"Grandma Woods" lent name, strength to town as locals recall her era

"Fly, scatter through the country to the Great West."

– Horace Greeley

The provocative challenge "Go west young man, grow up with the country," was penned in the 1840's by Horace Greeley, the noted politician-journalist. It was a challenge that spawned an era of desperate romanticism and blind adventure into the relatively unexplored vastness of the Oregon Territory. Enticed by the prospects of free land, improved fortunes, a milder clime and escape from dreaded disease, emigrants of the "Great Migration" of 1843 pressed onward toward the setting sun.

Becoming prisoners of their own dreams – "Oregon or Bust" and "Manifest Destiny," their indomitable spirit set the stage for the throngs who would later follow in their wagon-etched tracks across the dusty plains.

A fascinating chapter in our own local history discloses that one of our early settlers was a "charter member" of that first Pacific-bound trek.

Mary Elizabeth Wood (often mispronounced "Woods" – with an "s" – by past and present area residents) was just a young girl, possibly around the age of six (though we have no accurate record of this) when she journeyed with her family over the trail that would lead them to their "land of milk and honey."

There is a dearth of recorded information of their experiences over the Oregon Trail, and many gaps thereafter. A letter in the Tillamook County Pioneer Museum archives, written by a great-granddaughter of Mary Wood merely states,, "(Mary) was a pioneer of the 1843 migration..." she also adds, "I cannot learn when Joseph Wood (Mary's husband) came to Oregon." (His obituary alludes that "Deceased came to Oregon in 185-.")

Many questions plague the mind of the historian.

[illegible] let that so strongly pulled this family from a known existence to one, of the unknown? What were the trials and tribulations, joys and jubilations experienced as they ventured forth to the unknown – to this land of promise? A lot is left to conjecture. The layers of time often produce a curious jumble of fact, fancy and lore – the stories handed down generation to generation are dimming, many threatening to fade altogether.

Turning back the pages of time in her mind, Woods resident, Hildred Hall, remembers as a youngster, the long-ago stories reminisced by an aged "Grandma" Wood (as she was endearingly known to all). "Grandma lived to be an old lady – in her 90's. But she told us all about this coming across the plains, people losing their babies and different ones, the hardships they had."

Hildred also told of the ingenuity of those pioneer women, "The women were told they couldn't take anything fancy (in their covered wagons) – nothing fancy at all. They wanted flowers you know."

With a bit of cleverness the women "took starts of the flowers and kept them damp in the stoves, and the men never knew anything about it. I have a start of the pink rose, and the pink roses that come up at the Clyde Hudson place (now the Hudson House Bed and Breakfast, on Hwy. 101) – they're part of those pink roses brought across the plains. Oh, there's a lot of things around here if people could just remember them."

Minnie Nelson Blum, a pioneer herself, recalled in the Headlight-Herald, July 30, 1959, "Her (Mary Wood's) pioneer experiences were thrilling and heroic. I deeply regret that I have failed to record the stories she told me, as they have grown dim in my memory."

Circa 1926, the Tillamook Headlight printed an article that chronicled Mary and Joe Wood's arrival to Tillamook County in 1881. "(Mary), with her husband Joe, and family, were among the first to enter the county by the first wagon road from Grande Ronde. They settled on the Nestucca River at the present site of Woods, the town which grew up around (them)..."

Joe Wood's obituary also confirms the "approximate" date of their arrival in the county, "Deceased...was the first settler at Woods; and laid out the town of his name about twelve years ago." (Printed late in 1892, source of obituary unknown.)

There are earlier accounts of Joe's presence in the Nestucca Valley. One is recorded in Alexendria Rock's book: Short History of the Little Nestucca River Valley. She claims that Joe settled a land dispute between an Indian chief and a homesteader in 1876. "When James B. Upton...tried to take possession of the cabin on the claim he had selected, Chief Nestugga Bill refused to leave it, claiming it was his. After considerable pow-wowing, Joe Woods...who could speak Jargon, persuaded (the chief) to leave if Upton would pay him $30.00 cash." Upton did not have thirty dollars cash, but Joe haggled and the issue was settled with some cash and a "cayuse" (Indian pony).

