

Stayton story: Building a town ***Our Town, May, 2009***

By Linda Whitmore

In developing Oregon into a new society in the late 1800s, ordinary people were called to duties that might have been beyond their realm if they had not emigrated. One of these was Abner D. Gardner Jr., a man who took on many responsibilities in Stayton's early days and was associated with others who built its industry and government.

In a speech he presented to the Chamber of Commerce in 1940, Gardner told the story of Stayton's origins and its early growth. Excerpts of the speech were presented recently at a Stayton Chamber of Commerce forum lunch by City Councilor James Loftus, who owns the Gardner House Cafe. Enthusiastic audience members requested more detail, included here.

Gardner began, "Many people have come and lent a helping hand in the building of Stayton, and are gone, never to return again. And still our fair little city continues to grow and prosper."

He said as a young man, he and a brother hauled tan bark from east of Mehama to Salem and often camped overnight at the Stayton farm.

In 1866 "Drury S. Stayton planned and begins building what is now known as Stayton."

"Mr. Stayton was a man we loved, and liked to live with. His family consisted of six sons and three daughters. Gabriel Stayton his eldest son was his master mechanic and engineer. He built and installed machinery of the first sawmill in Stayton. ... He also built and installed a carding mill which was operated by his brother Drury E. Stayton for many years..."

Stayton operated the mill, Western Bat and Bedding Co., until about 1877, then sold it to Shaw and Sims, and later it was sold to Lee Brown and sons.

Gardner continued, "In the meantime C.W. & J.W. Thomas installed a rawhide chair manufacturing plant and operated, with others 35 to 40 years.

"Alex and Cyrus Clark had a sash and door manufacturing plant, which survived 25 to 30 years. Powell, Hoeye and Burson manufactured wagons and furniture which plant later was sold to Nels Brown, who successfully operated this business for many years. Hobson and Whitney built the Stayton Flour Mills in 1872..."

"A.L. Shreeve installed an electric light plant in 1896 or 1897. These plants were all operated by water power," Gardner said.

He continued a list of the businesses and their operators: "general merchandise W.H. Hobson, Hobson and Whitney, J.M. Jones, D.F. Campbell, G.W. Duncan, Whitney and Elder, J.I. Crabtree, Balsley, Gehlen, Trother, Young, Klecker, Gardner and Hobson and others; boots and shoes, George U. Rittenour; meat market, McKinzie and Briggs; hotel, Grahm, A.J. Richardson, Frank Lesley; livery stable, Thomas Brothers, White and Heater, Richardson G.B. Trask and others; blacksmith A. Kimsey, C.R. Bonham, Henry Huden, Crabtree, G.W. Caspell and others; ferry, A. Linch John Grier, Frank Henline; undertaker W.E. Thomas, Ringo and others; Stayton Mail, Gill Elmer Bennet, who named our local paper Stayton Mail, Brown, and others; milliner and dressmakers, Electa Stayton, Anna Stayton and others; harness makers, cooper, baker, Korenick; post masters Dr. McCauley, myself, Cooper, Barnaby, Waters, Alexander and others; mail carriers, A. Jones, Mulkey, Steele, Thomas brothers, Potter and others; doctors, Dr. McCauley, J.M. Kitchen, Magers, Dr. Cole and his wife, Derbyshire and Dr. Hunter and others."

Gardner made career changes . “The various additions of business grew so I disposed of my drug business to an apprentice, David Smith. He sold to Dr. Brewer and Dr. Brewer sold to Mr. Albus.”

Growth demanded better infrastructure and methods of transporting goods to market.

“In 1877 we found that our patronage from Linn County the ferry across the river was quite inconvenient, for them as well as ourselves, so we moved to get a bridge. We called a meeting of our citizens and selected parties to solicit petitioners to our courts for a bridge. All went well until some jealousy appeared and it was dropped and nothing accomplished. After studying the unfinished work, I assembled the fragments and secured the service of other parties, reaching out as far as Silverton, Woodburn, Salem, Jefferson, Albany, Scio, Jordon, Fox Valley, Mehama, and other unworked territory, and in a few months our bridge was being built.”

Gardner continued to respond to the community’s needs. “After installing my flouring mill, our roads needed to be improved. I know of no one doing as much roadwork in and about Stayton as I did. It seems someone in all communities has to lead out. John A. Shaw was a friend in time of need, later Lee Brown Sr. was a great help. We worked together many years on public improvements. Dr. Kitchen also did his part. The farmers in their vicinity were 100 percent with us... Cooperation is essential in all municipalities, county and state for effective work. Our people as a whole usually know what they want, they may differ on some minor points but when they see and understand the entirety of the proposition the difference is easily harmonized.”

In summing up his speech, Gardner said, “I trust you will excuse personal references as I have endeavored to give you facts only a few as I have found them in the past 71 years.”

A.D. Gardner’s life entwined with Stayton history

“A man whose business career has contributed materially to the prestige of Stayton, Marion County, is A. D. Gardner,” begins the account of the life of Abner D. Gardner Jr. published in “Portrait & Biographical Record of the Willamette Valley Oregon,” in 1903.

His father had headed a wagon train to Oregon in 1852 and settled in Scio. Gardner and seven siblings were raised in the undeveloped land and became closely associated with those who were leaders in creating the town of Stayton. A sister married Drury Stayton’s son, Gabriel, who built the first sawmill.

Gardner began his working career hauling tan bark from Mehama to Salem, often staying over on the Stayton farm.

Then, “In 1876, at the age of 21 I embarked in the drug business.” Two years later he married Minnie Schneider, with whom he had four children, Ethel, Veva, Norma and Abner.

In 1891 he purchased a flour mill, which became Gardner Brothers mill, and a few years later he sold his drug store to focus his attention on the growing mill. “My object in mind was to make a market for the farmers’ product and give to the farmer their flour at a reasonable rate of exchange, which I was able to do. I operated the mill for some 40 years most of the time 24 hours a day and 300 days a year,” he wrote in a 1940 speech.

In 1901 he went into the dairy business, with 800 acres. But that was not all. The biography states, “That Mr. Gardner’s good citizenship has not been unappreciated is evidenced by the fact that in 1876 he was appointed postmaster of Stayton, and for 13 successive years served in this office.” He also served on the town council, the school board, was associated with two Masonic lodges, other fraternal groups, and the Methodist Church where he served in several offices.

