Walt Woodward

This is another in the continuing series on communities in and around the Seattle area. Walt Woodward and Byron Johnsrud alternate as authors.

Edmonds shuns the growth-happy syndrome

—Staff photos by Roy Scully

Peggy Harris walked down Edmonds' main street past decorative tree planter.

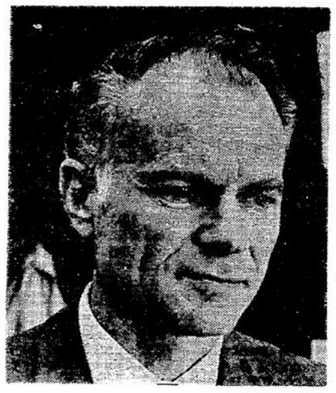
THERE IS another frustration to add to the one which history already records for George Brackett, the Puget Sound pioneer who, one day in 1870, was driven ashore in his canoe by a storm and, thus, founded Edmonds.

As he rested behind Edwards Point, he liked what he saw. A sandy beach gave way to a low, broad shelf which rose gradually up an amphitheater hill. Brackett dreamed of commerce and industry on the lowland and of hillside homes commanding an inspiring sunset view of the snow-capped Olympic Mountains. In two years, he and his wife, Etta, had settled there.

For a while, the place was known as Brackett's Landing. By 1883, it was time for a post office. A year later, the Bracketts were to file a plat; incorporation of the town was to occur in 1890 with Brackett its first mayor.

Modestly, the founder spurned the idea that his name should be given to the post office. He proposed Edmunds, after a good friend of his, Senator Edmunds of Vermont. The delay in getting federal approval seemed interminable. Finally, the official notification — and the necessary seal — arrived.

To Brackett's great frustration, the seal was spelled with an "o." Neither he nor his neighbors could tolerate another long delay. They let the spelling stand. Edmonds it became.



Harve H. Harrison

TODAY — 99 years from the establishment of Brackett's Landing — another frustration is developing in its founder's history. Edmonds is not the great, industrial seaport of which he dreamed. In fact, the official policy of the town he founded is to resist that kind of growth.

For example, while other shoreland communities last year nervously wondered what to do about the proposed granting of oil drilling permits in Puget Sound, the City of Edmonds promptly claimed offshore jurisdiction and boldly zoned against oil drilling on its underwater land some three miles out and 150 or so fathoms deep into Puget Sound.

That may have been, as some critics contend, only a "headline" stunt. But what of the prefatory letter by Mayor Harve H. Harrison in the unique 1971 wall calendar and yearly city report distributed by the City of Edmonds to its citizens. Harrison wrote:

". . . We see continued growth as an undesirable thing and a threat to our way of life. We see that more people means more houses, more streets and fewer trees . . . more furnaces, more fireplaces and more trash burning . . . more automobiles which pollute the air, cause traffic congestion and create parking problems . . .

"Our goal is to remain a small, low-density, rural-type community.

"In accordance, we are determined to resist all pressures to increase the population density and industrial development . . ."

RARELY, if ever, does an elected public official in the Puget Sound country speak and act so plainly in opposition to growth. But Harrison is not alone. A majority of the seven-member Edmonds City Council clearly could have prevented official publication of those words. It did not.

Gordon Maxwell

Chester Bennett

Natalie Shippen

At any event, rezoning for multiple dwellings, apartments and highrise living structures generally is denied by Edmonds' government. In fact, "reverse" rezones have occurred; a couple of areas once zoned for multiple dwellings now are restricted to single-family units.

Chester Bennett, 17 years in Edmonds, former city attorney and a leader of successful fund drives for a little theater and a swimming pool, provides an explanation:

"When I was on the City Council, we saw the fix some of our neighboring cities were getting into by packing too many apartment structures into too small an area. We took a look at our own code and made revisions. Edmonds is off the beaten path. By the time the pressure for growth hit us, we had profited by the mistakes of others.

"The good builders, mostly men who live here, don't mind our density control zoning. Promoters are not for it. But we know now that things could have gotten out of hand here during the Boeing boom of three or four years ago."

