

Stevensons On Cape Horn 126 Years



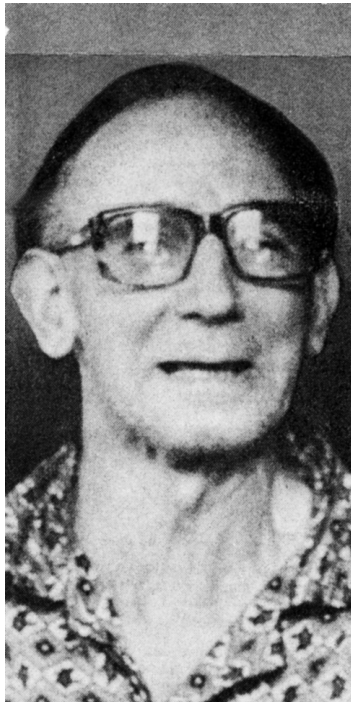
Smoke billows from a work train laying track at Cape Horn in 1927

By **BOB BECK**
Columbian Staff Writer

When John W. Stevenson looks out the window of his home, he sees history in every direction.

Looking north, he can watch cars and trucks creep along the face of Cape Horn, where state Highway 14 has carved little more than a toehold.

To the west lies the Burlington Northern Railroad tunnel, a quarter-mile hole carved through solid rock in 1907. Today, 73 years later, it still provides the only water-level access to the Columbia Gorge on the north side of the



John W. Stevenson

Columbia River.

When Stevenson looks south, he can watch the sparkling waters of the big river and, in his mind's eye, conjure up visions of the town of Cape Horn, long vanished.

Stevenson is one of the few surviving descendants of another John Stevenson, his grandfather, who crossed the plains by wagon train and settled at Cape Horn in 1854. The whole valley in the shadow of the big cliff has been in the Stevenson family for 126 years.

Stevenson, 66, is a bachelor and among the last in the area bearing the

family name. He traced the events that led up to the long family dynasty in the beautiful valley about 10 miles east of Washougal.

His great-grandparents and their children trudged across the plains in 1853, leaving the Wabash River of Indiana to escape the "ague," an illness that was believed caused by swamp air.

The family took up a 40-acre claim in Portland, on what is now Stark Street, then traded the property within a year for a team of oxen. Still pursued by the ague, they headed north across the Columbia.

To get as far away from swamp air as possible, the elder Stevenson built his log cabin on the highest ground atop Cape Horn, a good thousand feet above the river. His son, John, was 18 at the time. He then took out a donation land claim signed by President Ulysses S. Grant. His claim took in all of the beautiful valley between the Columbia and the Cape Horn cliff, and east as far as Prindle.

"He built one of the best docks on the river," the present Stevenson said. "This was a wonderful fishing area — salmon, sturgeon and smelt."

A community began to form at the water's edge. At its peak, there was a hotel, general store, saloon, blacksmith shop and a factory that processed locally grown potatoes.

The Cape Horn post

office was established June 4, 1883, with Loren Wright as first postmaster, and continued until 1942. Stevenson's grandfather used to sail across the Columbia to Bridal Veil, on the Oregon side, pick up the mail at the train depot there, and sail back.

In 1907, the railroad tunnel was punched through the Cape Horn rock, and the following year regular train service was begun.

Stevenson's uncle, Ben Stevenson, had a home at the river's edge. In 1927, when Highway 14 was being excavated along the top of the Cape Horn cliff, the contractor set off a mighty charge of dynamite. Down came thousands of tons of rock, sweeping the Stevenson home and other

buildings into the river.

"Uncle Ben tried to get a court injunction to stop the blasting, but he failed," Stevenson said. "A college professor had been brought out to supervise the setting of the charges, and everybody except Uncle Ben thought he knew what he was doing."

Stevenson's most vivid memories are of prohibition days, when Cape Horn was the center of a thriving bootlegging industry.

"There was a still behind almost every rock," Stevenson said. "Nobody tried to stop them because they were good business, and no one wanted to stand in the way of business."

The biggest bootlegging operation, Stevenson said, was in a building atop a



Gathering at Cape Horn store around the turn of the century included John Stevenson's parents, father Emory sitting on steps holding dog, and mother Elizabeth behind him.



