

Elizabeth Rigney (from page 3)

spots, scrub them on the board then set the whole lot to boiling. Keep stirring it with a stick, mind you, so as not to get any yellow spots. The boiling gets the clothing clean as well as killing any vermin that might be in them. If you've got soldiers, you've got vermin.

Now, you take everything out of the boiler and scrub more soap on any spots that are still dirty until all is clean. Rinse in clear water and wring it out. To keep it all from turning yellow, rinse everything again, this time in water with bluing. Wring it all out as dry as you can. Dip the bits that need stiffening into starch, wring that out as well. Then, you peg it all onto the line to dry.

When you're done with that, you do it all over again and again and again, each time with the coarser and dirtier bits.

Once everything's dry, you commence the ironing. Now, officers, and especially their wives, can be mighty persnickety. So mind you keep the iron clean and don't be scorching anything!

Of course, in the midst of all this, you keep hauling the water, chopping the wood and keeping the fire burning properly. Sometimes, just sometimes, you might be able to convince a soldier to be helping with

some of the chopping.

Now, you might be wondering, why, in the name of all the saints, would I be wanting such a job? Well, of course, there's the money. Luckily, my earnings are taken directly from the soldiers' wages so I'm sure to be getting paid. Some months I make more than my dear Johnny. Not that I'm saying anything against him, mind you, but commenting about the mere pittance they're paying the soldiers.

More importantly, being the Company laundress allows me to be with my dear Johnny. Soldiers aren't allowed to bring their wives who aren't laundresses along. The officers? Well, of course their wives are with them. They're gentry, so they've got a different set of rules.

There are other benefits from being a laundress. Why, since I'm washing everyone's clothing, I'm knowing most everything about everybody—even the officers and their families. The things I could tell you! Why, there was the time...well, to be hearing that, you'll need to come back later when there are fewer ears about that could get me into trouble.

Times have certainly been interesting here. All the German soldiers with their strange lingo can certainly make one's head spin. Most of the officers are from the East Coast. Fine men, they are, but I'm still not

so sure of anyone from so close to New York City. Luckily, with so many of the soldiers here being from Ireland, my ears are never lonely for the blessed sounds of home.

And speaking of blessings, the Good Lord has blessed us with children. Twins, just like Jacob and Esau in the Holy Book. But, for us, it's a boy and a girl. Keeping up with little John and Ann while I'm doing the laundry—well, I'm certainly not going to complain of boredom.

But things are soon going to be changing. Johnny's term of enlistment is almost over and we're looking to stake a claim for ourselves. What with my extra wages, we should be able to make a fine life for ourselves, maybe even build a fine house someday. Johnny's looking forward to farming his own land, maybe even doing some shoemaking.

As for me? I, too, look forward to having our own land. By the Blessed Virgin, think of that! Owning our own land, just like the gentry! But, where ever I go, I'd best be bringing my washboard along. Why, just look how far it's gotten me already.

Now, speaking of laundry, I've got more to be doing. You've been polite listening to me blather on, but I must be getting back to my washing.

(Mrs. Rigney picks up her bucket and washboard and walks out of the room.)

Fort Steilacoom

Vol. XXII, No. 3

Fort Steilacoom, Washington

Autumn, 2005

Elizabeth Rigney A Living History Portrayal

By Karen Haas

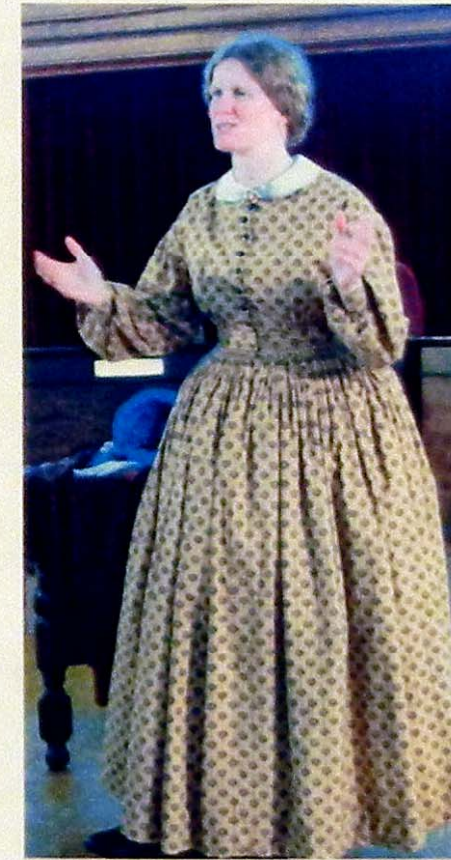
As part of a lecture series for the Town of Steilacoom's Sesquicentennial Celebration in 2004, six "modern" women portrayed six "historic" women who were at Fort Steilacoom in the mid-1800s. I was asked to be Elizabeth Rigney.

