Skagit County encompasses some of the most spectacular scenery in Washington state. From Rosario Strait and the flats (a riverine delta) to the forested gorges of the Skagit River to the craggy Cascades Mountains, it is an area rich in nature and human history. Home to native peoples for millennia, it attracted the attention of European and American explorers as early as the 1790s. Euro-American settlement began in earnest in the early 1860s. After the first dike was built on the LaConner flats in 1863, the county began to emerge as a major agricultural center. Throughout the twentieth century the area's reputation as a world leader in seed production increased along with its importance as a fishery and lumber producer and as an international destination for recreational salmon and steelhead fishing. Today, the county boasts good schools, museums, performing arts theaters, Skagit Valley College, malls and specialty commercial districts as well as wonderful state and national parks. It is also the center of Washington state's petroleum industry.

First Peoples of Skagit

People have lived in present-day Skagit County and its environs for nearly 10,000 years. Some time around 1300, a new group came down from the interior, possibly using the Skagit River. They came to be known as the Coast Salish. These tribal groups were largely extended families living in villages in cedar plank houses. They had active, viable communities that socialized and traded far beyond their villages and region. They fished for salmon, collected clams and mussels, and used fire to encourage bracken fern and camas to grow on natural prairies.

John Work, a trader with Hudson's Bay Company, came through the area in December 1824 and noted several "Scaadchet" villages as he crossed Skagit Bay and went up a winding Swinomish Channel. In 1850 there were 11 different tribal groups in Skagit County. As Work did, Euro-American settlers called them all Skagit Indians not seeing the differences.

After signing the Point Elliot Treaty of 1855, many of these tribal groups moved to a reservation on the southeastern end of Fidalgo Island. Others chose not to sign or could not make the signing due to severe weather. Today, there are eight tribal communities in the county, among them the Swinomish, Upper Skagit, Sauk-Siuattle, and Samish.

Euro-Americans

Rosario Strait is on the most western edge of Skagit County. The Spaniard Juan Francisco de Eliza charted it in 1791, and named it Canal de Fidalgo. Thick forests lined its eastern coastline. A year later George Vancouver (1758-1798) discovered an inner waterway while exploring Rosario Strait. He named it Deception Pass, but the Wilkes Expedition of 1841 determined that the area north of the pass was actually an island. Charles Wilkes (1798-1877) called it Perry's Island (present-day Fidalgo Island).

The first Euro-American to live in the county, was Englishman William (Blanket Bill) Jarman (1827-1912) who came in 1852 with his Coast Salish wife, Alice, settling for a short time near present-day Edison. The earliest permanent Euro-American settlement began on the long, narrow peninsula on Fidalgo Island later known as March's Point. Attracted by the prairies where the Swinomish cultivated camas and bracken fern, Enoch

Compton planted potatoes there in 1853, then went back up to Bellingham Bay to work in the coal mines.

Settlement progressed in fits and starts for the next few years, due in part to the 1855 Indian War and raids by northern Indians. By 1860 Compton returned to Fidalgo. Joining him were Hiram H. March, William Munks, and James Kavanaugh among others. Several of the men came with their Coast Salish wives. In 1870, Munks opened a store at his wharf.

Settlement on the county's mainland took hold when Michael Sullivan (1850?-1912) and Samuel Calhoun began diking the marshy flats near present day LaConner in 1863. At first ridiculed, they proved that with diking, agriculture was possible on what was thought to be useless wetland. Diking became an important part of settling the county.

Throughout the 1860s and 1870s, new settlements and trading posts appeared on Guemes Island, Samish Island where Daniel Dingwall set up the first logging operation in 1867, Edison, and the south fork of the Skagit River. LaConner developed from a trading post across from the Swinomish Reservation under the watchful eye of John Conner and his wife Louisa for whom the town was named. Amos Bowman (1839-1894) dreamed of a Northern Pacific terminus on Fidalgo and in 1879 built a small store and post office in a place he called Anacortes, named for *his* wife.

Meanwhile, enormous logjams blocked the Skagit River and prevented river traffic from passing through. In a three-year effort completed in 1879, workers finally removed the masses of logs around Mount Vernon. The removal of the logjams opened up access to the interior upriver. Mount Vernon began to grow with the arrival of sternwheelers and upriver towns took root. LaConner was for a time the leading town, but growth brought changes in 1883.