S.P.&S. construction crew and engine "Pioneer" is laying steel at Cape Horn on Nov. 16, 1907, at 10 a.m. Couple on the right looking on are Mr. and Mrs. John Stevenson, who homesteaded the land at the base of Cape Horn. They are the parents of Emory Stevenson.

steep cliff overlooking the river. A boom would be swung out from the cliff at night and a rope let down to a waiting boat. Up would come 100-pound sacks of sugar and other ingredients needed for a batch of "white lightning." The booze run off since the last visit then would be lowered to the boat, which would head for an eager market in Portland.

"This worked fine for years, until the 'revenuers' finally knocked over the operation," Stevenson said. Some of the remnants of the bootleg operation still can be found.

Much of the success of

early Cape Horn, Stevenson said, could be traced to gold mines operated back in the hills. Most of the machinery and supplies for the Mabee and Skamania mines came by boat to Cape Horn and then went by wagon train inland.

Stevenson's father, Emory, was a blacksmith and did much of the work for the mining companies.

Stevenson runs beef cattle and other livestock on his farm and lives a contented life, willing to let the rest of the world whiz by along the highway far above his home. He has been offered thousands of dollars

an acre for the Stevenson homestead, but he said he just laughs at the real estate agents.

He loves the simple life, he said, and would have liked to have lived in pioneer days at Cape Horn.

"In those days, if you made a dime you really had to work at it," he said. "Nowadays, people complain if they don't have everything. Just wait until they wake up some day and find out they don't have anything."

Stevenson said he believes that day is not far off.

