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# **ANACORTES ROTARY HISTORY**

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## **Chapter 6 – Krebs Presentation to Rotary in 1952**



**BY DUANE CLARK**

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George Krebs was an accomplished and productive Anacortes citizen during its early history. He moved to Anacortes in 1903 and kept detailed information about Anacortes for several decades. He was closely acquainted with many of Anacortes' earliest residents, including several of Anacortes Rotary's Charter Members.

In 1952, George gave a presentation to Anacortes Rotary about his 49 years (up to that time) in town. His presentation was filled with interesting Anacortes history, very detailed and colored at times with a sense of humor.

The text of George's presentation was preserved, and today, at least two copies have survived. One is at the Anacortes Museum, and one was filed and stored by 50-year Rotarian, Jim Anderson.

1952

Talk Made at Rotary Luncheon

George Krebs

I can hardly claim to be a real old timer as I didn't get here till 1903, and the pioneering had already been done. Still 49 years covers quite a bit of history and we have seen many changes since that time.

I learned from the oldtimers at that time that Anacortes had been quite some city during the boom days of the 1890s, with a population of some 5,000 to 15,000, depending on who was doing the talking. Evidence of the faith that some of the people had in the future of the city was shown by the number of brick buildings built at that time. The large four story brick at the corner of 8th and H Avenue was to be the leading hotel. It was opened with quite a celebration. Negro waiter, bell hops, etc. There was also a row of frame store buildings on N Avenue down to the water front. A large building at the foot of H Avenue was at that time one of the four depots. When I arrived it was used as the office for the North American Cannery. It seems there were two factions during the boom, one wanted the 8th Street and H Avenue location, the other wanted the present location for the business district. Other brick buildings were the Wilson Hotel, the two buildings directly opposite, the one where the Shell Service Station now is, the one now occupied by Aubert's Drug Store (Buer's Florist) and others. The Havecost Building, recently remodeled by Mr. Wells, the old bank building on the corner of Commercial and 4th. Also two quite large brick buildings on Q Avenue, showed that some people expected the business district to expand.

The large frame building now occupied by Allen's Mercantile Company originally stood a block west of the old hotel on 8th Street. It was moved to its present location by Lee Bradley who operated the leading drygoods and clothing store.

An electric railway was built from Anacortes to Dewey. I understand it made but one trip. Dewey had a bank and several stores. The bank building is now used by Mr. Ferris as a chicken house.

A palatial residence also a relic of the boom days, was the McNaught home on Oakes Avenue about half way to Burrows Bay. It was vacant when I came and was destroyed by fire a number of years ago. McNaught was Western Consultant for the Northern Pacific

Railway and evidently believed in Anacortes. As you know the locality is platted as Northern Pacific addition. Melville Curtis told me that some of the Northern Pacific officials were the heaviest losers in the Anacortes real estate boom. At that time the railway extended to Burrows Bay where there was a large ocean wharf, also a depot. This track was abandoned and torn up. The Great Northern, about 1909, rebuilt a line to the two large canneries at Ship Harbor and later extended it to Burrows Bay when E. K. Woods built his mill there.

The population dwindled rapidly after the collapse of the boom and flattened out entirely during the depression of the 1890s.

I had been living in Spokane for several years as agent for the Spokane Falls and Northern. They sold the road to the Great Northern who consolidated my office with their own and my job was abolished. I put in the summer prospecting in northern Idaho. This proved a financial failure, so came back to Spokane in the early fall. Meeting Tom Degan, Auditor for the Great Northern on Riverside, he told me I could have the Anacortes Agency if I wanted it.

I liked Spokane but had never worked on the coast, but several of the clerks in the office who hailed from Puget Sound were always shedding tears of homesickness for the salt water so decided I would try it.

Coming from Everett to Mount Vernon was a dismal ride, underbrush and trees along the track so close you could almost touch it, and growing together over head made practically a tunnel which widened out now and then for a small station or platform.

Arriving at Burlington at 8 P.M. I found there was no train till the next day. The looks of Burlington did not help change my opinion of the country. The streets wandered around big stumps, they had a bear tied to one on front of the hotel, and I began to wish I had stayed in Spokane.

The train from Anacortes arrived about 10 A.M. and Jim Corcoran, the conductor, told me Anacortes was a nice little town and that I had better go and look it over. The Anacortes train consisted of 10 box cars and a coach. We left Burlington at 12:30 and immediately dived into another tree tunnel. This came to an end at Whitney and the broad expanse of the Skagit Flats and beautiful farms certainly looked good.

We arrived at Anacortes at 6:30 P.M. having made the 16 miles in 6 hours which wasn't bad for a freight train in those days. Anyway, it wasn't time wasted, I had made several acquaintances on the train, also the conductor had introduced me to a number of residents at the different stops where we handled freight, passengers and express.