Portraying an actual person in a living history presentation is both rewarding and challenging. We want to be respectful of the person and portray them as accurately as possible. But all too often, biographical information is limited. Unless one is fortunate enough to find revealing sources, such as letters or diaries, actual personality traits often remain a mystery.

So, how does one present a historic person as a living, breathing, feeling person? First, do your research. Then, take the information you have about the person. Add what is known about other people, places and things of the time period. Mix well with inspiration. When the person becomes real for you, they'll be real for your audience.

The following is the text of my portrayal of Elizabeth Rigney in 1852. It was spoken with an Irish brogue. As you read it, I hope something of the spirit of this Army laundress who became a prominent citizen of Steilacoom, and whose descendants have played important roles in Pierce County, comes through.

(Elizabeth Rigney, dressed in a work dress and carrying a bucket and washboard, enters the room, and addresses the audience.)



Karen Haas portrays Elizabeth Rigney.

Well, I'm not seeing what interest the likes of you might have in what the likes of me has to be saying. But, I was told to be talking to you, so it's talking to you I am.

As you most likely can hear by my manner of speaking, I had the privilege to be born in the Lord's most favored land, Ireland—Queen's County, Ireland, to be exact. I would have been content to live the whole

of my life there, if it were not for the dreadful blight that struck our land. Each potato we dug up was blacker than the next, and, oh, but the stench was fearsome! People were starving. People were dying. A great sadness filled the land...ah, but 'tis not for me to be spreading such sadness here today.

I looked around my village and saw as how all the men were either dead, or married, or had immigrated to start a new life somewhere else. I hadn't a husband yet and my prospects were few. I didn't cherish the thought of life as a spinster; a life of pitying glances, taking care of other people and being expected to be doing other people's laundry (though I'll be telling you more about laundry later). So, I packed up what little I had, including this washboard, and joined the great hordes of immigrants leaving for America.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, I thought my heart would break inside me as I watched the beloved land of my birth slide beneath the horizon as the ship sailed away. But, the Blessed Lady answered my prayers with a miracle I'd never expected. For 'twas on that very ship I met a fine, strapping Irish lad, John Rigney. Aye, sure and that's the one who became my own Johnny. Having him there beside me made that terrible voyage almost bearable.

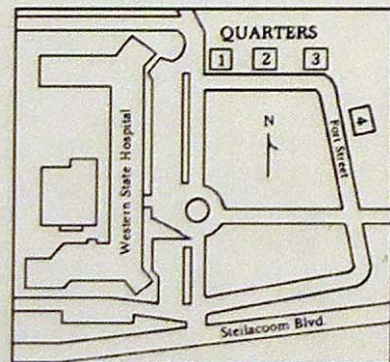
And so, we finally arrived in New York City. New York City! By all the saints, it was like the Tower of Babel, Sodom and Gomorrah all rolled into

(Continued on page 3)

Come to the Annual Meeting, October 9 at 2 p.m. in Quarters 2.

Historic Fort Steilacoom

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President's Message



Where have we been and where are we going? Fort Steilacoom expanded the program this year to provide additional activities to interpret the history of the Fort and area during the 1850s and 1860s. Added to the traditional Founders' Day picnic, the Annual Meeting lecture and December Christmas at the Fort, were guest lecturers who spoke on a variety of subjects.

Alan Archambault gave an illustrated talk on Fort Steilacoom soldiers' uniforms; Mike Vouri spoke about the Pig War; John McPherson gave a Power Point presentation on Indian War sites in Washington; during our Living History day, Dr. Robert Ruby asked for the exoneration of the five Cayuse Indians found guilty of the Whitman massacre; Georgianna Kautz told of growing up on the Nisqually Indian Reservation; and Robert Demorest explained how he constructed the Fort diorama. Another special program was Mrs. Casey's Tea. Forty guests sipped tea and enjoyed goodies as they listened to reenactors discussing historical happenings at the Fort.

"Thank you" to the presenters for sharing their knowledge with us. I enjoyed each presentation and learned a great deal from each speaker.

