

The saddest words of tongue or pen,
are these, the words,
"It might have been"
-Emerson

A Little History of the City of George, Washington

by Debby Kooy

The following narrative is an attempt to recount the founding and history of the town of George in Eastern Washington State, researched in several hours of conversation and written correspondence with Mrs. Virginia Sheldon, daughter of Charlie & Edith Brown, as well as with other George, WA pioneers.

Charles E. Brown, an entrepreneur/businessman, was a fellow who, by his daughter's account, "had a new idea every morning!" Charlie first conceived the idea for the town in the 1950's. He purchased the 339-acre property and worked with Mr. Wolf, a City Planning Instructor from the University of Washington. Charlie and Mr. Wolf planned the layout of zoning as well as the placement for streets in the town. They planned for each street in George to bear the name of a particular variety of cherry tree; this is still reflected in the town's map today, with names like "Bing", "Royal Anne", and the aristocratic-sounding "Montmorency Boulevard".

More important than the city's streets, were the highways just outside the city limits: That 339-acres of real estate was located smack dab at the confluence of not only Interstate Highway 90 (almost exactly in between Seattle to the west and Spokane to the east), but also State Route 281 leading north to Quincy with Wenatchee beyond, and State Route 283 leading north-east to Ephrata and Soap Lake.

It was Charlie's idea to make the town of George an early-American/colonial-theme town that would be attractive to tourists and highway travelers. This in spite of the fact that at that time, I-90 did not even exist

yet! Charlie enjoyed being ahead of the game in every aspect of his planning! He instituted the initial July 4 celebration in George in 1957, with the first giant cherry pie. Charlie served as the town's first mayor, presiding over its official incorporation as a City on July 4, 1961. His wife, Edith, and daughter Virginia, were charter members of the Georgettes, a woman's service group in town, responsible for making and baking the giant cherry pie. Charlie spent the rest of his life promoting his ideas for the town, and after he died in 1975, Edith served as the City's second mayor.

During his lifetime, Charlie and Edith owned several businesses. Among this collection of business enterprises were pharmacies, gift shops, shoe stores, and a fireworks importing and packaging business. Some of the businesses were located in Oregon and Washington State, and some of them were located in Hawaii.

One particular Hawaiian gift store which Charlie owned, sold grass skirts, and one such skirt was purchased by a woman tourist, who loaned the skirt to her niece, who wore the skirt to a costume party in Canada. It is unknown whether she danced too close to a tikki torch or some errant cigarette was flicked in her direction, but she was unable to remove the skirt quickly when it caught fire. The girl was badly burned in the incident, and her aunt soon determined to sue the owner of the store that had sold her the skirt. One of her attorneys was John Erlichman, later of Watergate fame.

The gift shop had been sold by the time the lawsuit went to court. Prior to the sale, the business had carried product liability insurance, but when the business sold, the insurance had been canceled, and of course was not in effect when the lawsuit happened. The lawsuit was successful, and it ruined the Browns financially. Charlie and Edith were forced to sell their

businesses and real estate holdings, including the still-undeveloped properties of George, Washington due to that very costly lawsuit.

After Charlie's death in 1975, a group of investors known as **Colonial Farms** entered the picture. Colonial Farms was a collective of several professional men, mostly doctors and lawyers from the west side of the state, as well as the Wenatchee area. Colonial Farms purchased all of the vacant property in George, along with the Martha Inn Cafe and George Shopping Mall which Charlie had also built in 1957. In the course of time, the early enthusiasm for developing George as a colonial theme town waned, and the George properties simply became a tax write-off for Colonial Farms, and nothing more.

By the late 1990's, restive community leaders convinced Colonial Farms that they should either find a way to develop the town or sell their holdings. Seemingly, the ideal solution materialized: two developers from western Washington came on the scene with fresh ideas and great enthusiasm for developing the town. Unfortunately, they did not have sufficient working capital to fund their development ideas, so they went looking for local investors to purchase all of the George real estate held by Colonial Farms.

The local investors they found were a family from Quincy whose successful farming and produce operations put them in position to be able to invest in the community. This family contracted with the two west-side developers to become the money behind the development of George, WA.

All was well...for a time. Both developers were often found attending city council meetings and Growth Management Comprehensive Planning meetings. Both were well versed in their ability as planners as well as in media promotion. Excitement began to build, and there was much interest and hopefulness within the community once more.

