

Chapter 3

A History of Steigerwald Lake National Wildlife Refuge

By Wilson Cady, Long-time Resident and Refuge Volunteer

Historically, Steigerwald Lake was a floodplain of the Columbia River at the mouth of the Columbia River Gorge. Millions of years ago, persistent winter snows in the mountains and plains to the east of the Steigerwald Lake area formed glaciers. One such glacier formed, blocking the Clark Fork River in Montana to create the huge glacial Lake Missoula. As the climate changed and the glacier began to melt, a series of immense floods over several thousand years repeatedly flooded the Gorge and Portland Basin. These floods, called the Bretz, or Missoula floods, attained elevations of 1000 feet, and traveled at speeds of up to 80 mph. Boulders and gravels that came from as far away as Montana and Canada were deposited in a layer known as the Troutdale Formation, which is visible along the Highway 14 road cut above the refuge. This series of flood events created the Columbia River Gorge as we see it today.

The yearly flooding of the Columbia River created sandbars, ideal for the germination and growth of the cottonwoods still visible on the refuge as the rows of cottonwood trees along the Gibbons Creek channel. When in flood stage, the river would inundate the entire area up to the Old Evergreen Highway. This is why Evergreen Boulevard, previously known as Highway 8, was built in that location and it explains the lack of any forested areas south of Evergreen Boulevard except for the cottonwoods that grew on sandbars and a few oaks that were on higher ground.

The mouth of the Columbia River was discovered by Captain Robert Gray, a Boston fur trader, in May of 1792. The famed British explorer George Vancouver was then sent to the region to verify Gray's discovery. Captain Vancouver was unable to get his ship, the "Discovery", over the bar at the mouth of the Columbia River, so he sent Lieutenant William Broughton upstream in a smaller ship, the cutter "Chatham". Broughton spent three weeks mapping the Columbia River, and on October 20, 1792, he arrived at Cottonwood Point. This was the farthest spot upstream that they reached while exploring the Columbia River. While there Lt. Broughton named the mountain that they could see after Admiral Hood, the sponsor of the trip, and Point Vancouver after his commanding officer. Near the present town of Washougal, Washington, he took possession of the territory for Britain. The lieutenant concluded that the Columbia River came from Mt. Hood and decided that there was no reason to explore further upstream.



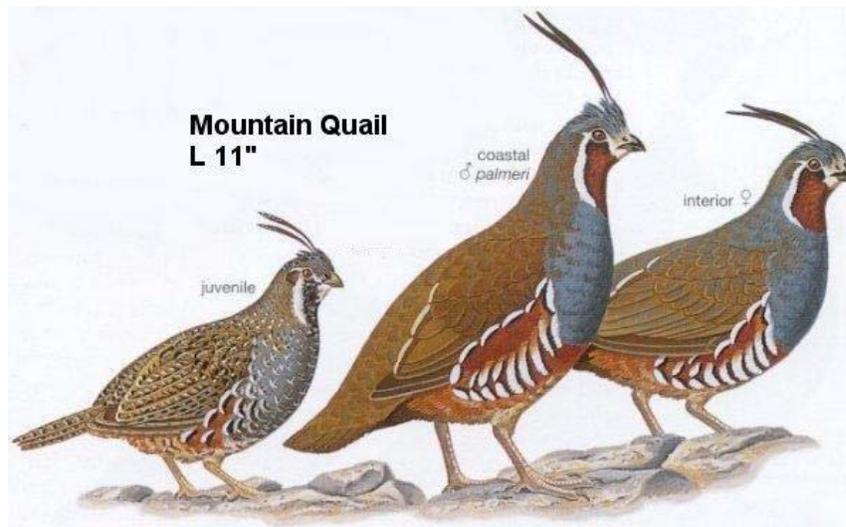
Kim Shaffer, who works for the Port of Vancouver, repositions the replica of Chatham, built in 1992 to celebrate British Lt. William Robert Broughton's exploration up the Columbia River 200 years earlier.



