

The Rockwells of Ebey's Landing

By Betty Lou Gaeng

GENEALOGY: A HAYSTACK FULL OF NEEDLES. IT'S THE THREADS I NEED. Exactly my own thoughts! Sometimes the pieces of the puzzle just never seem to fit. For me, the ROCKWELL story started as a project to make those pieces fit—a story of discovery. Instead it is a puzzle—a lot of needles; however, the threads seem to be missing.

Some time ago a very personable lady, Patricia (BAKER) BOGART, came to Sno-Isle Genealogical Society's Research Library at Heritage Park in Lynnwood, Washington. She had read in the newspaper that we were starting a project to assist those with Native Indian blood to find their roots. Her hope was that we would be able to help her in determining the ancestry of her great grandmother Mary, a full-blood Indian of the Puget Sound region. Mary had married a white man by the name of Elisha ROCKWELL and the couple made their home on Whidbey Island.

Even though I have done a lot of research, I still have not been successful in discovering Mary's roots, and was at a loss as to how to present the ROCKWELL story since so much is missing. I decided that is exactly how I would tell it—as a mystery. Thus begins this very frustrating story of contradictions, blocked records, what I am sure are erroneous records, and just plain no records. Amid all the difficulties, though, I must admit I made some wonderful and unexpected discoveries.

In September of 2007, I had the pleasure to meet Patricia when she came to our research library. As I mentioned, she is a very attractive lady, and looking closely you can see traces of her Native Indian heritage. Patricia told me that her grandmother Martha ROCKWELL was one-half Indian, born in Coupeville, Island County, Washington. Martha had married a white man, Joseph BAKER, who was stationed at Fort Casey on Whidbey Island. Martha and Joseph BAKER had a son, Rockwell BAKER. Rockwell BAKER was Patricia BOGART's father. Following is the family information gathered from copies of official documents.

A Marriage Return shows Martha's name as Mattie ROCKWELL, age 22, and the groom as Joseph F. BAKER, age 31, occupation: fireman at Fort Casey. The date of marriage is 18 May 1904—the place is Coupeville, Island County. Mattie's parents are shown as Elisha ROCKWELL and Mary (no maiden name is given). On 26 August 1952, J. W. LIBBEY, the Auditor of Island County, Washington testified as to the authenticity of the Marriage Return.

A Certificate of Death for Elisha G. ROCKWELL reads: Place of Death:

Coupeville, Island County, Washington—Date of Death: 21 September 1910. It also shows Elisha's birth date as 24 March 1835 and that he was born in Maine. His color is shown as white. His occupation is listed as farming.

A Certificate of Death for Mary ROCKWELL shows that she died at Coupeville, Island County, Washington on 28 October 1910. Her color is listed as "Dark," her age as 75, and her birth place is given as Island County.

A Certificate of Death for Rockwell BAKER shows he accidentally drowned while swimming at Tulalip Bay, Tulalip Indian Reservation, Snohomish County, Washington on 9 August 1952. The certificate provides information that Rockwell BAKER was born 28 June 1911 at Coupeville, the child of Joseph and Martha (ROCKWELL) BAKER. This certificate, significantly, shows his race as one-quarter Indian.

Another Certificate of Death is for Mattie ROSS. This is Martha (Mattie) ROCKWELL. She had earlier divorced Joseph BAKER and had later married Herman ROSS. Mattie died 4 July 1967 at the age of 84 in Arlington, Snohomish County, Washington. Her home was in nearby Granite Falls. Her birth date is given as 4 November 1882—birth place: Whidbey Island, Washington—Race: Indian.

Patricia BOGART's birth parents are shown on her Birth Registration as Rockwell Gearheart BAKER and Hazel Evaline ROWE.