The city council responded by stepping up the municipal infrastructure improvements, and by 1997, the city had a brand new municipal sewer system, an updated water system, and paved streets (the city only had gravel roads prior to this time) that were in reasonably good condition. George was ripe for development.

Development did indeed begin to happen: the old Chevron station on the corner of Frontage Road and Washington Way was demolished, and in its stead, was “George’s Country Place”, a gas station/mini- mart/restaurant with handsome colonial-style architecture. Added to the property was a large bronze bust of George Washington himself, right there on the corner, welcoming everyone to town. The Martha Inn underwent a good bit of remodeling and redecorating, and with an updated menu, the restaurant was once again pulling in traffic off of the highway. It seemed like a great foretaste of things to come.

But a series of factors then arose, which combined to wreck the hopes for the town: first, the construction of the municipal sewer did not proceed as rapidly as the developers had hoped, and this resulted in delay for their plans to build a motel. Second, this delay in constructing the motel meant no income for the developers, and they could not fulfill their part of the contract with the underwriters of their efforts. Third, and perhaps most destructive, was a disagreement which arose between the two developers: one felt that a NASCAR- style racetrack would be something that would really put George, WA on the map. The other (along with city leaders) disagreed, believing that a racetrack did not fit the intention and theme of the town’s founders.

The two developers eventually went their separate ways over the issue, and as time went on, the Quincy family who were underwriting the

development realized that their only option was to sue for direct ownership of the George properties. This lawsuit was not settled until 2005.

Meanwhile, the Martha Inn restaurant was allowed to deteriorate, and equipment failure forced its closure in 2006. The dilapidated building remained, on Frontage Road and visible from the highway - an eyesore and a fire hazard until 2010. The iconic Martha Inn sign is all that remains, inviting highway travelers to a restaurant that no longer exists. Locals know that people still come off the highway, looking for the Martha's that they remember from childhood, even in 2018.

There is an old saying: "A man convinced against his will, is of the same opinion still". It seemed for years that this was true of the owners of all the vacant property in what should be the city center of George. Initially talked into backing the development, they seemed to not to be convinced regarding the overall vision of the city's potential.

To be fair, being occupied with farming operations, packing sheds, potato processing plant, an award-winning winery, and so on, these busy and industrious folks can hardly be expected to be inclined to add "real estate developer" to their resumes. Unless a would-be buyer shows very unusual persistence, property sales in George do not easily happen.

However, notable exceptions began to occur in 2009 with the sale of property to Catholic Charities for the new 51-unit Migrant Housing complex, Saint Marta's Plaza, which opened for occupation in October of 2010. This immediately boosted the population of the city from 500 to over 725 residents in the space of one month. However, there remains many more would-be residents who are faced with the issue of limited housing stock - not just in George, not just in Grant County, but region-wide.

The Frontage road filling-station property which had been known as "George's Country Place" has now become Shree's Truck Stop. Owners Sanjay and Ekta Saini are fully engaged with the idea of promoting development and providing jobs for George residents.

This new blossom of hopefulness has also been evidenced by the development of George, Washington's new industrial park by the Quincy Port District. An annexation north of the highway which is already being expanded, the industrial park will soon reach full occupation of tenants. Of these, Ancient Lakes Winery has a most aggressive business plan. The company is building a phased, state- of-the-art grape crushing and bottling facility that is the only outdoor winery north of the Napa Valley. In its fourth season of production, the winery processed 12,000 tons of grapes last year. The facility will be processing 17,000 tons of grapes into 2.4 million gallons of wine by the end of phase one, and 50,000 tons of grapes will become 8 million gallons of wine by the end of phase four. Jobs are being created, and an industry is taking root here in a big way.

In spite of these forward steps, the very heart of George - its city center - is still a bald field of tumbleweed and cheatgrass in 2018. That's not good for anybody.

It remains to be seen whether or not George will ever fulfill Charlie's Dream as an Early American Theme Town. George residents hope for viability, sustainability, ample housing stock and reliable employment. The development of motels, shopping, medical facilities and restaurant options certainly wouldn't hurt either.

It is astonishing that a full *sixty years* after the founding of George, Washington, it can still be seen that on the 70-mile stretch of highway between Ellensburg and Moses Lake there is still not one visible motel, no

pharmacy, no Urgent Care facility, not even a MacDonald's or a Starbucks.

Whether you want to refer to George, WA as the Gateway to the Quincy Valley, or the Belly Button of the State of Washington, it's still true: "you snooze, you lose"! Strategic commercial development needs to happen at Exit 149.