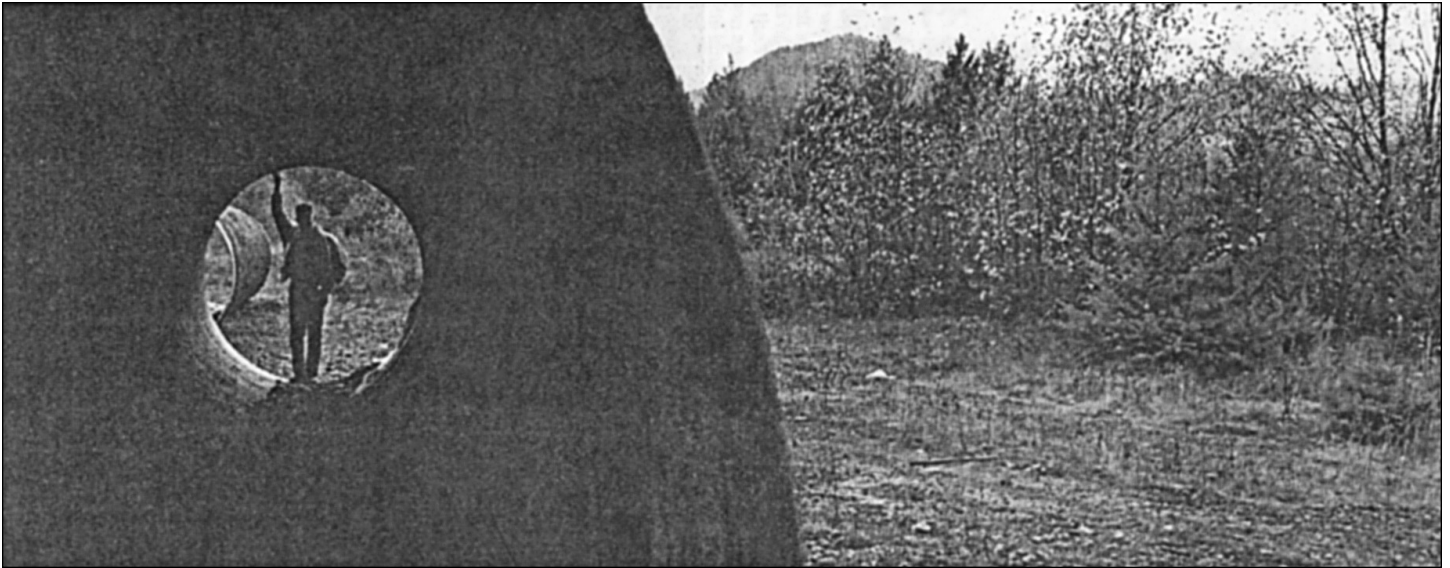


# A FUTURE IN THE FOREST



Photos by DAVE OLSON/The Columbian

Longtime Willard resident Gene Farrell stands at one end of a section of a giant culvert that once diverted Pine Creek around the Broughton Lumber Co. Mill. In 1986, the mill closed and was dismantled, the log pond was drained, and Pine creek was restored to its natural course.

# Helping rural towns breathe

## Grant offers a chance to set a new direction

By KATIE DURBIN  
*Columbian staff writer*

**W**ILLARD — Cook-Underwood Road leaves Highway 14 east of Home Valley and climbs steadily into the logged-over back country of eastern Skamania County, connecting the tiny communities of Cooks, Mill A. Willard and Underwood. The hills are a patchwork of clearcuts and Christmas tree farms. Orchards and vineyard cover the slopes near Underwood.

These are quiet and neglected places now, places that history has passed by.

But a first-ever U. S. Forest Service grant to these communities may help rekindle the spirit that linked them in their glory years.

For 60 years these were industrious timber towns, linked by the Broughton Lumber Co., which felled logs 6 feet thick from the surrounding forest, milled them into squared-off cants at its Willard mill and sent them down a nine-mile flume to another mill at Underwood for finishing. In its heyday, the Willard mill cut 150,000 board feet in a 19-hour day, and Broughton Lumber employed 150 workers in its mill and in the wood.

