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Skagit River Journal

of History & Folklore
Subscribers Edition

The most in-depth, comprehensive site about the Skagit
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Home of the Tarheel Stomp • [Mortimer Cook](#) slept here & named the town *Bug*



The saga of the Cornelius, Wallace and Rudene families Part 2 of 2:

First woman to settle on the mainland

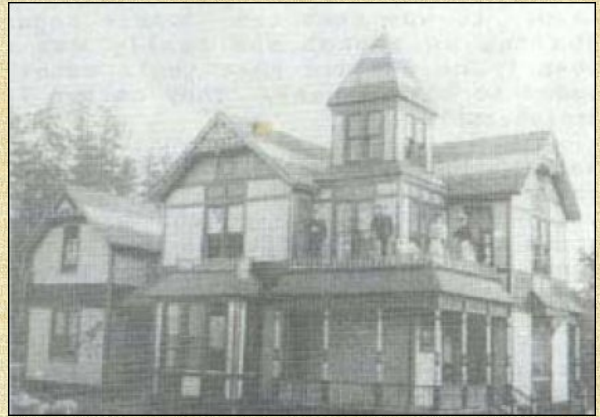
As Bessie Cornelius Rudene proudly pointed out for the rest of her life, she had unique pioneer credentials. She was the first woman settler to make her permanent home on the mainland of the area that would eventually be Skagit county. John A. and Bessie Cornelius's first home together was nothing more than a shack built from rough-cut lumber — less of a home than a mere protection against the weather, but it sufficed for their first two years on the mainland. In those early years John made most of his living by surveying claims for the settlers who arrived to take advantage of government squatter and homesteading laws. Times were lean in those early child-birthing days. Money was scarce and had to be plowed back into the homestead to carve a home out of the wilderness. Arthur was born back on Whidbey island on Aug. 7, 1968, and Bessie spent most of the late months of her pregnancy with friends there. The winter after Arthur was born was especially brutal, so Bessie and the children returned to the island. John remained to work on the dikes but joined them later while they again lived with friends. John was hired on in 1869 as the foreman of a ranch near present-day Oak Harbor and the family stayed on the island until April 1870. The family returned to the flats but by that time John realized that few settlers were depending on growing crops because there was not yet enough demand for them and transportation was not yet dependable. That would change later when steamboats ran often enough to transport grain to Seattle and points south. In the meantime, the influx of settlers guaranteed private survey work for John when he was not contracting with the federal government, so he did not go into farming for the time being. That winter, daughter Mary Ellen was born on Nov. 30, 1870, in Olympia with a doctor attending. Although she was named for Bessie's sister, like with her namesake, she went by a nickname all her life. In her case the name was Nellie; Nellie's fate would be bound to that of her mother.

According to records that Chris Barnes has maintained, John surveyed in the early 1870s most of the land from Snohomish county to the British Columbia border and most of the land on Fidalgo island, plus the islands in the archipelago, Camano island and the Stillaguamish river valley. The eastern boundary of his work was probably about where Highway 99 was constructed 50 years later. Swedish settlers John Chilberg and Perry Polson assisted him and we know from the photo on page 155 of the 1906 book, *Illustrated History of Skagit and Snohomish Counties* [hereafter the *1906 Illustrated History*], that he had a crew in 1872 that included Samuel McNutt, Joseph Snow, Messrs. McCroin and Dixon and a guide who was quaintly labeled "Indian." When John was not surveying, he also helped his neighbors, the Sullivan and Calhoun families dike around their places and eventually found time to dike-in his own place.

