

RECOLLECTIONS OF POINT AGASSIZ



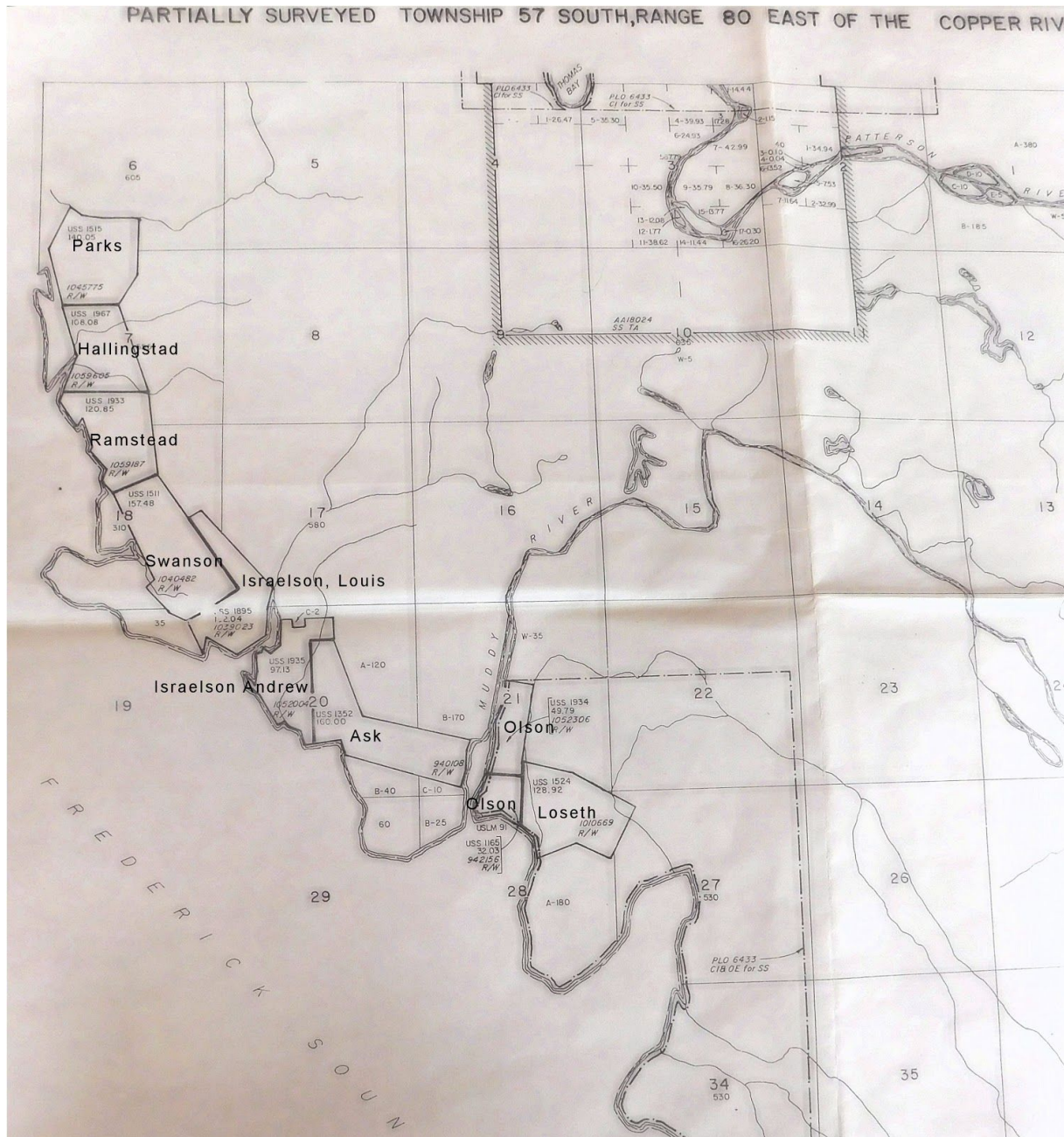
Pt Agassiz Anchorage

Located on the mainland, approximately nine miles northeast of the mouth of Wrangell Narrows, lies Point Agassiz, where in the 1920's and 30's nine families built large farms and homesteads in the fertile meadows between Clear Creek and Brown Cove.