PROOF THAT the boom did not overcrowd Edmonds is seen when the motorist, having come 16 miles north from downtown Seattle on Interstate 5, drives some three miles west on Highway 524 through a helter-skelter rapid-growth area and suddenly, as the road starts to slip down that amphitheater hill, finds himself in a choice residential area.

Well-groomed lawns, attractive flowers, shrubs and trees set off substantial homes, many of contemporary design. Save for a shopping development at the hill's top, an older "Main Street" commercial district at the base of the amphitheater, and a colorful waterfront, those homes are Edmonds.

The three factories, the sawmill and the 10 shingle mills which, 60 years ago, gave promise of fulfillment to George Brackett's dream are gone. A few light industries still operate on the waterfront, the state ferry terminal for the crossing to Kingston yearly lures half a million vehicles through Edmonds, and a breakwater-guarded boat basin accommodates 800 craft. These contribute to Edmonds' economy, but the truth is that Edmonds mostly is a residential area of prime quality.

Still, says the city's veteran chief administrative officer, Donald C. Lawson, the fact that the Edmonds tax base rests mostly on homes has not yet crippled city government. It does in most other chiefly residential municipalities. The difference in Edmonds is the higher assessed values of its homes.

The city can afford 136 full-time employes, assisted by 55 volunteer policemen and firemen and by 160 women and men serving without pay on boards and commissions.

AT 24,500 INHABITANTS, Edmonds is no longer the sleepy little village of 2,000 it was just two decades ago. The transformation of the one-time mill town is told in part by Peggy (Mrs. Carl) Harris, 19 years an Edmonds resident, gift-shop owner, member of the city's beautification committee and first woman president of the chamber of commerce:

"I had been a big-city gal, but we bought two acres with trees and a creek inside the Edmonds city limits. I wouldn't trade it now. As chamber president in 1959, I started the beautification committee. The Algoma Garden Club planted Kwanzan cherry trees in containers which now line our business-district sidewalks. What once was a rough-and-tumble mill town now is the cultural center of Snohomish County."

She cites the Edmonds Arts Festival, in its 15th year; the Driftwood Players, a year-around organization with its own playhouse; the Cascade Orchestra with regular seasons of scheduled concerts, and the successful presentation last year by the Stevens Memorial Hospital Auxiliary of a full-scale production of the musical, "Music Man."

Mrs. Harris has high hopes for the business district. She says:

"Young people are coming into the business community. I'm very excited about its future. Edmonds has no regional shopping center. Instead, we have the small-town atmosphere of individualized shops. Chances are, the owner will wait on you."

DOUGLAS S. EGAN, yacht and commercial-ship broker and present chamber president, shares Mrs. Harris' enthusiasm:

"Edmonds is a nice place to work and live. It doesn't have any real problems.

"Some residents no doubt have been hurt by the Boeing layoffs, but from a corporate standpoint, Edmonds businesses do not appear to be suffering."

Egan believes both the Port of Edmonds boat basin and the ferry terminal help. Many boat owners are not Edmonds residents, yet they make hardware and food purchases in Edmonds. Many ferry patrons likewise shop in Edmonds.

Egan is unhappy with the Burlington Northern Railway, whose modern station on the waterfront no longer is used by passengers. Only freight trains thunder past the fashionable homes on Sunset Avenue. Egan thinks the railroad should put underground the "picket fence" of utility poles and wires which parallel the tracks. And he feels the line should do some thinking about commuter train service into Seattle.

He once was a daily "commuter" on the westbound Empire Builder which rolled through Edmonds early enough in the morning for a 30-minute, traffic-free trip into downtown Seattle.

Egan's views on the undergrounding of utility wires is more than shared by Natalie (Mrs. Herbert) Shippen, five years a member of the Edmonds Planning Commission:

"We should pay more attention to Edmonds' environment. All we have done with it so far is to pave it and plumb it. The City Council last year ignored a modest budget request for beautification. The city is undergoing an urban arterial program, but nothing much is being done to bury utility lines while things are torn up."

IF THOSE ARE problems to which Edmonds, comfortable in its "off the beaten path" seclusion, should be addressing itself, there is one major problem it does not have — racial tension.