LaConner was growing nearby to the west. Alonzo Low set up a small trading post on the east side of Swinomish slough across from the Indian reservation when the area was still under the Indian Swinomish name. His father was one of the original party that landed on Alki point in 1851 and went on to found Seattle. His business failed within two years but Thomas Hayes reopened the post and in turn sold it to John S. Conner in 1869. But the Cornelius family was almost self-sufficient and they led a different life than folks in town. Bessie and John both learned Chinook Jargon to communicate with their neighboring Indians and Will spent hours every day with them at their camp. When it was time for Will to attend school in 1871, the family paddles with him down Sullivan slough to David Culver's private school in a LaConner log cabin. That was just a temporary answer, so Bessie insisted that John should promote a Pleasant Ridge school just as William Wallace had done for her and her siblings on Whidbey island. As a result, John became a member of the first Pleasant Ridge school district board, which opened a school in July 1872 at the Albert Leamer home and the teacher was Albert's daughter Ida who was only 15. The *1906 Illustrated History* noted that Miss Leamer was granted the first teacher's certificate in the present boundaries of Skagit county by Dr. W.T. Deere, who was then the Whatcom county superintendent schools and lived near present Anacortes. Miss Leamer also taught the next term, this time at the James Harrison residence. The first pupils were Fanny, Mary and Edward Chilberg; William and Arthur Cornelius; and Edgar Stacey. The *1906 Illustrated History* also includes a social note by John P. McGlenn, who came to LaConner as the Indian agent in 1872: He said that all ladies from miles around attended a dance his first week in town; he named eight, including Louisa Ann Conner, the town's namesake, her daughter Ida and Mrs. John Cornelius.

John Cornelius retires from surveying and takes up farming

We also learn from The *1906 Illustrated History* biography of Perry Polson that starting in 1872 he worked as a chain man for John A. Cornelius, surveying the shoreline from Port Susan bay to Burrows bay near Fidalgo island one year. When the government contracts were exhausted, John decided that enough settlers were arriving every month to make agriculture important to the local economy. The Cornelius family was completed in November 1873 when baby Charles was born. Sometime before then the family moved into their second home, a real framed house this time, up the ridge from their original cabin. Unfortunately, along with the baby came a nationwide financial panic and its effect was soon felt on the west coast as capital dried up and construction slowed to a trickle. That directly affected Whatcom county (which still included the Skagit portion) because the lumber mills at Utsalady and Whatcom shut down and hay was no longer sold to feed the horses that supplied the logs for the mills.



The house that J.O. Rudene built for Bessie on the old John Cornelius homestead in 1887. The top four photos on the page are courtesy of Christopher Barnes.

the logs for the mills.

By 1875, John's body was exhibiting the strain of the backbreaking work of slogging through swamps and climbing over deadfalls in the forests, besides the exposure to the elements in the swamps all over the Northwest. He was forced now to give up his surveying and concentrate on farming. Neighbors such as the Chilbergs, Pete Downey, J.O. Rudene and young Charles Conrad pitched in to grow grain and hay crops that were ideal for the cattle market that was picking up again locally. John had 14 horses and 75 head of cattle by then, mostly Jerseys. But there was still no market outside the flats and before long he was into debt without his old government income. Life became grim as can be seen in a letter that Bessie wrote to a relative in 1875.

But we are getting tired now and would like a change if we could better ourselves by it. I have always thought I should like to live in California and we hear a good deal of talk about it, so when you write I wish you would let us know if there is any chance of buying. All we would want would be a small place in a good locality.

Regardless of Bessie's pessimism in the letter, they dug in their heels and toughed it. An article in the June 10, 1876, *Northern Star* newspaper from Snohomish may have explained why they always came back from their blue moods.

When last at LaConner we took a trip with Mr. Calhoun across the flats to his place, thence to Pleasant Ridge. Upon reaching the top of the ridge near the residence of Mr. Cornelius, one of the most beautiful sights imaginable to the lover of fertile fields in a high state of cultivation, presented itself to our vision. For there on either hand was spread out several thousand acres of tide marsh, securely diked, nearly all in grain, this being of a dark rich color, and growing rapidly, while the rocky rounded island-like hills in the distance, relieved the scene from the monotony so characteristic of prairie land.

