

LIVING AND LEARNING IN THE NORTHWEST

SUNDAY SCENE

SPECIAL-EFFECTS LENSES:



A DANGER TO VISION? Page L 3

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SECTION L

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People of the night are wondering: What happened to Art Bell?

ERIK LACITIS
Seattle Times staff columnist

Paul Kay, 37, of Lynnwood, a mechanic and a musician, has his theory about what happened to Art Bell. "I don't want to sound too far-fetched," he tells me.

Far-fetched? We are talking about Art Bell here, where the paranormal and supernatural found a home.

It made him one of the most listened-to radio personalities in America.

The night people in this country are worried, all of those with the graveyard jobs, all of those with insomnia, all of those for whom Art Bell was that rather formal voice on the radio, coming from the high Nevada desert, bringing them the news nobody else would. Bell was proud that his show wasn't focused on Bill and Monica or politics.

Who's going to tell the night people about the latest UFO sightings, the alien implant photos, the Third Secret of Fatima, the Crop Circle Connector, the Chupacabra monster images, the Area 51 mysteries of that secret Air Force base and the true meaning of the Mayan calendar?

The night people worry about what possible threat had caused Art Bell to quit his show. All he told his listeners was, "... a threatening terrible event occurred to my family, which I could not tell you about ..."

Boom. That was it.

The country's highest-rated radio talk-show host was gone, his phone disconnected from the double-wide mobile home in Pahrump, Nev., from which he broadcast. The local sheriff did visit and said that Bell was unharmed.

Was it all a prank? The night people don't believe that.

"What can we do? Art has been my friend in the dark of night, every night, for three years now. I don't know what I'll do without his program ..."

That's a woman named Vicki, posting her message at the Web site www.artbell.com, which boasted more than 22.7 million "hits" this year.

The calls this week just kept coming to the receptionist for KOMO Radio, which airs the show here. What happened to Art? the listeners asked. As I write this piece, with its deadline earlier this week, the answer is that no, nobody knows.

Bell, 53, had become a gold mine for the industry. From 10 p.m. until 3 a.m., he ruled the airwaves in 400 stations nationwide. In city after city, his "Coast to Coast A.M." beat out the rock stations, the "serious" talk shows, the sports jocks. Every week, something like 8 million to 10 million people tuned in. In Seattle, his show clobbered the competition, after midnight generating nearly three times the ratings of the closest competitor.

The mainstream press never paid much attention to Art Bell. I doubt there was an ed writer who had ever listened to the show. How could you take seriously a talk-show host whose callers expounded, "What we're thinking of as aliens, Art, they're extra-dimensional beings that an earlier precursor of the space program made contact with ..."

A few years ago, a taxi driver first told me about Art Bell. Driving at night, flipping through the radio stations, he came upon the show. Bell was never judgmental about his callers or guests. A face on Mars? A time traveler? Psychic predictions? Fine, tell us all about it. Even if you didn't believe it, you listened to hear what new, amazing tale would be told.

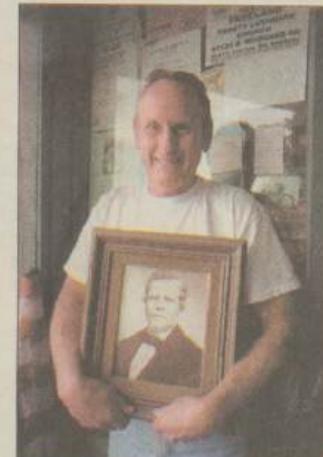
Neglected loganberry vines at historic Greenbank Farm, which was a model of agricultural innovation at the turn of the century.



BARRY WONG / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Island preserve

WITH TIES TO WHIDBEY'S PAST,
A FAMILY'S STORE IS A CATALYST FOR
GREENBANK HOLDING ON TO ITS RURAL SOUL



Tom Coupe, owner of Coupe's Greenbank Store, holds a portrait of his great-grandfather, Capt. Thomas Coupe, who built the second frame house on Whidbey Island.

