

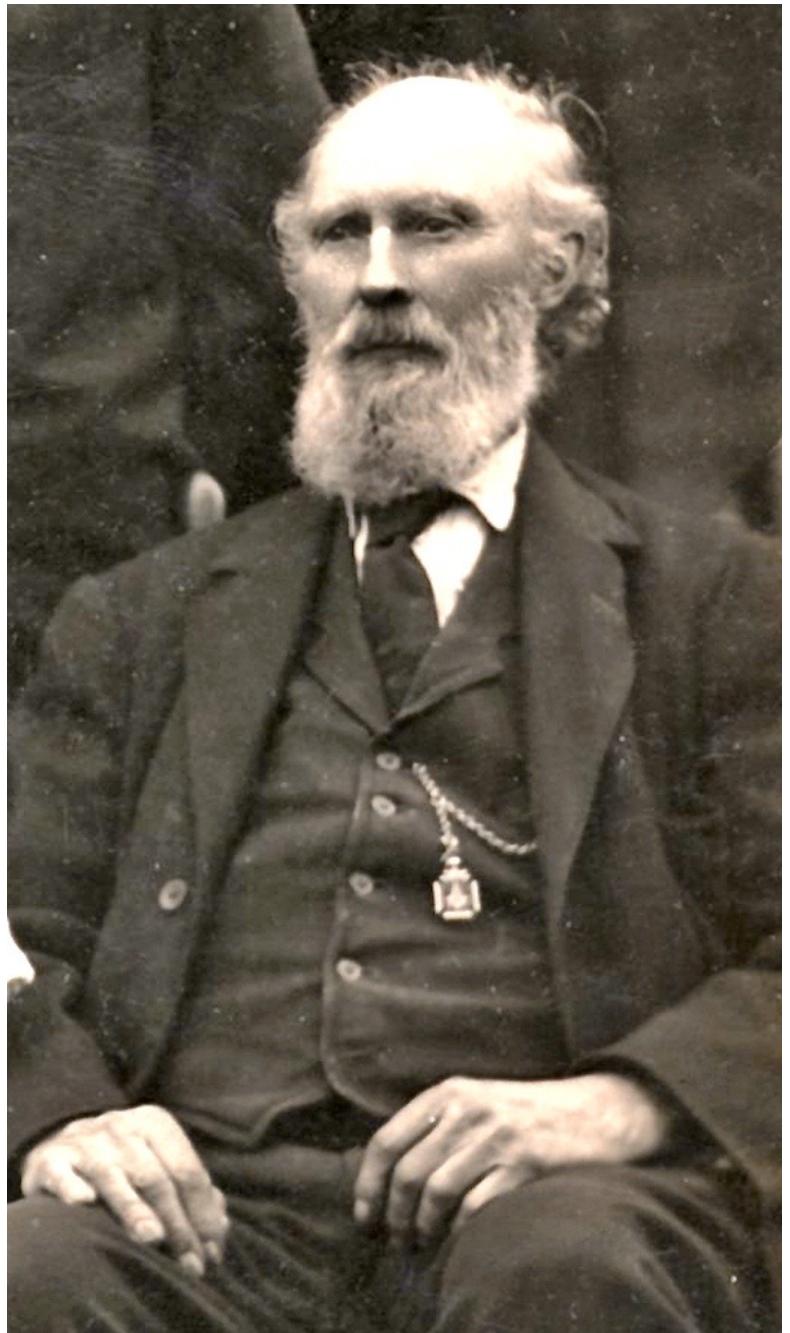
Clatskanie's "First" Citizen - Enoch W. Conyers

By Deborah Steele Hazen

"Quincy, Ill., April 20, 1852 - It was an ideal spring morning, the sun shining its very brightest, the south wind blowing gently and the shrill notes of the Bob White came wafting on the breeze from the neighboring hills, when about 10 o'clock in the morning our long journey across the plains... commenced. Our wagon... was light and of the very best material; our team, consisting of four yoke of cattle... Our company consisted of William P. Burns, Mrs. William P. Burns, Miss Laura Burns, Edward Payson Burns and your humble servant, Enoch W. Conyers. It was about 11 o'clock a.m. on the ferry boat when we parted with most of our nearest and dearest relatives and friends, who had accompanied us thus far and wished us God-speed and a safe journey... The well known sound soon came, 'All aboard,' and the cable was cast off, and a moment later we were gliding along on the bosom of the Mississippi, making for the Missouri shore. Every revolution of the engine separated us further and further from our relatives and friends, yet their 'kerchiefs could plainly be seen in the far distance, waving us a long last farewell. Then it was that we realized we were separating from those whom we may never have the pleasure of seeing again."

Thus begins the Oregon Trail diary of one of Clatskanie's first pioneers and leading citizens - the founder of the local family for whom Conyers Street, Conyers Creek and other local landmarks are named.

Conyers' diary, excerpts from which are featured at the Oregon Trail Interpretative Center near Baker City, records in descriptive language the hardships endured by the pioneers who traveled - usually on



foot walking beside their oxen-drawn wagons - approximately 2,200 miles across two-thirds of the continent to reach the 19th century "promised land."

