

**Two “Firsts” for Steilacoom Women:
Councilwoman Joan Curtis
Steilacoom Mayor Janda Volkmer**

This past August, Steilacoom’s first woman council member and first woman mayor met informally, in a “Steilacoom garden” to discuss their accomplishments and ways in which they made unique contributions to the Town on the Sound. Nancy Covert was the moderator for this summer afternoon conversation.

In a community that prides itself on being a “Place of Firsts”, Joan Curtis and Janda Volkmer have earned their places on that list.

Both women arrived in Steilacoom in the late 1960s, and like others before them, they found ways to make distinctive contributions to their community through the many volunteer opportunities available here. Their accomplishments during the past 40 years are listed below. Volunteer work opened the way to other ways to serve their community.

Eventually each was elected to town offices: Joan was elected in the 70s to a position on the Town Council, while Janda, who also served on the Council, was elected in 1988 as the community’s first woman mayor. She was re-elected for two more terms.

After moving to the community in 1968, Joan immersed herself in a variety of town volunteer activities in both the Museum Association and in the Town of Steilacoom, from coordinating and planning a variety of museum association traditions such as Steilacoom Dines Out events, to editing and writing the Town on the Sound and the SHMA Quarterly as well as serving as curator of the Nathaniel Orr Home.

When it came time to plan the Town’s 150th anniversary, Joan served on the 2004 Sesquicentennial Celebration Committee.

Included among her numerous honors are: Steilacoom’s Distinguished Service Award, Who’s Who in the West, The Washington State Historic Preservation Officer’s Award for Outstanding Career Achievement in Historic Preservation, the SHMA Merrill Award for Service and as the community’s Citizen of the Year.

Joan’s interests are “far ranging, her energy constant, and her skills varied. A love of history and for the town where she has made her home, a talent for journalism, an interest in education and an ever-inquiring mind have directed her pursuits, according to remarks made in April at a reception honoring her.

“Few people make such an impact on their communities and fields of interest, and Joan is one of those people. Steilacoom is fortunate to have her, and we all are delighted to know her.”

Although Joan “retired” from her curator role, she continues to volunteer at the Museum where she catalogues the endless donations of historic items.

Janda’s, who also came to Steilacoom in 1968, began her route to the town’s highest office in the late 1980s, after participating in a variety of community activities: helping at the annual salmon bake and apple squeeze and taking part in the Fourth of July celebration. Janda also served on a variety of town committees and commissions.

Her achievements include serving as a board member and vice president of the Washington Museum Association, past president of the Heritage League of Pierce County. Other professional affiliations include memberships in the National Association

of American Museums, Association of State and Local History as well as in four Pierce County heritage associations.

In addition to her museum experience, Janda also spent 10 years in fund development at the University of Puget Sound. She has worked in government and community relations.

She is a strong proponent of historic preservation, cultural diversity and protection of natural environment.

During a busy period in the town's history, Janda presided over the completion of several studies, including a comprehensive plan for the 2.1 square mile town on the edge of Puget Sound. Plans also were drawn up during her tenure for the disposition of Farrell's Marsh—a 62-acre-wetland area that lies between the Cherrydale and Oldtown areas.

A major achievement during her mayoral tenure included the renovation of Sunnyside Beach—a large, public access beach along Chamber's Creek Road, the route along which the old Tacoma-Steilacoom trolley once traveled.

Following a major restoration of Lafayette Street, Steilacoom's main thoroughfare, work was begun on the restoration of Union Avenue: a two-mile area which extends from Cormorant Passage to the Sound, terminating at the Ferry Terminal.

Ground was broken for the Steilacoom Library, originally housed at Town Hall—and dedicated in 1995. That year was the same one in which the County Ferry "Christine Anderson" was formally christened to serve as a link between the mainland and Anderson Island.

Other memorable town events during Janda's tenure include re-dedication of a plaque honoring town residents who had served during WW II, followed by dedication of a plaque honoring Steilacoom's mayors beginning in 1871 with William Wallace (also Idaho's first territorial governor). It also included the town's colorful Fourth of July parades—in which the Mayor often donned a costume and walked along the parade route, adding a homey touch to the national celebration.

Although the women are retired from highly visible roles in the community, they continue to take part in its daily life. From their vantage points of having been involved in all aspects of town government, and desiring to leave a positive legacy for its citizens, ever mindful of the rich legacy of Steilacoom's history, the women continue to draw on their expertise and provide insight on a variety of on-going town issues.

At the conclusion of their "afternoon" discussion, Joan said that, "*There's always going to be change, but the water, the mountains, the view will remain.*"