

La Conner, Washington

People and Place

Location

The Town of La Conner, located in Skagit County, is situated on the southern end of the Swinomish Channel, north of Skagit Bay. La Conner is a small town that encompasses approximately 0.4 square miles of land and 0.1 square miles of surface water. La Conner is located approximately 70 miles north of Seattle and 40 miles south of Bellingham. The Town of La Conner is located at 48°24'33"N, 122°31'52"W.

Demographic Profile

According to the 2000 U.S. Census the population of La Conner was 761. Between 1990 and 2000, U.S. Census data reports that the population of La Conner increased by 16%. In 2000 the percentage of males and females was 45.2% and 54.8% respectively. The racial composition of the population in 2000 was predominantly White (90.8%), followed by American Indian and Alaska Native (1.7%), Black or African American (0.8%), and Asian (0.3%). There were zero Pacific Islanders living in La Conner in 2000. Few individuals (3.8%) classified themselves as belonging to some other race. Overall, 2.6% of the population identified themselves as belonging to two or more races. Slightly over five percent of the population (6.2%) identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino.

In 2000 the median age of the population was 45.5, which was higher than the national median of 35.3 for the same year. According to the 2000 U.S. Census the population of La Conner had an even age distribution; approximately 51.1% of the population was between the ages of 21 and 59. A small percentage (5.9%) of the population was foreign-born; of the foreign-born population 60.9% were born in Canada. Approximately 73.9% of the population of La Conner in 2000 was living in family households. The 2000 U. S. Census reports that 91.2% of the population over 18 years of age had received a high school degree or higher, 33.3% had received a Bachelor's degree or higher, and 11.4% received a graduate or professional degree; as compared to the national averages of 79.7%, 22.3%, and 7.8% respectively.

History

Skagit County was created in 1883 from the southern portion Whatcom County. The same year La Conner lost its status as county seat to Mount Vernon, located 15 miles northwest of La Conner. Skagit County derived its name from the name of the Indian tribe which lived along the river known by the same name, the largest watercourse in the North Cascades.

The La Conner area was home to the Swinomish Indians for many years. The Swinomish are descendants of the Kikiallus, Samish, and Lower Skagit Tribes.¹ The Swinomish and three additional tribes – Samish, Sauk-Suiattle, and Upper Skagit –living in the area now known as Skagit County were signatories to the 1855 Point Elliot Treaty. The treaty gave Western Washington tribes the right to self-governance and set aside several reservations, including one for the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community on Fidalgo Island, across the Swinomish Channel from the Town of La Conner. The Swinomish reservation expanded to 7448 acres in 1873 and tribal members in the area were forced to move onto the Lummi, Tulalip, or Swinomish reservations.

Today Skagit County is home to two Indian reservations, the Swinomish reservation and the Upper Skagit Indian reservation, located beyond Sedro Woolley. Swinomish Tribal services

include: medical and dental health facilities, a senior center, library, youth services, adult education programs, and Swinomish AmeriCorps. The Tribe also continues to practice their native religion in the 200-foot long smokehouse (1200 seats).² The 2000 U.S. Census reports that 2664 tribal members lived on Swinomish Reservation.

In the 1700s the Spanish, British, and Russian explorers and fur traders were the first nonIndians to enter the Skagit region. The first White settlers were primarily homesteaders, who arrived in the area in the mid-1850s. It was not until after the first dike was built on the La Conner flats in 1863 that farming took hold, when settlers in La Conner successfully planted and harvested a modest barley crop.³ Alonzo Low established the first Swinomish post office in 1867 on the land that would become La Conner. Low's family was among the original party that landed on Alki point – when Alonzo was two years old – and went on to found Seattle.⁴ Two years later, J.S. Connor bought the existing trading post, established by John Hayes, another early settler. It was around the trading post that the Town of La Conner developed. At the time the local post office was called Swinomish. In 1869 the entire town and an additional 70 acres was deeded to John Connor for \$500 and to honor his wife, Louise Ann (Siegfreid) Connor, he had the town's name changed to La Conner in 1870.⁵