The Territory of Alaska was an organized, incorporated territory of the United States from August 24, 1912 until statehood was granted on January 3, 1959. The 1862 Homestead Act allowed any American to put in a claim for up to 160 free acres of federal land for the price of a small filing fee. It was required that the head of household be at least 21 years of age and to certify that they had never borne arms against the United States. After filing on the land, a surveyor would be sent out to establish corner posts and meanders. Once the application receipt was in their possession, the homesteaders could begin the process of "proving up" on the land. This required them to live on the land, build a home, make improvements and farm for five years. When this was accomplished, they would need to find two neighbors or friends willing to vouch for the truth of his or her statements about the improvements

to the land and to sign the “proof” document. After the completion of this file form and the six dollar payment, the homesteader would receive the patent for the land (signed with the name of the current President of the United States) and they would be entitled to keep their claim, free and clear. This paper represented the culmination of years of hard work and dedication.

Proving up in this case involved building wood sheds, barns, hay sheds and homes sufficient to offer protection from the severe winter weather.



In the early years lumber was brought from Petersburg. In 1932 Edward Ramstead Sr. acquired a circle saw and built a large shed for a mill. Lumber was cut at cost for any member of the community who asked. Working together, they would fall large spruce trees to be milled into planks. Some would be dried, but some were nailed up green. The interior walls of the houses would be covered with flour paste on newspaper before wallpaper was applied. Almost all the roofs were covered in handcrafted shakes, made by using a froe. For the exterior walls, shingles were made at the sawmill in town.

Early homesteaders encouraged family and friends to join the small community to increase the number of school age children. The Territory of Alaska would build a school house at Point Agassiz and furnish a teacher if there were at least seven pupils in residence there.



The Schoolhouse

Andrew Israelson constructed the building. By September of 1925 the school house was ready and Daisy Oja was hired as the first teacher. Enrollment was a little over the required number. The children attended the one room schoolhouse eight

hours a day, five days a week, grades one through eight. The school's second story was living quarters for the teacher.



Roy Swanson, Marvin Israelson, Spencer Israelson, Aine Ramstead, Verner Israelson
Mildred Israelson, Brita Ask, Dolores Ramstead, Honey Kelly (Teacher), Dagny Loseth
Dorothy Israelson, Leif Loseth
Bud Ramstead, Arnold Israelson, Elmer & Raymond Swanson

Schoolkids and teacher on the steps of the schoolhouse

“Everyone had to walk to school. There was no public transportation. There were no roads originally but in 1927 or ‘28 approximately seven miles of one lane, gravel road was built and a good wooden bridge to cross Bear Slough, a few hundred feet north of the site of the new school house. Numerous culverts were installed but no bridge was ever put in on Muddy River, so the Loseths and the Olsens had to either wade the river in hip boots and then walk a couple miles to school or row across when it was in flood stage which was quite often in the fall and spring.”

Glen A. Ramstead

A pastor from the Lutheran church would visit the little red schoolhouse at least once a month to conduct services for the good of the souls on the mainland. Parishioners of all ages from Petersburg would join him, and fishing boats would take them to Pt. Agassiz for the day. Best clothes were donned and worship services were held. They would sing long and loud, then picnic lunches were eaten, games for the young and old played, visits with friends were had and then townsiders would board the boats for the return trip to Petersburg . Farmers would preach if there was no pastor (sometimes in Norwegian but most often English).

Although there was plenty of seafood and venison, there was very little fresh food available in Petersburg. The homesteaders made a living raising cattle, sheep, goats, chickens, geese and vegetables on the rich, sandy soil of the area. Milk, butter, cottage cheese, beef, eggs and produce were brought over to Petersburg for barter and sale. The milk cans would be left in sheds by the road and the truck, usually driven by Carl Swanson or Edward Ramstead Sr., would pick them up and take them to Petersburg daily or every other day. Payment was made pretty much on consignment and was made in groceries or other supplies at shops such as the Sanitary Market.

In 1921, John Hammer and Andrew Wikan started their business, Petersburg Dairy. They bought the milk from the Point Agassiz farmers for ten cents a quart and sold it in town for 15 cents. They hauled it to town in five gallon cans, bottled the milk and sold it from their small store and bottle washing shed, located at the present site of Anchor Properties. In 1924, the partners bought the lot where the original Hammer and Wikan building still stands. They constructed the new building and ran their business there until 1926, when they changed their name and discontinued the dairy business to concentrate on the grocery line.