Lewis & Clark celebration at Cottonwood Beach August 7, 2005

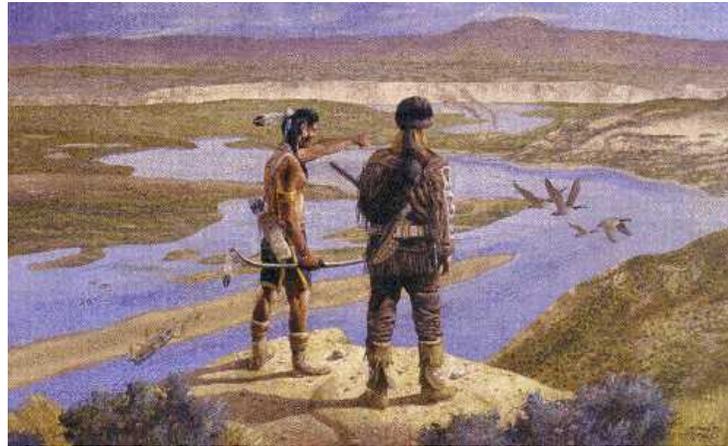
Between March 31 and April 6, 1806, Lewis and Clark camped near the present day Cottonwood Beach on the return trip of their Corps of Discovery. Originally planning to spend only one night, Lewis and Clark were informed by the local Native Americans that game and other foods were scarce along the Columbia River upstream. For this reason, they decided to stay longer and gather food staples for their journey upstream. From this campsite, William Clark also led a group of men back down the Columbia to explore the Willamette River, which they had missed on both their outward and return voyages.

On the hills above Washougal they discovered the Mountain Quail, a species no longer found in Southwest Washington. The following passage from Clark's journal describes their discovery.



Capt. Clark, April 6, 1806--Reubin Fields killed a bird of the quail kind or class which was whistling near our camp it is larger than the quail or partridge as they are called [in] Kentucky and Virginia, its form is precisely that of our partridge tho' its plumage differs in every part. the upper part of the head, sides and back of the neck, including the Croop and about 1/3 of the under part of the body is of a bright dove coloured blue, under neath the under beak, as high as the lower edge of the eye, and back as far as the hinder part of the eyes and thence coming down to a point in the front of the neck about 2/3rd of it's length downwards, is of a fine dark brick red. between this brick red and the dove colour there runs a narrow stripe of pure white. the ears are covered with some coarse dark brown feathers. just at the base of the under chap there is a narrow transverse stripe of white. from the crown of the head two long round feathers extend backwards nearly in the direction of the beak and are of a black colour. the length of these feathers is 2 1/2 inches. one overlies and conceals the other which is somewhat shorter and seems to be [w]rapped in the plumage of that in front which folding backwards collapses behind and has a round appearance. the tail is composed of 12 dark brown feathers of nearly equal length. the large feathers of the wings are of a dark brown & are rather short in proportion to the body of the bird. in this respect very similar to the partridge. the covert of the wings and back are of a dove colour with a slight admixture of redish brown. a wide stripe which extends from side to side of the body and occupies the lower region of the breast is beautifully variegated with the brick red white & black which predominates in the order they are mention and the colours mark the feathers transversely. the legs are covered with feathers as low as the Knee; these feathers are of dark brown tipped with dark brick red as are also those between and about the joining of the legs with the body. the foot is precisely that of the common partridge except that they are as also the legs white. the upper beak is short, wide at it's base, black, convex, curved downwards and rather obtusely pointed. it exceeds the under chap considerably which is of a white colour, also convex underneath and obtusely pointed. the nostrils are remarkably small, placed far back and low down on the sides of the beak. they are covered by a thin protuberant elastic, black leather like substance. the eyes are of a uniform piercing black colour. this is a most beautiful bird I preserved the skin of this bird retaining the wings feet & head which I hope will give a just idea of the *bird*. it's loud note is single and consists of a loud squall, entirely different from the whistling of our partridge or quails. it has a chirping noted when allarmed like our

partridge. to day there was a second of those birds killed which precisely resembles that just described. I believe those to be the mail bird the female, if so, I have not yet seen.



The Northwest Company, a fur trapping business, commissioned David Thompson to chart the Columbia River from its mouth to its headwaters. In 1811, five years after Lewis & Clark, he also camped at Cottonwood Beach.

In 1847, Joseph Gibbons followed the Oregon Trail, ferried his cattle across the Columbia River from The Dalles, and drove them downstream along the north bank of the Columbia. Gibbons built a cabin in November 1847 and planted crops near the mouth of the creek which bears his name. The mouth would have been where the Old Evergreen Highway is today.



Although his name is obscure today, J.E.C. Durgan has been credited as a founder of Washougal, and was one of the leading early Vancouver merchants. Durgan crossed the Plains from Illinois to California in 1850, and then returned to his home in the Midwest two years later. About 1854 he traveled to the Oregon Territory and settled on a donation land claim five miles east of Washougal, not far from the Skamania County line.

The late Rolf Jemtegaard, from a pioneer family on Mt. Pleasant, told stories from his youth in the early 1900's of harvesting potatoes from rows a mile long in the Steigerwald Lake area and loading them onto steamboats for delivery to the Portland market. Jemtegaard

Elementary School was named after his sister, Gudren Jemtegaard, who was a teacher in Washougal.