The reason is simple enough. Only a handful of minority race representatives are included among the citizenry. A longtime Edmonds resident, Gordon Maxwell, is willing to talk frankly about this. An auto-freight executive who was a councilman for 9 and mayor for 10 of his 36

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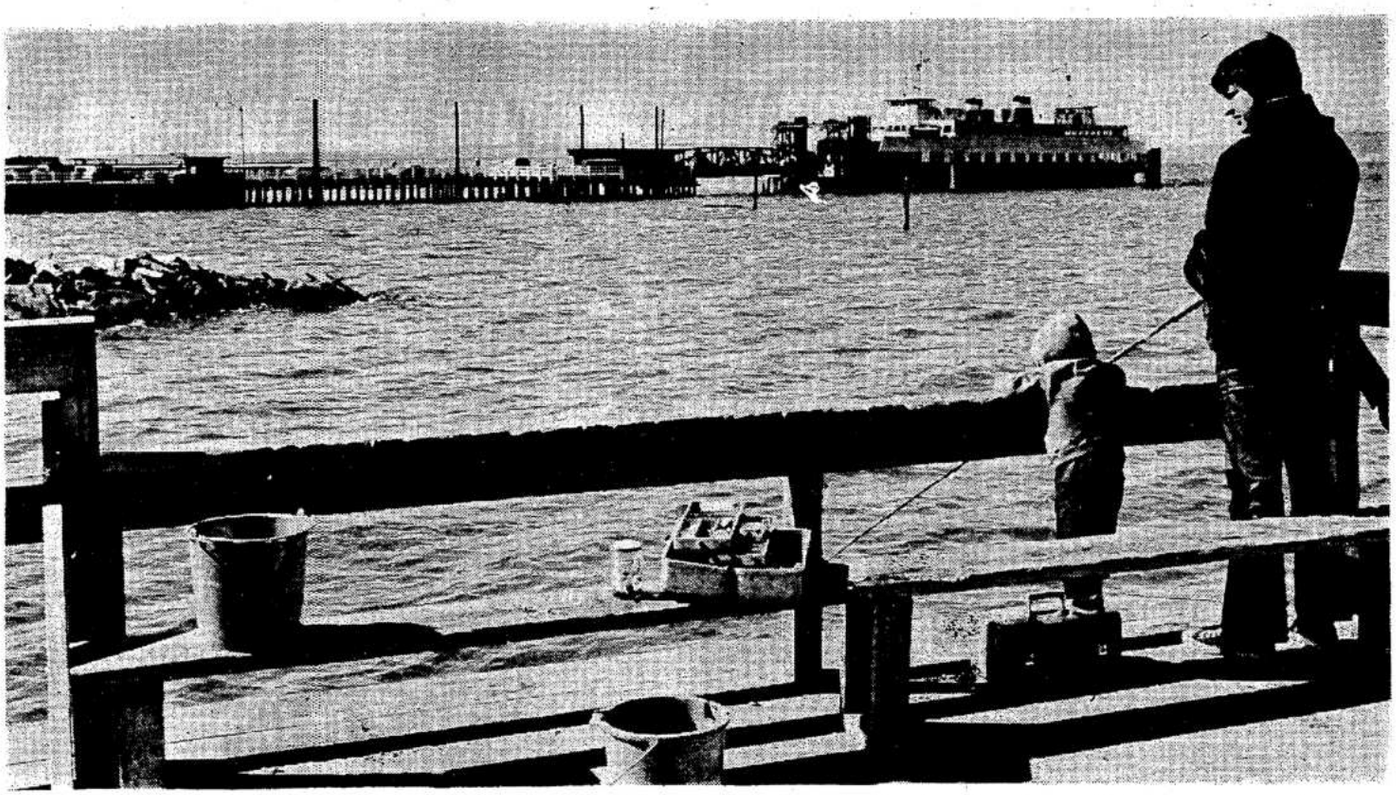

Edmonds' municipal fishing pier provided view of a ferry loading for the trip to Kingston.

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years as an Edmonds resident, and who now serves on the Planning Commission, Maxwell concedes that "a suburb can enjoy only a certain amount of snobbishness." But he adds:

"Economics probably keeps minorities out. Our land and homes are more expensive. Yet single-family residences are what is desired in Edmonds, expensive as they are."

Maxwell, plain-spoken, is frank enough to say that he, too, does not relish the thought of more people swelling Edmonds' population. He asserts he is the only public official in Snohomish County who objected to Boeing's move to nearby Paine Field.