Nettie Martinson had the only dairy in Petersburg, which offered an excellent but limited milk supply. In the early 1930's Dean Kayler discussed with Nettie his idea of starting a new business and a meeting was called with the Point Agassiz farmers. The plan was for him to buy the milk, pay cash and he would then sell all the milk. This met with complete approval of Mrs. Martinsen and the farmers. At home on Third Street, bottles were washed, boiled in a tub on the wood stove, cooled, filled and capped. From there Dean would carry wooden crates to his customers and deliver the milk on their doorsteps as the ad stated, "Before breakfast". Soon help was needed and the good and faithful workers, Dave Ohmer and John Robert Otness were hired. As business progressed, a contract was made with the Alaska Steamship Company for a delivery to be made when the ships docked. Soon the need for more space was apparent and thus, the move was made to a downtown location in the Telephone

Exchange Building. There was just a small counter with an icebox in the corner. At any time fishermen would come to the back door and say, “Dean, we are going out, need milk”.

Dean had a deep desire to become part of the fishing business. He followed his dream and Dean C. Kayler Seafoods was born. This necessitated the selling of the creamery, when Lloyd Swanson became the new owner.

Some of the farmers raised blue and silver fox in chicken wire pens. The fur pelts were brought to town and sold to Mr. Rubenstein. A respected travelling fur trader from Seattle, he would put a notice in the paper advising he would be in town and staying at the Mitkof Hotel.



The Ramstead Barn

Adults and children worked together to herd and milk the cows twice a day, sterilize dairy equipment, tend the animals and gardens, clean the barns, pitch the hay, haul water and chop wood. There was no indoor plumbing or electricity.

Drinking water was collected in barrels from rain on the roof or a small dam up Bear Slough. The well water was unpalatable due to the strong smell and taste of sulfur, though the animals didn't mind it. The Swansons' had a "bricked in well" and first class, good drinking water.

Supplies were purchased in Petersburg or by mail order from Sears, Roebuck and Co.



Delores Lund (née Ramstead)

While most enjoyed good health, those who were sick were brought to Petersburg for medical care. Some examples of home remedies were sulphur salve to get rid of fleas and the inhalation of steam from boiled onions and honey for congestion.



Ingrid. Ask at her spinning wheel



The Ask Home

The agriculture at most of the farms entailed truck gardening--the raising of vegetables for market--of potatoes, rutabagas, turnips, carrots, horseradish, parsnips and many varieties of greens and berries. The gardens were fertilized with seaweed and starfish.

An underground root cellar was an essential way to keep food from freezing in the winter and cool in the summer. Root cellars were dug underneath the house to a depth of four or five feet. The vegetables were placed in the cavity and then covered with sand, which had been spread and aired outside until it was bone dry. In this way, food would keep all winter.

In 1942, the estimated total amount of food raised at the settlement was eight tons of potatoes, seven tons of rutabaga and a half ton of carrots, cabbage and small garden products. Additionally, an estimated ten tons of beef and lamb were raised and

50 gallons of fat were saved from butchering to be donated to the Red Cross and shipped outside for vital war uses.



Farmers would burn their fields annually to release nitrogen from the straw stubble back into the soil.

“The hay to feed cattle grew wild there and was very lush and nutritious. Generally no supplemental feeding was ever required for a healthy herd. When by 1932, our herd was at a total of about 50, we used to harvest approximately 150 tons of wild hay, namely timothy, clover, tricorner, red top and rye grass.”

Glen A. Ramstead

In 1918, Carl and Aurora Swanson and family moved to Point Agassiz taking with them a young cow from Nettie Martinsen, purchased for \$10. Over the years, they would build up their stock. Many of the farmers bought cows from the Juneau Dairy as the dairy wanted milk cows but not all of the calves.

Dick and Dan were two draft horses used by the Israelson family to haul hay on the meadows. Their lead cow, Dolly, would guide the cows into the barn each night,

shepherded by the border collie, Emma. Lilly Anna was a docile cow who remained head of the Ramstead's herd until their departure in 1939. Their farm dog was named Lassie.

