This month's King County small place: Snoqualmie

Snoqualmie, Washington sits 25 miles east of Seattle, nestled in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains. Named by the Snoqualmie tribe, the term means "valley of the moon." Mountains surround the city on three sides, providing a stunning backdrop to the community. Mt. Si, which rises 3800 feet above sea level, dominates views from most areas in the community.

Snoqualmie Falls is another natural wonder within the city limits that draws visitors from all over the world. At 268 feet, the falls stands 100 feet higher than Niagara Falls. One of the oldest power plants in Washington State sits deep inside rock under the falls. Water from the Snoqualmie River drives generators that provide power to the Northwest power grid.

Snoqualmie's history orients itself around agriculture, lumber, and the railroad. Samuel Hancock was one of the first white men to explore the area. In 1851, Hancock explored the area looking for coal. Fearing Indian attacks, Puget Sound settlers built forts in the area, including one named Fort Alden. The Indians never attacked, so the forts fell into disuse.

In 1858, Jeremiah Borst settled at the remains of Fort Alden and began raising hogs and farming apples. Borst is known as the "Father of the Snoqualmie Valley." As Borst and others farmed, another group of men built the area's first sawmill in 1872. By 1877, there were 12 logging operations on the Snoqualmie River, and by 1886, 140 men and numerous logging camps floated millions of board feet of lumber downstream to towns along Puget Sound.

The valley saw the first hop fields in 1882. Hops, a major component in the making of beer and ale, was a major cash crop in the valley for a number of years. Growing continued until the 1890's when an aphid outbreak, along with a market crash, forced the crop into decline.

The railroad came to Snoqualmie in 1890. Puget Sound entrepreneurs built the Seattle, Lake Shore and Eastern Railroad and also built the Snoqualmie depot, which still stands today.

Snoqualmie and North Bend were platted in 1889. Ironically, North Bend was originally named "Snoqualmie" and Snoqualmie was named "Snoqualmie Falls". Electricity came to the valley in the late 1890's through a power plant built into the rocks at Snoqualmie Falls. Along with the electric power came jobs to operate the power plant. Another irony is that the original generators are still supplying power to today's electric customers.

Snoqualmie, as we know it, incorporated in 1903, and other businesses came to fill the gap left by the fall of hops growing. A large dairy farm, Meadowbrook Farm, operated continuously from 1904 until mid 1960's. In 1917, the Snoqualmie Falls Lumber Company built the country's second all-electric lumber mill in the Snoqualmie Falls area. The mill, which was started as a Weyerhaeuser joint venture, operated until 2003 when it was closed by the Weyerhaeuser Corporation.

The community experienced a building boom through the 20's and ended with the economic crash of the Great Depression in 1932. The city's population stabilized to about 1200 people in 1960 and grew to 1500 in 1990. Today, the city is experiencing growth through the annexation of a master planned community called Snoqualmie Ridge.

Originally a Weyerhaeuser tree farm, The Ridge was platted by The Quadrant Corporation, a Weyerhaeuser home building subsidiary. The development is mixed use, combining residential, office and retail. When The Ridge is complete, Snoqualmie's population is projected to be 15,000.

The city has worked hard, though, to preserve open spaces and to maintain the rural nature of the community. Along with North Bend, the city purchased the Meadowbrook Farm east of town, and maintains it as an open space. A large herd of elk calls this space home and has been known to stop traffic on Highway 202 as people try to see the animals while driving. Deer inhabit the green spaces on The Ridge and frequently make an appearance on peoples' front yards.

Snoqualmie is home to the Northwest Train Museum. The museum operates out of the old railroad station and runs a weekend train from the Falls to North Bend. Using 100 year old passenger cars and vintage diesel locomotives, the train is a magnet for railfans and families. The museum has a static display of old rail equipment including one of the largest collections of steam logging locomotives in the country.

There's a lot to do in Snoqualmie. Beside the train and the falls, there's an 18 hole championship golf course. The Ridge is honeycombed with hiking trails and neighborhood parks. Being just 25 miles from the Pass, Snoqualmie residents can hit the ski slopes in the winter. Summertime activities include a farmers' market, the Railroad Days festival in July and A Day Out with Thomas, also in July. Snoqualmie is a little place that packs a lot of fun into a small package.

Getting to Snoqualmie is easy by car. Drive east on I-90 to Exit 25 and turn left onto Snoqualmie Parkway. Try not to drive off the Parkway as you marvel at the view of Mt. Si, the Cascades, Mt. Baker and the Canadian Rockies. Turning left on Center puts you into the middle of the shopping village on the Ridge. Or, drive all of the way down the Parkway to Railroad Ave. Turn right onto Railroad into the original town. Metro riders can ride the 209 or 214.

Next month: We drive over SR 202 to Fall City