
SNOQUALMIE VALLEY HISTORICAL MUSEUM

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Elk in the Upper Snoqualmie Valley

By Dave Battey



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Elk Return to Meadowbrook Farm — September, 2003

The Snoqualmie indigenous peoples relied on the natural prairie between Snoqualmie and North Bend as both pasture and garden plot. Left barren by the retreating glaciers, the wide flat grassland was kept free of brush and trees by periodic burning – both natural and human perpetrated. The Indians knew that periodic burning kept the prairie grass healthy, provided the edges between the prairie and the forest where deer and elk prospered and provided optimal

growing conditions for native foods such as the little trailing blackberries (the larger Himalayan and Evergreen Cut-leaf blackberries were introduced post 1885), bracken fern (the roots were a food staple), Tiger lilies and Camass (native root crops).

Former Museum director Greg Watson emphasized this food providing role in a 1999 letter to the City of North Bend as follows: "The land we call Tollgate Farm includes part of the ancient Snoqualmie Prairie, a large tract of burn-maintained open space stewarded by the Snoqualmie Tribe for centuries as an area for concentrating and gathering food plant species such as Bracken Fern and Tiger Lilies, as well as attractive browse for Elk and Deer. Obviously, such Prairies were important resources to ancient people, and the descriptive name "Highas Closhe Illahee" (the Great Good Land) applied to the prairie by the Native American guides of explorer Samuel Hancock in 1851 applies equally to Tollgate as to the adjacent Meadowbrook Farm, also part of the same prairie."

The coming of European Americans to the Valley on a permanent basis, beginning with Jeremiah Borst settling at Fort Alden (near Meadowbrook Way and Park Street) in 1858, increased pressure on the native elk population (you can feed a lot of people quite well with one elk) and there were no hunting laws or 'protected' areas to guarantee re-generation of the local herd. Inevitably, elk became rare in the Valley and were eventually 'hunted out.' The Pacific Northwest was not alone in this loss. Indigenous elk disappeared from much of their natural home environment. Especially hard-hit was the Roosevelt Elk subspecies which is generally found west of the Cascades. The Rocky Mountain Elk subspecies is found further east.

So it came to pass that in 1913 the Seattle Elk's Club hosted the national Elk's convention and to add festivity to the event responded by plugging the hole in the Valley food-chain. They engineered and paid for the introduction of Rocky Mountain elk from Yellowstone National Park in Montana. This ready-made herd was shipped in by boxcar and unloaded (to the cheers of conventioners) in the Upper Valley to fend for themselves. And fend they certainly did, as noted in this local newspaper article:

NORTH BEND POST, JULY 3, 1914

ELK A NUISANCE

Herds near Snoqualmie Seriously Damaging Farmers' Crops

Snoqualmie, July 1. — The band of elk brought from Montana a year ago and turned loose between North Bend and Snoqualmie are doing considerable

damage to growing crops and many farmers are emphatically in favor of proper authorities taking immediate action to have the animals removed from their present rendezvous — either driven to the timbered hills or taken out of the country.

The original herd from Yellowstone Park numbered 44 and in 18 months has increased in numbers 100 per cent. This increase will continue annually. The animals are all healthy, handsome and playful. They are not afraid of mere man and seem to harbor the I. W. W. (early lumber and sawmill workers union derisively nicknamed Wobblies) notion that the world owes them a living with grain fields as playgrounds added for good measure. They often feed upon grain, green peas and tender fruit trees, but really do the most damage to crops while at play in the bottom lands. They usually emerge from their woods retreat early in the morning and after trekking about the improved farms for a few hours retire to the tall timber nearby until evening, when they again come out in the open for another frolic and select pasture.

They take one jump and easily and gracefully scale any old fence. When driven out of the enclosed field they return so soon as the farmer's back is turned. There are several large antlered bucks, many gingerly yearlings and quite a few timid calves, in the herds.

A representative of the *Post* visited Charles Weller's ranch near Snoqualmie last Saturday afternoon and went through the potatoes, garden and grain fields. At every turn was the hoof prints of elk, some as large as that of a big cow or horse. Every part of the growing crops had been damaged. Last year, Mr. Weller sustained considerable damage, but not so much as this year.

D. G. Reinig (Dio) is another farmer who reports having his crops seriously damaged by some of the elk at-large in the valley. There are other farmers complaining of elk depredations.

If the county or state authorities do not take some action to curb the antics of the elk near Snoqualmie, the farmers interested will reluctantly take the matter in their own hands and that, too, in the mighty near future.

A January, 1946, *Snoqualmie Valley Record* article adds: "Eventually the two-legged Elks returned to their homes, but the imported, antlered variety remained to roam the fields and ravage the crops of the local irate farmers and for many, many years, men with guns were hired to scare the crop-conscious quadrupeds away from the hay and stuff, but with little success." The herd was once driven up the North Fork of the Snoqualmie River in a desperate attempt to banish them from our agricultural areas. But they returned "a day later."