These records gave me the necessary information to begin the search. Another clue to aid me in the beginning was a book in our research library, A Particular Friend, Penn's Cove, a history of the settlers, claims and buildings of Central Whidbey Island by Jimmie Jean Cook, published by the Island County Historical Society, Coupeville, Washington. This article gives a brief biography of Elisha G. ROCKWELL, showing he was born in Dover, Maine. The article presented some great clues to assist in finding the roots of Elisha, but the only help for locating roots for Patricia's great grandmother was the statement, "He [Elisha] had a handsome Indian wife named Mary and two daughters. . . ."

Since Elisha ROCKWELL's roots would be the easier of the two to find, I started with him. His birthdate is pretty well established as 24 March 1835. Thus, he should appear in the 1850 federal census for Maine. Having the clue that he was born in Dover, I began there. At the time of Elisha's birth, Dover was located in Penobscot County, Maine. However, in 1838 Penobscot County became Piscataquis County. In that area, there was only one ROCKWELL family listed in the 1850 census. They lived in Piscataquis County, in the town of Dover. My hopes were high, but when I looked at the actual census record, those hopes plummeted. This document contains what I believe to be one of those too often erroneous enumerations by a census taker. Every now and then these errors show up, but this one was a setback—leaving me with my first mystery. Here is a synopsis of the census record:

Thos. ROCKWELL, age 43, occupation: farmer, born: Peacham, Vermont.

Deborah ROCKWELL, age 40, born: Maine.

Eliza ROCKWELL, age 15, female, born: Sebec, Maine. [Sebec is adjacent to Dover]

Martha J. ROCKWELL, age 13, born: Sebec, Maine.

Thos. J. ROCKWELL, age 11, born Sebec, Maine.

Francis ROCKWELL, age 6, born Sebec, Maine.

Lucy ROCKWELL, age 4, born Sebec, Maine.

Subsequent census returns for Elisha ROCKWELL, show that he was born in Maine, his father was born in Vermont, and his mother was born in Maine. The birthplaces shown for the parents are quite a coincidence, or are they? Did the census taker hear the name as Eliza instead of Elisha and then mistakenly list “female?” I believe the evidence indicates this is Elisha ROCKWELL (not Eliza as shown in the 1850 census). The age is right, the birthplace of the parents fits, and another plus for this assumption is that Elisha named his younger daughter Martha, one of the names listed here as a daughter of Thos. and Deborah ROCKWELL. Another plus for believing this is the correct family is the fact that after this 1850 census enumeration, I could not locate any indication of the existence of an Eliza ROCKWELL. Also, I can find no record for another Elisha ROCKWELL in New England who can possibly be the Elisha ROCKWELL we are researching.

In the previously mentioned book A Particular Friend, Penn’s Cove, the author states that Elisha left his parents’ home in Maine and “set sail from Portland [Maine] for San Francisco by way of the Panama Isthmus.” This fact seems to be borne out by a record I found in a passenger and immigration list from the source Louis J. Rasmussen, San Francisco Ship Passenger Lists, Coloma, California. This listing shows that an E. G. ROCKWELL arrived at port in San Francisco, California in 1852. In the 1860 federal census for Fillmore Township, Post Office: Quincy, Plumas County, California (July 20), Elisha ROCKWELL is enumerated—his age is given as 23, occupation as blacksmith, and birthplace Maine. Historical accounts state that Elisha had gone to work in the California gold fields, then on to the mining discoveries at the Cariboo mines in British Columbia, and then spent a winter in Victoria. In the spring of possibly 1864 he moved to Camano Island where he filed a preemption claim for 160 acres of land. There he met and married his wife Mary. I have not as yet discovered any official records proving this, but these facts seem possible.

The next record for Elisha ROCKWELL is the 1870 federal census, Whidby’s Island, Washington Territory, Post Office: Coupeville, Island County, where Elisha is shown as a 32-year old logger, married to Mary ROCKWELL, age 30, an Indian born in Washington Territory. Neither Patricia nor I have been able to locate the marriage certificate, but the records we do have seem to indicate they were most likely married about 1869. Regarding Mary’s age, there are many different dates of birth given, with her death certificate showing she was born in 1835. However, census records indicate her birth could have been much later. In fact, the 1900 federal census gives the date of her birth as April 1840. This census also has the information that Elisha and Mary had been married for 30 years, which would make the date of their marriage approximately 1869/70.