Steigerwald Dairy Building on Sandy Boulevard, built in 1926

Allen Norman Steigerwald was a resident of Portland, Oregon, for more than 60 years. In 1890 he built one of the finest houses on the corner of N.E. Union Avenue and Oxford Street, now known as Simpson Street, in the city of Portland. A building contractor and member of the firm of Steigerwald, Disbrow, Melton Co. he built boats for the Klondike gold rush miners. In 1904 and 1905, he contracted work for the Lewis and Clark Exposition and helped build the Agricultural and Forestry buildings. In 1905, he purchased land and established the Rose City Nursery and Fruit Farm near Portland, out of which grew the Steigerwald Dairy in 1913. The Dairy was operated by his sons, Ira R. Steigerwald, (January 20, 1887, to October 14, 1944) and Alvin Norman, (May 2, 1889 to March 9, 1957). Alvin was listed as a dairyman in the family genealogy. The Steigerwald family operated a dairy herd in the Steigerwald Lake floodplain, keeping their cattle in a large barn which was located west of the present day (2010) Bi-Mart store. Their outlet dairy store, which was shaped like a giant milk bottle, was on the corner of 37th Street and Sandy Boulevard in Portland. This building went through many configurations, including additions to make it look like a 7-Up bottle and currently a can of Budweiser Beer.

The Port of Camas-Washougal was established in 1935 but did not move into the Steigerwald Lake area until the dike around the floodplain was completed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1966. This was done with funding came from a Congressional bill

championed by Julia Butler Hansen. At that time the entire floodplain was zoned as “Heavy Industrial”.

The western part of the industrial area was built on an area filled with sand removed from nearby Cottonwood Beach in the early 1960’s. This may have obliterated any signs of the Lewis and Clark Encampment.

The remaining areas near Steigerwald Lake inside of the Columbia River dike were used for a variety of agricultural purposes. Cattle and hay were raised on the Straub property. Row crops including Blue Lake Pole Beans were grown by Cas Roberts in an area that was locally referred to as Roberts’ Bean Farm. Cas Roberts lived in the house that is now used as the refuge headquarters and built the rock fireplace with stones he had collected as a rock hound. Later these croplands were farmed by the Winsell Farms family from the Vancouver area.

Prior to 1966, Gibbons Creek flowed directly into the Steigerwald Lake basin and then flowed west until its outflow into the Columbia River. As a part of the flood control project, Gibbons Creek was put into a canal that ran through the industrial park and then pumped over the dike west of Cottonwood Beach. Passage of salmon, steelhead and sea-run cutthroat trout through the dike and into Gibbons Creek was to be accomplished through a tidal gate structure. Both the Washington Department of Game and the Port assumed that the tide gate would be maintained by the other party, so sandbars built up around the gate, making it largely unusable by the salmon. Fortunately, it jammed part way open allowing some fish to continue making into Gibbons Creek, preserving this run of native fish. The estimated loss of fish was 1,000 coho salmon per year, along with an unknown number of sea-run cutthroat trout and steelhead.

The field west of Gibbons Creek and south of Highway 14 was owned by the Kerr Canning Jar family, with a large home along Gibbons Creek south of the Old Evergreen Highway. As late as the 1960s, Mrs. Kerr was still being driven around the area in a chauffeur-driven Packard.

In the early 1970s, Highway 14 was extended across the floodplain to the mouth of the Columbia River Gorge. There had been a move by several prominent local residents, including Dr. Emil and Dory Brookings, to place the road on top of the Washougal dike to avoid damaging the wetlands, but it was finally constructed in its present location.

At the first Vancouver Audubon Society meeting in September of 1975, the guest speaker was Keith O’Neil, the Regional Director of the Washington Department of Game (now Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife). At the close of his presentation he asked if the chapter was going to do anything about Steigerwald Lake. No one present at the meeting knew where this was and when O’Neil explained its location, my wife Susan and I responded “Oh, Roberts’ Bean Farm”. He explained the value of the area to wildlife and that the area was zoned as “Heavy Industrial”. He envisioned preserving the area for use as pheasant release site for hunting purposes. Since Susan and I were the only Audubon members living in the Camas/Washougal area (we owned property east of Washougal and drove past Steigerwald Lake on a daily basis), it was assigned to us as a conservation project.

Susan and I began doing a census of the birds that could be seen from the side of the road, which was necessary because the property was owned by Don Stevenson, Earl Martin, and George Straub and was closed to the public. Occasionally I would sneak out to the lake through the forested area along Gibbons Creek while birding.

During the 1970s, Washington Department of Game biologists Chris Merker and Chris Mudd conducted a study on the existing and potential wildlife value of Steigerwald Lake and Gibbons Creek. This information, along with what we had gathered started giving credence to the claims of the habitat value of the area.