BY SHERRY STRIPLING
Seattle Times staff reporter

GREENBANK, Whidbey Island — Three speeds are visible from the front counter of Coupe's Greenbank Store, which sits on the narrow waistline of Whidbey Island.

First are the customers. In and out, in and out. Cigarettes. Milk. Penny candy. Deli sandwiches. Happy Hippie coffee.

Next are the cars. They fly by on Highway 525. After years of slowdowns and detours from a road-widening project the Coupes say almost bankrupted their store, the cars look like racehorse trotters breaking into a gallop after the finish line, unshackled at last from their restrictive gait.

And then, on the horizon over Holmes Harbor, with Camano Island in the background, herons and eagles drift.

If Coupe's Greenbank Store were an am/pm, a 7-Eleven or any other artificially flavored convenience store that doesn't have feed prices still visible in pencil on the rafters, Greenbank might be just another highway wide spot.

Instead, this century-old neighborhood, once likened to Eden, still has an identity, now as The Little Community That Could.

The highway, a few buildings, and far-

ther north, the big red barns and dying loganberry bushes of the old Greenbank Farm are all that are really visible. But some 10,000 residents are tucked away in four waterfront communities, many of them summer or weekend visitors only.

Coupe's Greenbank Store ties them

all together with such staples as gossip and the opportunity to sign petitions, the same role versions of this store have played since 1904.

"It's what this country was founded

PLEASE SEE Greenbank ON L 2



John Thomas Coupe didn't hesitate to give up a better-paying job to help when his folks recovered the store. "I'm a Greenbank lifer, now," he says.

Island preserve

GREENBANK

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on," says Harry Bayne, a retiree who says being able to sit in a country store and talk about issues or folly makes him feel closer to the community. "It takes me back to the 1920s and '30s."

Tom Coupe, 60, and his wife, Mary, 58, have owned the store off and on since 1964. They run it with two of their six adult children. Another daughter and her husband own the upscale Green Door Restaurant in a loft overlooking the store.

The Coupes did not stumble onto Whidbey Island recently. They're descendants of Thomas Coupe, who sailed from New England in 1852



and built the second frame house on the island, which still stands 10 miles up the road in Coupeville.

They are strong-willed, still eager to fight the tides, anchored by history.

In recent years, they've added pasta, energy drinks and a micro-brewery beer named for their ancestor's ship ("Coupe's 'Success' Cream Ale") to their shelves. But they're the first to put up their dukes to fight other forms of progress, a trait that's made them the perfect town criers for Greenbank, the least developed area of fast-growing Whidbey Island.

Last year, the people of Greenbank celebrated the end of an all-island fight to save historic Greenbank Farm, which was a model of agricultural innovation at the turn of the century and later the largest loganberry farm in the country.

Tourists will remember the farm as home to Whidbey's Logonberry Liqueur and the summer Logonberry Festival, which draws upward of 30,000 people.

Two newly formed groups, the Greenbank Community Council and Friends of Whidbey Island, used an assist from the Trust for Public Lands to come up with a creative combination of public and private funding.

The result is that instead of the proposed 500 new homes, new loganberry bushes are being planted this month at the now community-owned farm, which remains open with wine tasting and gifts and eventually will be an outlet for island produce and products.

But where did word first spread that developers were interested in buying the farm?

Coupe's Greenbank Store.

Who opened the store after hours and set up the first eight or nine chairs so people could gather and

say, "I wonder if . . . ?"

Who else but the Coupes.

"We'd be lost without them," says longtime customer Karen Clark. "They're like the loganberries. They've just always been here."

They haven't always been in Greenbank, but close.

Through the window of her Coupeville office 10 miles north, the manager of the Island County Historical Society Museum, Sandra Plush, can see beautiful Penn Cove, the harbor that attracted Capt. Thomas Coupe.