I think this meeting old friends and making new acquaintances, which was part of train travel, is one of the social pleasures the auto has taken away from us. We now jump into our car and drive to Seattle without saying a word to anyone during the trip except maybe to tell the service station man to put in five gallons of gas. This isn't intended for a railroad advertisement.

This was September 3, 1903. The climate didn't impress me as being anything to rave about. It rained all the time and the weather was decidedly chilly. What got me though, was that the natives didn't seem to know it and seemed to think they were in a tropical zone.

There were three hotels and not a stove in the office of any of them. They took the stoves down in the spring and didn't put them up again till late fall. None of them had furnaces. I doubt if there was such a thing in town. Shortly afterwards, Capt. Mathison put steam heat in the Hotel Taylor and several years later Mr. Funk did the same at the Hotel Wilson.

A few days after my arrival, Herb Seals who ran a store in the old brick building which was later made into the Island Theater invited me to a picnic the grocers were giving. After being here a month, I learned you could scare up a picnic on the slightest provocation.

I had always associated a picnic with a nice warm day so when I woke up in the morning and found it raining, presumed it was automatically called off. But along about ten o'clock, here they all came with their baskets and bundles in a drizzling rain. We all went over to Guemes, had our dinner, ate ice cream and came home in the rain.

I presume we had a good time as we attended many another afterwards.

Well, I soon got so I rather liked the place. The depot was at the foot of Commercial Avenue. So far as passengers were concerned, they seldom used it, preferring to do their waiting across the street at the Taylor Hotel where there was a good lobby, dining room and bar. Besides our daily train we also

handled the wharf where the local boats landed. There were two boats each way between Seattle and Bellingham making stops in both directions at Anacortes.

The boats and trains arriving and departing was a matter of public interest and everybody not otherwise engaged, came down to watch.

There was also a daily boat to the islands.

That Pacific Coast Steamship Company operated three large steamers between Seattle and San Francisco, the Pueblo, Umatilla and Queen, making stops at Anacortes each trip. As there were quite large steamers for that time, they were a matter of special interest.

While our depot wasn't much to brag about, there was always something of interest going on on the water front and I was sorry to move when our present depot was built in 1911.

In 1903 we had six canneries, Alaska Packers, Fidalgo Island, North American Fisheries, Apex Fish Company, W. A. Lowman, Rosario Straits. Each of these canneries figured on packing 100,000 cases each year. They had a certain number of white men employed. Girls and women did the hand packing, but the greater part of the labor was done by Chinese. There were Chinese contractors who would bring up from Portland the required number for each cannery in the spring, returning them in the fall.

All the canneries made their own cans from tin plate before the season started and would have 100,000 cases of empty cans in the loft before the fish started to run.

We had three saw mills, The Great Northern Mill Company, afterwards the A L and B; the Rogers Mill Company, now the pulp mill; and the Fidalgo Mill Company, whose site is now occupied by the Anacortes Veneer Company.

There were four shingle mills, Berard and Son; Balsh and Vincent, now the Anacortes Shingle Company; Burk and McLean, now the Pioneer; and J. N. Cavanaugh and Sons whose dry kiln has recently been converted into a boat building works.

W. F. Robinson was operating a fish reduction plant and shortly established the Robinson Fisheries in the cod fish business. Jack Trafton was his foreman.

Capt. J. A. Mathison, pioneer cod fish man, was located where the kelp plant now is.

Melville Curtis operated a coal and building material business also the wharf now known as the Curtis Wharf Company,

There were only about four driving horses, W. V. Will, Kate B. Whitney, Andy Mitchell, and N. P. Thomas. The rest of us walked excepting sometimes we could hire a rig from the livery stable.

Two horse drawn drays, owned by B. F. Amsberry and B. B. Batee, together with a two horse team and wagon owned by N. McLean did all the trucking and freight handling.

The city at that time was about half the size it now is and I often wonder why it takes so many trucks and autos to get the freight and people moved around.

There was no street pavement and only one or two small pieces of cement sidewalk. Oakes Avenue was planked for the full length of the graded portion, this was a relic of the boom. Very few of the streets were graded. Commercial Avenue was graded only to 12th Street, beyond that R Avenue was used as the highway out of town. Commercial Avenue was paved from the waterfront to 12th Street. (Year 1914)

The south end of Commercial was paved in 1915, this contract was handled by Henry Kaiser who now is in the shipbuilding and other industries.

Eighth Street was paved in 1924.

Ed Knapp had the first auto, I believe, but the first one I ever had a ride in was a one lung Cadillac. Dan Wilder had one in 1906. We made a trip to Burlington, on our way over we went sailing around the curve at Fidalgo Mill to gain momentum up the Mitchell's Hill. Dan hollered to me that if we didn't meet a team we would make it alright. Well, no team appeared and we did make it which was really something to talk about.

There were no movies but about six times during the winter, read shows would come for a day or so. They appeared at the IOOF Hall. For the most part people had to make their own entertainment, parties were frequently given, also local talent generally put on a stage and minstrel show. The parties referred to were not the present day version of cocktail and martinis, etc.