The town became a popular farming community and hub for steamers carrying passengers and freight from Seattle.⁶ Historically, fishing and its related industries were also important drivers of the local economy. In the 1870s the commercial salmon and cod fishing industries began in Skagit County, primarily around Anacortes and La Conner. The associated industries of canning and packing were established shortly thereafter. La Conner was a successful town with its growing port and protected harbor, but in 1880 when the log jam that blocked the Skagit River at Mount Vernon was cleared, Mount Vernon was in position to become a major city.⁷

La Conner prospered during the depression largely due to the logging and fishing industries. The dredging of the 11-mile long Swinomish Channel, completed in 1937, turned La Conner into a working waterfront. Companies such as Dunlap Towing, specializing in a variety of ocean towing markets, have been based in La Conner since 1925. But the town was not merely an industrial haven. The quiet and peaceful town, amplified by the decision of the railroad to bypass La Conner in favor of Burlington in 1889, became a popular destination for artists seeking inspiration from nature for their works. Famous artists and writers such as Morris Graves, Mark Tobey, Guy Anderson, Tom Robbins, and others have lived and worked in the La Conner area during the last century.

Today the Town of La Conner blends together three different cultures: tourism, the arts, and fishing. La Conner is on the National Registry of Historic Places. The Civic Garden Club, located within the town, was the first courthouse north of Seattle. The famous Skagit valley tulips are grown on floodplains that surround La Conner. The Swinomish Tribe maintains a successful partnership with La Conner and has created a Tribal Days festival to draw visitors to the area; La Conner has declared September 25th Native American Day. The day is a holiday for town employees so that they can attend the co-sponsored Tribal Days Festival.

Fishing remains an important part of the local culture, particularly for the Swinomish Community, which continues to fish for salmon, crab, clams, and sea urchins in the surrounding bays and waterways. However some companies, such as Moore-Clark, have shut their doors due to decreasing Puget Sound salmon fisheries. Moore-Clark, a hatchery fish-food processing plant and longtime industrial employer, closed in 1992.

Infrastructure

Current Economy

At the time of the 2000 U.S. Census, 24.5% of the employed civilian population 16 years of age and over was employed within local, state, or federal governments. The majority of La Conner's employed civilian population 16 years of age and over (38%) was employed in "management, professional and related occupations." Slightly less (22.6%) were employed in "sales and office occupations."

La Conner's economy relies less on fishing and logging today than it did throughout the early 1900s. According to the 2000 U.S. Census natural resource jobs including agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting employed only 3.1% of the population. Additionally, in 2000 only 91 Skagit County residents identified themselves as commercial fishermen.⁸ Despite employing the lowest number of workers, industries dependent upon natural resources, particularly commercial fishing, have paid some of the area's highest salaries. In 2000 commercial fisherman earned \$57,810 in annual average wages.⁹ Finfish was the major fishery, employing 53 workers making \$83,016 annual average pay.¹⁰ Today the town's economy has diversified to include tourism, health care, education, construction, and the arts.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census 97.2% of the potential labor force was employed and there was a 2.8% unemployment rate (calculated by dividing the unemployed population by the labor force). In 2000 a total of 33.1% of the population over 16 years of age were not in the labor force as compared to the national average of 36.1% for the same year. The 2000 U.S. Census reports that in 1999 the income of 11.8% of the population was below the poverty level. The median household income in 1999 was \$42,344 and the per capita income was \$24,308.

In 2000 there were 434 housing units in La Conner. The percentages of occupied housing units that were owner versus renter occupied were 55.1% and 44.9% respectively. Approximately 14.3% percent of the housing units were vacant, of which 59.7% were available for rent and 22.6% were vacant due to seasonal, recreational, or occasional use.

Governance

La Conner has a Council-Mayor form of government. The Mayor of La Conner hires and oversees the work of the Town Administrator and each of the town's six departments. Five La Conner residents serve on the Town Council. Skagit County levies a 7.9% sales tax and a 2% hotel/motel tax.

