From Chopping Trees to Shopping Sprees: The Environmental History of Lynnwood

by Brandon Dilbeck

Editor's note: Ask most people today, "What's in Lynnwood, Washington?" and you will most often hear the reply: "The Alderwood Mall." Because Alderwood Mall is located within the present Lynnwood city limits, the former distinctiveness of Alderwood Manor as opposed to Lynnwood is mostly blurred in current general opinion. Fifty years from now, when Lynnwood will celebrate its centennial, the historical differences may blur even further.

Brandon Dilbeck, an undergraduate at the University of Washington, grew up in Lynnwood and chose his hometown as the subject for this research paper, written in May 2009 for Professor Linda Nash's class, History of the Americas 221. The assignment, he wrote, "was called the Place Paper, and the idea was to explore some place of some importance, and to look into its history, [with] particular emphasis on how the area's environment shaped its growth." Although his clever title suggests that his subject is Alderwood Manor, Brandon's paper is in fact about Alderwood Manor *and* Lynnwood considered together. Moreover, the main focus is not the history of Lynnwood as such but on environmental changes in Alderwood Manor and how its proximity to major transportation routes allowed it to survive. It may need to be emphasized, however, that the cost of survival was the merging of its identity with that of Lynnwood. The distinct history of Lynnwood, and the pioneers who were *not* chicken farmers, has yet to be written.

Brandon had visited Heritage Park in the past and seen photos of the logging that blazed the way for the Interurban. "I knew that the area had been through many great changes in a relatively recent stretch of time." He had fun learning about the Alderwood Manor chicken farms and expresses amazement that this aspect of local history has all but disappeared. A visit to the SIGS Library at the Humble House as part of his research for this paper led to his gracious permission for his paper's publication. Congratulations to Brandon for receiving a grade of 4.0 on his paper, and his first publication credit.

Lynnwood, Washington is home to a plethora of stores in the east of the city and along a few major roads, with suburban housing essentially everywhere else. Before the beginning of the twentieth century, the Lynnwood area existed mainly as a dense old-growth forest situated between the previously established cities of Seattle and Everett. Between then and now, it became the second most productive chicken egg community in the country. Lynnwood owes much of the success in its history to the opportune development of transportation that passed through, and to the fertile land and favorable climate, which allowed great forests and numerous chicken farms to thrive. Residents and entrepreneurs shaped Lynnwood's history and present condition by making the best of the opportunities that their environment, their surroundings, and even their own failures offered them.

At the beginning of the 1900s, there were many trees in what is now Lynnwood. Many of the trees between Seattle and Everett were tall, old-growth evergreens, primarily Douglas-firs and cedar trees. Some of them had grown to be as large as 200 feet tall and

eight feet in diameter, and they densely populated the area.[1] Much of the ground was completely shaded by the branches overhead. One man who was born in the area and hunted there as a child, described there being "a 4- to 6-inch layer of fir needles as a carpet on the ground."[2] The region's plentiful rainfall and moderate temperatures made it perfect for these huge evergreen forests to grow.

This land between Seattle and Everett was the habitat of very many exceptionally large trees at the beginning of the twentieth century, but it was home to very few people. Only a few tough pioneer families wanted to live in the area. They made a living by clearing small sections of land, growing vegetables (potatoes, mostly), and selling them to logging company camps throughout the area.[3] Not many families decided to settle in the area, but those who did fared rather well. Others did not wish to settle in the area because they felt that it was too remote: a trip between Seattle and Everett required people to take a two-day hike between the two cities along a coarse trail that was created when a long-abandoned telegraph line was installed. Alternatively, travelers could take a steamer trip through Puget Sound or Lake Washington and then somehow make their way inland to the homesteads.[4] There was little desire to develop in such a remote area when there were already well-established cities just to the north and south. The area's isolation caused people to choose to live in either Seattle or Everett instead.

