

Out of the Archives

a newsletter from the Washington State Archives

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Mesa collection provides a glimpse into the past

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The Central Regional Branch of the Washington State Archives received an interesting series of documents from Mesa, a small town in Franklin County. The collection came with over 30 historic photographs, some dating back to the early homestead era at the turn of the 20th century.

The photographs were in great condition, allowing the Archives to have a peek into the early days of Mesa. The majority of the photos are of early pioneering families, farms, and farming equipment. One photo in particular shows a farmer towering over his crop, overlooking 29 mules as they tow him while atop his farm equipment across the fields of Mesa. In



Farmer in Mesa, WA using his mule-powered farm equipment.

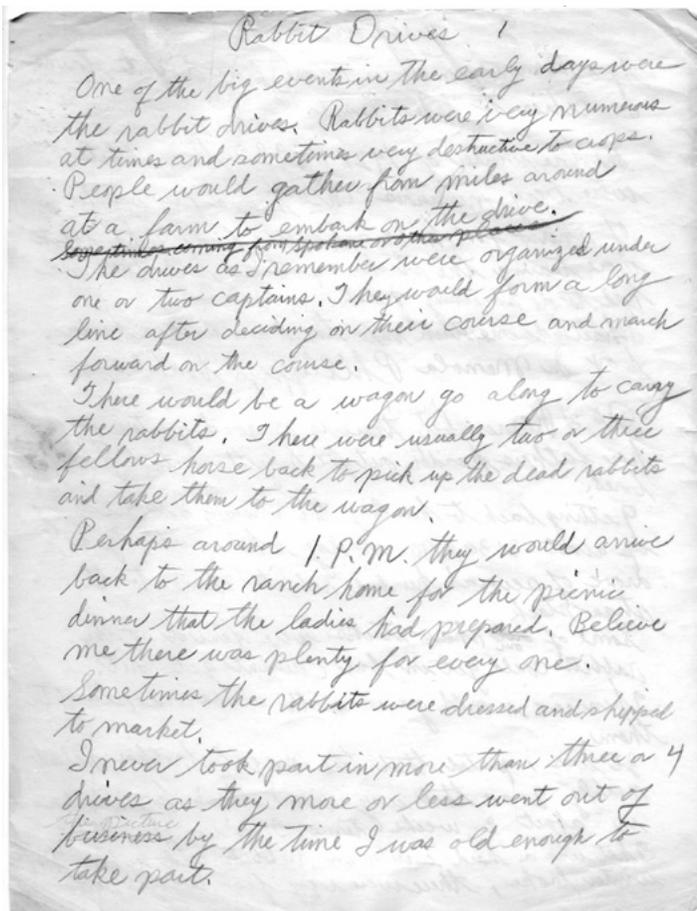
addition to the photos, we received original documents, both typed and handwritten, from Mesa's early residents providing their firsthand accounts of what life was like during the pioneer days of the town.

Pioneer woman Beulah Eades wrote about her parents moving to Mesa in search of the 160 acres promised by the Homestead Act of 1862. They settled on a plot of land in the town of

Connell, eight miles north of Mesa. Farming proved to be difficult for many pioneers including the Eades family, forcing them to alter their crop from wheat to rye, which at the time was considered more durable in Eastern Washington, but the transition still did not produce the necessary yield to sustain the Eades family. Ultimately, they had to abandon their plan of becoming farmers. In the pre-irrigation days in the Columbia basin, growing a sustainable crop was far from a guarantee.

The failed attempt at farming forced the family to relocate to an apartment in downtown Mesa, where they managed a grocery and drug store. However, the harsh realities of early pioneering caught up with them there too, and the shop went out of business. Beulah wrote frankly about her father's lack of business understanding: "My father was not a good business man for he could not say no — gave credit until he could not pay his bills so he had to close the store," (pg. 3, Synopsis of the P.M. Eades Family). Archives received many other personal accounts of early Mesa families' travails as well.

A man by the name of William Rowell wrote about a series of memorable experiences growing up in Mesa, including the first time he rode in an automobile, his first call on a telephone, and his recollection of when the citizens agreed to name the town Mesa.



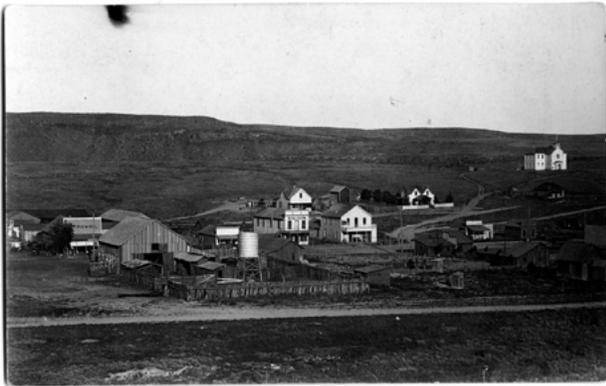
Handwritten account of the 1914 rabbit drive.

He also wrote a few pages describing the annual "Rabbit Drive" held in Mesa, in which folks from the surrounding area would assemble for a competitive rabbit hunt in teams of four or five. Each team would walk in a line firing at any unfortunate rabbit that found itself in their sites. One or two players from each team would trail on horseback behind the line of sharpshooters to collect the rabbits. The hunts often lasted multiple days.

Rowell recounted that close to 5,000 rabbits sprung out of existence after a few days of competition in 1914. To go along with Rowell's recollection of that tragic event in rabbit history. The Archives had previously obtained a Mesa photograph of what looks to be at least 5,000 rabbits stacked together in a pile with men holding rifles behind

the mountain of rabbits. The photograph is labeled with the date November 11, 1914. We assume this was the same drive Rowell described.

The little town of Mesa not only provided handwritten documents and photographs, but what was also sent was wholly unexpected: a series of artifacts from the early 20th century. We received a sheet of paper with eight different styles of buttons crimped on, along with dated descriptions which said the artifacts are from the Old Manlig Homestead, a short distance east from downtown Mesa. A separate piece of paper arrived attached to five fountain pen tips, 14 postal stamps glued to a cardboard square, a spool of thread, and finally and most peculiarly, a cuff link to a sleeved shirt, dated 1908. This was an incredible and unusual find.



Mesa postcard.

The assortment of photographs, handwritten documents, and artifacts, gave life to the historic Mesa collection at the State Archives, and provided researchers and Archives employees the opportunity to paint a picture of what life was like during the earliest pioneer days of Mesa, Washington.
