***You are invited to share your history!*** Please do! A special thank you to Carol Nersten, Marsha (Wirta) Bonay, Peggy (Wirta) Dahl, Carol Rondell, and Pattie Pleas for sharing their stories.

Send your stories to:

***BLHS***

***23694 Da Lacy Lane***

***Mount Vernon, WA 98274***

***OR***

***Email: biglakehistoricalsociety@gmail.com***

January 15, 2022

WINTER NEWSLETTER 2022

**MARK YOUR CALENDARS!**

**January 27, 2022** BLHS Quarterly Meeting—7:00 PM, at Big Lake Community Church—*Please consider attending as we would appreciate help as we prepare for the 2022 Biennial Exhibit*

**April 22, 2022** BLHS Quarterly Meeting—7:00 PM at Big Lake Community Church

**July 22, 2022** BLHS Annual Meeting—7:00 PM at Big Lake Community Church

**August 13 & 14, 2022** BLHS Biennial Exhibit at BLFD Community Room, 10:00 AM – 6:00 PM

## Big Lake My Forever Home

Written by Carol Nersten

**OUR STORIES**

Diagram

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We lived on Hwy 9; the address then was Route 4 Box474.

My mother was born at home in Walker Valley. All her brothers and sister were also. They all settled in and around Big Lake soon after they married.

Mom was the kind of woman who could fix anything. She canned everything vegetables, fruit, fish, and meat. Always busy doing something. Every summer she would take us to pick the treasured tiny wild blackberries. There was a patch down by the railroad tracks below our house. I knew summer was coming to an end when she started sewing. She made me some beautiful dresses for school. They were better than the ones you bought in town.

We very seldom went to town. Mom and Dad bought groceries at Clear Lake. Dad did not like to drive to Mount Vernon or Sedro-Woolley.

I spent many weekends with Gramma Catlin and Uncle John. They lived on what is known now as Garden Street on Big Lake Boulevard. My aunts Mary Ammons and Mae Hoffman lived on Garden Street too. Aunt Julia Bailey lived in Montborne. With everyone so close it was easy to get together, so we did every summer at Aunt Mae’s and Uncle Lloyd’s. Lots of food and lots of fun.

Time with Gramma Nersten and Uncle Art on the farm was always an adventure. They milked cows twice a day and had chickens to feed. Gramma had a huge garden. So, we would sit on the back porch steps and snap beans. For a break she would take me down to the creek to wade in the cool water. Gramma made her own butter. With this butter she made the best shortbread cookies. She also made headcheese for her friends after they butchered. Growing up in Norway she learned not to waste anything.

My second home was across the street from my home. The home of Orn and Elsie Chase. The twins, Glen and Glenda were my playmates all through my childhood. We always found something to do outdoors, no matter what the weather. In the summer we would get a piece of fishline, a hook, dig a can of worms, and head for the creek. We would find a branch to use for a pole. If we didn’t catch a fish (which was most of the time) we would end up in the creek ourselves. Glenda and I went from little girls playing with dolls to teen learning to dance from American Bandstand. And how could I ever forget Mrs. Chase’s homemade bread and cinnamon rolls. Oh! So Good!

Down the road I would visit the Gribbles. Mrs. Gribble would play her records and would visit and eat cookies. Mr. Gribble, everyone who grew up in Big Lake knew, he was our school bus driver. I liked him very much. Further down the road by Jones Corner (where Mount Vernon/Big Lake Road meets Highway 9) I would visit the Powell’s. Mrs. Powell would let me borrow her Zane Grey books, when I brought it back, she would ask me about the book to make sure I read it. If I did, I could borrow another. Guess I was sort of the neighborhood pest.

When I was about eleven, Mrs. Roy Sell and Mrs. Richard Tesarik started a 4-H Club. This is where I got my start sewing. It was so exciting to have our sewing projects entered in the Skagit County Fair. One year we even had a float in the parade.

And of course, there was always the big Firemen’s Picnic at Green’s Resort (Big Lake Resort and RV Park). We always looked forward to going. We would get to see our school mates we hadn’t seen all summer. I could go on forever with memories of my family, friends, and Big Lake neighbors. Big Lake will always be home to me.

# BIG LAKE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## IF THE LAND COULD TALK—100 YEARS OF HISTORY

**Contributed by the daughters of Roy Wirta—Marsha Bonay and Peggy Dahl**

## I

An expectant Hilma in early 1921 with her Collie pup on the farm.

