

# The Puget Sound Co-operative Colony is established at Port Angeles in June 1887

By Kit Oldham, Posted 7/21/2007

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In June 1887, the Puget Sound Co-operative Colony, incorporated in Seattle the previous month, moves its headquarters to the small settlement of Port Angeles on the Olympic Peninsula, where its founders envision building an ideal collective community. Dozens of adherents are already living at the colony site on Ennis Creek. By fall some 400 colonists will have doubled Port Angeles's population. The colony is the first of many utopian communities that will emerge around Puget Sound over the next 30 years and the only one that plays a significant role in building a major city. Over the next few years, Colonists construct Port Angeles's first sawmill, its first office building, many homes, schools, and churches, and an ornate Opera House. As an experiment in co-operative living, the Colony survives for only a few years, but the energetic and committed settlers it attracts play a major role in the rise of Port Angeles as the civic, commercial, and industrial center of Clallam County.

## "A City Beautiful"

The Puget Sound Co-operative Colony was the brainchild of two Seattle lawyers, Peter Peyto Good (d. 1886) and George Venable Smith (1843-1919). They were progressive advocates of labor rights -- and also instigators of anti-Chinese riots in Seattle, because like many white labor activists of the time they resented Chinese workers. At the height of the racial violence in February 1886, they were also drawing up plans for a model city on Puget Sound. Good's interest in utopian cooperation as a means of improving conditions for the working class was inspired by a European trip that included a visit to a cooperative community of ironworkers at Guise, France. He showed Smith "illustrated maps of a city beautiful with cooperative homes, cooperative hotels and all industries upon a cooperative system, which so captivated Mr. Smith that he was at once seized with the determination to organize another such colony" (LeWarne, 17).

The proposal for a cooperative colony on Puget Sound was announced in February 1886, shortly before the riots. Good died of pleurisy on February 21 (friends blamed his death on his 10-day jailing the previous fall for labor agitation), but Smith and other leaders of the anti-Chinese faction, including Laura E. Hall and John J. Knoff, continued organizing and promoting the planned colony. Smith set off on a trip around the country to recruit members.

In April 1886, Knoff acquired land for the future Colony on the deep, protected harbor at Port Angeles that is formed by the sand spit of Ediz Hook jutting into the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Port Angeles was founded in 1862, a few years after the first non-Indian settlers arrived, by Victor Smith (1827-1865) (no relation to George V. Smith), who persuaded the national government to establish a federal townsite there. Despite Smith's grandiose plans, Port Angeles languished for two decades, and only with the economic boom of the mid-1880s did the population of the small settlement at the base of Ediz Spit reach several hundred.

The Colony paid Norman R. Smith, Victor's son, \$15,000 for 25 blocks of the platted townsite and 200 acres of timberland. The property, a short distance east of the existing settlement, was located at the mouth of Ennis Creek which emptied from a deep ravine directly opposite the tip of Ediz Spit. The nearby village of Ie'nis (from which the names Ennis and Ediz were both derived) was still home to several hundred Klallam Indians.

## **Rapid Growth**

Prospective colonists began arriving at Ennis Creek long before the Puget Sound Co-operative Colony was officially organized and the site publicly announced. Twenty-two, including some existing residents of Port Angeles, were there by the end of 1886. More arrived throughout the spring, coming not only from Washington Territory, but also from Ohio, Chicago, and Greeley, Colorado. The Colony was incorporated in Seattle in May 1887 with George V. Smith as president. It officially transferred its headquarters to the Port Angeles site in June and at the end of the month there were 239 Colonists in residence.

By the time of the move, a sawmill -- the first in Port Angeles -- was in operation, and colony buildings, including a hotel on the beach with a communal kitchen and dining room, were under construction. Over the summer, the Colony's population grew to several hundred, nearing that of the existing town. The East End and West End, as the colony and the original town respectively came to be known, developed a considerable rivalry but also many connections. Some longtime Port Angeles residents joined the Colony. Conversely, many arriving colonists ended up settling in the West End when they could not be accommodated on the Colony property. Colonists cut a road through the thick Douglas fir timber on the federal reserve land that separated the West and East ends.

Despite, or to some extent because of, its success in attracting adherents, the Puget Sound Co-operative Colony did not last long as an experiment in collective living. Leadership quarrels and factional disputes erupted almost from the start. George V. Smith lost his position as president of the board of trustees early in 1888. He departed on good terms and went on to a long career as probate judge, county prosecuting attorney, and then Port Angeles city attorney.

## **Achievement and Decline**

Under Smith's successors, the colony evolved into more of an entrepreneurial enterprise than a true collective. It engaged in numerous real estate ventures, platting and selling lots throughout Port Angeles. It also developed a major construction business, building many homes for colonists and others, multiple churches, and the city's first office building. Colonists built the grand Opera House -- locating it not on Colony land but in the West End. The Opera House, which opened in 1891, featured the first plate glass windows in the city and, later, the first and for many years only flush toilet in Port Angeles. The colony developed a shipyard at the mouth of Ennis Creek and built the steam schooner *Angeles*. Former colonists, such as brothers Fred and John Thompson, went on to build additional ships there.

Despite some achievements, the colony's commercial ventures ultimately failed. The colony newspaper, the *Model Commonwealth* edited by Laura Hall, which had espoused the cooperative cause and other radical views (it scandalized many in November 1887 by denouncing the execution of four anarchists convicted for their role in the Chicago Haymarket riot as "Murder Most Foul"), proved to be unprofitable, and by 1889 it was sold to A. H. Howell, who renamed it the *Port Angeles Times*.

Factional disputes continued and as liabilities outpaced assets these led to lawsuits. Soon after the Panic of 1893 struck and the timber market collapsed, the colony was forced into receivership, where its dwindling assets were supervised by the court until it was officially dissolved in 1904. By then the sawmill had burned and the remaining buildings at Ennis Creek were abandoned.

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**Port Angeles waterfront, Clallam County, 1888**

Courtesy UW Special Collections (Neg. No. UW 4934)

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**Sources:**

**Charles Pierce LeWarne, *Utopias on Puget Sound, 1885-1915* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), 15-54; Paul J. Martin, *Port Angeles, Washington: A History* (Port Angeles: Peninsula Publishing, 1983), 33-51; Murray Morgan, *The Last Wilderness* (New York: Viking Press, 1955), 87-88.**