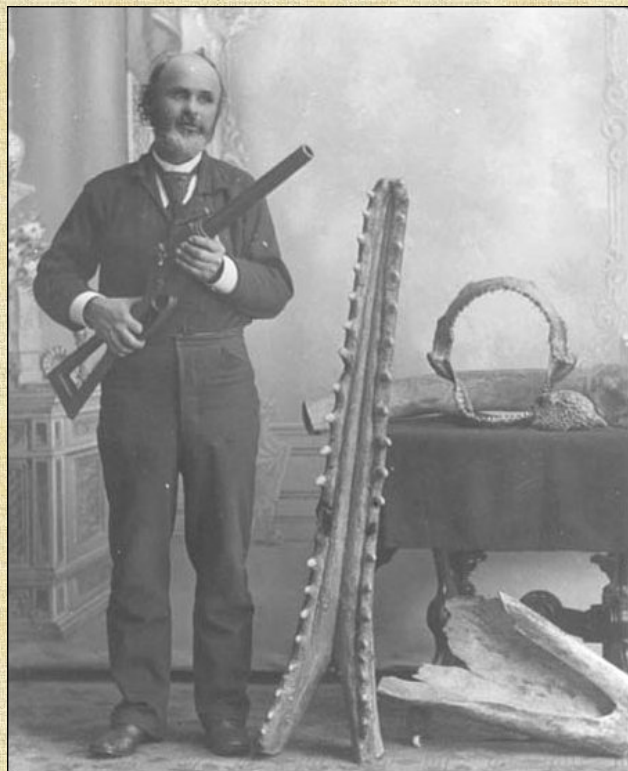
Their finances may have improved as the country climbed out of the Depression, but the bad news for the Cornelius family did not end. In the late summer of 1876, diphtheria swept through the area and one by one, the children came down with it. Bessie finally became exhausted, trying to care for them, as did Dr. George Calhoun, the brother of their neighbor, Sam Calhoun. Baby Charles, who had seemed so healthy just weeks before, seemed to be immune, but then he also became sick while his parents were so weak. He succumbed to the disease on Oct. 1, 1876, just weeks before his third birthday. Luckily, William, Arthur and Nellie survived the sickness well.

The farmers in the Pleasant Ridge area finally decided that since there was still no market locally for their farm products, they needed to supply the market at sawmills such as the one at Utsalady, where employment and production were picking up again. Just two months after the death of baby Charles, another article appeared in the *Northern Star* on Dec. 2, 1876 detailed John's farm progress that year: The writer noted that he had encountered one of John's relatives who was returning from Swinomish to Oregon:

He was taking a common black English radish, raised on his nephew's ranch, 28 inches in circumference. . . . He informed us that John A. Cornelius had just completed the diking in of his ranch of 182 acres situated at the end and around the base of Pleasant Ridge, affording the finest view, as well as the best location for a ranch on the Swinomish and one of the best situations for a home in the territory.

By 1877, however, John's health declined so much that he could not handle the stress and physical challenges of managing a farm of more than 160 acres. He leased most the acreage to a young Swedish immigrant, J.O. Rudene, whom he trusted, and he hoped that the profits on the crop would grow as the country and the Northwest came out of the Depression.

The prodigal uncle returns



Easily the most delightful of the family photos, this photo of Eli Polk Mounts, Ruthinda's half brother, was given to us as a Christmas present by our dear old friend and faithful reader, Lawrence Harnden Jr. Who else but a retired Coast Guard chief would fully appreciate the prodigal uncle. Probably photographed in front of a studio backdrop, this photo was more than likely taken in Eli's later days when he regaled audiences all over the county with tales of how one slays an Ahab.