**Books & 2022 BLHS Calendars Are Available for Purchase**

The colorful new 2022 BLHS Calendars with photographs by local resident and photographer, Kym Pickup Larvie, and *Big Lake Valley*, BLHS’s book of the early history of our community, are available at the Big Lake Store for $15.00 and $21.99 respectfully. Purchases may also be made by contacting: BLHS, 23694 DaLacy Ln, Mount Vernon, WA 98274, or email [biglakehistoricalsociety@gmail.com](mailto:biglakehistoricalsociety@gmail.com).

BLHS WINTER NEWSLETTER 2022

A picture containing outdoor, grass

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About 1937 the county developed a road to the “top of the hill” to serve 8 families living there. That didn’t come about without John making a lot of trips to the courthouse to try to bring pressure on the County Commissioner to allocate necessary funding. The process took about 5 years to consummate.

John and Hilma were successful in making a living at farming. Eggs were sold to the local co-op, and the Jersey cow milk was sold to Darigold. They had cultivated a large garden for root vegetables and other produce. Fruit trees were planted including apples, pears, cherries, plums, and apricots producing fruit for the family. A root cellar was dug that provided storage for the produce that could be held over for fall and winter.

In 1941, their son Roy, left home to attend college in Pullman at WSU and seven years later John and Hilma decided to retire from farming and move into town. They moved into a small home in Burlington, WA after selling the farm in 1948 to a young couple with two younger children. According to the son of the couple who bought the farm, they lived there for a very short time before the farm went back to the bank. Neither the dream of farming nor the marriage would last. Soon the farm was back on the market.

To be continued next issue….

This is the biography of 80 acres located on “Starvation Ridge”, as it was called in the early years, today it is better known as the Mt View Road.

John Wirta and Hilma Laakso were married December 18, 1919. A young, tough, and hardy Finnish couple, they bought this property through a Seattle realtor, sight unseen, 80 acres of undeveloped land two miles NW of Big Lake, WA. A couple of years later, their only child, Roy was born on the farm, Easter Sunday, March 27, 1921. Later Roy would attend elementary school at Big Lake and high school in Sedro-Woolley. He left the farm in 1941 to attend WSU in Pullman, Washington. In later years he would often return to visit his early home known as the “Wirta Place”.

John and Hilma’s long-term plan was to develop this land into a farm which would bring in a living. The site included a small three room dwelling, a woodshed, a well, and an outdoor privy. There was no access road. An easement was secured from a neighbor to provide an access road. Pete Pederson offered that at no cost. Although the area had been logged about 1915, stumps remained. Removing stumps meant getting a horse, dynamite, and a horse drawn scraper to level the ground. John partially cleared about 10 acres. Some stumps remained, but enough of the land was cleared to grow vegetable crops for domestic use and hay to feed the cows.

A used wagon was acquired to haul salvaged lumber for additional buildings. The lumber came complete with used nails to be pulled out, straightened, and reused. This allowed construction of a cow barn, hay barn, shelter for the horse, and sauna (an absolute must for most Finns).

By 1927 enough money had accumulated to build the first chicken coop. It was 100 feet long and the beginning of an autonomous income. Over the next five years was added the brooder house in which to care for baby chicks. Since there was no electricity, carbide lighting was installed for the chicken coop and the home. The carbide generator was a 200-gallon tank for water and a self-regulating hopper for 200 pounds of calcium carbide to form acetylene gas on demand. Each charge was good for about 3-4 weeks.

In the summer months the well on the property would go dry, and water had to be hauled from remote springs on the property. John decided to dig a new well in the area immediate to the farm buildings. Dig he did. He dug a hole 4 feet square, 25 feet deep into hardpan soil, but no water. In desperation, with one strong lunge he drove the iron bar into the bottom. The bar broke into a layer of gravel and water began to stream into the well. In a couple of minutes there was about 2 feet of water, and he had to get out in a hurry. In succeeding years that well never went dry, even in the driest of seasons.

In a combined appeal by the neighborhood, the power company installed a line to provide electrical power. Very soon an electric pump distributed water to the 2000 chickens, electric lights in the place of carbide, and lighting for the home and barn. The 5 cows could be milked and cared for with bright electric lights instead of the dim kerosene lanterns.

In 1936 the old house was torn down and a new house constructed. While the new house was being built, the family lived in the brooder house. John and Hilma’s son Roy drew up floor plans for the new house (Roy had taken a course in mechanical drawing in high school). Bill Ford, a carpenter, did most of the construction and Roy painted the exterior. The new house consisted of a kitchen (with low counter tops to accommodate Hilma, she was only 4’6”), a large living room, and 2 bedrooms. The cooking was done in a new wood stove and the house was heated by an oil burner in the living room.

About 1937 the county developed a road to the “top of the hill” to serve 8 families living there. That didn’t come about without John making a lot of trips to the courthouse to try to bring pressure on the County Commissioner to allocate necessary funding. The process took about 5 years to consummate.