A correspondent for the Oregonian described early in 1883, the "land of milk and honey" where the Woods family chose to locate, "She only, as yet, a young settlement is fast coming into notice with her rich river bottoms of alluvial soil, unequaled in Oregon for its producing qualities...the Big Nestucca River is said to be navigable for fourteen miles when cleared of a few log drifts, and her bay is alive with the finest salmon in the fall season..."

Mary "Grandma" Woods

By late 1892, Woods was a bustling, principle town. Joe Wood did not live to see it reach its zenith in 1900, and later its inevitable decline to competing commerce. His obituary indicated he died of heart trouble Dec. 3 of that year,1892.

"Grandma" Wood continued on for 38 more years. She left an impression on all who met her. Her eye for beauty was her true genius. Many was the youngster who sat at her knee transfixed by real-life adventures. More than half a century later some can still conjure emotions from their mental scrapbooks...tiny hands running over the cool nappy texture of Grandma's needlepoint cushions, or the intoxicating fragrance of roses heavy on a sun-drenched garden path.

One local woman mused, "There was a lady here one day and she was telling me what beautiful moss roses – the only ones she'd ever seen – Mrs. Woods had.

She also clarifies the misconception that the Woods were the first white settlers in the vicinity, "I have said that Mr. and Mrs. Woods were its first settlers, however, there were living in Woods at my earliest recollections, a Mr. and Mrs. John Belleque, pronounced Blake. Living with John was his brother, Peter Belleque. (They) may have been there years before any other white people."

South county historian Lloyd McKillip corroborates, "Some historians claim that Joe Woods was the first settler of Woods, but he wasn't. There were quite a few Belleques in here before them...they were in here a while before Joe was."

And fast come into notice "she" did. The settlement hugging the north bank of the Nestucca exalted like a meteor for one brief moment in local history.

From Minnie Nelson Blum's narrative, "(Pacific City) was a barren and unused territory, when Woods was the thriving metropolis of the south end of the county."

By 1886 a post office was established, with William Booth its first postmaster. Many attribute him for naming the village in honor of Mr. and Mrs. Wood. Nonetheless, it is a charming, picturesque name.