What for a number of years was the big event was the fourth of July celebration. In those days a train trip was quite a treat to be enjoyed by a great many people, but mainly once a year, and then only for some special occasion. A visit to Anacortes for the celebration was a treat looked forward to by everyone in Skagit Valley. Other Skagit county towns, by mutual

consent, put on no celebration of their own. The railroad ran a special train from Rockport in the morning, returning in the evening after the fireworks.

Before the building of the new depot, the railroad ran across Commercial Avenue to N Avenue. At 10th Street, to the 10th Street depot which as at that time being used as a section house. It continued down N Avenue to the water front and curved around to the foot of Commercial Avenue where the depot and Great Northern Wharf were located. This is now the location of the Port Dock. The 10th Street depot referred to should have been on wheels, it was afterwards moved to 20th Street and used as a section house. Then it was sold to a new church organization and moved. They sold it and it finally wound up on Commercial Avenue where the Traftons used it for a boat building shop. They in turn sold it and the new owners made a real modern building out of it in which they operate a grocery store.

We had, for several years after I came, one train a day, mixed freight and passenger. Then regular passenger service was inaugurated, three trains a day each way. This lasted for a number of years till auto and bus competition retired the trains one at a time and finally we were back to freight trains only.

When it came to real excitement, I think the fire alarm took first place. We had a hook and ladder wagon, also some hose carts but no fire engine, we used only the city pressure. The fire department was entirely volunteer, but any one could be what you might call an associate member who got to the City Hall in time to get hold of the long rope and help pull the outfit to the fire. Sometimes Ed Roland or one of the draw men would get there and there was a team to help pull. The fire beel kept ringing till everybody in town knew there was a fire. In many cases a bucket brigade would be formed to help out. It is surprising how well they did with such crude equipment.

We, afterwards, bought a heavier hook and ladder truck, a fine big team with Bert Thompson regularly employed as driver. I don't believe LaFrance will ever make a motor driven piece of equipment that will give you the same thrill as that we experienced with the fire bell ringin, Bert Thompson uring his team down 8th Street, skidding round the corner and off to the south end at a mad gallop as they went out of sight we rushed to the telephone to find out where the fire was and central would say someone's chimney was on fire, often it was on of the mills.



In 1865 the Western Union commenced building a telegraph line from the U. S. to Russia. This line was to go up the coast to Alaska, thence along the Aleutian Islands to Russia. This line cut across the wouth western end of Fidalgo Island. Portions of it can still be found imbedded in tracks near the Ginnett homestead. They had not gone far beyond Fidalgo Island when word was receivved that the Atlantic cable had been finished and was a success and all work was stopped and the line abandoned.

It seems to me our winters are milder than 40 years ago. We generally had two weeks skating, sometimes people put up ice. Seldom had much snowfall so it was quite a surprise when upon opening the dorr Feb. 2, 1916, to go to work found 5 feet of snow. It had fallen after ten o'clock that night. It was all gone in three days.

There have been three floods of the Skagit flats during my time. The first one I believe was in 1909, the last one in 1921. The water was about level with the fence tops. Quite a number of miles of railroad went out each time.

The original plat of Anacortes was layed out with the avenues alphabetical and the streets numerical, which I think is the ideal way. One can easily locate any desired intersection. Mayor Beard found the only flaw in it when the principle street happened to be P Avenue. He objected to the sound of this and by council action, it was changed to Commercial. Anacortes is probably the biggest little town in the U. S., about 3 miles one way by 5 or 6 the other.

There were no service clubs, such as the Rotary, Kiwanis and Lions, but there was a Chamber of Commerce and shortly afterwards, the Alask Yukon club was formed, which was somewhat more on the social order, but also covered the same field as the Chamber of Commerce. Along about 1913 it was decided that for the best interest of the town, a consolidation should be made on the theory that one good organization was better than two weak ones. The new organization was formulated as the Anacortes Chamber of Commerce and Manufacture. I was elected president for the reason probably, that I hadn't belonged to either of them, therefore would be neutral. We had a good membership, our office was in the lower floor of the building now occupied by the Jackson Funeral Parlors. A paid secretary was on the job all day. Oscar Argus and John Briskey held this position during my terms. Regular meetings were held in the evening each week.

As president of the Chamber of Commerce, I figured what we needed was more population. I raised seven children, but go no

cooperation in this direction from the balance of the members, they thought two were enough.

During my residence here I have seen the city go up and down, like a thermometer. But each time the low ebb was a little higher than the previous time, and the net result today is the gain of about 3,500 people. For several years before gas rationing commenced, I had spent week ends traveling all around the sound and peninsula county, anticipating the day I would retire and thought maybe I would find some place that I would like to spend the balance of my days. But each time when we drove around the bay into Anacortes, we concluded so far as locations in this part of the country were concerned, Anacortes had them all skinned.

Am quite sure we are the only town in the country that could afford a site with a million dollar view for a garbage dump. (They finally moved it.)