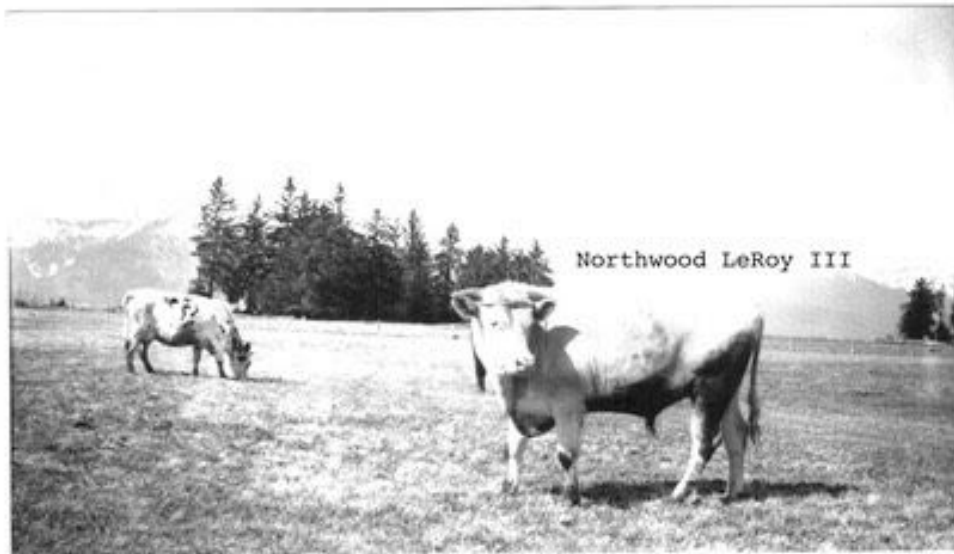


Israelsons' home and barns with cattle grazing in the meadow

“Leroy was the first thoroughbred bull in Alaska. He came up from Northwood Farms in Oregon, brought up by Alaska Steam. He was so gentle, my younger brother used to lead him around with a tether when he was four years old. My dad had imported him to improve all the stock in Pt. Agassiz. He was a great success and source of much pride as he was the first one in Alaska. He was pure white and his progeny were red roan, blue roan or pure white, no matter who the mother was. The offspring progressively improved in the amount of butterfat content and quantity of milk and quality of beef. He was a very wise investment. He was very gentle with all the members of our family including my small brothers, but when young David Loy came to visit with us in the summer during haying season, for some obscure reason, Northwood Leroy the 111 from Northwood Farms in Oregon kept Dave either running full speed in the opposite direction or climbing trees. We never did figure out what was the cause but Dave still recalls climbing between the strands of fence barbed wire,

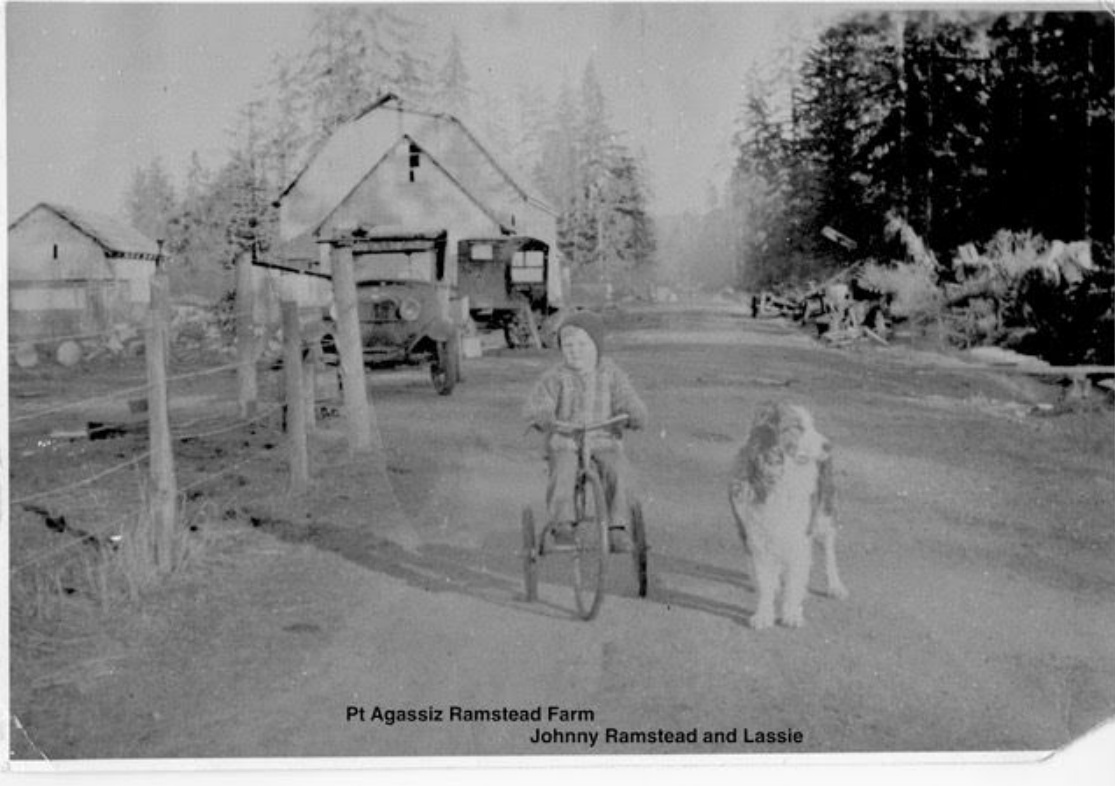
while the bull jumped over the fence and then finished chasing him up a tree. He would then bellow and paw the ground and if I or my brother Jim and our dog Lassie hadn't come after him he would still be up there."

