center for the past 32 years.

### The Pacific Highway Through La Center

The first roads into La Center were from the east. Lockwood Creek Road was built in 1876, so the farmers east of La Center could get their produce to the steamers. Travelers from Vancouver took the road that ran between Pioneer and Stoughton and crossed the Lewis River on the Reed Bridge that used to connect with Lockwood Creek Road. The road north from Salmon Creek, through Pioneer and down the hill into La Center was completed in 1878, and a ferry was used across river until the bridge was completed.

The road going down the hill to the river opposite Pekin from La Center was built in the late 1870's or early 1880's by William Bolen before it was extended to Woodland. NW 9th Ave, which travels north over Hawk hill from La Center, was the early highway before 1914. Hawk hill was bypassed in 1915.

In the summer of 1913, the Interstate bridge over the Columbia at Vancouver was under construction and Clark county was proceeding alone in

the financing and construction of the bridge. The state and counties were preparing to spend \$1,250,000 on the Pacific Highway from Blaine to Vancouver and the worst sections of the highway were to be worked on first. All of which were in Clark and Cowlitz counties.

At the time it was the policy of the administration to expend the money on the worst places so that by 1915, when the Coast was to be thronged with Eastern tourists coming to visit the Panama Exposition, the Pacific Highway, throughout its entire distance in Washington, would be passable and all heavy grades reduced, and more than half of its length was to consist of a finished, graded and drained, hard-surfaced roadway.

In 1914, Clark county spent \$40,000 on the 6 mile section between Woodland and La Center. This was one of the worst sections, at the time on the entire highway, now that the road over Carrolls Mountain was improved. The road builders proceeded south toward La Center beginning at the newly completed Woodland bridge. The grading work was completed in October of 1914. This eliminated the old road over Hawk Hill that was at times impassible.

In 1915, between Vancouver and La Center, the state had trouble obtaining the new right-of-way, and it took almost 3 years to secure this route. The grading and gravelling construction on the highway on this section was completed on August 10, 1919.

By 1920, the Pacific Highway between Pioneer and La Center, that was graded and graveled in 1919, had settled enough to receive pavement. Paving operations would begin between Vancouver and Kalama in 1921 and it would take about 2 years to complete this project. On August 20, 1921, because the town of La Center had incorporated into a municipality a few years ago, a part of the Pacific Highway was to remain unpaved. State law forbids the use of state highway funds within the limits of an incorporated settlement, and for this reason when paving resumed on the Pacific Highway, La Center between the city limits was passed up.

The assessed valuation of the town was \$60,000, and the cost of paving the half mile stretch was about \$20,000, so although the community possessed unlimited amounts of municipal spirit, the funds necessary to finance the project within the incorporated limits were lacking. It was proposed that La Center un-incorporate, allow the state to finish the paving of the highway and then re-incorporate, but the proposal did not have very much interest among the town officers.

With the exception of this small stretch, the highway was graded that year and paved the following year. Work had already commenced on the detour, getting it in shape in preparation of the closing of the highway. Grading operations had already started between La Center and Woodland as a large

steam shovel and a number of teams were at work widening the grade and eliminating small curves. The concrete paving between Pioneer and Woodland that began in 1921, was officially completed on September 14, 1921.

On September 10, 1921, La Center held a barbeque celebration for the opening of the Pacific Highway between Vancouver and Kalama. The cattle, bread and sandwiches were furnished by the citizens of the La Center community. Other attendees brought side dishes and other items for the guests. Later speeches were given and afterwards, athletic contests and a baseball game took place.

It was reported that the 59th infantry was making better time in its overland march on the Pacific Highway from Camp Lewis to Vancouver Barracks than was planned, and that the regiment was to reach Vancouver 4 days earlier than expected. This news caused a change of the plans made by the Prunarians. This organization had planned to attend the La Center barbecue celebrating the opening of the Pacific Highway on Saturday, and on Wednesday to stage a welcome for the troops. A committee had made arrangements for the Prunarians to attend the La Center celebration during the day and return to Vancouver in the evening to receive the troops. This arrangement, however, depended on whether the troops arrived in the evening or not.

On May 1, 1922, paving operations began between La Center and Woodland, and motorists were advised to detour over the Pekin ferry. George McCoy of Vancouver operated the ferry during the construction. The ferry was able to carry 10 cars and was available 16 hours a day until construction was completed. The paving between La Center and Woodland was completed on October 1, 1922. Now motorists had a continuous paved road between Vancouver and Kalama eliminating some of the worst stretches of highway.

As crews were busy paving the highway during the summer of 1922, there was a particularly dangerous point on the new pavement. Lieutenant Irwin of the Portland traffic department, made the trip over the new road. The dangerous section was at La Center just west of the river crossing and was only dangerous when traveling northbound. At this point the new bridge was under construction and the new pavement was laid down almost to the new bridge on a grade that swung right toward the new structure, which was west of the old bridge.

There was a detour that utilized the old bridge. At the time Lt. Irwin came through, there were no warning signs and Irwin, as he was driving back to Portland, followed the new pavement right down to the new bridge and stopped the car when it was right on the brink of a 40 foot drop into the river. There were 3 of 4 more cars behind Irwin when he stopped. He reported the danger and warning signs were posted.

On December 16, 1922, plans for a new bridge over the Lewis River at La Center was approved and construction was to begin in 1923. The construction work did not interfere with traffic as the site was located a few feet west of the old bridge. The approaches at both ends of the new bridge were already completed.

On May 24, 1923, the new bridge at La Center was approved at the Federal level. The new concrete bridge measured 1,150 feet in length, was 20 feet wide and had two 3.5 foot sidewalks. Work began on August 23, 1923, by H. E. Doring, of Portland. The sand was brought in from the Columbia River and the gravel came from the Willamette River. This structure was the longest reinforced concrete bridge built on the state highway system at the time.

The bridge consisted of a 142 foot deck, with 4 hinged arches 25 feet long, and 20 "T-beam" spans at 42 feet long each. The foundations consisted of very deeply driven piles, extending through about 60 feet of sandy loam to sand and gravel. The arch footings had heavily battered piles. The bridge was completed in October of 1924.

The bridge lasted for 77 years and was replaced in 2001.