

Hanford pioneers take one more tour of 'home'

Connie Eckard, FH

"You can't go home again," wrote Thomas Wolfe.

Actually, the surviving former residents of Hanford and White Bluffs *can* go home again — but only on one weekend a year. And then it's only a brief car ride or bus tour of the home sites that were swallowed up to prepare for the wartime production of plutonium.

The weekend of Aug. 3-5 was billed as the 58th reunion of these White Bluffs and Hanford pioneers. But that's the number of years they've been former residents, not the number of years they've actually been getting together for reunions and tours. It was 25 years before non-employees were allowed back to visit on what is now the Hanford Site.

This year, the Saturday bus tour of the site included almost as many children and grandchildren as it did former residents of the area. These descendants were there to connect with a past they have only heard about in countless stories.

Many of the same people show up each year for this weekend of reminiscing and storytelling about the days before the government condemned their homes and sent them packing in the spring of 1943. Those old enough to remember where the farms were in the area are now in their 70s and crowding 80.

The accuracy of their memories borders on uncanny. The bank is the only structure still standing in White Bluffs, but when the Saturday tour bus stopped south of the railroad tracks and Route 2, Elroy Wiehl provided the riders with a virtual walk down Main Street of the long-vanished townsite.

He recalled the dentist's office across from the bank as well as Keller's Tavern, Shuster's Meat Market, the Wilkinson Telephone Company and the offices of the *White Bluffs Spokesman*. Silent movies were shown at Liberty Hall. And when dances were held, the old car seats were moved back against the wall and an orchestra provided music from the stage.

A banner at the Shilo Inn notes the 58 years that have passed since Hanford and White Bluffs residents were forced from their homes.



During a break from their bus tour, descendants of White Bluffs residents check the city map at the old townsite. From the left are Karen Roberts, Gaynet Sutton, Bernie Sutton and Kathleen Hitchcock.



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A railroad siding is still there. Gone, however, are the lumber company, train station and ice plant, where residents brought fruit from their orchards to be iced for shipment to market. And the fruits of their labors were taken to be deposited in the bank building down the street, the lone landmark now standing in silent reminder that this was once a thriving, prosperous community.

It was a community that gave up everything for a secret project that ultimately brought an end to the war — everything, that is, but the memories. ♦



Walt Grisham, left, Alene Clarke and Don Skelton share stories of what it was like growing up in farm country along the Columbia River.