Bessie wanted to help bring income to the family but she felt frustrated, not knowing exactly how to do it. So imagine how happy she must have been when her long-lost uncle Eli Mounts — Ruthinda's half brother, showed up out of the blue and provided both an emotional and financial tonic for the whole family. The last she had heard about Eli was from Ruthinda's memory of leaving the Mounts home in Iowa in 1845 when he was three. His mother was Ruthinda's stepmother and she had never been close to the woman her father had married after being widowed. Eli told them an amazing tale of how he was orphaned at age four and ran away from his foster home, eventually floating down the Missouri river on a log. Not to be outdone in the Mounts family full of unique individuals, Eli's described his life as a teen in a way that reads like a cross between a Stephen Crane novel and a cold-war spy story. At age nineteen in 1861, Eli enlisted in the 16th Iowa regiment as a drummer boy and soon found himself marching to a Civil War battlefield. He had no taste for battle and soon he was into mischief, crossing the line to fraternize with the Confederate enemy. But his new friends wanted him to fight on their side. To avoid that end he obtained a job carrying the mail, but was soon captured by Union soldiers. Not wanting to be caught and executed as a spy, he escaped after being put on a boat.

The only way out was to get far away was to become a sailor, so he volunteered for a whaling mission in 1862 and found a career. Even though he hopped back and forth from side to another, Eli always maintained his loyalty to and admiration for the Union. He deeply regretted that he did not have an honorable discharge but he would not allow anyone to intercede on his behalf, possibly worrying that the paperwork from his dalliance with the Confederacy might resurface. So he sailed off and tried to put his quixotic years behind him. Eli decided in 1879 to take some time off from whaling when his ship dropped anchor somewhere on Puget sound. Chris Barnes explains in her book, *Bessie*, that Eli heard that he had a pretty little niece in these parts. When he found the homestead on Whidbey he could see the Mounts resemblance in niece Bessie, but more than pretty, she looked pretty exhausted, as was typical of frontier wives in those days.

When you look at photos of those amazing persevering women, the one common element is that they all look tired. Eli knew how much hard-worked hard, such as the ones on ships, enjoyed fresh fruit. Strawberries were ripe when he arrived, so Eli volunteered to row across the bay for thirty miles round trip to the Utsalady mill and sell them to the sawmill cookhouses as a desert. That netted \$7 for the family each time and they continued the seasonal deliveries for five years. Eli became a favorite member of the family. Young Arthur was especially fascinated with him and he would later publish a book about Eli's adventures in 1901, *Islands in the Ocean of memory*. Arthur got to know him well because he was the only boy at home and got to tag along behind Eli when he was not in school. Will was away at school in Anacortes where his mother enrolled him at the new

... school. When he was away at school in Alacortes where his mother enrolled him at the new Alden Academy so that he could take courses in music and art as well as learn reading, writing and arithmetic. The school was expensive at \$12 per month but Bessie convinced John that no sacrifice was too great for their children's education; all three eventually graduated there. Late that fall, the family bade farewell to Eli as he returned to his whaling ship and they had no idea that the days of fun and games would soon end.

In the winter of 1880, John kept delivering produce and grain to Utsalady with his friend Tom Kennedy. On one return journey, they got stranded on the mudflats between Ika Island and the mouth of the river when the tide was ebbing. By the time the tide floated them out again, John caught a cold that turned into pneumonia. This was the last challenge to his system, which was still weak from his surveying days. Within a few days, he realized that he was dying and he sent for his friend, J.O. Rudene. He explained his concern that he had not provided enough for his family and he asked his friend to look out for them. He died soon thereafter on Feb. 16, 1880, at age 40, and like her mother, Bessie became a widow way before her time.

J.O. Rudene and the Cornelius family

When John died at age 40 on Feb. 16, 1880, he left Bessie as a 31-year-old widow with three surviving children: William, 13; Arthur, 11; and Nellie, nine. John's was the second body at their family cemetery on the top of Pleasant Ridge, joining that of baby Charles who died four years earlier. Like her mother, who was widowed by the death of William Cornelius in Oregon, Bessie soon had to deal with a mortgage on land that John had bought contiguous to their property. She hated having to tell her mother, Ruthinda, that her favorite stepson had died so young, but Ruthinda took it with her customary stoicism. She also advised Bessie to remarry soon for the sake of the children, just as Ruthinda did when John's father died. For the time being, that was out of the question for Bessie. The only financial promise for the future was the lease that J.O. Rudene had taken out on the homestead before John died.