In addition to the routine Fort business, the board has been discussing how to repair the leaking roofs. We are seeking grants to replace the roof on each of the four

buildings. They were originally replaced in about 1980, during the reconstruction of the buildings. They have been in a deteriorated condition the last several years and are now at a critical point. DSHS is ultimately responsible for the exteriors of the buildings, but has been short of budget. Therefore, HFSA is trying to raise enough funding through grants to roof at least two of the quarters. Walter Neary and Shelly Knight have been working with Janda Volkmer to obtain funds.

You are invited to attend the remaining events for this year. Be sure to come to the Annual Meeting at 2 p.m. on October 9th in Quarters 2. After a short business meeting with the election of officers and board members, Kathleen Benoun will present the history of Western State Hospital. Kathleen is the librarian at the hospital and has a special interest in preserving history. She has been working with others to establish a permanent museum of the hospital history. They have already set up displays and exhibits at the hospital's main building. If you want to see these exhibits, contact Kathleen at (253) 756-2593.

On October 16 at 2 p.m. in Quarters 2, five reenactors will portray *Ladies of Fort Steilacoom*. Nancy Keller-Scholz will be Abigail Casey, wife of Silas, a former Fort commander. Karen Haas will appear as Elizabeth Rigney, a company washerwoman and wife of John Rigney. Sandy Burwell will take the persona of Mary Slaughter, cook for the officers and wife of Lt. Slaughter. Judy Bridges will tell the story of Kitty, Lt. Kautz's Indian wife. Jane Isch will speak about the duties of Mrs. Dougherty, the servant of Col. and Mrs. Casey.

And don't miss *Christmas at the Fort*, our candle-light reenactment of a Christmas of 1859 scheduled for December 10 from 4 to 8 p.m. There will also be craft activities for children.

This has been a very busy year at the Fort. We hope you have enjoyed the many fine events.

Carol Neufeld Stout



Richard Lyle Dunkin

Lyle Dunkin was a moving force in the preservation of Fort Steilacoom. He served as the superintendent of restoration from 1983 to 1989. Those who worked with him were Chuck Collier, manager of the project, Jack Langston, Bob Weir, and Arnold Stern. Many others also helped at various times with the restoration.

Lyle served as president of Historic Fort Steilacoom Association from 1985-86 to 1987-88, and again in 1989-90 and 1992-93.

Lyle was given two awards for the restoration project: an "Award for Outstanding Merit" and a "Certificate of Appreciation for Outstanding Volunteer Services."

Lyle and Lou Dunkin were very active in the preservation of historic Fort Steilacoom and furnished the antiques. They have donated some of these and many records permanently to the museum. When appropriate furnishings could not be found or purchased, Lyle would often hand-craft them.

In addition to his work at the fort, Lyle was active in the reconstruction of the Bair Drug & Hardware Store, renovated the Albert Balch House and restored the McAvoy dental office. He was also a mayor and councilman of Steilacoom.

Elizabeth Rigney (from page 1)

one! There were no jobs to be had, even for a skilled shoemaker like my Johnny. Every window, it seemed, had a sign that read "No Irish Need Apply." So, having no other prospects, he joined the Army of these United States.