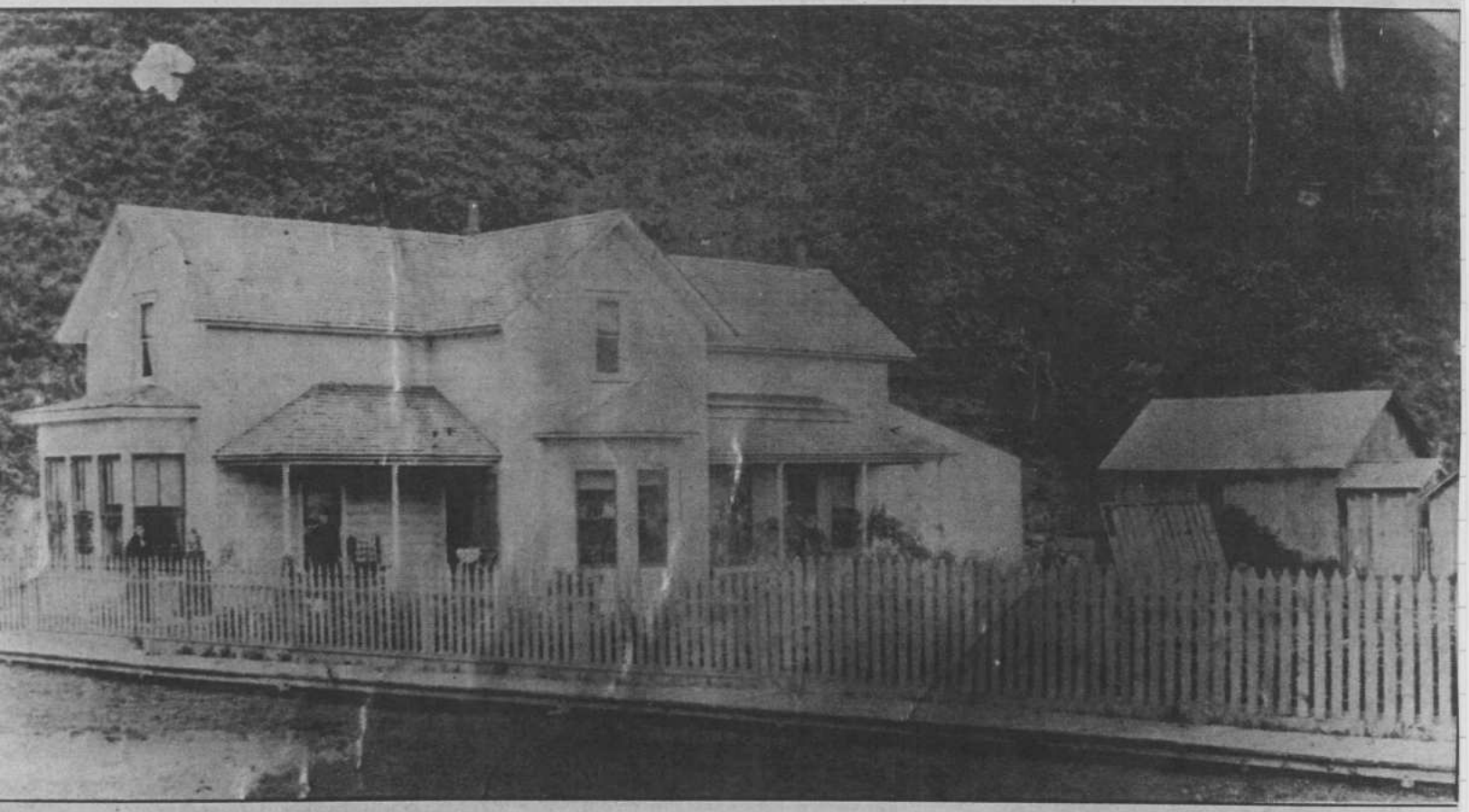
A deed dated Aug. 4, 1887 reads, "Know all men by these presents, that we, Joseph Wood and Mary E. Wood, his wife, do hereby layout, designate and establish the town of Woods, within Tillamook County, Oregon..."

An accompanying plat diagrams a simple layout of lots, roads and several parcels of land. Besides many houses, there are the post office, a saloon (owned by A.B. Pollard), two stores (J.G. Dutcher's and A. Phelp's), a sawmill, and a school district.

Joe and Mary lived in a rough hewed log cabin until early in 1891 when they began to construct their first framed house from timbers salvaged from the shipwrecked (Christmas, 1890) Struan. Alexendria Rock notes in her book the early settlers had "determination, incentive and love of homestead...burdens...were met with willingness and firm resolution."

But the story does not end there, "The rustic and other lighter timbers for this first (framed) house in Woods were hauled over the toll road from Grande Ronde, some 30 miles away. Through the muds of 30 miles, over the Coast Range mountains, across rivers swift and rocky, and around grades steep and narrow..." And on it goes...!

The scrubby hills (there had been forest fires earlier in the century) shouldering the burgeoning hamlet, or possibly a nearby grove, could have lent the town's name. "Peter Belleque, well, he and Joe and Mary got together – she told me this – I talked to Grandma Woods – but she said, "We got together, and decided to call it "Woods"." I suppose there was woods around there...", recounts Hildred Hall.



Joseph and Mary Wood's home in the town which still bears their name. (Photos courtesy Tillamook County Pioneer Museum)