Commercial fishermen operating in Washington waters are subject to the Business and Occupation (B&O) tax under the "extraction" classification (0.48%); those fishing outside of Washington waters but selling fish within Washington are subject to the tax under either the "wholesaling" or "retailing" classifications (0.48% and 0.47% respectively), unless the fish are sold in interstate or foreign commerce.¹¹ Those who both catch and sell fish in Washington are eligible for a Multiple Activities Tax Credit (MATC).¹²

Washington State levies a Food, Fish, and Shellfish Tax, paid by the first commercial processor of food fish or shellfish, including: Chinook, coho, and chum salmon or eggs (5.62%); sockeye and pink salmon or eggs (3.37%); oysters (0.09%); sea urchins/cucumbers (4.92%); and shellfish and other food fish or eggs (2.25%). Tuna, mackerel, and jackfish are exempt from this tax. Additionally, there is an Enhanced Food Fish Tax, which applies to the "first possession of enhanced food fish by an owner in Washington State" and is based on the "value of the enhanced food fish at the point of landing."¹³ The rate of the tax depends upon the species of fish or shellfish.

Vessels used for commercial fishing purposes part-time are subject to an annual Washington State Watercraft Excise Tax levied at 0.5% of the fair market value of the boat. Vessels used for commercial fishing purposes full-time are subject to personal property taxes at the base rate levied by the state. Washington also levies a 10% excise tax on fishing equipment, a three percent tax on electric motors and sonar fish finders, and import duties on tackle and pleasure boats to fund sportfish restoration programs.¹⁴ Washington State levies a tax of \$0.28 per gallon on motor vehicle fuel. Since most of this tax is used to maintain terrestrial roadways, Washington boaters are entitled to a refund of about \$0.17 per gallon. The difference includes state sales tax and a penny per gallon contribution to a Coastal Protection Fund. Most diesel fuel sold at docks has already had this tax removed.¹⁵

There is a National Marine Fisheries Service Regional Office located approximately 70 miles south in Seattle. The nearest North Pacific Fisheries Management Council meeting also takes place in Seattle. There is a Department of Fish and Game office located about 50 miles south in Mill Creek, Washington. The nearest U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services is located in Seattle. La Conner falls within the Bellingham U.S. Coast Guard Station's area of responsibility which includes the San Juan Islands north to the Canadian border and south to Admiralty Inlet. The Bellingham Station was established in 1947 and provides six vessels.

Facilities

La Conner is accessible by ground, water, and air. La Conner is located approximately 15 miles southwest of Mount Vernon and the Interstate 5 corridor that runs between Seattle and Vancouver, B.C. Highway 20, four miles north of La Conner, runs east-west through Skagit County connecting most of the county's major cities. There is a Greyhound bus terminal located in Mount Vernon. Skagit Transit provides public transportation between La Conner and the cities of Mount Vernon, Burlington, Sedro Woolley, Anacortes, and upriver through Concrete. Washington State Ferries run from Anacortes, 11 miles to the northwest, to the San Juan Islands and Vancouver Island, B.C. Amtrak's Cascade Corridor Service, stopping in Mount Vernon, provides rail transport between Vancouver, B.C. and Eugene, Oregon. Three public-use airports are located within 15 miles of La Conner but the nearest airport certified for commercial carriers is located 40 miles north in Bellingham. Additional nearby airports include Vancouver International Airport in British Columbia and SeaTac International Airport in Sea Tac, Washington.

The Town of La Conner hosts three public schools, an elementary, middle, and high school. The Skagit Valley College, located in Mount Vernon, is the closest college with an enrollment of over 3400. La Conner's water comes from the Skagit River near Avon and is purchased from the City of Anacortes. Cascade Natural Gas provides services to residents of Skagit County and electricity is supplied by Puget Sound Energy. Water and Wastewater Services LLC operates La Conner's wastewater facilities that also serves Swinomish Tribal Community, the Port of Skagit County, and the Skagit County Sewer District No. 1 (Hope Island Area). Public safety in La Conner is provided by sheriffs contracted from the Skagit County Sheriffs Office. The La Conner Medical Center is located within the town and the nearest hospital is approximately 10 miles north in Anacortes.