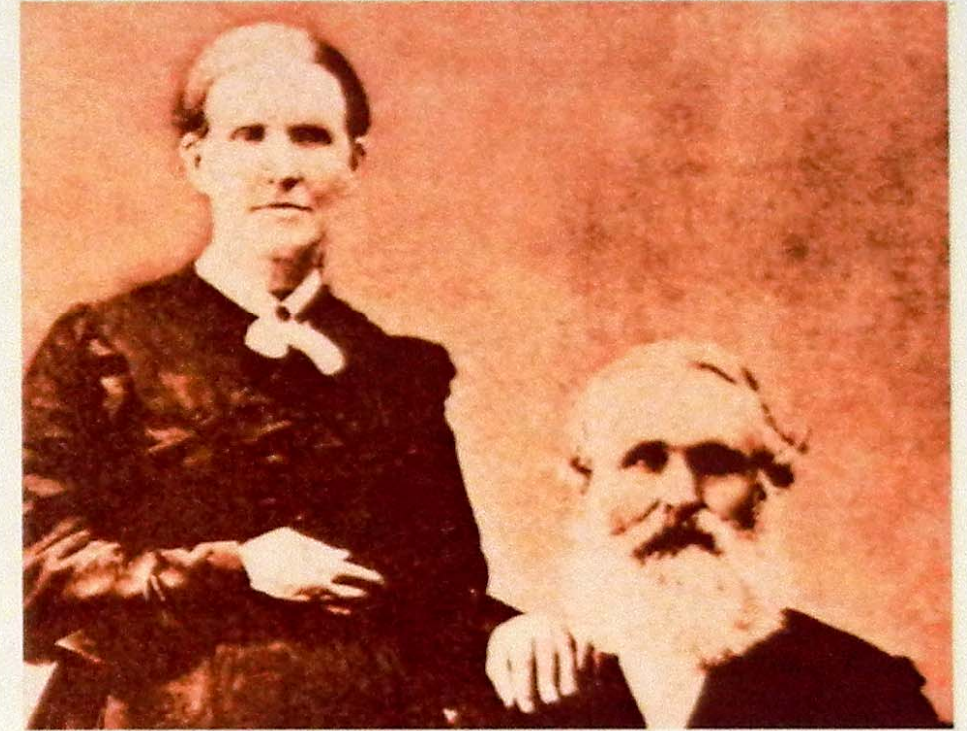
The Army sent him off to fight against the Mexicans, not that he had a quarrel with any of the Mexicans. But, when you're in the Army, you fight with who they tell you to. He later told me of the land of Mexico, full of dust and dreadful heat. The blessed Saint Patrick obviously hadn't been there, for it was full of snakes—fearsome snakes with poisonous teeth. Though, to be sure, they did have the good manners to warn you with a rattling sound before they bit you.

When the Army was finished in Mexico, Johnny returned for me. On the thirtieth day of September, 1848, I became Mrs. John Rigney.

Well, then Johnny's company, Company M it's called, was ordered to sail off to the far side of the continent to protect the settlers against the Indians. I had the choice of joining my Johnny by becoming the Company's laundress or staying there in New York City. Well, knowing what I thought of that place, I'm sure you can see that was hardly a difficult choice for me to be making! So, off we sailed.

Now, I had been thinking the voyage to the New World was fearsome. But it was mere child's play compared to "Rounding the Horn." I fairly wore out my knees and my rosary as the boat struggled through the wind and waves. But the blessed Saint Christopher saw us through and we arrived safely here in Washington Territory.

This Territory's a fine place, it is. Some are comparing it with the Garden of Eden itself. Well, I have heard of some of the natives who may be in need of a fig leaf, if you're catching my meaning. Saint Patrick has surely been here, for all the poisonous snakes are on the far side of the mountains. The cool, misty



Elizabeth and John Rigney

climate brings to mind my beloved Emerald Isle. And, of course, it's far from the crowds of New York City, so it's seeming like a good place to call home, it is.

Captain Hill said the men were to start erecting a fort right here where Thomas Heath had had his farm. Mr. Heath was an Englishman, but they're saying he was a good man. Gone to his reward, he has, God rest his soul. So Johnny and the rest of the men started building Fort Steilacoom. Of course, the officers' quarters were finished first, you know how the gentry are. Then they built a hospital, a company storehouse, a guardhouse, a store and a bakehouse. And all the while, I was doing laundry.

Now, looking at the likes of you, with your fine white hands, I'm wondering if you've ever turned your hands to doing laundry. No? Well, listen well, all of you, and I'll tell you how it's done, just in case you're ever needing to be doing it.

First, you make the soap. You have at least made soap, haven't you? No? By the blessed Saint Bridget, but you're a helpless lot! Let me be

giving you the directions. You never know when it may come in useful.

To be making the soap, you start with lye. You get that from running water through the ashes of your fire. Now, you're needing to be careful with that lye, it'll burn right through your skin if you're careless. Then you get your tallow, that's animal fat you've boiled and skimmed. You mix the lye with the tallow until it starts thickening, put it in your molds and let it cure for a few weeks. It's not gentle, lye soap, but it will clean what needs cleaning. Be sure to keep a goodly supply of that soap on hand, for you'll be using all you can make.

Sort the clothing according to the color and type of cloth, and by how much dirt it's got on it. You're looking for dirty clothes? Well, look no further than the soldiers. They're just like overgrown boys, they are, always getting dirty. Once you've got your clothing sorted, you put it to soak overnight.

In the morning, drain off the soaking water. Shave some of the soap into hot water and pour it over the finest of the items to be washed. Rub more soap on the most soiled