In 1880, Elisha ROCKWELL was a partner with Alex McLEAN and their logging camp was listed as the polling place for the Skagit Head precinct. Two years later, the camp was known only as McLEAN's Camp, so perhaps they no longer worked together. In the 1880 census record there were three children shown in the ROCKWELL household: Annie, age 9, one-half Indian; Charles, age 4, one-half Indian; and Baby [this would be Martha], age 1, one-half Indian. All the children were shown as born in Washington Territory. Records indicate there was another child born to Elisha and Mary who must have died very young. The family is also listed in the Washington Territorial Census Records for 1883, 1885, 1887, 1889 and 1892.

Elisha ROCKWELL having done well in business made the decision to retire and become a farmer. On the 11th of September 1891, Elisha purchased for the price of \$1400, a seven-acre piece of land on Fort Casey Road, Coupeville—at what is known as Ebey's Prairie. Elisha then had a very comfortable Queen Anne style farmhouse built for his family, and on the land planted a large garden. The house, even though it has passed to other owners, is still known as the Rockwell house. Martha inherited the house when her parents died in 1910 and she lived there until 1915, when she sold it. She and her husband Joseph BAKER were also divorced about this time. There is some indication that Joseph may have been killed in the First World War.

Elisha and Mary's son Charles died young—sometime before the 1883 Washington Territorial Census. Annie died as a young lady. She is buried at Sunnyside Cemetery, Coupeville, Island County, Washington. Her grave marker states: Annie ROCKWELL—1 Aug. 1871—4 July 1896—Rest in Peace. As shown earlier, Martha (ROCKWELL) ROSS died 4 July 1967. She is buried at the Granite Falls Cemetery, Granite Falls, Snohomish County, Washington. Elisha and Mary ROCKWELL are buried at Sunnyside Cemetery in Coupeville, near daughter Annie.

Nothing I have found so far in the records has helped to uncover Mary ROCKWELL's roots. Since her English name is Mary, it would seem that she was baptized. Those records are either non-existent or unavailable. Also, it would appear that Elisha and Mary might have been married at Camano Island, certainly in Island County. Again, the records are either non-existent or unavailable. Mary's family history remains a mystery, and will probably always remain as such. Both Patricia BOGART and I hope that this story of the family may stir a memory and someone will come forward with knowledge that will solve the puzzle of Mary's origin.

In our present day, the Elisha Rockwell House is now part of the National Park Service, Department of the Interior, Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve, Whidbey Island, Washington and can be seen listed on the PNRO Inventory, Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve. At the present time the house is not open to the public and is soon to be restored by the Park Service. In July of this year, Patricia and I visited Coupeville and were privileged to be given a special tour by a park ranger. We were able to see the interior of the house, which must have been a

very comfortable and lovely home during the time the ROCKWELLS lived there. The accompanying picture, which I took at that time, shows a house still in remarkable condition even though it has been unoccupied and only used for storage. The Elisha Rockwell House is located just south of the town of Coupeville on Fort Casey Road a short distance south of where Fort Casey Road intersects with Terry Road.

In 2004, the National Park Service published a “Historic Structure Report” regarding the Rockwell House. In their Executive Summary it was stated:

The Elisha Rockwell House was constructed as part of the flourishing agricultural community surrounding Ebey’s Prairie on Whidbey Island. The house reflected both the economic prominence of agriculture in the development of the island and the societal status of the family farm. Changing practices and the economics of scale in the business of agriculture during the latter half of the 20th century gradually relegated the building to secondary status within what became a factory farm.

The summary went on to say:

The opportunity now exists to reclaim and interpret through landscape and structure rehabilitation the significant function and character of a 19th century farmstead on Ebey’s Prairie. . . .

