

The Strange Customs of Victor Smith

Chapter 4: His Legacy

By John Kendall

When Smith died unexpectedly in 1865 at age 39, here is what happened to places and people that were part of his life:

PORT TOWNSEND: In 1866, it got back what Smith had taken – port of entry and military hospital.

The Key City was back in business. Its leaders felt they had a lock on the Key City and its future, so they caught a bad case of railroad fever – convinced that a railroad would terminate at Port Townsend. Hopes were high and so were real estate prices. Three events terminated that dream: the economic Panic of 1893, the same year the railroad ended in Seattle. Then in 1913 the main port of entry moved to Seattle, with Port Townsend a sub-district.

PORT ANGELES: After the customs house move, Norman noted that only 27 whites remained in Port Angeles. “The small area available for occupancy along the beach was the only part of town improved from 1862 to 1890,” wrote one historian. “In 1883 only five insignificant structures remained in town.”

If, as Victor Smith’s detractors say, that he ruined Port Angeles, then another Smith may have saved it.

George Venerable Smith – no relation to Victor – was a Seattle lawyer who helped found the Puget Sound Cooperative Colony, and somehow decided to start the colony in Port Angeles in 1887. When George Venerable Smith arrived, Norman Smith was happy to help him purchase land outside the reserve. The Victor Smith family had acquired land east of Ennis Creek over the years; Norman deeded 1,032 lots to the colony.

Many members of the colony were artisans and craftsmen – trades lacking among the “westsiders,” those near the shoreline west of Ennis. The colony’s utopian dreams (equal pay for equal work; no outside currency, just colony scrip) met with the realities of remote, frontier living. Then George Venerable became vulnerable over allegations of mismanagement and he left the colony; later he was prosecuting attorney and a judge in the city. The colony was dissolved in 1904. During its seven active years, the colony injected new life into a crippled community. New people brought population growth, which meant the colony’s craftsmen built schools and churches.

There are indications that Victor Smith, had he lived long enough, might have tried to establish a utopian community. In his youth he tried to establish such a community near Cincinnati, and he wrote of doing so in Port Angeles.

In 1889, wrote a local historian, “the board walks of Port Angeles on Front Street creaked to the boots of several thousand restless, potential settlers. They faced a land settlement dilemma – the sea was in front of them, a Government Reserve just behind them on a hill.” So they jumped the reserve.

The squatters remained in limbo until July 4, 1890, when a government-sanctioned land rush allowed the landless to legally start the process of owning land.

What Port Angeles had lost as a customs port of entry, it gained as a Coast Guard base (in 1934) and the place where Puget Sound Pilots get on and off inbound and outbound vessels (since World War II).

THE SMITH FAMILY: Unkind words were uttered about Victor, but not about Caroline, who raised five children and when the family first arrived in Port Angeles, was the only non-Indian woman within 50 miles. Caroline read classics to the children and played the piano.

As a widow, she and the children lived with her in-laws on Ediz Hook; then a log cabin, which burned down; a tent; and small house. Caroline married a local merchant and they moved to the Midwest. She died in 1891. When Port Angeles was being surveyed, Victor included Caroline Street.

In Norman’s telling, his Port Angeles boyhood was idyllic: “No more ideal life for a boy can be imagined, hunting and fishing with the Indians, sailing our own boat and paddling our own canoe.”

Norman dabbled in real estate; became a surveyor; was a White House page during the Grant administration; was elected city mayor in 1891 and 1892; lobbied to reinstate Port Angeles as the port of entry; caught railroad fever, which was cured after losing money; retired to Arcata, Calif., where he could see where the *Brother Jonathan* sank with his father aboard. He died in 1953. A newspaper reported on his 90th birthday: “ ‘What’s the formula for long life?’ snorted Smith. ‘I haven’t got any, and I’ll bet I’ve drunk enough whisky to float a battleship in my time.’ ”

LT. MERRYMAN: The whistleblower who alerted Chase had grown up in Illinois and his family knew Abe Lincoln. Did this mean a conspiracy against Smith? In Norman’s telling, after his father died, his mother told him that Merryman had been ordered to send her a monthly remittance to pay back the \$1,700 that Smith had been ordered to pay.

SALMON P. CHASE: Smith’s patron and Lincoln sparred over the appointment to the New York customs house. Again, Chase threatened to resign, and this time Lincoln accepted. Chase quickly became Supreme Court justice, and swore in Lincoln for his second term. Chase died in 1873. Chase National Bank, which morphed into today’s JPMorgan Chase, had no affiliation with the man.

DR. ANSON HENRY: When he boarded the doomed *Brother Jonathan*, he may not have known that the Andrew Johnson administration was considering him for governor of Washington Territory. What if Henry and Smith made it to Portland, then home? What if Henry became governor and

Smith had shaken the “Panama fever”? Gov. Henry in Olympia and Treasury agent Smith in Port Angeles – who knows what dreams and schemes Smith could initiate with Henry fighting Smith at every turn.