

## **History of Johnson Creek Canyon**

**by Steve Johnson, 1992**

There is plenty of evidence pointing to active use of the creek by Native Americans. Arrowheads, spears, bowls, and other artifacts have been found along the creek and adjacent fields. In the Lents area, a prominent local landmark for many years was "Indian Rock", at the base of Mount Scott near the William Johnson homestead. The area was littered with arrowheads, and it was one of the few tangible reminders, as late as the mid-1930's, that Native Americans had once been active in the area.

Johnson Creek got its name from William Johnson who moved to the region in 1847. Originally from Maryland, the Johnson's settled on the south side of the creek, at the base of Mt. Scott near 100th street.

Johnson, his son Jacob, and two other sons journeyed to California for the gold rush in 1849. Upon their return, Jacob staked a claim at Deardoff Road and the creek (about 134th). His father built a sawmill on his property and Jacob did the same on his claim, taking advantage of the red cedar and Douglas fir in the immediate area.

The first settlers in the Johnson Creek Canyon area were George and Jacob Wills. Jacob Wills, born in Kentucky, emigrated in 1848 from Iowa to Portland, Oregon. He was accompanied by his father, George W. Wills. They took adjoining land claims, Jacob's claim embracing a good part of Eastmoreland. Further to the north, a land claim that included Crystal Springs and Reed College was owned by his brother in law, Edward Long. George Will's claim included the site of Tideman Johnson Park, and part of Ardenwald.

Jacob built a home between the present day SE 23rd Ave. and the Southern Pacific Tracks and between Tacoma and Tenino Streets. This would put his home west of Highway 99E, not far from the present day Johnson Creek Park.

George Wills settled at the top of the ridge just west of the present intersection of 32nd and Johnson Creek Blvd. (the house is still there, though dramatically altered).

Most of Jacob Will's land holdings were east of his home, but much of his property, especially in the Johnson Creek Canyon area, was probably thick with old growth forest. Jacob Will's home was on the flat land, a natural place for rail lines and roads eventually to be built. Commerce went north and south. It was also only a short distance to Lot Whicomb's boat landing in Milwaukie.

In 1849 Jacob built a dam 10 feet high and impounded the creek water and erected a sawmill securing an iron planer that came around the horn that year. A small mill, cutting 2,000 feet of rough lumber in 24 hours, was already running at Milwaukie, close by, but Jacob built an enormous mill that would cut and plane some 6,000 feet in 24 hours. It was the first sawmill with a planer in all the old Oregon country, turning out the first dressed lumber in the Pacific Northwest. The creek then developed 60-horse power in winter. The summer flow of the creek generated 30-horse power.

The exact location of the original dam and mill is not known, but based on the known location of a mill that was later built  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile upstream, the most likely location was just above the junction of Johnson Creek and Crystal Springs, not too far from his home site.

In 1849 this mill supplied lumber for the needs of miners in the gold rush to the south fork of the American River, the lumber being shipped by water to San Francisco, thence up the river to Sacramento, and was hauled by ox team out to Coloma.

Within a few years a flood washed out the dam and Jacob Wills went up Johnson Creek about  $\frac{1}{2}$  a mile and built a bigger dam that would saw about 10,000 feet daily. He ran this mill until 1888.

According to descendants of pioneers in the area this mill was located near the present day Eastmoreland Tennis and Racquet Club, at the start of the Johnson Creek Canyon. It was also closer to George Will's home site on the south ridge above Johnson Creek

The Wills logged off parts of their claims in order to feed the mill. To transport trees to the mill and then to transportation sites along the river or later for train transportation it was necessary to have several roads into the canyon. By time the Wills built their second mill (1853-1854), ½ mile upstream from the first one, they probably had a road leading to it from their homestead.

A road also led down into the canyon from the south side near the 32nd and Johnson Creek intersection to the site of the second mill. A road in use until the 1940s connected Willsburg Road and SE 28th in the present Eastmoreland, near the Roe Saw company.

The other two earliest roads into the canyon were Berkeley Way on the North Side, and a road still used by the Tideman-Johnson family on the south side, that descends into the canyon near 40th and Johnson Creek Blvd., which may have been used before the family as early as the 1870s.

In 1868 Jacob and Lorana Wills entered into an agreement with the Oregon Central Railroad in which they deeded it one 60 foot right of way. In his agreement with the railroad, Jacob insisted that a suitable switch be constructed for the use of his sawmill.

Jacob also had plans for a town. The town of Willsburg was plotted in the 1860s. The site was on the flat land near Tacoma and the intersection of the now Southern Pacific Rail line. The Willsburg post office was established January 15, 1883, and operated until 1900.

Lewelling and Beard started a small furniture factory on the creek, at a point where the Wolstead Knitting mills stands today. The furniture factory was run by water power. After some years, it was sold to G. Shindler & Co.

The Willsburg School played an important role in the early history of this area of town. It was built in 1877 on land donated by Lorana Wills, wife of Jacob Wills. It was the only school for miles. Its boundaries were Woodstock on the north, Willamette River on the west, 57th on the east, and south to Roswell and 32nd. In 1877 the school census showed 20 girls and 14 boys.

