

Stanwood Area ECHOES

Newsletter of the Stanwood Area Historical Society

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Stanwood Area Echoes

Issue No. 62 : Spring, 2019

PALACE HOTEL CA. 1900



The Palace Hotel in the photograph above was a prominent, 3-story landmark on the Stanwood waterfront at the end of Market Street which is now called 102nd Avenue or the Pacific Highway. There are few references to the hotel in the history books, but this early 1900 photograph by John T. Wagness seems to display a grand beginning.

For more on the Palace Hotel see page 3.

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Members and Friends:

The membership of the Stanwood Area Historical Society is roughly 250 but the number of volunteers who keep this ship afloat is perhaps 20 dedicated people. We are certainly not immune to the toll that time and age take on even the most dedicated and the Society has some grave hurdles to overcome if we are to remain a viable institution for the Stanwood/Camano community in the years ahead. We continue to reach out to members of the wider community to join us in whatever capacity fits your schedule to ensure that this institution can accomplish its goals.

Despite the challenges, however, our committed group rallied to produce two of the most successful events undertaken by SAHS—the Snow Goose and Birding Festival and our annual Spring Tea. Hundreds of visitors came through the great hall of the Floyd Norgaard Cultural Center for both happenings. While we have hosted the Snow Goose Festival for years, this year, with the looming threat of it being cancelled again, we undertook to save the Festival and make it one of our planned annual activities. We couldn't have done it without the critical assistance of groups such as the Friends of Camano Island Parks, Sound Water Stewards, Cama Beach Foundation and both Chambers of Commerce. A special thanks to Festival Committee Chairwoman Cathy Wooten who kept us on track and worked tirelessly to make the Birding Festival, with all its moving parts, a great success.

Nearly 200 women came to the Spring Tea, many from outside the local area. Stanwood High School Culinary instructor Brian Wallis and his wonderful student staff provided the tea and exceptional food. Area businesses generously provided the panoply of silent auction and raffle basket goodies. The money collected went to pay for the event and support the ongoing efforts of the Historical Society. Eighty-five percent of every dollar collected goes back into events for the community including the Ice Cream Social and Fourth of July Parade (45 years), and our Santa Day for the kids (19 years). Both events are free to the public fulfilling part of our mission to serve this amazing community.

Australian politician Elizabeth Jean Andrew said that “volunteers do not necessarily have the time; they just have the heart.” It takes heart to continue providing the aforementioned activities to the Stanwood/Camano community. We hope yours will lead you to assist us in these endeavors at the Stanwood Area Historical Society.

Sincerely,

Richard Hanks, President

Stanwood Area Historical Society

Stanwood Area Historical Society Effective January 1, 2019

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Newsletter Editors

Richard & Robin Hanks

AN ENTREPRENEUR WITH AN ADVENTUROUS HEART

William Connors was a man of "slight build" but the Irishman was not one to be trifled with. His instincts and quick action were fully evident in May of 1891 during a visit to the violence prone Fashion Saloon in Olympia in which he had a financial interest. Connors ignored the verbal abuse spewing from a drunken patron at the bar until the man made a sudden motion toward his hip pocket. Believing the drunk had a revolver, Connors acted first, grabbing his own pistol and clubbing the abuser over the head releasing a torrent of blood from his skull. "The blow sobered him," a newspaper reported, "quieted his tongue and made him as peaceable as a Quaker."

Following an influx of Scandinavians (many of them Norwegians) in the 1870s, Connors was part of an Irish wave that settled in the lower Stillaguamish Valley in the latter 1800s with names such as Hogan, O'Melia, McDougall, Gilpatrick and Tolin; many from Maine or just north along the shores of eastern Canada. Logging and tavern ownership became their chosen trades in the Northwest. This ubiquitous commodity of alcohol was sarcastically necessary "to supply the raging thirst which even in spite of the salubrious character of Puget Sound, seems to have tormented the inhabitants of most of the early towns," explained a 1906 history of the area. Raging thirst aside, saloons or taverns since before the birth of the republic were often places of sanctuary and familiarity for immigrant groups like the Irish. "By the Gilded Age," writes Jon Grinspan, "saloons were places for slow, social imbibing, a beer drinker's republic, blending immigrant and American cultures," where one participant remembered that "political matters ebb and flow free as froth on the beer." However, that mix of liquor and politics, as they all knew, could still erupt in sudden violence in the drinking dens of the rugged Northwest.