Coupe deeded a portion of his land claim to found Coupeville. Front Street has hardly changed. Plush's office also overlooks the historic Victorian houses, built with finished lumber Coupe and others brought back from San Francisco.

Coupe is most famous for being the only man to sail a full-rigged four-masted schooner through narrow Deception Pass on the north end of Whidbey Island, where you can stand on the bridge today and see tremendous swirling tides.

"To handle a ship like that would have been quite a feat," says Plush, and yet Coupe thought it was a lark and even took his wife with him.

Then Plush sits back in her chair and adds:

"The Coupes are all still the same, I think."

When Sally Coupe Jacobson, 36, painted a portrait of her great-grandfather using her father as a model, she had only one concern about any difference in his looks, and that was soon eased.

"Oh, good," she told him on the morning of his sitting. "You haven't combed your hair, yet."

The original Thomas Coupe was married to Marie and had six children, losing one daughter, Jenny, as a child.

The modern Tom Coupe married Mary and had six children. Their daughter, Jennifer, was on life support for three days as a child after nearly drowning.

"We kept hoping history wouldn't repeat itself," Mary Coupe says.

Mary and Tom both grew up in Seattle but spent their summers on Beverly Beach on the east side of Holmes Harbor.

They married in 1959, when he was 20 and she was 18. Five years later, they were the parents of three and the new owners of the Greenbank Store. All six of their children grew up in the store.

Jacobson, who owns the restaurant and deli with her husband, Randy, remembers customers coming in with berry-stained fingers.

In her childhood, box socials and progressive dinners kept the community connected.

But all that was changing by the time the Coupes sold their store in 1981. And when they got it back, after the second of two new owners faltered, Greenbank had changed even more.

"A lot of the old-timers peered in the window with big smiles on their faces," says Mary Coupe, "but there were lots of faces we didn't recognize."

The Coupes slowly earned back support with their dedication to providing everything a little community might need: gas, pet food, real choices for dinner, videos, medicine for damp Whidbey's notorious allergies, candies and beer.

There's one choice of flour and one choice of sugar, but residents don't have to drive 20 miles north to Oak Harbor or 10 miles south to

A CENTURY-OLD NEIGHBORHOOD ONCE LIKENED TO EDEN IS NOW KNOWN AS THE LITTLE COMMUNITY THAT COULD



Tom Coupe, John Thomas Coupe, Mary Coupe, Tina Coupe Schultz and Sally Coupe Jacobson outside Coupe's Greenbank Store, which the family has owned off and on since 1964.



Greenbank, Whidbey Island, in the early 1900s. Last year, the town celebrated the end of an all-island fight to save Greenbank Farm, once the largest producer of loganberries in the country.

'We'd be lost without them (the Coupes). They're like the loganberries. They've just always been here.'

KAREN CLARK
longtime customer of Coupe's Greenbank Store .

Freeland just to survive.

"It's more than a highway beer store," said customer Glen Russell, "it's a great country store."

John Thomas Coupe, 30, runs the

counter in the morning and his sister, Tina Coupe Schultz, 34, who recently moved back after 11 years away with her Navy husband, takes over in the afternoon.

John remembers coming into the store the day his parents sold it and being told, "Coupe, you're going to have to pay for that candy now!"

He didn't hesitate to give up a better-paying job to help when his folks recovered the store.

"I'm a Greenbank lifer, now," he says.

The store still offers penny candy. Kids are encouraged to stay and use the phone to call home after they get off the school bus.

Though Mary Coupe describes herself as socially reticent, she's

taken on grown men who've overindulged at the Logonberry Festival, shooing them out for using foul language in front of children.

It's been a long battle for the Coupes to get their store up and running again.

To keep the doors open during five years of off-and-on construction on Highway 525, they've had to cash in their retirement fund.

They refinanced their house to make a down payment on the required underground gas tanks.

Tom Coupe would have liked more than a one-year retirement from the post office before Mary got out the scrub brushes in 1993, but Mary could only see saving the store.

"Anybody who lives in the area will be there during the day."