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Books

'Orchards of Eden' tells of turn-of-last-century settlers

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COVER TO COVER

When I first drove across Eastern Washington in 1977, following the Columbia River, vast sections of it were scrub land. Since then, large orchards and vineyards have replaced barren tracts of sand, rocks and sagebrush, with the aid of irrigation. Across the Hanford Reach in no-man's land, lies a place once inhabited by a small town that was settled at the turn of the last century. The settlers dreamed of growing things with irrigation. The town had a bank, a ferry landing, farmhouses, an orchard, a pumphouse and 40 years of Wheeler family history.

The rich, familial stories became author Nancy Mendenhall's legacy. She remembers the area from early childhood and writes about it in "Orchards of Eden: White Bluffs on the Columbia, 1907-1943." Her grandparents' Willowbank Farm was north of town. She draws from a wealth of letters written by her grandfather and other family members, interviews of neighbors and other historical information, to relate the story of communities along the Priest Rapids Valley of the Columbia River and the tiny orchard town of White Bluffs.

Frank Wheeler, Nancy's brick mason grandfather, was drawn to the agricultural dreams of greening Eastern Washington through irrigation during the early 1900s. Although he had no farming experience, he brought his wife and children to an uncertain life in the desert.

Despite challenges of weather, the governmental climate, rising and falling market prices and the economy, the family and the community thrived for nearly 40 years. Yet they were forced to leave behind their labor when the land was confiscated for the Manhattan Project during World War II. Nancy simply intended to preserve her family's memories, but she also captured an era of near modern-day pioneers who wrestled with isolation, the elements, fickle markets, power companies, banks, the railroad, the Depression, the

advent of World War II, economics, politics and perseverance.
She produced a captivating journal about a place and the people who were much like the hardy folks who settled here and built up our Valley.