As early as 1860, loggers began taking down trees in Brown's Bay, an inlet on Puget Sound which is roughly west of where Lynnwood is now.[5] After cutting down all the easily reachable trees on the Puget Sound shore or on the rivers, the loggers went inland, using large horse or oxen teams to pull the logs downhill into Puget Sound. Later, the development of new technology, such as locomotives and donkey engines, helped the loggers get the logs into the Sound much more easily. Once the logs were in the water, logging teams gathered them into booms and floated them to mills in Seattle.[6] Floating huge logs across water is a relatively easy way to transport them, so this was an advantageous place for loggers to cut down trees because it was very close to the water.

Not many loggers logged the area until the Puget Mill Co. started its logging business in the Lynnwood area. In the mid-nineteenth century, Puget Mill began buying forestland in Washington to ensure that it had enough trees to keep its mill in Port Gamble in operation for a long time. By 1909, it owned 175,000 acres in Washington. Puget Mill decided to log the 6,000 acres between Seattle and Everett first. One reason for this was that Snohomish County had a substantial tax on standing timber. The aim of this tax was to accelerate the development of the area and to get more people to move in, and there was plenty of demand for more housing. The Klondike Gold Rush of 1897 had doubled Seattle's population to about 80,000 people by 1890.[7] This sudden boom in population increased Seattle's population density, giving much of the population the

---

[1] Wing, Warren W. 1988. *To Seattle by Trolley*. Edmonds, Washington: Pacific Fast Mail, 21.
[2] Humphrey, Robert. June 8, 1988. "From Logging and Chicken Farms: Alderwood." *The Seattle Times*, sec. H. Retrieved May 4, 2009 from http://newsbank.com.
[3] Broom, Judith M. 1990. *Lynnwood: The Land, the People, the City*. Seattle, Washington: Peanut Butter Publishing, 3.
[4] Little, Marie and Kevin K. Stadler and the Alderwood Manor Heritage Association. 2006. *Images of America: Alderwood Manor*. Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 7; Broom, 41.
[5] Broom, 4.
[6] Humphrey, Robert. August 20, 1991. "History – In the Very Beginning Was a Blanket of Timber." *The Seattle Times*, 14; Little, 15. Retrieved May 4, 2009 from http://newsbank.com.
[7] Broom, 5, 50.

desire to move elsewhere. In addition, the few settlers living in the Lynnwood area at the time increasingly demanded roads, electricity, and other development. The overall demand for growth within the area, the Snohomish County standing timber tax, and the increasing population in nearby areas were all key factors in Puget Mill's decision to log the Lynnwood area first.

Meanwhile, the Everett and Interurban Railway Company, incorporated by Fred E. SANDER, began building an electric railway from Greenwood in North Seattle to Everett in 1902. There had been plenty of demand for better transportation within the area for years. Progress on this railway was slow. In 1908, STONE and WEBSTER from Boston took over the company, renaming it the Seattle-Everett Traction Company, and it had the railway completed by 1910.[8] The company intended to extend the railway all the way north to Bellingham, but the project was never finished.

Local residents called this railway the "Interurban." It connected the citizens along its route in such a way that a trip that formerly might have taken two days instead took only an hour. According to a 1931 timetable, a ride along the extent of the railway from Seattle to Everett took only about 70 minutes, including the time to stop at each of the 27 stops. Passenger trips north- and southbound departed from about 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. every hour. At night, the Interurban transported freight, primarily wood. Because the Interurban made transportation so easy, it had the effect of unifying the entire Puget Sound area. A "shopper and worker who didn't own a car found it easier to go to the city by rail" than to the businesses in his or her own vicinity.[9] This forever changed the lives of the few people establishing homes between Seattle and Everett, since they now lived within an hour of Seattle and Everett. The Interurban opened many possibilities for everyone in the area.