Born on Dec. 2, 1828 in Carlisle, Kentucky, Enoch was a toddler when the family moved to Adams County, Illinois. Enoch's father was reportedly a friend of Thomas Lincoln, the father of Abraham, when both families lived in Kentucky and later when they both emigrated to Illinois. The boy who was to become Clatskanie's most prominent early citizens, attended school until the age of 16, then went to work, becoming deputy postmaster before enlisting in the Illinois Volunteers when the Mexican-American War began in 1846. He served with the regiment until after the battle of Buena Vista in northern Mexico, when he was transferred to a hospital as a surgeon's assistant.

Discharged in mid-1847, Conyers returned to Illinois, went back to school and embarked on a self-guided study of medicine. When he was barely 20, Enoch opened the first telegraph office in Iowa and operated it for a year before returning to Quincy, Ill. to help his father with a mill. Clearly an energetic and ambitious young man with a taste for adventure, Enoch answered the call to "Go west, young man." When he set off on the Oregon Trail in April of 1852 it was his intent to go to California, taking the trail that split off to the south in Wyoming, but his experiences during the first 2 1/2 months of the journey convinced him to continue on to Oregon.

While his diary, available on-line and at the Clatskanie Historical Museum, reflects the prejudices as well as the aspirations of the generation which fulfilled America's "Manifest Destiny," Conyers' eyewitness account of the harrowing journey makes for fascinating reading. Death and disaster, humor and heroism, celebrations and despair, Conyers observed and chronicled it all. "This much I have learned since we started across the continent," he wrote on July 6, 1852 shortly after the decision to head for Oregon rather than California. "That if there is anything in this world that will bring to the surface a man's bad traits, it is a trip across the continent with an ox team."

Conyers and the Burns family - with whom he got along "splendidly" - arrived in Oregon City on Sept. 25, 1852 - five months and five days after leaving Illinois. He feasted on Willamette Valley watermelons and "good fresh vegetables" for a week before his practically penniless state took him to the young communities of Portland and Milwaukie in search of a job. After a few false starts, he found work as a brick-layer building chimneys for settlers in the Hillsboro area. By the spring of 1853, Enoch was thinking about returning to Illinois when one of his comrades on the trail convinced him to travel to "Oak Point" (now part of the Port Westward industrial park in the Quincy area near Clatskanie) to work at a mill. There he met Hannah Bryant, who had crossed the plains with her family the same year as Enoch. They were married on Oct. 12, 1853, and filed one of the first 12 donation land claims in the Clatskanie area. Enoch and Hannah's claim was in the vicinity of what is now known as Conyers Creek, Bellflower Street and South Nehalem Street, while the Bryants claimed the land in what is now downtown Clatskanie.

With the exception of six years in Yamhill County, Enoch spent the rest of his long life in Clatskanie. He represented this community in the last territorial legislature and the first state legislature after Oregon became a state in 1859. It was Conyers who cast the deciding vote that sent James Willis

Nesmith to Washington, D.C. as Oregon's first senator. The leading citizen of Clatskanie's first generation served again in the state legislature in the early 1900s. He was also the first mayor of the town.

The first school house in the Clatskanie area was in the Conyers' home and he paid the teacher's salary himself.

He was Clatskanie's first postmaster, hosted the post office in his home, and agreed to carry the mail from Oak Point to the new settlement free of charge in exchange for the honor of naming the town. He chose to name it after the small tribe of Indians who lived here, rather than what it was being called in some early documents - "Bryantsville," after his parents-in-law. It seems a safe bet that he also named Quincy - after his former home in Illinois.

According to Mr. Conyers' obituary in the Oct. 12, 1923 issue of *The Clatskanie Chief*, "settlers of those early days could tell heroic tales of Mr. Conyers and how he was the only man with medical knowledge for years between Astoria and Portland and how he traveled here and there caring for the sick, taking no pay, but happy to be of service." Subsequent historians have been somewhat skeptical regarding the efficacy of his medical skill.

The first store in Clatskanie was established by Mr. Conyers, and up to almost the end of his long life - he died less than two months before his 95th birthday - he received reimbursement for the goods that he sold on time in those early days when he trusted all his customers to pay as they could.

Conyers led the effort to deepen and channelize "Clatskanie Creek," into what is now the Clatskanie River. He owned and operated the first sternwheeler serving the community, bringing supplies and passengers to town, and providing a means for the local farms and mills to get their products to market. He was also instrumental in building the road to the Nehalem Valley, and during the snowstorms of 1880, he gave a man five cows to keep the road open over the mountain.

A charter member of the Tualatin, Rainier and Clatskanie Masonic lodges, Enoch served as the Clatskanie Lodge's first master in 1908.

Enoch and his wife Hannah had two sons and five daughters, all of whom spent their lives in Clatskanie.

"Talented, with a keen mind and ready sympathy," according to his obituary, "Mr. Conyers was always foremost in any good work for the community. Many are the monuments that his life and deeds have left to Columbia County."

There is little doubt that Enoch W. Conyers was a remarkable man - the first embodiment of the can-do community service ethic that has been the pride of Clatskanie.