Glen A. Ramstead



The Ramstead's prize Bull

The Ramstead's prize bull, Northwood LeRoy III



Pt Agassiz Ramstead Farm
Johnny Ramstead and Lassie



Johnny Ramstead and Lassie



Original Post Office sign, on display at the Clausen Memorial Museum

The only public service outside of the school was the post office operated by Mr. Andrew and Mrs. Annie Israelson. In April of 1930, Andrew Israelson became the one and only postmaster at Point Agassiz. Their home was the post office for the next 13 years. Annie was the assistant postmaster. Weather permitting, mail which had come north on the steamships was generally brought to Point Agassiz by Carl Swanson or Edward Ramstead on their return from delivering milk to Petersburg. Mail could be collected at the post office any day except on Sunday.



Below the post office sign is Vera Sommers, a teacher for the area children. To the left is the schoolhouse and to the right is the Andrew and Annie Israelson homestead and Post Office.



Old Ramstead Model T - Swanson's Slough



Going towards the Point

Milk truck going to the Point

The road was built using a steam dredge which was brought into Point Agassiz and used to dig a ditch from the point to Muddy River and then to Clear Creek. The dredged soil was used to make the road. The ditches are still visible on either side. A corduroy road was built of 6" wide poles and logs leading from the Ask property to the "Depot", a bend in the Muddy River where Gainhart Samuelson had the F/V Raider tied to a log to protect it from ice from Leconte Glacier.

During the Depression, the farmers fared well enough. They earned a little money and had plenty of food and wild game. When pasteurization became the law, the small dairies could not comply with the requirements. The little school and the post office closed. Alaska Steamship's more frequent schedule made it difficult to compete with outside prices and the new variety of products.

The old homesteaders began to leave Point Agassiz and move to town with the idea they would one day return. Many of the young adults who were left went into the service. The cows were sold or butchered along with the sheep and goats and chickens. Desks, books, blackboards and a Victrola were left in the school. Household items were left in the houses and farming equipment remained in the sheds and barns. The road quickly returned back to nature.

"When the children grew up to high school age, the numbers of elementary school children decreased until in 1939 the Territory of Alaska closed the school and we were forced to concede defeat in that beautiful area because none of the ranchers wished to remain where there was no education available for their offspring."

Glen A. Ramstead

"I remember well the sad time when my family and other homesteaders were forced by age and economics to move to town."

Norman Israelson

As the years passed, the homesteads were kept by the original families and generations have returned. New properties have been developed on the lands below the magnificent mountains of the Coast Range. A dock and gravel roads now give access to modern and comfortable homes. One can imagine that the pioneers of Point Agassiz would be pleased that their descendants continue to live on and enjoy the land they cultivated a century ago.











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