J.O. Rudene was another of the many Swedish immigrants who settled near Pleasant Ridge on the Swinomish flats. Like his neighbors Olaf Polson and Isaac and Charles Chilberg, he emigrated from Sweden to Iowa and then to the Skagit river. He was born John Oscar Jacobson in the Ostergotland district of Sweden on Aug. 13, 1850. His niece Hazel Edmonds Hartman wrote a booklet, *The immigration of our Swedish relatives to America*, published by Dick Fallis in 1984, which gives a lot of background on the family and the immigration patterns. She wrote that J.O.'s older brother August came to America to work for his maternal uncle John Shanstrom in Fairfield, Iowa in about 1871. The *1906 Illustrated History* notes that two sisters also came with him. For an unknown reason, August changed his surname from Jacobson to Rudene, and then returned to Sweden to persuade brother J.O. to move to Iowa. J.O. noted in his paid biography that working on his father's farm until age 23 gave him a thorough knowledge of farming while he was able to take advantage of the best education available. Their region of Sweden was southwest of Stockholm and the largest city nearby was Linnköping.

J.O. went along with August when his brother returned to Iowa that year. August came west to LaConner in 1875 and J.O. followed a year later. A 1915 letter from Rudene to a relative explains the interconnection of the Swedish immigrants here:

Then in spring of '76 I came to Washington territory. I came by emigrant train [Union and Central Pacific] to San Francisco and by boat from there to Seattle — and at the dock a stranger met me by the name of Nelson Chilberg, he spoke my name, and we soon got acquainted. Mrs. Chilberg is my cousin. In couple days I took steamer for LaConner, the old favorite, J.B. Libby, which went to Bellingham or Whatcom [Whatcom], so called at that time, once a week. My brother met me at LaConner, and took me in a shovel-nosed canoe, up

through Sullivan slough to Mr. Albert Leamer's place on Pleasant Ridge which were on 8th of May 1876, and I must say I thought it were a queer country, timber looming up sky high on the Ridge — and when the high tide came in it covered all the land except few acres that were diked in at that time.

J.O. and August soon found diking and land-clearing work for Sam Calhoun and then they rented the Puget Mill Co. farm north of Pleasant Ridge. In 1880 August sold his share of their farm business to J.O. and went to San Francisco to set up a shoe shop. In 1881 J.O. was able to buy a 200-acre farm at an administrator's sale that was located in Beaver Marsh, an area that was not yet diked and cultivated. Up until then, 50 acres were cleared and the rest was in brush and timber, so he continued the backbreaking work he described from the Calhoun place: "we had no roads no bridges any where — we had to go in boats or scows or walk and pack our things on our backs." Geologists explain that Pleasant Ridge was once an island that rose from a shallow body of delta water. The land around only built up with the accumulation of thousands of years of silt from the upriver Skagit. With the Cornelius acreage, he now had almost 400 acres under cultivation. After devoting full time to farming for years, with the principal crops of oats and hay, he made enough to make all the payments on his own farm. Before Cornelius died, Rudene hired neighbors Pete Downey and Charles Conrad to work as farmhands on the combined leased land until they split up the Puget Mill property between them a few years later.