Billy Connors, as he was called, may have inherited his wanderlust for adventure from his father John who in 1862 left the family in Machias, Maine, the same year Billy was born, seeking work in the Puget Sound. John also may have wanted to



The Stanwood home of John Connors. SAHS #90.20.04

escape being drawn into the fratricide of the American Civil War. Logger John Connors worked as a teamster at Port Gamble before returning to Maine two years later where he fathered daughter Elizabeth in 1865 and son Frank in 1867. John Connors returned to Washington in 1875, a year after the death of his wife, 32-year-old Phoebe Kelly. His three younger children went to live with an older brother, a sailor by occupation. The life of his nautical brother attracted Billy who two years later at 15, quit school and also chose the sea for his vocation, working continuously on vessels and sailing around the world until his "adventurous spirit" led him to the "wild and woolly" west of Seattle in 1881, as reported by one biographer.

There, he quickly found employment in the expanding logging industry and by 1882 had set up residence in Stanwood living with his father who had relocated to the area from Port Ludlow. John Connors married Maria Wheeler in 1881. In 1884 Billy married Martha Hewitt of Stanwood. They had four children: Ernest, Lindie, Gertie and Arthur. Like Billy's mother, Martha died young-- only 31 at the time in 1896. Perhaps her death or his need of another adventure lured Billy Connors to the gold fields of the Klondike a year after Martha's passing, leaving his children in Stanwood in the care of his father. He was registered at the daunting Chilkoot Pass on May 12, 1899.

(Continued on Page 4)

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At the age of 14, younger brother Frank also left Machias joining father John in Stanwood. He lived with his father until 1887. On Christmas day of that year, Frank married Cora Wheeler and began farming outside of Stanwood. He had 120 acres of prime land a short distance outside of Stanwood and a five acre plot just across the city's northern limit. The reliable Frank was made road supervisor of District 1 in 1895. By 1930 Frank was a Snohomish County Commissioner. At the age of 71 Frank was working as a Water Works engineer when he died in Stanwood in 1940. His home still stands at the north end of Market Street just before the railroad tracks. Billy may have found some success mining in the Yukon since upon his return to Stanwood in 1901 he, with partner Anton L. Peterson, bought Hotel Gilpatrick at the corner of Broadway and Market, which he re-named the Palace Hotel. Anton sold out in 1902, the same year Billy married Cora Milliorn. The hotel was three stories high, with elegant turrets built in the Stick and Queen Anne styles and had a reported 70 well furnished rooms.. It was a extravagant affair. It was one of four hotels, six restaurants and five saloons in the town in 1907.

Under the "skillful" and "energetic" management of Conners the Palace was touted as "one of the most popular stopping places of the Puget Sound country, the Stanwood home of most of the traveling men who make that point," in 1906. In a 1910 article, the Palace claimed to be the only hotel

with hot water and patent toilets with a "first class dining room and café," and of course, a "first class bar." These were boom times for Stanwood and Billy was riding that wave; newspapers noting his new Tonneau Winton Six automobile in 1911—an early touring car running two to three thousand dollars.

Billy Conners seemed to embrace innovation and that September he sponsored the first moving pictures which came to Stanwood. The Palace Photo Play in the McKean building on Main Street featured a cowboy thriller and "Ancient Roman Battles," according to the local newspaper. An excited five hundred people came to the opening. Ads proclaimed that it was "good for youngsters" with admission only 10 cents. Stanwood writer Alice Essex noted the success of this new media spectacular since in March 1912 Conners secured a lease on George Ketchum's property at the corner of Market and Main streets to build his Folly Theater. In 1913 house projectionist Will Walker said that the Folly was "one of the best equipped little houses in the country." According to writer Eric Flom, It could seat 300 patrons in neatly arranged folding opera chairs. It featured a homemade white canvass screen roughly ten feet across covered in bronze powder and varnished. The "Powers Six projector" was operated by a 16-horsepower gasoline engine and three-and-a-half kilowatt generator. Charles McKean soon became manager of the Palace Photo Play dubbing it the Star Theater with Billy concentrating on the Folly.

But Billy Conners certainly was aware of a new wave sweeping the region—temperance. Washington state preceded the national legal change by going dry in 1916. A hard blow for a man who described himself in the 1910 census as a "liquor merchant." At this point Conners also owned the Kentucky bar, besides the Palace. With the new law both underwent conversion. The Palace bar became a billiard parlor run by Billy's son-in-law Henry Whalen while the Kentucky became a fish market. The year also brought the death of his second wife Cora who was only 49. He married again by 1920; a woman 22 years his junior that we know only as Florence. In 1922 Florence gave Stanwood's first theater entrepreneur another son, this one named after his father.