The Town of La Conner has several community services and organizations including: the Quilt Museum in Gaches Mansion, the La Conner Civic Garden Club, the Museum of Northwest Art, and Sylvan Pioneer Park. The tourism industry in La Conner is well developed with over 14 hotels.

In the late 1960s the Port of Skagit County, located 13 miles northwest in Burlington, purchased land in La Conner and began construction on the La Conner Marina. Completed in the 1970s the 500-boat marina offers dry storage space and a boat launcher. There are no fish processors located at the marina. The marina is home primarily to recreational vessels with only seven or eight commercial seiners (50 to 55-feet) that fish in Alaska during the summer months (R. Johnson¹⁶); there are no tribal vessels moored in the La Conner Marina. The Town provides boat moorage at three sites: Benton, Calhoun, and Washington Street end floats. There is a public boat ramp at Sherman Street end under the Rainbow Bridge. The Port of Anacortes is the primary public cargo port in Skagit County. There are at least 11 boat repair and service companies located in La Conner and about three boat builders. There are at least five charter boat companies in the La Conner area offering fishing, whale watching, and ecotourism excursions.

The Skagit County marine resource committee (MRC), a Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative, alternates monthly meetings between Anacortes and Mount Vernon. The purpose of the MRC is to bring a scientific and grassroots approach to protecting and restoring marine resources in the area. Serving on the MRC are representatives from the scientific community, local and tribal governments, and economic, recreational, and conservation interests.

Involvement in West Coast Fisheries

Commercial Fishing

Of the 224 unique vessels that delivered landings to La Conner in 2000, 137 were tribal commercial vessels, 39 were commercial vessels, and 48 were for personal use. In the same year recorded data indicates landings in the community in the following West Coast fisheries (data shown represents landings in metric tons/value of said landings/number of vessels landing): crab (190 t/\$971,526/94), groundfish (confidential/confidential/1), salmon (182 t/\$253,799/101), shellfish (15 t/\$138,042/10), shrimp (confidential/confidential/2), and other species (52 t/\$95,583/9).

La Conner residents owned five vessels in 2000 that participated in West Coast fisheries. Community members owned 3 vessels that participated in the Federally Managed Groundfish fishery. According to recorded data the number of vessels owned by La Conner residents in 2000 participating in each said fishery by state (WA/OR/CA) was: groundfish (0/0/NA), highly migratory species (NA/0/NA), salmon (2/0/0), shellfish (NA/0/NA), shrimp (NA/0/0), and other species (2/0/0).¹⁷

Recorded data indicates that in 2000 the number of La Conner residents holding permits in each said fishery by state (WA/OR/CA) was: coastal pelagic (0/0/2), crab (1/0/0), groundfish (1/0/0), highly migratory species (NA/0/0), salmon (5/0/0), shellfish (0/0/NA), and other species (1/0/0).¹⁸

According to available data, 14 state permits were registered to La Conner residents in 2000. Recorded data indicates that in 2000 the number of permits held by community members in each said fishery by state (WA/OR/CA) was as follows: coastal pelagic (0/0/4), crab (1/0/0), groundfish (3/0/0), highly migratory species (NA/0/0), salmon (5/0/0), shellfish (0/0/NA), and other species (1/0/0).¹⁹

There are several seafood processors located in the La Conner area. Lone Tree Point Seafoods Inc., located on the Swinomish Reservation, began operations as a wholesale processor in 1996. The company is currently the leading cannery packer for 4 lb canned wild salmon and exports to Australia and Europe. Lone Tree Point purchases both treaty (Upper Skagit,

Swinomish, Suquamish) and nontreaty fish, and imports salmon from Alaska. They employ 45 permanent and 60 seasonal personnel and generate \$3 million annually in sales.²⁰ The Wabi Fishing Company specializes in smoked sockeye, king, coho, and Alaskan black cod packed in glass jars. Pacific Ocean Products, Inc., located in the old Olympic Fish Company Building, opened its doors in 2003. The company, with three employees, operates as a buyer of locally caught Dungeness crab, salmon, and spot prawns and sells to west coast domestic markets (D. Hwang²¹). The Olympic Fish Company relocated to Pier 91 in Seattle.