Skagit County Comes Into Its Own

Washington Territory formally came into being on March 2, 1853. At that time, Skagit County was a part of Island County, which included the present counties of Snohomish, Island, Whatcom, and San Juan as well. A year later, in March 1854, a small group of settlers broke away from Island County and formed Whatcom County. Skagit country went with it. For the next 30 years, many of the founding settlers did business up on Bellingham Bay or held territorial positions that kept them there while they proved up their claims down on Fidalgo and in other county settlements. In November 1883, a group of local legislators fed up with Whatcom's dominance and convinced of their own future, successfully passed a bill in the territorial legislature that separated Skagit from Whatcom. LaConner was Skagit's new county seat, but only for a short time. Mount Vernon would claim that title a year later.

The first order of business was roads, bridges, and ferries. The county built a bridge over the Sullivan Slough near La Conner and four ferries were set up on the Skagit River. A "horseman" went for 10 cents, a "footman" for five. Cattle and sheep went for 25 cents.

Throughout the rest of the nineteenth century, the new county continued to grow. Tiny, hardscrabble communities established public schools. Logging camps abounded, providing steady employment and open space for more farming. In 1886, Mortimer Cook opened the first shingle mill near present day Sedro-Woolley. Mining camps up the Skagit River and on Ruby Creek in 1879 brought dubious results for gold, but they inspired new settlements when limestone, coal, iron, and talc was found: Hamilton, Birdsview, Baker (later Concrete) and Marblemount among others. The mining district became an important area for investment and growth.

With new communities came the demand for roads and the railroad, which came to Sedro-Woolley in 1889 from Fairhaven up on Bellingham Bay. There was also a desire for better communication.

The Western Union Telegraph Company had put in a line that ran through the Swinomish Indian reservation in 1864, but with better roads and logjams gone, the mails improved. Delivery between Seattle and Mount Vernon went to three times a week. In 1886, the Skagit River Telephone proposed a line from the mouth of the Skagit River to the Sauk River. It did not develop beyond incorporation, but three years later Anacortes was using this brand new technology. By 1894, Mount Vernon and Sedro-Woolley had their first telephones. Wheelock & Glover and the Independent Telephone helped bring long distance calling to communities around the county. A free local call could be made from general stores, charging long distance by the quarter-minute.

County Industries Grow Up

Fish canneries opened in Anacortes in the late 1890s amid anti-Chinese sentiment and a national Depression. The industry would be an economic mainstay up to the latter half of twentieth century.

But agriculture continued to be the main industry. For a long time, oats and eventually peas were the mainstay, but new crops took on prominence just after World War I. One of these crops was the growing of seeds. A decade before forming the Puget Sound Seed Garden in 1883, A. G. Tillinghast had grown cabbage seed. Beets, flax, spinach, mustard, and cabbage were all attempted. Several other farmers joined him in the 1920s. At first the crops were harvested by hand, but eventually various combine machines were invented to help with the harvest. In the 1930s, the Charles H. Lilly Company developed seed production further. At one point Skagit County grew 95 percent of the cabbage seed produced in the United States. All seeds were grown under contract to one or another seed company.

Tulip bulb production is an extension of the seed production industry. Mary Brown Stewart started growing tulips in 1906 with bulbs from Holland, but tulips were "only a small part of the crop and the whole operation was of modest size" (Barrett). In 1926 her son Sam Stewart started the Tulip Grange Bulb Farm near LaConner. Marinus Lefeber, a friend of Sam Stewart, moved their Whatcom County operation down to a farm along Memorial Highway near Mount Vernon. The farm was in business until 2002. Other bulb growers joined them after 1945. By 1997, 700 acres were used for bulb farming, with a value of $42 million.

In the late 1920s, farmers began growing vegetables commercially for large packing outfits such as the Bozeman Canning Company of Montana, the San Juan island Company, the Skagit Valley Packing Corporation at Avon, and the MacMillian Canning Company at LaConner.

They mainly packed peas, but also packed green beans, spinach, and several kinds of vegetables and fruits. S. A. Moffet, the second company in the nation to get into freezing vegetables, built a freezing plant in Mount Vernon in 1940 after successfully starting the precooling process of 50 tons of peas in a LaConner farmer's barn in 1936.

During World War II, there was a labor shortage while the men were away in the service. Braceros (farmworkers) were brought to Skagit County from Mexico in large numbers to help harvest the hay and pea crops, important to the dairy industry for fodder. The braceros camp at Burlington was the largest mobile camp in the United States.

