

# Bricks, trains and recreation helped build Chester

By Bill Zimmer

FOR THE SPOKANE VALLEY HERITAGE MUSEUM

The community of Chester is located in southern Spokane Valley (Bowdish and Dishman-Mica area) near Painted Hills Golf Course.

Chester Township received its first tax money from Spokane County in 1910, just a year after townships were authorized by the State Legislature.

In 1888, a group of citizens met and decided to go ahead with building a new school. Amos Lewis, one of the three newly appointed school directors, donated an acre of land. The school district was organized as School District 71. The new two-room Plouf Gulch School, which opened on Oct. 1, 1888, was paid for by donations.

In territorial days, the average school term was three months. Most districts ran two terms: one in the fall and one in the spring. The Chester District hired Cora Bussard to teach for a three-month term for a salary of \$25 a month. Her salary was paid by subscription from families who had children in the school. Amounts collected ranged from \$10 to 25 cents. Bussard's husband operated a sawmill and one of the first threshing machines in the area.

In 1889, when the Oregon Rail and Navigation Company completed the railroad through the area, the local station was named Chester. That also became the town and school name.

The Gerimonte family has a long history in Chester. Sally Gerimonte's grandfather came to the area in 1904 as a partner in the brick plant at Mica. He married and then started a brick and sewer plant in Chester. Sally (1935-2008), who spent her life in the community and was very involved in civic affairs, became known as the local historian.

Chester in its heyday boasted a school, a hotel and boarding house, a brick and pottery plant, a store and a post office. The clay for the brick plant was hauled by horse and wagon from the pit at the south end of Adams Road. The demand for bricks and tile was partly due to the Spokane fire of 1889. Many wooden structures were rebuilt with brick. A railroad siding in Chester was used for loading brick and tile.

The mail came by train to the post office in the store. Train service for passengers was provided to and from Spokane. The train operated between Wallace/Kellogg and Spokane. This service was discontinued some time before 1945. However, the Milwaukee Railroad operating out of Chicago had daily trains (the Hiawatha) going through Chester en route to Portland or Seattle.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE SPOKANE VALLEY HERITAGE MUSEUM

The Chester School, shown here in this circa 1930s photo, was constructed as Plouf Gulch School in October 1888. It educated the community for years before being closed in 1955 upon consolidation with the Central Valley School District.

At left: Ski-Mor, shown operating here in 1935 near what is present-day Ponderosa, featured an Olympic-size ski jump and was a popular winter destination for the Spokane region.

In 1939, the store, which served as the hub of the community, burned, and the post office was moved to a nearby house. The census during the previous decade showed a population of about 400.

A non-denominational church was organized in 1940, though Sunday School had been provided as far back as 1910.

Another fire started near Chester in 1944, burning along the railroad tracks over a large area and into the hills to the south. The brick plant quit operating at about that same time.

The Chester store was rebuilt after the fire of 1939 and again in 1995. At that time, Wayne Ady, who had owned and operated the store for over 20 years, turned it over to his son, David, the current owner.

Winter fun was abundant in the Chester area. Before there was a resort on Mt. Spokane, Ski-Mor was the place to go for winter recreation. Ski-Mor was located on the east side of Brown's Mountain near what is now

the Ponderosa area and boasted an Olympic-size ski jump. The Torrey and Shafer families established and operated the resort. The lodge had a huge fireplace and served hot chocolate and coffee.

Those who administered townships had to do it for love of service to the community, certainly not for money. In 1967, the Washington state compensation statute specified that a Township supervisor "shall receive no more than \$75 per year" and the Clerk "no more than \$100 per year."

In 1969, the State Legislature took away the right of townships to levy taxes, effectively putting an end to townships around the state. Chester Township dissolved around 1970.

Though Chester no longer exists as a government entity, it still has life socially and through the business community. The school closed in 1955 after the district consolidated with the Central Valley School District.

## VALLEY OF THE SUN

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February	Dishman
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July	Liberty Lake/Saltese
August	Spokane Bridge
September	East Farms/Otis Orchards
October	Trentwood
November	Orchard Avenue
December	Millwood

Though various writers have identified and recorded pieces of the history of Chester, the Chester Lunch Bunch seem most effective in bringing that history to life. The Lunch Bunch is a group of former Chester schoolmates who get together once a month at various restaurants to socialize and share memories of life in the Chester community. Over time, things they have shared include: Sledding and tobogganing through the cemetery which had the only hill, community dances at the school, year-end picnics including kids and parents, and recollections of teachers and other staff (in particular Nora McNearney, or "Aunt Nora," who cooked the meals at the school.) Sally Gerimonte was always an active member of that group until her death in 2008.

Incorporated in 1901, the Chester Community Cemetery is now 111 years old. It was cleaned up and restored in 1995 through the efforts of a 17-year-old Boy Scout named Sam Turner working on his Eagle Scout rank. There are more than 50 scattered gravestones in the 5-acre plot. The earliest recorded burial is in 1902, though one headstone for a 4-year-old child is dated 1890-1894. Among the most recent burials is Wayne Ady, the former owner of the Chester Community Store, who died in 2004.

The area marked by Bowdish Road and Dishman-Mica Road may no longer produce bricks and tile, it may no longer have its own school district or its own train stop, but it is still providing important services to the community and is continuing to build on the history of Chester and the Spokane Valley.

*Bill Zimmer is a retired teacher and volunteer at the Spokane Valley Heritage Museum, 12114 E. Sprague Ave. Additional items about the history and culture of the Chester area -- or any of the communities in the Valley of the Sun series -- are available in the museum archives. For more information, call 922-4570 or visit [www.valleyheritagecenter.org](http://www.valleyheritagecenter.org).*