In 1977, the Port of Camas-Washougal applied for a \$2.5 million grant from the U. S. Economic Development Agency (EDA) to install the infrastructure needed to extend the industrial park. A small article in the newspaper stated that Congressman Mike McCormick had caused any environmental stipulations on the development to be dropped. When his office was contacted, his staff declined to tell us what environmental rules were being bypassed. Further inquiries led to a statement from his office that he believed the environmental requirements to purchase additional wildlife habitat and clean up Gibbons Creek to a level that would support fish were unreasonable.

As 1977 was a drought year, the major landowner had a power shovel dig a ditch through the middle of the lake in an attempt to reduce the amount of wetlands. He then cleared the 30-acre willow forest that stretched from the west end of what was left of the lake to the sewage treatment plant. While doing this work, the braided channel of Gibbons Creek that flowed through this willow stand was bulldozed it into a single channel.

These threats to the wetlands and a proposal to develop Cottonwood Beach as a barge loading area with a dock and dredged barge turning basin led to public opposition by a diverse group of local citizens. This group formed by Susan and Roger O'Hara called its self "The Gibbons Creek Preservation Society" (GCPS).

When the GCPS started questioning the industrialization of the wetlands, the landowners denied that there was any wildlife using the area, even though one of the owners was leasing his property for duck hunting.

The GCPS was unable to get information or responses from the Port or Congressman, so it was decided that it would be best to contact the source of the proposed grant money. When the EDA staff was contacted, they stated that the only laws that were being dropped were ones that did not apply to the project. They referred to the Presidential Wetlands Act, because they believed there were no longer any wetlands in the area. The Gibbons Creek Preservation Society challenged the idea that there were no wetlands at Steigerwald Lake, and EDA agreed to send out a representative to inspect the area. The EDA representatives flew out from Washington, D.C., and showed up at the site wearing three-piece suits and wing-tipped shoes. We walked out into a field north of where the model airplane field is located, and showed them the lake with Mt. Hood shining in the distance. Right after a Bald Eagle flew across our view, they said that they couldn't fund the project as this was obviously a wetland and valuable habitat.

During the same time, Chuck Williams, a Cascade Indian and the former National Park Representative for Friends of the Earth, returned to his Skamania County ancestral home at Skamania. He had seen the many battles being waged in the Columbia River Gorge to block different development proposals such as the five additional dams on the Little White Salmon River and a steel mill on Wells Island at Hood River. Chuck suggested that the groups fighting these battles should join together as one organization and work towards preserving the Columbia River Gorge. This started the Columbia Gorge Coalition, which led to the creation of the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area in 1986. Chuck was also instrumental in gathering support for the establishment of Steigerwald Lake National Wildlife Refuge from many national wildlife and environmental organizations.

In 1984, Oregon Senator Mark Hatfield introduced legislation to create the Steigerwald Lake NWR as partial mitigation for habitat lost in the construction of the Second Powerhouse at Bonneville Dam. His reason for introducing the bill was that he did not want visitors at the Crown Point Vista House looking down smokestacks on the Washington side of the river.

The Trust for Public Lands (TPL) raised \$6.7 million dollars to purchase an option on the Steigerwald Lake property to protect the property until the Federal government could authorize funds for its purchase. It maintained that option until 1984, when President Ronald Reagan authorized \$8.5 million dollars to purchase and restore 800 acres at Steigerwald. The refuge was officially established in 1987.

In addition to authorizing funds for the land purchase in 1985, Congress directed the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) to realign Gibbons Creek to facilitate fish passage into upstream spawning areas, reduce pumping costs incurred by the Port, and provide management flexibility for the impounded wetlands. Completed in 1992, this project diverted Gibbons Creek into a half-mile long elevated channel that passes over the lakebed. At the end of the channel the creek empties into a side channel between pre-dike sandbars, flows through a culvert under the Columbia River Dike, and into the Columbia River through a fish ladder. At the same time, funds were authorized to install an outfall pipe to take the wastewater from the Washougal Sewage Treatment Plant to the Columbia River instead of dumping it into Gibbons Creek.

Steigerwald Lake has gone through a myriad of changes since Lieutenant William Broughton planted the flag at Cottonwood Point in 1792. The wetlands have been plowed, diked, drained, and threatened with a variety of industrial proposals including a garbage-burning power facility and a nuclear power plant. Yet through all of this, it has remained a valuable wildlife area and a scenic gem. Now this historic site is protected as a National Wildlife Refuge, and the wildlife habitat is being restored by a dedicated group of volunteers, the Columbia Gorge Refuge Stewards. These volunteers, working with others, remove non-native species and replace them with native plants. In addition, they present environmental education programs at local schools and serve as an information contact for people walking the Gibbons Creek Art Trail. If you aren't a member of this group, please consider joining it and making Steigerwald Lake "your refuge".