The site for the school was  $\frac{3}{4}$  acres on the hillside, facing toward Sellwood above the Southern Pacific Railroad, approximately half way between Jacob and George Will's homes. The lumber to build the first schoolhouse was cut by the Jacob Wills sawmill. The school was located on a hillside near what is now SE Tacoma and 26th behind the Hoe Co. The drinking water was obtained from a spring about one hundred feet down the hill from the school house on the Jacob Wills property. The school operated until 1912 until other schools were built; Ardenwald in 1913 and Duniway in 1914.

By time the Tideman-Johnson family moved to the area (in 1878), much of the area forested area was cleared. What Jacob or George Wills had not cut down by saw had been a victim of fire or wind. The Johnson Creek canyon was the last area to be logged because it was further and, with steep unstable slopes and marshes on the bottom land, was more difficult to reach.

The canyon was a foreboding place, not a place to erect a home, or to farm. However the area did have resources, including stands of old growth fir, cedar and hemlock. The canyon walls were also laced with springs that were important for drinking water and irrigation.

Tideman-Johnson had immigrated and moved west in the 1860s, while working on the railroad. He and Olava first settled in the Brooklyn neighborhood. They bought the farm along Johnson Creek because Tideman wanted to go *back to the land*. They built a house and barn on the south side of Johnson Creek Blvd. in the 1880s.

In 1912 they tore down the original farm house and built a new house still located at 3635 SE Johnson Creek Blvd. Unfortunately, Olava died before the house was built and Tideman died the following year.

Telmer, Tideman's son and his wife Eva Johnson moved into the new house after Tideman and Olava died. They lived there until Telmer's death until about 1938. His brother, Luther, and his wife Madge moved on to a three acre tract of land belonging to the family at the far east end of the original farm. Telmer and Eva farmed the 50+ acres south of Johnson Creek Blvd., and eventually leased it to others to farm.

The area has changed over the years. Some of the changes have been manmade, others have been natural.

In 1903 Tideman-Johnson deeded 1.41 acres to the Oregon Water Power and Railway (OWP) Company at the east end of the canyon in exchange for .69 acres at the west end so that a rail line could be built through the canyon. The rail line ran from Portland to Estacada, with stations at historic communities along Johnson Creek including Sellwood, Wichita, Bell Station, Lents, Gilbert, Sycamore, Cedarville (Linneman), and Gresham.

The OWP created fill at the east end of the canyon for the railroad bed, severing the nine acre wetland to the east from the Tideman-Johnson Park area. It is likely that flood waters covered a much larger area before the fill.

The Portland Traction Company operated an inter-urban line, the Springwater Line between 1940 and 1958. The Berkely station was situated at the foot of 37th street next to the current entrance to the Park.

In 1933 the Works Progress Administration (WPA) began channel improvement project to address the flooding problems. The involvement of the WPA was at the request of Multnomah County, following on the original permit request of farmers. The channel was excavated to a depth of 15 feet and rip-rapped by hand with stone to protect against erosion. Picnic areas and scenic overlooks were built, a waterfall was constructed at 45th street, and the channel was split there to accommodate a fish ladder to facilitate the passage of anadromous fish. The excavation and rip-rap work begin at the mouth of the creek and progressed up stream almost 15 miles.

Other dramatic changes in the canyon have been the result of natural causes. The 1962 Columbus Day storm blew down over 500 trees in the canyon. High waters such as the 1966 Christmas flood have changed the channel of the creek. Introduction of plants such as English ivy and Himalayan blackberries have pushed out native plants.

Throughout the twenties Telmer encouraged people to use the terraces on both side of the creek in the canyon, including the present Tideman-Johnson Park. It had become such a tradition that in the 1930s the WPA built a bridge across the creek between the present day park, and the cool and damp northern side of the creek.

A letter to the editor in the *Oregon Journal*, January 1, 1931 gives a good picture of how the canyon was used by the public:

I wish to ask if it is fair to Eastmoreland, Berkely and West Errol Heights communities to have no park for the children, since traffic is so heavy that they can no longer play on the street and there is no park nearer than Sellwood and it is not safe to cross at Bybee Avenue. We should have the Johnson park tract before it is taken by some private amusement company. We have appealed a number of times to our city commissioners to buy this tract but with no results so far. This is the only park ground near this district and it is certainly a beautiful place, with a running stream for fishing and swimming and with lovely beaches and an ice-cold spring of pure water, a cool shady place for a hot day. All these years Mr. Johnson has let us enjoy this place, to come and stay as long as we wished. I don't believe there is another man in the city who would have been as considerate of the children's happiness as he has been. We all extend our thanks to him.

The Johnson children would sell ice cream on hot days in the summer, standing down by the WPA bridge as people crossed over to drink from the spring water or sit in the shade. For years on the Fourth of July Telmer would host an informal fireworks display creek-side.

As the city grew, things changed. Telmer's good feelings waned as vandals began to take advantage of his generosity. He began to take measures to keep people off of the south side of the creek.

After Telmer died the Johnson family decided to sell the land. In 1942 six acres on the north side of Johnson Creek were donated to the City of Portland, to be used as a park, which is now Tideman Johnson Park. Most of the land (50+ acres) was sold as Victory Garden lots, forming a part of Ardenwald.