An unexpected and very interesting addition to this story came to light while I was investigating the ROCKWELL family history on Whidbey Island—BEANS. Who would have thought that dried beans would become part of a story about family history?

At Ebey’s Prairie the bean is known simply as the Rockwell. This is a small bean, about the size of a pinto bean. The bean is a very light tan in color, with reddish markings. We were told they are not good as commercial beans—they are heirloom or specialty beans--highly sought, but not commercially grown on a large scale. These particular beans were grown on the ROCKWELL farm and it is thought that Elisha must have brought them from his ancestral home in Maine to Whidbey Island. In my investigation, I have found that this type of dried bean—now called heirlooms—back in the 1800s and earlier was very popular as a staple food for New Englanders. Many were brought to this country from Europe by early settlers, clear back to the time of the Mayflower. One variety, called the European Soldier Bean, looks similar in coloring to the Rockwell, but is much larger in size and is more kidney shaped. Another bean similar in appearance is the Brown Speckled Cow Bean. I looked at many pictures of beans and read the descriptions, but none seem to quite fit. Another question—what is the origin of Elisha ROCKWELL’s bean?

Thus, yet another mystery enters the picture: where did Elisha ROCKWELL get the start for his bean field? Did he bring the beans with him from Maine—or did Mary have them? Were they part of her Indian heritage? Perhaps they were brought to this country by the men of the Hudson’s Bay Company and passed on to the Native people. Or could one of the early Catholic priests, such as Father CHIROUSE, who came from a farming background in France, have brought them? Father CHIROUSE certainly spent time on both Whidbey and Camano Islands during the mid-1800s. Also, there have been many reports that he carried sacks of

seeds with him as he traveled. Perhaps he carried beans as well. He was instrumental in planting a lot of apple and pear trees, potato and vegetable gardens. Could he also have planted beans? As I lamented at the beginning of the story, this search is full of puzzles.

At the Coupeville Museum on Whidbey Island we were shown a display of dried beans. Along with the display there is an explanation of the beans, stating they are named for Elisha ROCKWELL, who brought these beans with him from his home in Kansas, and then grew them on his farm at Coupeville. Just another mystery—where and how did this story come to be? Elisha had absolutely no connection to Kansas. I believe we can discount this origin completely.

Thirty years ago the people living at Ebey's Prairie, as well as other concerned citizens, realized that they would have to act to protect this pristine area of Whidbey Island from development. This decision and their actions made history. They helped to establish this nation's first historical reserve. In 1978, with the establishment of this 17,400 acre reserve, a rural community and its historical record of Pacific Northwest history was preserved to reflect a settlement of the 1800s, with its fields, farmhouses and wooded hills. Last July was the first time I personally visited Ebey's Prairie and I could not help but marvel at the peace and quiet there. It was as if I had actually stepped back in time.

At this same time in July, Patricia and I visited descendants of Ebey's Prairie pioneer families, Georgie SMITH of Willowood Farm, and Sara PURDUE and her son Wilbur PURDUE. They grow the Rockwells and have been very cooperative in supplying information. When Patricia and I visited them they showed us their fields. The plants on both farms were healthy looking, flowering, but a few weeks short of harvest time

At that time, Georgie SMITH had about one-quarter acre of Rockwells growing at historic Willowood Farm. She has also been working with the Whidbey Island Slow Food Convivium hoping to get national exposure for the Rockwell beans. The Convivium's aim is to rediscover and preserve the foods common to the early settlers of Whidbey Island and the healthy slow cooking method of preparing those foods

Sara PURDUE's family are old-time Ebey's Prairie people also. Her father Wilbur SHERMAN grew the beans and now she and her son Wilbur PURDUE grow them. She said that the great thing about Rockwell beans was that they were used in the entire community and shared at community functions. If one neighbor ran low, or was out of beans, others shared. She also mentioned that when her cousin was in Maine, he saw beans that looked like the Rockwells. Of course, they were grown under a different name there. This would appear to prove the story that Elisha brought the beans from Maine.

