



Pioneer woman often carried grain to Cedar Creek grist mill.



Lily Atwood looks back on nearly a century in La Center

La Center past recalled: People were 'tough then'

By **BOB BECK**
People Section Editor

RIDGEFIELD — "Sure, they were hard times, tough times . . . but, oh, how I'd love to live them again."

Lily Atwood is a tiny lady, almost seeming to disappear into the wheelchair to which she is confined. But her eyes sparkle with the joy of remembering yesterdays, when she talks about the LaCenter of the 1880's and 1890's.

A resident of the Ridgefield Rest Home since she was injured in an accident, Miss Atwood, 94, is always willing to share her memories of another time and another breed of people.

"Oh, we were tough then . . . we had to be," she explains, as she spins tales of working for \$1 a week and for being left alone for days at a time when she was less than ten years old.

She was, she said, born in the St. Johns area of Portland in 1879. Her mother, who was widowed when Miss Atwood was an infant, cared for her three small children by hiring out as a house cleaner and a cook.

Miss Atwood was about two when they moved to La Center, the village where she was destined to spend the rest of her life.

In those days, she recalled, one could take a steamboat from Portland up the Lewis River to La Center when the river was high. Their home was a "scow house," so called because it was at one time used to ferry cattle across the river.

In those pioneer days, long before welfare and social security, her mother had to find work wherever she could to keep the tiny family together. This meant she often had to leave for a week at a time, cooking in a logging camp. She left Lily, still only nine years old, in charge of the home, to do the cooking and cleaning and to take care of the two smaller children.

"I usually made sourdough bread or biscuits or pancakes . . . Afraid to stay alone? No, we were never afraid. We did just as mother told us to do before she left and everything worked out just fine."

Later Lily went to live with a family named Gaither. He was the La Center postmaster and had a small farm.

Her most vivid memories are of riding up to the old Cedar Creek grist mill to have wheat ground into flour.

"Nobody had store-bought bread then. Everyone raised his own wheat and took it to George Barr at the grist mill (which was constructed in 1876).

"Mrs. Gaither would fill two big sacks with wheat and I'd ride up to the grist mill. Mr. Barr would grind it into a coarse, brown flour, taking part of the wheat as payment."

She recalled that Mr. and Mrs. Barr and their three children lived at the mill and took in boarders. Even in those pre-women's lib days, Mrs. Barr apparently wore the pants in the family, making her husband do the laundry for the family and boarders.

"She'd holler, 'Pa, come in here and wash these clothes.' He'd fill the tubs with water, roll up his sleeves and do it all."

Although still not a teen-ager, Miss Atwood was forced to work to keep the small family fed. She picked apples and cleaned houses and cooked — all for a salary of \$1 a week. "Those dollars really looked big, though," she said. "We called them hog dollars."

After attending La Center schools, Miss Atwood took up cooking in nearby logging camps. What did the loggers like?

"Anything, as long as there was plenty of it. I cooked huge kettles of beans, cabbage, carrots. Lots of sauerkraut. Oh, how they loved sauerkraut. Mother used to sell it to the saloons where the men would eat sauerkraut and drink beer."

She worked seven days a week, cooking for the loggers, although sometimes she got Sundays off to go home and visit for a few hours.

Cooking for loggers was hard work. "Whenever I heard the dishes rattle, I knew I had better run into the dining hall with another pot of food.

"People don't work nearly as hard as they used to. But I enjoyed it. We had our good times, too . . ."

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