

The Garry Oak Tree Landmark and Old Hwy 99

By - Don Trosper – Heritage Builders (Apr. 2024)



Could Old Highway 99 someday be as famous as Route 66? Will songs be written and tourists drawn to visit it? To some people that seems unlikely, but I suggest that it is worth considering. There is a sense of romance to this historic transportation route, arguably one of the oldest overland roads in Western Washington. Known in the past as the Cowlitz Trail, it could be said that it was a northern extension of the Oregon Trail, ending in Tumwater.

One aspect of its heritage has received a lot of attention recently with the discussions surrounding one of the south Tumwater landmarks, the Davis/Meeker Garry Oak Tree next to the old Olympia Regional Airport hangar. Without discussing the controversy regarding the saving or removal of that 400+ year old tree, I thought it might be helpful to provide a little historical background to this landmark.



It does my historic heart good to see the passion for Tumwater's heritage expressed by members of the public. Keeping in mind that all trees will eventually fail and fall, it certainly represents a unique part of the culture of our historic community. Not everybody knows it is far

older than the famous Bush Butternut tree that fell in recent years. My humorous nature leads me to call it the Tumwater Family Tree. It honors our roots and tempts me to go out on a limb to suggest developing a branch office to preserve it as long as possible.

It doesn't take too much to imagine just how many people through the generations have traveled by that living landmark. The tree reaches back to native American tribal roots. The foot trail was a part of their trading routes for a multitude of generations. It was important to them also for the nearby prairie land which provided an important seasonal food source for Camas Root bulbs. Later the British of the Hudson's Bay Company utilized and improved upon the trading routes serving their farms and other operations in the northern part of the Oregon Territory. Tumwater's founders, the Simmons/Bush party were the first Americans to expand upon the trail by cutting a rough wagon road in 1845 from Cowlitz Landing (near Toledo in Lewis County) to New Market, the first permanent American community north of the Columbia. The town is known today as Tumwater and is an end of the northern extension of the Oregon Trail.

That special oak tree was a landmark for everyone who came through the area. One memory was shared by a descendant of the Rev. Thomas Harper family as they arrived at Bush Prairie in 1853. Elmira Harper wrote in a family memoir, *"Their first camp on Puget Sound was real close to the big oak trees that are seen at the Olympia airport. The family stayed there for some time while Rev. Harper looked around."*

The narrow gauge Olympia Tenino Railroad roughly followed the Cowlitz Trail route starting in the mid 1870's. Train passengers would have seen the big oak trees as they traveled between Olympia and Tenino, paying a dollar per ticket to connect with the Northern Pacific Railroad.

The age of the automobile era brought about many paved roadways. The Pacific Coast Highway (Highway 1 and Highway 99) was part of the main route between Portland and Seattle. A huge number of cars, trucks and buses would have passed under the limbs of the big oak trees on Bush Prairie. In fact, as the highway was improved in later years, Old Highway 99 was diverted around the Garry Oak landmark, recognizing its historic value. The Olympia Regional Airport also developed about the time of the highway. It expanded during the World War II years of the 1940s and later gave the State Capitol access to regional air travel.

Interstate 5 came through Tumwater in the late 1950s, paralleling Old Hwy. 99 to the west, reducing the traffic load on the old highway. The old highway and Capitol Boulevard remain a main thoroughfare south from Tumwater. It is expected to see more growth since south is the future direction of Tumwater's expansion.

There are few remaining landmarks in the Tumwater area. It is a community with a bright future for cultural tourism. It is important as we grow to preserve landmarks along this historic route that traverses the pioneer farms of the Bush family, the Gabriel Jones farm, the

Kindred farm, and through the important landmark that made Tumwater famous, the former site of the Olympia Brewing Company.

SUBJECT: Regular Commissioners' Meeting of March 13, 1984

DATE: March 14, 1984

At their meeting of March 13, 1984, the Board of County Commissioners took the following actions. Departments are asked to closely review these contents for referrals and actions affecting their departments.

9:00) The meeting was called to order by Chairman Barner. Commissioner Fraser moved to approve the day's agenda as presented. Commissioner Eldridge seconded the motion. Motion carried. Commissioner Fraser moved to approve the Minutes from the Regular Commissioners' Meeting of March 6, 1984 as amended. Commissioner Eldridge seconded the motion. Motion carried.

2:00) A discussion was held regarding the oak tree at the Olympia Airport with staff and interested citizens. Jerry Hendricks, Deputy Director of the Public Works Department, explained the possible options open to the Board: realignment of the road to build it around the tree, or removal of the tree. He explained that the realignment of the road would cost approximately \$20,000, with the total construction cost of the road from Tumwater to Tenino (nine miles) at \$2.2 million. The following persons testified: John Boyd, Scott Baker, Charles Chambers, Tom Joslin and Jack Davis. There was a general consensus among the citizens present to attempt to save the tree. After further discussion, Commissioner Fraser moved to give direction to the Public Works Department to make the alignment design at the area of the tree such that the tree is avoided and to ask that the department attempt to seek donations for additional landscaping to be done around the tree. Commissioner Eldridge seconded the motion. Motion carried.

So then, are you ready to write the next hit song that just might surpass the popularity of Route 66 in the Southwest U.S.? Perhaps not, but let's at least continue to build upon the passions to preserve and promote the living history of our local heritage for future generations.