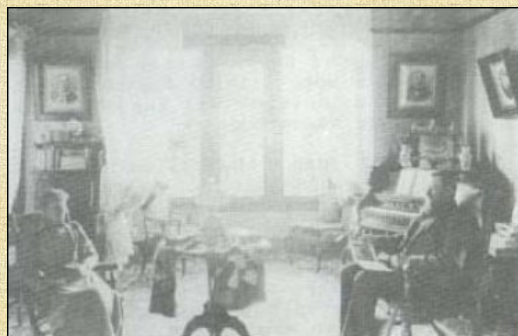
Meanwhile, Bessie Cornelius was grieving over the one love in her life. Just two months after John died, she received news that Absalom Cornelius died down in Oregon on April 17, 1880, at age 82. She hardly even knew the Cornelius family down there, but news of her grandfather's death reminded her of the similarities of her life and her mother's. Both Ruthinda and Bessie married Cornelius men. Both men died young, leaving their wives with practically no means of support. They were both also uprooted when their children were babies to move away from home, and their children became used to canoes and Indians when they were just toddlers. Bessie's grandmother, Elizabeth Cornelius, died on Nov. 27, 1881, and was also buried at Turner, the town where they settled 35 years before.

As the weeks dragged on after they put John's body to rest beside baby Charles at the crest of the hill, she realized that the lease income from J.O. Rudene was the only thing keeping the family afloat. She still did not know about Rudene's deathbed promise to John that he would look after the family. Bessie began housekeeping for him as he supervised the farmhands, but she apparently did not see how fond he was of her. She admired his progressive ideas about farming and his leadership in land reclamation on the flats, but he was a Swede. Bessie was about as fond of Swedes as her mother was of Indians when she first moved to Whidbey island. To complicate matters further, she was shy outside the family circle and a bit of a snob. Gradually she felt more natural when he was around the house, but she did not initially have any romantic feelings for him. She was open to marrying again, however, especially after her mother gave her blessing and even urged it. She was just 33, and because she married young, she realized that her children would soon be ready to leave the nest. She shuddered at the thought of being alone on the hill and withering away years before her time. No doubt she remembered how her mother aged prematurely as they tried to scrape by back on the island.

As he notes in his 1915 letter, he bought the Cornelius acreage sometime in 1881, which helped Bessie financially and took the mortgage off her back. Finally, J.O. named the question, but she kept putting him off. Ironically, the only reason she finally said yes was because she got the wrong idea that he was planning to leave, so she



J.O. Rudene-Bessie Cornelius wedding 1882.



Bessie and J.O. Rudene in the parlor of their house on Pleasant Ridge

finally consented to be his wife. They were married on Aug. 12, 1882 at a friend's home in Seattle and B.N.L. Davis, the pioneer Baptist minister from Riverside near Mount Vernon officiated. One suspects that she was not as head over heels as she was when John courted her in her teen years, but she substituted affection and a deep appreciation for his qualities as a father and a provider in lieu of passion.

Their union turned out to be a godsend for both of them. Although they did not have children together, J.O. loved having a built-in family. He was quite a character and in many ways the opposite of John. They were incompatible in some ways, but J.O. knew how to stay out of her way when she was cranky. That happened often when she was not feeling well. Chris Barnes notes that when Bessie got on J.O.'s nerves, he was heard to say: "Vimmin ain't vat dey used to be. Let a fart out sideways and dy's on the blink." They joined the celebration with the folks in LaConner when Skagit county was born in November of 1883. When Territorial Governor Newell signed the proclamation of Nov. 28, 1883, J.O. hoped that the new county would bring new markets for the farm products. Bessie hoped that it would not encourage more "foreigners" to move into the Swinomish flats. Regardless of her husband's lineage and the fact that she grew up with Indians, she continued to think of both Swedes and Indians as inferior and even suspect.