As the Interurban tied together Seattle and Everett, Puget Mill continued logging South Snohomish County. By 1920, in contract with Brown's Bay Logging Company and its successor Admiralty Logging, Puget Mill had cleared nearly all of the forested land between Seattle and Everett. What remained was thousands of acres of "barren, desolate [land] with an abundance of ten- to 30-foot stumps."[10] Many mill owners were known to cut down all the trees in an area and then leave it for another expanse of land, but Puget Mill realized it would be able to make more money by selling the land.[11] They cleaned up the land, named the area Alderwood Manor, and divided it into five- to ten-acre lots.[12] They advertised these lots as chicken farms as far as Chicago, and hundreds of interested people came from as far as the Midwest.[13] Puget Mill saw the potential that this large stretch of land had, and knew it was able to make money by selling it.

Several elements helped Puget Mill sell many of the chicken farm lots. One important factor was Alderwood Manor's proximity to Seattle and Everett, as well as its location on the Interurban. This allowed quick, easy transportation to those cities, allowing families to go shopping or get additional jobs. Another factor that encouraged many future farmers to buy lots is that Puget Mill wanted to make it very easy for farmers to obtain

[8] Ibid., 44.
[9] Ibid., 43, 45.
[10] Ibid., 5.
[11] Humphrey, "From Logging."
[12] Koch, Anne. January 25, 1990. "City Hatched from Chicken Farms." *The Seattle Times*, sec. C. Retrieved May 4, 2009 from http://newsbank.com.
[13] Langston, Jennifer. January 22, 2003. "Historic Lynnwood? Well, Yes." *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, sec. B. Retrieved May 4, 2009 from http://newsbank.com.

the land. Lots went up for sale starting in 1917, at $200 per acre. Not only was the price affordable, but the down payment was small, and the Puget Mill Company offered to give "assistance to build your home and the chicken houses as needed."[14] This was to entice new farmers with minimal farming experience of any kind. Puget Mill also constructed a "demonstration farm," designed to attract inexperienced farmers and convince them to buy a plot of land. The demonstration farm was a $250,000 thirty-acre plot next to the Interurban station, owned and operated by Puget Mill.[15] Here, they grew mainly poultry and some fruit, nuts and corn "to demonstrate how easily anyone, with or without experience, could become an 'agriculturist.'"[16] Puget Mill was successfully able to sell many of these chicken farms to a wide variety of customers.

Puget Mill's advertising worked phenomenally, and through the 1920s, chicken farming at Alderwood Manor was remarkably successful. The population in 1922 was about 1,500 people, a drastic increase of its 1917 population of 22. In 1922, there were 200,000 hens in Alderwood Manor.[17] An average chicken laid 60 to 100 eggs each spring, but one hen laid 326 eggs in one year alone. Her nickname was "Babe Ruth" because "she had had a 'home run' nearly every day."[18] Babe Ruth's outstanding egg laying broke the previous world record of 312 eggs, valuing her at $10,000 in 1922, but many other chickens in Alderwood Manor had records from 300 to 319 eggs per year.[19] The amount of eggs laid each week could fill three boxcars;[20] "laid end to end they would stretch from New York to San Francisco."[21] At its peak, Alderwood Manor was the second-largest egg-producing community in the country, second to Petaluma, California.[22] Alderwood Manor was home to many people specializing in poultry farming, and businesses thrived.

Chicken farming tended to work well in Alderwood Manor partially because kale thrived in the environment. It grew plentifully and remained green throughout the year thanks to the nutritious and slightly marshy soil, which drained well. Also helpful was the moderate weather, which is neither too hot in the summer nor too cold in winter, and plentifully rainy. The moderate weather was also beneficial to the health of the hens, providing plenty of drinking water and comfortable temperatures. Farmers used the kale grown in the area mainly to supplement the hens' diet.[23] Kale is highly nutritious, and was given credit for giving Alderwood Manor a nationwide reputation for producing "rich, full-flavored" eggs, which allowed these eggs to sell in New York for higher prices than Eastern-grown chicken eggs.[24] Kale was also beneficial to the quality of the soil, allowing for persistent growth of the crop, which continued to allow chicken farmers to produce many chicken eggs for several years.

