Jesse Settlemier (1840-1913)

Jesse Holland Settlemier, one of Oregon's pioneer nurserymen, was born in Alton, Illinois, on February 5, 1840. He traveled west to California and then to Oregon with his parents and eight siblings in 1849. He made his first money, $1.60, from the sale of fruit trees that his father had encouraged him to grow in fence corners on the family's home claim in Mt. Angel. Before his eighteenth birthday, Settlemier and two of his brothers started a nursery near Tangent in Linn County. On Christmas Day in 1862, he married Eleanor C. Cochran.

Settlemier was eager to have his own business. In March 1863, at a sheriff's sale, he bought a 214-acre tract of land in the lower Willamette Valley for five dollars an acre and moved into a log cabin. He started Woodburn Nursery, which developed into one of the largest nurseries on the West Coast, and soon built a modest wood-framed farmhouse on the corner of Settlemier Avenue and Arthur Street in Woodburn.

In 1871, Settlemier platted the first four blocks of what is now downtown Woodburn and gave a lot to anyone who would build a business on it. He also gave a quarter lot for a church, a full block for a school, and eighty-five acres to the railroads to persuade them to build track through town.

Settlemier learned that the land he had purchased had a faulty title and he would be forced to buy it again at a higher price. Due to contacts he had made with the railroad companies, he was able to find help to pay off his debts.

In January 1879, Settlemier's wife Eleanor died, leaving him with six daughters and a son to care for. He married Clara S. Gray in October, but she died six weeks later of typhoid fever. In 1881, he married Mary C. Woodworth; they had one son.

In 1891, at a cost of approximately $10,000, Settlemier built a magnificent twelve-room Queen Anne Victorian-Craftsman-style home on the corner of Settlemier Avenue and Garfield Street in Woodburn. The house was proclaimed the "Grandest Mansion in Marion County" and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Settlemier became the town's first mayor in 1885, serving two terms. He was a member of the county convention, a delegate to the state convention in 1886, and served two terms as a state legislator beginning in 1905.

He continued to build his nursery business, making it into the largest such business in the state, with clientele ranging east to the Mississippi, south to Mexico, and throughout the West. By 1892, the nursery had about 3 million plants, and the business recorded a profit of almost $60,000. Settlemier was inducted into the Oregon Nurserymen's Hall of Fame. When he retired in 1892, his son Frank took over the nursery operations.

Settlemier died in Portland on February 20, 1913, and was buried in the old pioneer section of Belle Passi Cemetery in Woodburn.

Written by Cindy Thomas

Further Reading:

Culp, Edwin. *Yesterday in Oregon*. Caldwell, Id.: Caxton Press, 1990.

Dethlefs, Ted. "Mt. Angel." *Marion County Historical Society* 15 (1998).

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