Grand matriarch Ruthinda dies in Oregon, 1886

In future chapters, we plan to profile the Cornelius children along with their next generation, both of which provided some of the most important pioneers of the Skagit Valley. For now, we will just summarize some of the most important events and dates in the rest of J.O. and Bessie's life. The next sadness in the family was when Bessie's mother, Ruthinda, died down in Hood River, Oregon on April 26, 1886. Ruthinda had begun making real estate deals as far back as Whidbey island, in fact, she may have been the one who sealed the deal to sell their island acreage. She continued to trade properties down in Oregon and one day in 1884 when she visited Bessie's sister Polowma in Hood River, she saw a house on a hill that she decided to buy. Just as Isaac Cornelius had done to her 40 years earlier, Ruthinda died intestate without a will. Her habits of buying and selling without her husband's knowledge caused the family much grief since it took years to straighten out the whole mess in probate. Bessie's siblings were scattered about by then. Isaac reformed and made a new life for himself in Ely, Nevada. Polowma was Hood River, Oregon; James lived in Portland, the booming city of Oregon; and Sarah lived in Lexington, Oregon. Back when Bessie married J.O., William's only question was about whether Rudene knew how to farm the cause of his only real argument with John. William was overjoyed with Rudene's success and not long after Ruthinda died, he asked if he could move up near them. They welcomed him to their home and he lived here another 13 years until his death at age 88 in 1899.

Bessie's fondest wish was a distinctive country house where they and their children could entertain and welcome family. That was something her mother never had and J.O. answered her wish by building her a new two-story home up the northern brow of Pleasant Ridge in 1887. It became a landmark in the area, evidenced by these articles from the November 1890 *Northwest* magazine:

From the summit of the northern extremity of Pleasant Ridge, a few miles back of La Conner, can be seen a landscape of agricultural beauty and wealth unequalled in Washington. The entire Swinomish flats and Beaver marsh are visible from here, stretching out to the right and the left without a rise or a depression, a sea of verdure as smooth as a mirror, dotted with residences, barns and granaries and the light verdure of trees and shrubbery. To the northwest in the blue distance rise the peaks of Guemes, Orcas, Fidalgo, Cypress and other islands, between which the vision extends through endless azure vistas over the Gulf of Georgia. At this point J. Rudene has built a beautiful residence on one of the first building spots on Puget Sound. To one used to a landscape clad in the somber verdure of our coniferous forests, this view in the summer time when the face of the country is veiled in the lighter green of growing grain and deciduous trees, or later, when the grain turns to harvest gold, has an effect most novel and charming. The steamers, when seen moving through the sloughs, with only their upper works and smokestacks visible, present a very strange appearance, apparently floating on the growing grain. . . .

Anyone who admires beautiful scenery in the agricultural districts should travel through Skagit county valleys. In the month of May when the grain is 6 to 8 inches high is one sight. The next panorama would be the first week in September when the grain stands in shocks ready to be threshed. The next scene of interest is the big threshing machines scattered through the valleys, sometimes 5 or 6 can be . . . seen from one place.



Nellie Cornelius

The Rudenes were respected members of society now, as J.O. was appointed diking commissioner and then was elected county commissioner in 1888. He was later elected as representative to the state legislature in the Republican landslide of 1904 and re-elected for two terms after that. J.O. and Bessie were longtime members and benefactors of the local Swedish Methodist church, which their son Will helped build in 1888 on a little piece of land east of the present cemetery. Keep in mind that in the early days, many little country churches like that one were built in neighborhoods such as Pleasant Ridge because there were few passable roads for frequent transportation. Once travel became commonplace by the 1920s, the church was torn down and the timbers were used for the Mount Vernon church. Chris Barnes notes that J.O. often gave a preacher as much as \$40 when he came out to say prayers in their kitchen, so they were priority stops on the preacher route from then on. The 1932 interview also reports that the house had a "Prophet's Chamber," a room that was always available for a preacher.

Many members of J.O.'s family lived in the Northwest by the time that the *1906 Illustrated History* was written. His brother August lived in Ballard and three sisters had moved to the Northwest: Mrs. Tina Osberg on Swinomish slough, Mrs. Carrie Edmonds on Pleasant Ridge and Mrs. May Turner in British Columbia. The family was delighted again when their favorite lost-uncle Eli showed up again after World War I and spent his last years on the flats, hosting guests to lantern slides and lectures until he died in 1924.