---

[14] Broom, 51; Humphrey, "From Logging."
[15] Koch.
[16] Broom, 5.
[17] Archer, Michelle. July 22, 2007. "From Egg Fame to Mall Neighbor." *The Seattle Times*, sec. D; Broom, 55. Retrieved May 4, 2009 from http://newsbank.com.
[18] Broom, 53.
[19] Doig, Frank C. February 17, 1922. "Washington America's Egg Basket." *The Issaquah Press*, vol. 6, no. 23, 3. Retrieved May 4, 2009 from http://news.google.com.
[20] Thompson, Lynn. April 7, 2004. "Egg Farms Have Mostly Flown Coop." *The Seattle Times*, sec. H. Retrieved May 4, 2009 from http://newsbank.com.
[21] Broom, 49.
[22] Ibid., 5.
[23] Doig; Broom, 53.
[24] Doig.

Despite the ease of growing plentiful amounts of kale, many farmers eventually turned out to be unsuccessful at poultry farming. As many as 85 percent of the farmers in Alderwood Manor had no previous farming experience before Puget Mill sold the land to them,[25] and they were unable to cope when circumstances took a turn for the worse. The Great Depression of the 1930s was one of the greatest sources of difficulty. The bad economy caused the price of a dozen eggs to drop from a dollar to only 10 cents.[26] Chickens need to eat a lot of food—not just kale—and when the cost of growing their food or buying it elsewhere was no longer offset by the income from selling the eggs, many of the farms failed. Some people defaulted on their payments to Puget Mill and were forced to give the land back.[27] However, some others were not willing to quit. They took advantage of Alderwood Manor's proximity to Seattle and the easy commute along the Interurban, and they were able to find jobs in the city—in shipyards or canneries, for example—while still living in Alderwood Manor.[28] Unfortunately, the farms nearly all struggled, and the Alderwood Manor poultry business days soon ended.

While the agriculture industry was struggling, the Interurban railway was also approaching its final days. In 1927, Washington State Route 99 ("Highway 99" in Lynnwood) was constructed roughly a mile and a half west of Alderwood Manor.[29] This provided commutes and other travelers with an alternative to the Interurban. As personal automobiles increased in popularity, more people drove on Highway 99, and fewer people regularly rode the Interurban. The poor economy of the 1930s dissuaded people from buying cars, and this probably prevented the Interurban from immediately falling into disuse.[30] However, the trains eventually quit running in 1939.[31] It seemed as though between the chicken farms and the Interurban railway, everything Alderwood Manor had benefiting it was abruptly vanishing.

Highway 99 brought new business and new customers to the area, though. Businessmen in Alderwood Manor could see that the Interurban was dying, but that the highway would soon be bringing many potential customers into the area. Many entrepreneurs connected Alderwood Manor to the highway with a new road which today is one of Lynnwood's busiest, and built new businesses to derive some benefit from the imminent stream of customers. Motorists were the key targets of many of these businesses because they were moderately wealthy and could probably afford to buy merchandise or services to keep their cars maintained.[32] Perhaps this is why there are now so many car-related businesses—new and used car dealers, repair shops, and until recently a scrap metal junkyard—overwhelming the Highway 99 corridor in North Lynnwood. Other types of business not related to automobiles, such as grocery stores, restaurants, motels, and later, department stores, were built along the highway.[33] One man planted acreage just east of the highway and named it by combining his wife's name Lynn with the "wood" part of Alderwood—Lynnwood—and when nearby businesses

[25] Broom, 56.
[26] Koch.
[27] Thompson; Humphrey, "History"; Broom, 55.
[28] Langston.
[29] Broom, 47.
[30] Ibid., 47.
[31] Little, 8.
[32] Broom, 41, 81.
[33] Ibid., 48.

copied the name, its use grew until everyone would be calling the area Lynnwood.[34] The new stream of potential customers and huge increase in shopping centers and businesses brought through the area saved many of the Alderwood Manor residents financially.