Cows Galore

Skagit County was also known for its dairy industry. At the turn of the century there were as many as 900 dairies in the county. These dairy farms were small family operations where every cow had a name and mixed ancestry. These were called "grades" (Younquist). Changes came to the industry in the 1920s with pasteurization and purebred stock.

The first cattle breeding programs began in the early 1930s. The Youngquists paid $12,000 for a Pontiac Segi purebred cow. A neighbor, Jim Hulbert had purebred Herefords. Milk production increased along with the

quality of the stock. Butter was made at home for a long time. Milk was sold to a creamery such as the Mount Vernon Creamer, which began to take everything for milk and butter. The Youngquists hauled it in by horses until they got a truck. In 1907 a "Carnation" condensory plant came in and took 10-gallon cans.

Increased production and breeding programs were expensive for farmers. To help them, co-ops were organized to ease the cost. Darigold was the first co-op in the area. During 1940s and 1950s, Darigold had 1,800 members. Each paid $10 a cow to get into the organization.

Skagit County Today

The county continued to be a rural area well into the twentieth century, with pockets of light industry in Mount Vernon, Burlington, and other towns. These towns and some of the outlying districts had electricity, but as late as 1940, many of the older houses were still not wired. The logging industry still provided important income to many families.

Many of its roads were graveled, though the Pacific Highway built by the Federal Government in 1915 had a "hard-surfaced" road. It came up from the Mexican border in Calexico, California via Seattle. The name changed to US Highway 99 in 1926. In those days it took several hours to come and see the sights of Skagit County and the flats. In the 1960s Interstate-5 replaced 99, sometimes going over the old road, other times paralleling it. The new freeway brought more people to the valley.

Today, Skagit County is one of the fastest growing counties in the state with a population of approximately 106,000. Mount Vernon, its seat, has a population of 26,670, but Burlington across the Skagit River has grown a whopping 6.4 percent in just a few years. New developments in Anacortes and west of Mount Vernon and the arrival of golf-course communities and homes above the $300,000 range have begun to change the face of the county.

Such increase in urban areas has put pressure on the county's agriculture. Although farming remains one of the most important activities in the Valley, since 1987 the number of farms has declined from 806 farms to fewer than 710. Nine out of 10 farm couples depend on off-farm income to keep their farms going. Despite this, old and new crops continue to bring substantial dollar numbers to the county.

Skagit County is a major producer of cabbage, table beet, and spinach seed for the world. About half of the world's beet and Brussels sprout seed are grown in the Valley. Fifty percent of the U.S. supply of parsley, cabbage, and parsnip seed and 90 to 100 percent of the U.S. supply of Chinese kale, Chinese cabbage, Chinese mustard, and Brussels sprout seed are also grown in Skagit County. A new development has been in the growth of nurseries, greenhouses, and organic farming. And although peas have declined dramatically, the potato is enjoying status as the number one crop in the county.

Today, Skagit County is a vibrant place to live in. It balances its historic roots and the influx of new cultures and faces, while enjoying the benefits of its growing cities and the peace and beauty of its spectacular mountains, rivers, forests, and farmland.

Sources: Wayne Suttles, *The Handbook of American Indian: Vol. III, NW Coast* **(Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1990);** *Chechacos All: The Pioneering of Skagit* **ed. by Margaret Wills (Mount Vernon, WA: Skagit County Historical Society, 1973), Richard White,** *Land Use, Environment, and Social Change: The Shaping of Island County* **(Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1980); Martin Sampson, Upper Skagit elder, oral interview, August 1, 1961, Skagit County Oral History Preservation Project, Skagit County Historical Museum; Polk's** *Skagit County Directory* **1905-06, 1907-08, 1917-18 and 1921-22; Oral interview with Emil Youngquist, p. 17-19, Skagit County Oral History Preservation Project, La Conner, Washington;** *Skagit County Grows Up* **ed. by Helen Barrett, Anne Carlson, and Margaret Willis (Mount Vernon, WA: Skagit County Historical Society, 1983); "Past Tulip Growers of the Skagit Valley," Skagit Valley Tulip Festival Website (http://www.tulipfestival.org/HISTORY/hist_growers-other.html);** *Skagit in Transition Demography 2003,* **Skagit County Health Department.**