

Orchards of Eden: White Bluffs on the Columbia 1907-1943

Author: Nancy Mendenhall, 469 pages, 2006.

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The community development process begins with the collective vision and commitment of a group of people that makes a certain geographic location their home. For these “place committed” residents, processes once initiated take on a course impacted by circumstances, large and small that result in consequences, not quite predictable, but easily generalized for other situations. The *Orchards of Eden* story is a quick read, albeit almost 500 pages, and gives us important insights on community infrastructure and community involvement.

The setting of *Orchards of Eden* is the 1906 land boom that opened up the Eastern Washington desert’s potential to irrigated farming. This well documented historical story of the Shaw-Wheeler family’s efforts to find the American dream through land ownership, farming/orchards, also chronicled the community’s likely responses to government efforts to stimulate/support such rural development programs by such agencies as the Bureau of Reclamation, Agricultural Extension (now Cooperative Extension), rural electrification, railroads, and so forth.

While the beginnings of the story of White Bluffs is almost 100 years old, being able to live through this community’s story will give many of us involved today as educators and policy makers a better perspective on the timeless aspects of the community development process. To me, volunteerism, maybe more so than the government stimulation efforts, is the enduring legacy from the *Orchards of Eden* story. Numerous examples include: the community irrigation systems which required the cooperation of all the shareholders to keep them maintained; the endless good work of the local Grange members was pervasive on projects everywhere. Volunteerism, Grange members and other community members, was evident in the “well baby” clinic, the town library, and the sharing of garden and orchard produce with more needy families and for use in school lunches.

Sadly, World War II, brought an abrupt end of this community as its land was condemned for the Manhattan Project. However, much can be learned from the forces that made this community grow and thrive, challenges met and overcome; these same forces were played out in many other western communities where water flow was vital for those communities to grow and prosper. As one who has been intimately involved with the CD process as an extension educator as well as a western state rural development decision-maker, this micro view of this one community helped give me a sense of historical perspective of the challenges that faced many small western communities of that period as well as insights that continue to impact today’s rural development and community sustainability efforts and policy decisions.

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