Then, there was a surge of people moving into Lynnwood. A housing shortage in Seattle encouraged residents to move out and live somewhere more open and less populated. This also coincided with a national increase in demand for suburban housing, which there was plenty of space for in Lynnwood. Those people still owning defunct chicken farms were able to easily convert their chicken houses into homes suitable for prospective residents, and they were able to sell their land for substantial sums of money because of the large demand for suburban land.[35] Also appealing were the good school district, the area's proximity to Seattle, and especially the huge number of stores becoming available to shoppers.[36] Despite the disappearance of the Interurban and the chicken business, Lynnwood continued to flourish: its commercial development grew steadily but rapidly over time, and Alderwood Mall was built in 1979; the residential suburbs are also still expanding today.

Today, it seems that few residents of Lynnwood really know about their city's history, particularly because many of the historic buildings were demolished when Interstate 5 was established through where many of the old buildings used to be. In all of Snohomish County, the state has licensed only two egg companies, but neither actually has any chickens, and only one, Northgate Egg Farm, is in Lynnwood. Northgate Egg Farm simply receives eggs from farms in Skagit County and redistributes them to hotels, restaurants, and fishing vessels in the area.[37] Heritage Park, just off Interstate 5, houses several of the historic buildings that still exist today, including the cottage of the Demonstration Farm's superintendent, and Interurban Car 55, a trolley from when the Interurban railway was still in operation. The Lynnwood city logo also features exclusively a silhouette of the front end of a trolley, referencing the Interurban's influence on the creation of the city. There hardly seems to be any reminder of Lynnwood's old chicken farming days, though.

Lynnwood got its big start due to its proximity to Seattle, Everett, and the Puget Sound, but its residents' ability to adapt to changing situations is what allowed the city to continue to prosper. It is thanks to the ideal growing conditions that trees grew here, encouraging logging and clearing, and that land was good for farming, encouraging populace and agriculture, which encouraged many people to move to Lynnwood to live and work. Now, the city is full of suburban neighborhoods and miles of shopping plazas. Lynnwood looks the way it does today because of the important events of the past, which circled significantly around the success and then the failure of both the Interurban and the chicken farming. It looks nothing like the old-growth forests or the barren chicken farmland it used to.

Bibliography

Archer, Michelle. July 22, 2007. "From Egg Fame to Mall Neighbor." *The Seattle Times*, sec. D. Retrieved May 4, 2009 from http://newsbank.com.

[34] Little, 8.
[35] Archer; Little, 8.
[36] Humphrey, "History."
[37] Thompson.

Broom, Judith M. 1990. *Lynnwood: The Land, the People, the City*. Seattle: Washington: Peanut Butter Publishing.
Doig, Frank C. February 17, 1922. "Washington America's Egg Basket." *The Issaquah Press*, vol. 6, no. 23, 3. Retrieved May 4, 2009 from http://news.google.com.
Humphrey, Robert. June 8, 1988. "From Logging and Chicken Farms: Alderwood." *The Seattle Times*, sec. H. Retrieved May 4, 2009 from http://newsbank.com.
Koch, Anne. January 25, 1990. "City Hatched from Chicken Farms." *The Seattle Times*, sec. C.
Langston, Jennifer. January 22, 2003. "Historic Lynnwood? Well, Yes." *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, sec. B. Retrieved May 4, 2009 from http://newsbank.com.
Little, Marie and Kevin K. Stadler and the Alderwood Manor Heritage Association. 2006. *Images of America*: *Alderwood Manor*. Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing.
Thompson, Lynn. April 7, 2004. "Egg Farms Have Mostly Flown Coop." *The Seattle Times*, sec. H. Retrieved May 4, 2009 from http://newsbank.com.
Wing, Warren W. 1988. *To Seattle by Trolley*. Edmonds, Washington: Pacific Fast Mail.