Sara PURDUE has given permission to use a SHERMAN family bean recipe and the history handed down from her parents Wilbur and Grace SHERMAN. She also provided a picture of her father Wilbur at work on his farm thrashing the

harvested beans.

Wilbur and Grace Sherman and the Rockwell Bean History

By Sara Purdue

Wilbur SHERMAN planted Rockwell Beans every year. He planted the beans in late May in hills about one inch apart with three to four beans per hill. The beans were harvested in August or September when the plants were harvest yellow and the beans hard to the bite. The beans were shelled, cleaned and stored as dry beans. Grace and Wilbur SHERMAN cooked the beans for church potlucks. Wilbur's mom and dad, William and Lottie SHERMAN, raised the beans too. Many of their children and grandchildren remember Rockwell Beans as a family adventure. It is said that these beans were brought to the Ebey Prairie by Elisha ROCKWELL, who lived in the farmhouse by the Engle Dairy, near where Wilbur PURDUE and Sara (SHERMAN) PURDUE are raising the same beans today. Rockwell Beans are popular with Prairie families and other recipes in delicious variations exist.

RECIPE FOR WILBUR AND GRACE SHERMAN'S ROCKWELL BEANS

1 pint Rockwell beans (Pinto beans, if Rockwell beans aren't available)	
1 white or yellow onion, chopped	1 cup white sugar (or less)
1 ham hock	1 tsp. salt

Soak beans in water overnight without salt. Add onion, ham hock, and sugar with enough water to cover the beans.

Cook gently until beans are tender (about 1 hour). Add salt and bake uncovered in a moderate oven (350 degrees) for 2-4 hours.

Check beans and add water if they seem to be drying out. Adjust seasonings to taste.

Roots run deep at Ebey's Prairie. Another family that grew the beans was the ENGLE family. The ENGLES are another very old-time Ebey's Prairie family, the pioneer William Engle having settled there about 1852. Descendants of William ENGLE were the last owners of the Rockwell House. Sara (SHERMAN) PURDUE's sister, Cheryl, is married to Bob ENGLE, Jr., great grandson of William ENGLE. The land adjoining the Rockwell House is still farmed by ENGLES, although the National Park Service now owns the land.

Betty (ENGLE) ENGSTROM was the daughter of pioneers Carl and Edith ENGLE and granddaughter of original pioneer William ENGLE. She said that the ENGLE family has farmed Island land for over 100 years. Her father Carl ENGLE grew the Rockwells, saving enough to replant each spring. Betty ENGSTROM's mother Edith ENGLE also had a favorite recipe which featured the Rockwell bean. This recipe, over 100 years old, was passed on to daughter Betty and then to her daughter.

Even though the original purpose of this research was never accomplished; that is, the solution to the puzzle of Mary ROCKWELL's ancestry, Patricia BOGART

can be justly proud of her heritage. Her great grandfather, a white man of English roots, came from the distant state of Maine to marry an Indian woman, whose ancestors were the Salish people, original inhabitants of what became Island County. Together, Elisha and Mary ROCKWELL merged two cultures, raised a family, became part of a pioneer settlement, and made history by having their name perpetuated through the existence of a special dried bean. A great history of a true American family!



A handful of Rockwell Beans held by Patricia Bogart—Photo by B. Gaeng



Patricia Bogart amid a field of Rockwell bean plants on the Purdue Farm, Ebey's Prairie, Whidbey Island, in Washington State, July 2008. Photo by B. Gaeng



**The Elisha Rockwell House, Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve,
144 South Fort Casey Road, Coupeville, Island County, Washington, July 2008.
Photo by B. Gaeng**



**Harvesting the Rockwell beans. Sara Purdue's father, Wilbur Sherman (1904-1995)
on his farm—Ebey's Prairie, Whidbey Island.**