The tribal commercial fishery plays a significant role in the La Conner commercial fishing industry. In 2004 there were 64 tribal commercial vessels listed with the Tribe fishing primarily for salmon, crab, and shrimp (L. Turban²²). Tribal members are also engaged in beach seining for species such as pink salmon and some tribal members smoke and sell salmon to the community.

According to the Boldt Decision,²³ the usual and accustomed fishing areas of the Swinomish Tribal Community include the Skagit River and its tributaries, the Samish River and its tributaries, and the marine areas of northern Puget Sound from the Fraser River south to and including Whidbey, Camano, Fidalgo, Guemes, Samish, Cypress, and the San Juan Islands, and including La Conner Bay and Hale Passage adjacent to Lummi Island.

Swinomish tribal officials are also involved in local environmental issues, such as the presence of Seattle City Light's operation of a hydroelectric dam on the Upper Skagit River; Swinomish tribal fisheries depend upon salmon runs that utilize spawning grounds in the Upper Skagit River.²⁴ The tribe has no aquaculture or hatchery facilities.

Sportfishing

There is at least one licensed agent selling fishing permits in La Conner. In La Conner in 2003 there were 1234 sportfishing license transactions valuing \$14,868. In Catch Record Card Area 8-1 (Deception Pass, Hope Island, and Skagit Bay) the 2000 sport salmon catch, based on catch record cards, was 2105, including 969 Chinook and 1136 coho. In 2000 there were approximately 7772 marine angler trips in the sport salmon fishery. In the same year a total of 1449 bottomfish were caught by boat-based anglers in Puget Sound within Catch Record Card Areas 8-1 and 8-2 (Ports Susan and Gardner). The recreational harvest of clams (lbs) and oysters (#) for Area 8-1 in 2000 was estimated to be 113,325 and 0 respectively; harvest occurred over an estimated 18,847 user trips.

Subsistence

Subsistence hunting, fishing, and gathering activities are fundamental to the way of life of some coastal community members. Both tribal and nontribal individuals participate in subsistence fishing. Today, members of the Swinomish Tribe and other nontribal subsistence fishermen obtain fishery resources from the waters surrounding La Conner. Subsistence fishing is not discussed in great detail in this Community Profile due to the lack of available data.

Involvement in North Pacific Fisheries

Commercial Fishing

In 2000 La Conner residents owned 15 vessels that were involved in North Pacific fisheries. In the same year community members landed fish in the following North Pacific fisheries (data shown represents landings in metric tons/value of said landings/number of vessels

landing): other finfish (confidential/confidential/1), herring (confidential/confidential/1), and salmon (781 t/\$578,750/11).

In 2000 26 La Conner residents served as crewmembers in North Pacific fisheries. In the same year nine community residents held 11 registered state permits. In 2000 La Conner residents held one herring and 10 salmon Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission permits.

Sportfishing

Sixty-four Alaska sportfishing licenses were sold to La Conner community members in 2000. There were no sportfishing businesses in La Conner that participated in Alaskan fisheries in 2000.

¹ Zaferatos, N. 1998. Tribal Planning as Strategic Political Action: A Case Study of the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community. *Journal of the American Planning Association* 64(4):395-410.

² Skagit Valley Internet Directory. 2004. La Conner History, [Online]. Available: URL: <http://www.skagitvalleydirectory.com/laconner/history.html> (access date - October 2004).

³ Skagit County Profile. 2002. Labor Market and Economic Analysis Branch, Employment Security Department, [Online]. Available: URL: <http://www.wa.gov/esd/lmea/pubs/profiles/skagit.pdf> (access date - September 2004).