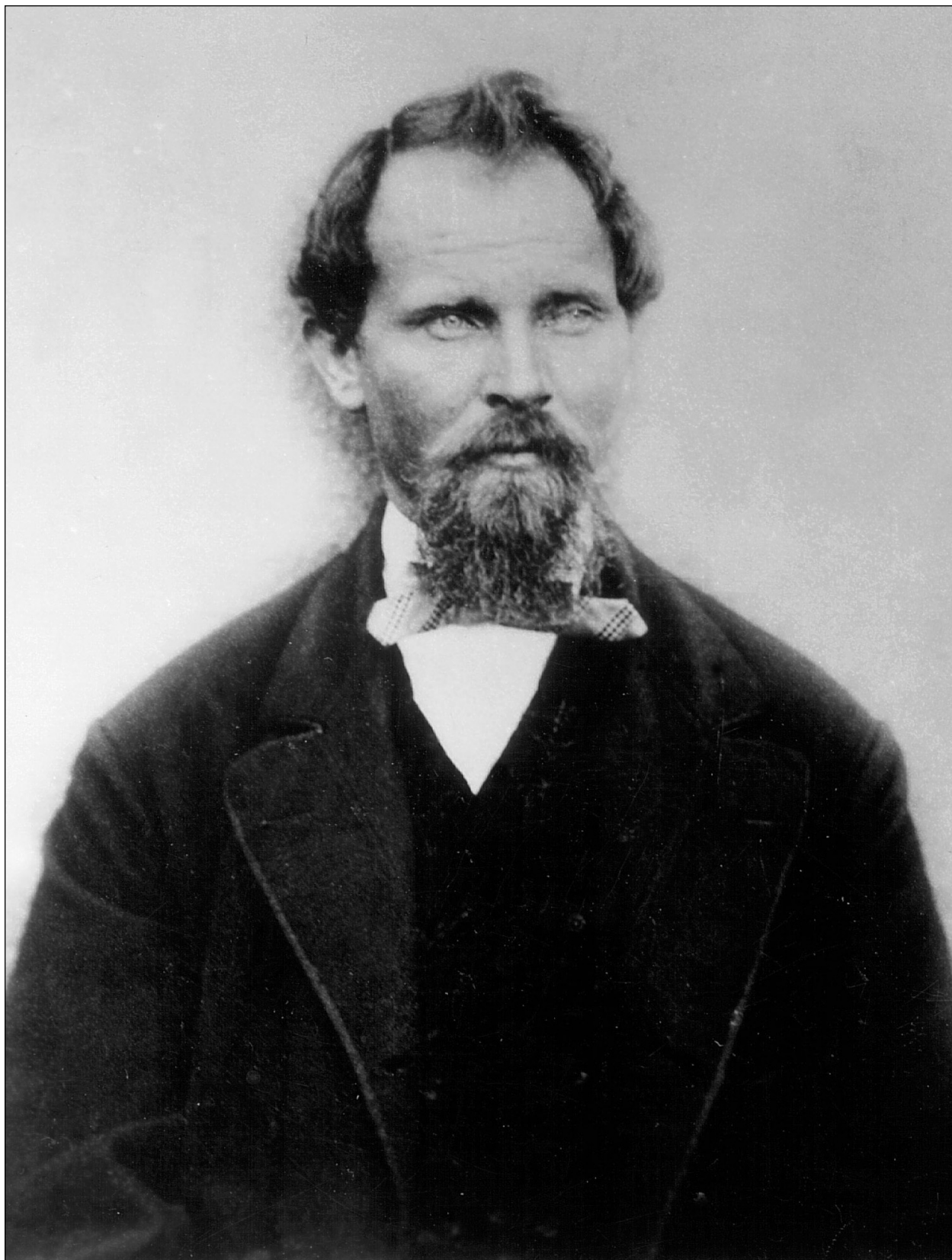


John W. Stevenson, pioneer of Cape Horn of 1853. His homestead was at the base of Cape Horn along the Columbia River, and is still in the family. He was chief carpenter of the Oregon Steam Navigation Co. (1865), and was employed at Eagle Creek Sawmill. He married Sarah Tait. His sister Mrs. Joseph Bailey was the original owner of the photograph. Photo was taken in the 1860's.



Sarah Tait Stevenson, wife of John W. Stevenson, pioneer of Cape Horn of 1853. Their homestead was at the base of Cape Horn along the Columbia River, and is still in the family. Photo was taken in the 1860's.

(Photo courtesy Frank B. Gill)
(Oregon Historical Society Negative 53869)



John Stevenson was one of the original settlers at Cape Horn in 1853. He was also with the Colonel Joseph Ruckel Portage Railroad. This picture was taken in 1867.

Obituary: John W. Stevenson

"The Skamania Pioneer". September 10. 1926

The funeral of the late J. S. Stevenson, who died at his home at Cape Horn last Monday, was held from a Vancouver undertaking parlor at 2:30 last Wednesday and the body shipped to Yakima for burial.

Mr. Stevenson was almost ninety-two years of age, being born in 1835 and had been very able in both mind and body up to within a short time of his death. He was taken with heart trouble Sunday night and died at 4:30 Monday morning at the home of his son, E. F. Stevenson. The end came to the aged pioneer without much suffering and he passed into the great unknown apparently without pain, his body machinery wearing out with time and a very active life.

His wife passing away several years ago, he is survived by three daughters and five sons who were all at the funeral services in Yakima where the body was laid to rest.

His children are: Mrs. Minnie Smith, Mrs. Elizabeth Smith, Mrs. Lila Mahoney, George W. Rocket (Mrs. Minnie Smith and Mr. Rocket being children of his wife by a former marriage), J. W. Stevenson, all residing at Yakima: Miles B. Stevenson and E. F. Stevenson of Cape Horn and J. I. Stevenson of Portland.

Mr. Stevenson had a wonderful life and saw much history of the west made. He came west in a covered wagon from Illinois when he was seven years old and could tell of many exciting and dangerous experiences the pioneers had on their journey over the prairies, rivers and mountains. He had a vivid memory and his stories of the perils, hardships and pleasures of the pioneer were always entertaining and interesting.

He came to Skamania County in 1855 and settled on what is now Cape Horn; two years later filing on a homestead where he lived with his family the remainder of his life. He helped build and operate the first sawmill in the county for the company that operated the portage road at the rapids before the days of rails on either side of the river. He assisted in building two of the block houses and at the time of the Indian massacre at Cascades, he was working, we believe, for the government.

His wife and family were in their cabin at Cape Horn and Mr. Stevenson, fearing the Indians would find and kill them, walked to his home in the night, taking his family under cover of darkness on foot to Parker's Landing between what is now Camas and Washougal, there getting a scow and taking them to the fort at Vancouver and later returning to Cascades where he went through the fight with the Indians.

After the trouble was settled, he brought his family home and was one of the first farmers of the county. Living on the same piece of land all these years and watching and assisting in the development of the county.

There are few of these old pioneers left and as the days roll by their ranks become thinner and thinner. With their passing will go some of the strongest hearts the west has even known or will ever know. To men like Mr. Stevenson, the people

of this county owe a debt that can never be paid. It was their bold venturesome spirit and tenacity of nature that gave us this great western country and although they may never have done great things as they are measured today, they laid the foundation for the civilization and exploitation of the west and a building is only as strong as its foundation. When the final accounting of all things is done, the names of the pioneers who blazed the trails to the west will be emblazoned on the escutcheon of St. Peter as those of real men and women.

Note: John W. Stevenson is not related to the Stevenson brothers that founded the City of Stevenson.