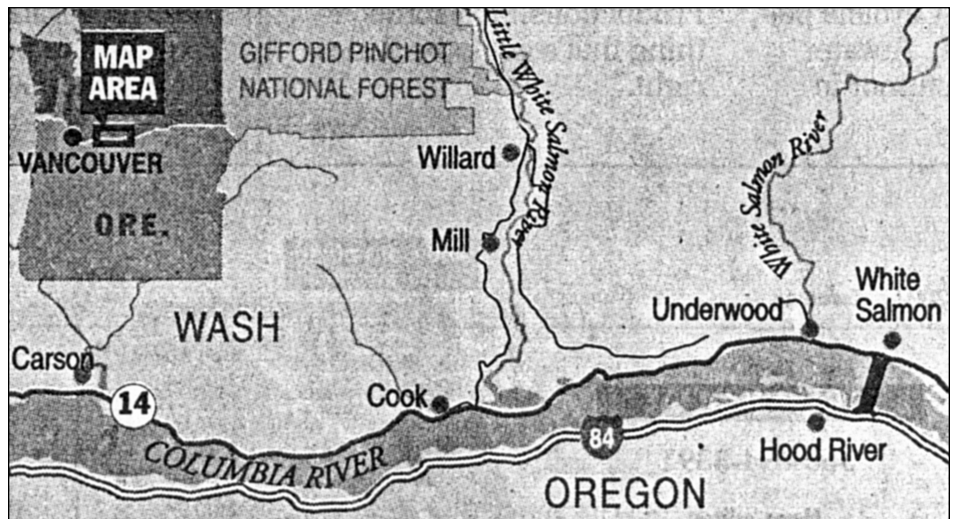


**Newcomer Charley Hazen visits with old-timers Gene and Corrine Farrell, both 80, as they stroll through Willard. Hazen moved to the area two and a half years ago. Gene Farrell worked at the Broughton Lumber Co. mill in Willard.**

Gene Farrell remembers those years. He was the foreman of the Willard mill, and it was his job to make sure it ran efficiently. On his living room wall hangs an oil painting of the

mill complex with its log pond gleaming and its smoldering wigwam burner throwing sparks into the sky.

Gene and Corrine Farrell raised five children in Willard,



a company town. People gathered daily at the company store, which also housed the Willard post office. Doors in Willard were left unlocked, car keys left in ignitions. That at least has not changed.

In 1986, the Willard mill closed. Soon after, the flume — the last of its kind in the United States — was partially dismantled. A historical marker at Drano Lake points out sections of the wooden trough still visible on the hillside across the lake.

Four of the Farrell children still live in the area. Gene and Corrine, now both 80, bought their house at the edge of town from the company after the mill closed. The couple stayed on.

"We had planned to move, but when they decided to sell we decided to take the course of least resistance," Gene Farrell said.

Myrna DeBolt of Carson lived in Mill A for four years after her husband, a Forest Service timber sale administrator, was transferred to the old Willard Ranger District. She worked as a substitute teacher at the Mill A School. Her son, Paul, began first grade there.

It was a lovely spot," she said. "It was just like a big family up there. Everyone knew everyone."

With the mill's closure, life began to leak out of the communities.

The Mill A and Willard Granges closed. So did the Willard and Mill A stores. The closest gas station now is in Bingen, down a steep winding road on Highway 14. A Gifford Pinchot National Forest road maintenance shop that employed 200 in the 1970's was



**A piece of the old Broughton Lumber Co. log flume that once carried rough-milled logs nine miles down the mountain to Underwood still stands in Willard.**

down to a half-dozen employees when it finally closed three years ago.

These days, some rural services are sketchy. The spring-fed Mill A water system violates state water-quality standards. The Mill A volunteer fire department recently disbanded.

Enrollment is on the increase at Mill A School, which serves kindergarten to eighth grade. But more than half the school's 86 students are eligible for subsidized meals. The school district banks the federal timber money it receives, using the interest to cover cost increases.