Maxwell still holds some other opinions not unanimously shared by others. For example, he firmly believes the Edmonds waterfront should be held for the public or devoted to public uses. Although he thinks he lost his 1967 bid for reelection as mayor because of his stand on the waterfront, he still holds to these views:

"I am opposed to any more extension of the boat basin. That is not a public use. I am opposed to a wall of apartment houses along the waterfront. They are private. I believe access to the beach is a kind of birthright."

ACCOMPLISHMENTS in line with Maxwell's waterfront position are in evidence. A senior-citizen center, of which he is a prime mover, is being developed there, and a city park, complete with a fishing pier, is a popular attraction at Sunset Beach.

Mayor Harrison also talks frankly about Edmonds' problems. The top one, he says, is solid-waste disposal. The Edmonds resident with a load of waste must travel either to Everett or the nearest King County transfer station. Some don't: they dump "over the bank" or in vacant lots. The mayor believes a solution lies in cooperation by Edmonds with contiguous municipalities and with private enterprise.

Two vexing problems, Harrison contends, are near solution. A holding area is being constructed by the state to rid Edmonds streets of long lines of ferry vehicles. And the governmental confusion of the 120,000 residents of South Snohomish County when faced with fire, police and accident emergencies amid a welter of one county government, five municipalities and a fire district soon will be clarified, he says.

Harrison, chairman of the intergovernmental committee working on the problem, predicts that by year's end a central dispatch system will be responding efficiently to emergency calls. By March of next year, he believes the "911" telephone dial system for the placing of those calls will be in use throughout the area.

BUT IF SOLID-WASTE DISPOSAL, ferry traffic clogging city streets and area-wide governmental confusion are matters which Edmonds, alone, cannot solve, Harrison firmly believes that Edmonds is facing up to its own internal challenges.

"We realize we must control the density of population if we are to retain the flavor of a small town," he says. "So we discourage industry and rezones for apartments.

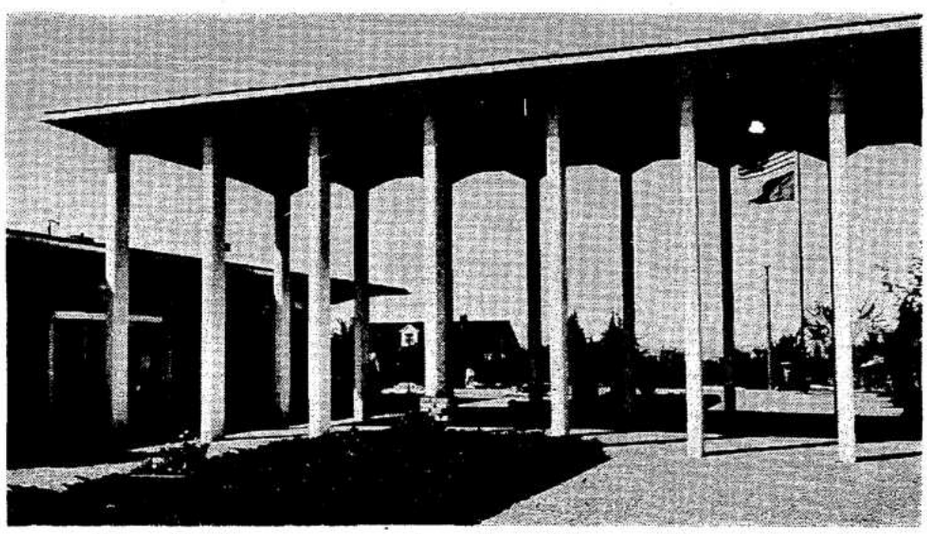
"We are concerned with the health of the business community, which must compete with nearby regional shopping centers.

"That is why Edmonds has no municipal business-and-occupation tax and no parking meters. We try to zone for ample off-street parking. And although we once had one-way streets downtown, we now have gone back to the two-way traffic of a genuine small town."

So Edmonds, frustrating as it may be to the dream of its founding father, is no industrial, growth-happy complex.

It is a peaceful dead-end community.

Dead-end. Not dead.



This vaulted breezeway connects portions of the new Edmonds city hall.