⁴ HistoryLink. 2004. La Conner: Thumbnail History, [Online]. Available: URL: http://www.historylink.org/WA_output.cfm?file_id=5655&CFID=3861154&CFTOKEN=89752716 (access date - October 2004).

⁵ Welcome to Skagit County. 1999. Third Street Books Exchange, [Online]. Available: URL: <http://www.rootsweb.com/~waskagit/placenames.html> (access date - September 2004).

⁶ The Town. 2004. La Conner, Washington, [Online]. Available: URL: <http://www.laconner.net/thetown.cfm> (access date - September 2004).

⁷ HistoryLink. 2004. La Conner: Thumbnail History, [Online]. Available: URL: http://www.historylink.org/WA_output.cfm?file_id=5655&CFID=3861154&CFTOKEN=89752716 (access date - October 2004).

⁸ Skagit County Profile. 2002. Labor Market and Economic Analysis Branch, Employment Security Department, [Online]. Available: URL: <http://www.wa.gov/esd/lmea/pubs/profiles/skagit.pdf> (access date - September 2004).

⁹ Skagit County Profile. 2002. Labor Market and Economic Analysis Branch, Employment Security Department, [Online]. Available: URL: <http://www.wa.gov/esd/lmea/pubs/profiles/skagit.pdf> (access date - September 2004).

¹⁰ Skagit County Profile. 2002. Labor Market and Economic Analysis Branch, Employment Security Department, [Online]. Available: URL: <http://www.wa.gov/esd/lmea/pubs/profiles/skagit.pdf> (access date - September 2004).

¹¹ Washington State Department of Revenue. 2004. Commercial fishing, [Online]. Available: URL: <http://dor.wa.gov/content/taxes/Industry/Fish/default.aspx> (access date - July 2004).

¹² Washington State Department of Revenue. 2002. Information on Washington's Tax Structure: Fish Taxes, [Online]. Available: URL: <http://dor.wa.gov/content/taxes/industry/fish/default.aspx> (access date - July 2004).

¹³ Washington State Department of Revenue. 2001. Commercial Fishing, [Online]. Available: URL: <http://dor.wa.gov/content/taxes/Industry/Fish/default.aspx#enhanced> (access date - July 2004).

¹⁴ National Conference of State Legislatures. 2004. Environment, Energy, and Transportation Program: Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife, [Online]. Available: URL: <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/esnr/FISHHUNTWILD.htm> (access date - July 2004).

¹⁵ Washington State Department of Licensing. 2003. Fuel Tax Frequently Asked Questions, [Online]. Available: URL: <http://www.dol.wa.gov/vs/ft-faq.htm> (access date - July 2004).

¹⁶ R. Johnson, Marina Manager, La Conner, WA. Pers. commun., 29 September 2004.

¹⁷ 'NA' refers to data which was not available, for example, due to few or no recorded permit numbers, or the partially permitted nature of a fishery in 2000.

¹⁸ 'NA' refers to data which was not available, for example, due to few or no recorded permit numbers, or the partially permitted nature of a fishery in 2000.

¹⁹ 'NA' refers to data which was not available, for example, due to few or no recorded permit numbers, or the partially permitted nature of a fishery in 2000.

²⁰ Community Development: Lone Tree Point Seafoods Inc. No date. Swinomish Indian Tribal Community, [Online]. Available: URL: http://www.swinomish.org/planning/economic_development/businesses/lonetreeseafood.html (access date - September 2004).

²¹ D. Hwang, Owner, Pacific Ocean Products, Inc., La Conner, WA. Pers. commun., 04 October 2004.

²² L. Turban, Fisheries Manager, Swinomish, WA. Pers. commun., 30 September 2004.

²³ Office of the Circuit Executive. 2000. Muckleshoot Indian Tribe v. Lummi Indian Nation, [Online]. Available: URL: <http://www.ce9.uscourts.gov/web/newopinions.nsf/0/9909aaf534e2be87882569b40066c5ec?OpenDocument> (access date - October 2004).

²⁴ Kamb, L. 2004. Seattle, tribes sign accord on 'government-to-government' relations. Seattle Post-Intelligence, July 21.