Bessie lived in their grand country house as an invalid for her last dozen years or so. Nellie, who showed great promise as a teacher and writer as an adolescent wound up a spinster taking care of her mother, whose injured leg was in primitive irons. J.O. died at age 80 in 1930 and Bessie died at age 86 in 1935. When Bessie died, the house was sold off but Nellie was given a life estate to live there until her death, which occurred there in 1942. The bank then took it over and auctioned off the estate. The house was torn down during the World War II period. Today, the lovely Fohn family home stands on nearly the same spot and the view from the brow of the hill is still breathtaking.

Our story ends here for now. The next chapter in 2009-10 will begin with the

Our story ends here for now. The next chapter in 2009-10 will begin with the story of the next generation — Will, Arthur and Nellie Cornelius, and separate stories will profile Phil Cornelius, the longtime Darigold manager and grandson of Bessie, and Phil's daughter Betty Cornelius Bowen, who was the savior of starving artists and guided the infant Seattle and Northwest art world, preparing it for the coming out party around the 1962 Seattle World's Fair. We will also follow other key descendants such as Vera Cornelius Moa and her son Don, who moved to Stanwood where he served as mayor and is one of the sparkplugs of the fine museum there. He has been a tremendous source of family memories and photographs.

Finally, we owe many thanks to Chris Barnes, who has maintained the Cornelius-Wallace-Rudene family history and helped us unearth the long-forgotten tales of this extended family that can rightly claim to have the longest timeline of Northwest history of anyone living in Skagit county. Chris has written two lovely little books about the matriarchs Ruthinda and Bessie and it is a shame that they did not enjoy wider circulation. The books are *My Ruthinda* and the follow-up volume, *Bessie*, both published in 1984. In the summer of 2001, Chris took me for a walk through the Pleasant Ridge cemetery, which started as a private burial place for the Cornelius family. Then we went past the old Pleasant Ridge school to her beautiful home, which overlooks the flats that lead northeast to Mount Vernon. It is the former parsonage of the Bethsaida Swedish Lutheran Church. You look out south from her sun room and see the old stone blocks that formed the base of the church walls and you walk upstairs and look out from her balcony and see rolling acres of farmland that hundreds of Swedes and others created out of brush and tidelands.

Both Chris and Don shared basic family history narratives, which we used as a shell. We then read Chris's books and were inspired to plow through their other documents and material, and went to outside sources to find still more. In future chapters, we also plan to feature more drawings by we will see beautiful drawings by Chris's mother, Harriet Cornelius Tjernagel. We hope that readers can help us fill in the gaps and that they will share similar memories of their families, especially if they helped settle Swinomish flats, LaConner flats and Fir Island. We are especially looking for stories of the Polson, Chilberg, Leamer, Peter Downey and Robert White families.



Historian John Conrad interviewed J.O. Rudene before he died in 1930 and learned that the first three autos in Skagit county were Cadillacs, which ran on batteries and had no windshield or top. Peter Downey, Nick Bessner and J.O. Rudene were the owners and this is J.O. Rudene's auto in front of his Pleasant Ridge house. This photo courtesy of the fine book, *Skagit Settlers*, which is available at the Historical Society museum in LaConner.

Return to [part one](#), which includes: *Ruthinda Mounts Browning becomes a widow in Iowa and Isaac Cornelius becomes a widower; they marry and join a wagon train to the West in 1845; after visiting the Whitmans near Walla Walla, they continue to proposed Oregon Territory; Ruthinda becomes a widow again and marries a third time to William Wallace; they decide to move north to what will become Washington Territory; The Wallaces visit Chief Sealth at Point Alki, who offered them land on Elliott Bay; become one of the first white settler families on Whidbey island; homestead without any amenities; raise a family in the wilderness; and Ruthinda is finally united with her long-lost stepson; and they celebrate a wedding.*

Links, background reading and sources

- Our portal section to all [west-county features](#) from Hwy 99 west to the sound.
- Alphabetical links to [biographies and obituaries](#), countywide
- Memorials and obituaries by [John Conrad](#), memorialist for the Skagit County Pioneer Association from 1949-73.

Story posted on Jan. 11, 2003, last updated Feb. 11, 2009

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