"With 56 percent on free and reduced price lunches, we don't want to ask people to pass levies," Principal Jim Saltness said.

"The only things that tie the people in these small communities are the school and the church," said Anita Gahimer, director of the Port of Skamania County, who grew up in Mill A and recently returned there to live. "They were tied together in so many ways. Now those ties are lost. It would be really nice

to get some community spirit going."

That may happen soon.

Gahimer has just landed a \$30,000 federal grant that will help residents of Cooks, Mill A, Willard and Underwood begin planning for their shared future. The grant comes from the Northwest Economic Adjustment Initiative, which helps former timber communities find their footing and attract new family-wage jobs.

Launched in 1993 as part of the Clinton administration's Northwest Forest Plan, the program has provided \$9.8 million to communities surrounding the Gifford Pinchot National Forest over the past eight years.

Gahimer hosted a first meeting with community residents Nov. 14 in Mill A. It's important, she said, for residents themselves to identify their needs.

Some needs are obvious. Money is required to begin upgrading Mill A's substandard



**Firefighting in Willard is basic, but at least it exists. Fire volunteers in nearby Mill A recently disbanded.**

water system and restore fire protection. "I'm sure these are things the community will want to address," she said.

There may be people who want help writing forest and fire management plans for their land. There may be people who want to compile a history of the area. "It's the citizens who need to make this happen, the citizens who will come up with the issues they want to address," Gahimer said.

### Rural bedrooms

These days most of the 185 or so households along Cook-Underwood Road are supported by jobs outside. Improbably, these isolated hamlets are becoming bedrooms for larger towns, including Stevenson, White Salmon and Hood River, Ore. They are growing again, too, as urban refugees in search of peace and quiet buy up logged-over land that has been subdivided into 10-acre lots.

Charley Hazen is one newcomer. He and his wife, Linda, moved to Willard two and a half years ago when he was transferred from the Washington Department of Transportation's Vancouver branch to Bingen.

"Price is what drove us up here," Charley Hasen said as he stood in his leaf-strewn yard. "I like it. It's a quiet community. Being on the back side, you don't hear all the traffic on Highway 14."

Life in Willard is good, Hazen said. "I'd like to see no change," he said with a newcomer's zeal. "I'd like to see it just the way it is. You don't want to see the property taxes increase like they have over in Underwood."

Just down the road, Bob Roe is trimming noble fir, Douglas fir and western red cedar branches in his garage workshop and fashioning them into wreaths and balls, which he sells to tree farms and by mail order. The raw materials are close at hand. Trained as a forester, Roe has lived in Willard off and on since 1978. He has a landscaping service and grows potatoes, carrots and parsnips. His wife commutes to a laboratory job in North Bonneville.

"Everybody up here has two or three things that they do," he said. "After the mill closed, people had to work somewhere."

What changes would Roe like to see?

"It might be nice to have a better firehouse in Willard," he said. "The firehouse is pickup truck with a pump in back."

He wonders, too, what would happen in the unlikely event the nearby Williams natural gas pipeline caught fire. "We might need to have an evacuation plan," he said. "If the gas line did go out, it would block both roads out of Willard. We

might want a helicopter pad."

Gene Farrell thinks about what changes he would like to see. None immediately come to mind. "We do hope someone will open up the store in Mill A again," he finally says. A small restaurant would be nice, he added, but it probably wouldn't do enough business to survive.

Not everyone is eager to see grant money flow into these communities. Not everyone wants to get involved. Some people who live this far out in the country just want to be left alone.

But others believe good things are bound to happen.

"Whenever you get people together to talk, it's healthy," said Saltness, the Mill A School principal. The school will do its part, he added. "We want to be a good partner in the community."

Gahimer is another optimist. "Most people have chosen to live here because it is very peaceful, it is off the beaten track," she said. "On the other hand, most people also want a little bit of community in their lives."



Photos by DAVE OLSON/The Columbian

**Bob Roe of Willard supplements his income as a landscape contractor making holiday wreaths and balls in his garage. "Everybody up here has two or three things they do," he says.**