So the elk prospered and the herd grew and looking for a protected environment to call home — settled on the island in the middle of the Snoqualmie Falls Lumber Company (Weyerhaeuser) log pond named Lake Borst for Jeremiah.

For those of us who don't remember what the mill pond island really looked like when it was bare of trees — cleared so that the wind could air-dry lumber in the

early days of the mill — this island is a somewhat unique piece of geography. It was formed from an ox-bow abandoned by the Snoqualmie River, and was first used by the Snoqualmie Mill Company before the turn of the twentieth-century. When the Snoqualmie Falls Lumber Company (Weyerhaeuser) built their mill beginning in 1914, they regulated the flow out of the oxbow and completed the circle that we see today — creating the island later inhabited by the elk.

Irene Fury moved to Monte Vista farm above the mill in 1920 and notes: “The Mill Pond was the home of a band of elk and they stayed there when they could find forage but in winter they sometimes wandered off the island in search of food. We would see them in the ball park by the Meadowbrook Bridge on our way to school. The Women’s Club would buy food for them. This ball park was also a community activity and very well kept up for many kinds of local festivities.”

This community ball park, situated on Weyerhaeuser land at the south end of the mill pond between the Meadowbrook Bridge and the Milwaukee trestle, was a large open field close to the elk’s home and your author remembers seeing elk feeding there as a child.

Robert Brinkley, who moved to the mill town of Snoqualmie Falls in 1918 notes, “A mill employee fed the elk and took care of them.” This had to be a difficult decision for mill management since a recent U. S. Department of the Interior article states, “Some conifers like Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) are palatable and highly digestible for elk.....”

The *Snoqualmie Valley Record* of March 3, 1932, in an article titled “Worst Flood” noted: “The island in the mill pond was inundated and forced the elk to the mainland. A deer was seen going over the falls.”

There are varying opinions about the mobility of the elk herd. Many people feel the elk were free to roam and others are convinced that a log-boom kept them on the mill pond island most of the time.

The herd provided much needed food through the Great Depression, but World War II disrupted their primary predator (man) and the elk population blossomed. When the hunters returned from the war they were more focused on post-war opportunity and less interested in rifles — and the population exploded — leading to a catastrophe during the extra-cold and snowy winter of 1945. Snow and ice covered the ground for weeks and forage was very limited. Food was provided for the elk herd, but it was not enough and some twenty of the animals starved to death.

The Washington State Department of Game responded as soon as weather would permit and in December of 1945, in cooperation with the Snoqualmie Falls

Lumber Company they began a rescue operation for the remaining elk. The survivors included one “grand bull” and eleven others.

To quote from the *Valley Record*, “Four men worked ten days with the cooperation of the Snoqualmie Falls Lumber Company, and built a corral on the island 150 feet long, rectangular in shape, with the big, open end about 125 feet wide, tapering to a runway at the other end which went to the water of the Mill pond. (See photo on page 6)

The elk were encouraged to enter the corral by bales of hay and after two weeks of baiting the trap was sprung and nine of the 12 animals were caught. A five-ton truck was ferried across the pond on a huge raft (borrowed from the mill) and backed up to the end of the runway and after much shouting and pushing and coaxing the nine elk were at last safely stowed in the truck which was then ferried across the pond and driven to the upper reaches of the Nooksack (River) in Mt. Baker National park where they were released. (See photo of truck on page 7). This is a logged-off area rich in the food that elk love and the small herd should, Nature willing, increase into a sizeable herd.” The final three cow elk were rescued in a later expedition.

A *Life Magazine* article dated January 5, 1946 and donated to the Museum by the Harold Keller family, speaks to the rescue and provides this additional information. “The truck was strongly reinforced and covered to protect the nervous elk. One bull and eight cow elk milled in the corral, which steamed from their body heat. Their knifelike hooves cut wet ground into knee-deep mud.”

So once again, the Upper Snoqualmie Valley was without elk. Almost. A few animals still existed in what had become the City of Seattle’s Cedar River watershed. Protected from hunting, this herd of native Roosevelt elk grew and prospered. About 1995 Valley residents began seeing elk once again and they had expanded to the area surrounding the Weyerhaeuser mill by 1997.

Elk were ready to return to Meadowbrook Farm and have done so with gusto, enjoying the ‘edges’ still predominant on the acreage the Snoqualmie’s kept clear for thousands of years. A significant number of these swift and graceful animals are now living in and providing entertainment on Meadowbrook farm, Tollgate farm, and the Three Forks Natural Area. Who knows? They may soon re-inhabit Mill Pond Island in Lake Borst.

If you have any favorite Valley elk stories, please share them with us.

Dave Battey - Snoqualmie