With a new family perhaps Billy Conners decided to seek a new beginning or



Customers of the Palace Hotel could ride the Stanwood Transfer to the train station on the east end of town.

SAHS 92.08.05.04



Palace Hotel 1911 entrance with sign above. Automobile with 14 men standing around it, the driver believed to be Billy Conners. Photographed by John Wagness. SAHS 99.25.02

maybe it was the same lure that sent him to sea at 15 and to the Klondike at 25. In 1927 he, Florence and Will Jr. moved to Anchorage, Alaska where he found work as a machinist at the age of 65 for the Alaska Railroad. But a hard life had weakened the Irishman's heart. After being elected as a fisheries commissioner in 1930, Billy Conners suffered a heart attack and died January 15, 1931. He was buried in the Anchorage cemetery. Florence Conners and her son Will were still there nine years later taking in boarders to pay the bills.

Both Frank and Billy were Republicans by political persuasion and while active one author believed that Billy never attempted to benefit from that association. The steady Frank Conners was lauded as a man of character and of energy who enjoyed the respect of the entire community. The epitaph for Billy deserves greater nuance. He found a "creditable position among the successful businessmen and enterprising citizens of his adopted state," by "the pursuit of a persistent purpose"—and an adventurous heart.

by Richard Hanks

Sources: *Illustrated History of Skagit and Snohomish Counties*, 1906; *Seattle Daily Times*, July 14, 1907, June 4, 1911; *Morning Olympian*, May 30, 1891; *Bellingham Herald*, January 24, 1931; Alice Essex, *The Stanwood Story*, v. I and v. II; *Federal census records and city directories*, *Ancestry.com*; *Northwestern Real Estate and Building Review*, May 1891; Eric L. Flom, *HistoryLink.org* Essay 7585; Herbert Hunt, *Washington, West of the Cascades...v. III*, 1917; Jon Grinspan, *New York Times*, November 26, 2016.



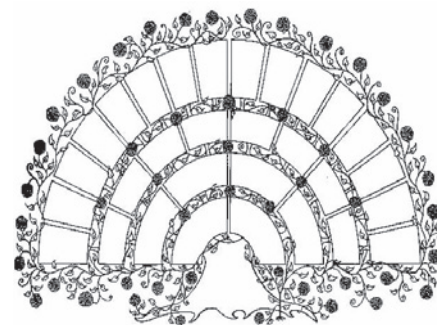
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Stanwood Area Historical Society
 Open Wed & Fri • 1 to 4 p.m. or Call for Appt.

**SAHS Board & Member Meetings - Please join us every month on the
 Second Tuesday at 4:00 pm on the second floor of the Eldridge Center.
 We need all of your ideas and support in carrying out our mission!**

EVENTS @ THE FLOYD

April 28th • 4 p.m. - 6 p.m.

History and Hors d'oeuvres

Rick Castellano - Island Co. Historical

May 3rd, 4th & 5th • 10 a.m. - 5 p.m.

Pickers Row Antiques & Vintage

Collectible Spring Show

May 19th • 4 p.m. - 6 p.m.

History and Hors d'oeuvres

Kirsten Smistad - Norwegian Textiles

May 27th • 1 p.m. - 2 p.m.

Memorial Day

Remember & Honor the Fallen

July 4th • 11 a.m. - 1 p.m.

Parade & Old Fashioned

Ice Cream Social



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The Floyd Norgaard Cultural Center Public Hall is available for the arts, music, theater, cultural events as well as a banquet hall for family events, weddings, reunions, birthdays, & business meetings.

Proceeds from rentals and events benefit the continuing preservation and rehabilitation of the Public Hall and SAHS educational and historical projects and programs.

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The Stanwood Area Historical Society is a special place. It collects and conserves the wondrous treasures of history that define our community. Your participation would not only assist in this crucial protection of our past, but would make you part of our important work. You can make a difference. Join SAHS today!

Memberships are due annually in January. This is a significant means of support for the Society and includes a subscription to the newsletter. SAHS is a tax-exempt non-profit organization and depends on gifts, bequests from individuals and groups, fundraising activities and membership dues for its financial support. Your contributions are tax deductible and will be used only for the preservation of the history of our area.

☐ Individual Membership: **\$20.00**

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