

The Great Onion Flats, Gone Forever

BY LOYCE MARTINAZZI

I was on my hands and knees pulling weeds in the Grande garden up at Lee Farms the other day. My thoughts wandered back to when I was a kid pulling weeds on the onion flats in Sherwood. One June my dad took my sister Jo and me to Chet Fischbuch's farm in Cipole, which was part of the original Erwin Cummins donation land claim. Dad stayed with us till noon, showing us how to weed three rows at a time, straddling the middle one. "Be sure to pull all the roots out" he told us, "don't kneel on the onion plants", and especially, "you need to keep up with the men."

We worked from 8 am to 5 pm with one hour off for lunch. Later my sister Toni joined us in the fields. Weeding onions was the first hourly wage job we kids had. Chet paid us 75 cents an hour, and raised our wage to \$1 an hour after a few years when he found out what good workers we were.

In the fall we helped sack the mature onions. The onions had been dug up and lay in thick rows. Three people formed a team. One held the sack, and moved backwards as the other two gathered the onions by their long tops into great handfuls, and lifted them into the sack.

Once I told Bill Galbreath, cousin to Chet, that sacking onions was hard work for a girl. "Hell," he said, "that's hard work for anybody."

After the great Missoula Floods raged through the valley some 13,000 years ago, beavers came and built dams and the great swamps they made became filled with vegetation which would decompose, creating deep rich soil.

By 1870 farmers began to drain the swamps, first using tree bark as the conduit. Erwin Cummins was the first to start growing onions in the Sherwood Flats. But there were other beaver dam lands, in Mulloy, and even here in Tualatin. As the farmers plowed, they turned up thousands of arrow points that the native Atfalati had used to hunt game.

The swamp here in Tualatin spanned the area between Boones Ferry Road on the west, to just south of Brown's Ferry Park on the east. And there the Thompson, Nyberg, Frederick, and Eddy families grew onions.



Nyberg's onion field. The gunny sacks were hauled to the onion barn where they were dried.



The Nyberg boys hauling a load of onions to the Southern Pacific Depot in old town.



Onions ready to be sacked.

While draining the swamp, the huge bones of Tualatin's famous mastodon were first found, just south of where the Fred Meyer complex stands.

The Cimino and Hedges families also grew onions on another swamp north of Tualatin-Sherwood Road. Many generations of children weeded and sacked onions just like I did. For over 100 years the rich beaver dam soil produced thousands of tons of onions and other produce. The onion business was good for the local economy. When the I-5 freeway was constructed in the 1950s, silt filled the ditch and Clayton Nyberg complained that Reed Canary Grass

was taking over the swamp, making farming difficult.

And now, the land has reverted back to swampland where birds can nest and wild critters can roam at will. The Wildlife Refuge in Sherwood is a federally funded project where urban folk can experience nature. And the Tualatin wetlands provide cover for wild ducks and geese.

The rich fertile beaver dam soil, some of the best in the world, that once provided a good living for the community, is now covered over with water and vegetation. And much of our produce is imported from Central and South America. The end of an era.

Photos courtesy of the Tualatin Historical Society



Bill Young, Don Galbreath, Bud Hess and Gary Weckert weeding onions in Cipole.



In winter the onion fields flooded. To the left is the original bridge over 65th Avenue (Meridian Road). Legacy Meridian Park Hospital complex is now located behind the stand of trees.