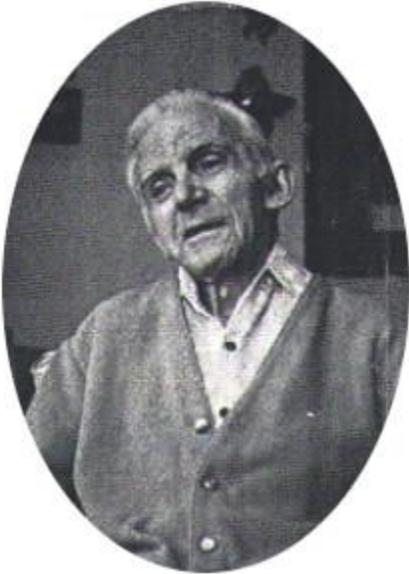


Oscar Freed



Oscar Freed was born in Illinois in 1894, but was raised in Ohio. In the 1910s he moved to Valentine, Montana, and in 1918 married his wife, Dorothy. By 1920 he and Dorothy were homesteading and raising wheat in Valentine. Three straight years of crop failures prompted him to change course and move to Seattle.

Freed arrived in Seattle in 1923, the same year his only son, Richard, was born. From 1923 to 1934, he and Dorothy ran the Rainier Valley Feed Store. In 1928, he acquired a farm on the west side of 212th Avenue SE just north of SE 20th Street, in present-day (2005) Sammamish. The farm, now known as the Reard-Freed Farmstead, is the only location in Sammamish on the National Register of Historic Places.

But Freed did not immediately move to the farmhouse, opting to rent it instead. "Dad farmed it [the house] out to bootleggers," Richard Freed said with a laugh, referring to Prohibition, which was in effect at the time. "We'd go out there and it'd be all quiet -- there'd be a few cattle there but that's all. The bootleggers had a still in the barn that was sunk down so you couldn't see it. They put hay over the top of it. Finally the federals came down and knocked the still over. It stunk of whiskey out there for a good three weeks!" (interview).

By 1934, Prohibition was over, the bootleggers were gone, and that year the Freeds moved to the farmhouse. Oscar sharpened dental equipment and made dental instruments to order. He also ran the Mountain View Poultry Farm into the 1940s, but this was hard for him. He'd injured his back in a

skiing accident as a young man, and arthritis had settled in his back while he was still young, making it difficult for him to move his neck.

"I never knew him to turn his head," Richard said in a recent interview. "He would have to turn his whole body to look at you."

In those days, there was no running water on the plateau. People dug wells for their water. Freed claimed to have the best well -- 176 feet deep -- but one day in 1945 the well dried out.

The Freeds began hauling water from Pine Lake to meet the family needs. Then came one of those unique life events that seems innocuous at the time it happens, but ends up having a far-reaching and lasting impact. Oscar and Richard were delivering dental instruments to a man in Auburn. En route to the man's home, Oscar spotted two water hydrants and was intrigued. He then talked to the head of the newly founded Auburn Water District.

Freed knew that growth in the area that would one day be Sammamish was hampered by the lack of readily available running water. He summoned his friends to the Pine Lake Community Club and pitched the idea of forming a local water district. He and three others worked on stirring up community interest and in the fall of 1945 the question of forming a local water district was put on the ballot.

It passed -- barely.

"In 1945 when I talked about water as a public utility, they thought I'd lost my marbles," Freed chuckled when he was interviewed by the *Issaquah Press* in 1978. Several Pine Lake area residents put up \$100 apiece, and dug a well deeper than the rest. "Fortunately, we hit water," Freed said.

In February 1946 the residents set up their first water district meeting, and Water District 82 was born. Freed was voted the water commissioner, a position he held for more than 31 years, until retiring at age 83 in August 1977.

"Dad was dedicated to that water district. He lived and dreamed it," Richard said. Throughout the rest of the 1940s, Oscar Freed worked for the water district for no pay. This was because there were so few customers -- even by 1951, five years after the district was formed, there were only 35 families hooked up to Water District 82.

There were more families living in the Pine Lake area than that. However, people just didn't want to pay \$4 a month for a water hookup, particularly in established homes that had already had wells in place.

The district received more customers as the population slowly grew, but then more water was needed. A second well was dug, and a wooden tower with a 12,000 gallon water storage tank was built near SE 15th Place and 228th Avenue SE, which was replaced by a 2 million gallon tank in the late 1970s. Two more wells were added by 1975. Well Number 4, added in the late 1960s, turned out to be an unpleasant surprise: not only was it particularly hard to dig, but there was swamp gas in the water.

"Boy did that water stink." Freed said in his 1978 Press interview. "But it was a good well of water and the health department passed it. And after sitting awhile, the smell went away."

Freed ran the water district out of his home; the office manager late in Freed's tenure, Margaret "Maggie" McCormick, had her office in the dining room. It was a casual, paper-intensive operation with people often dropping by to pay their water bills.

Freed's home and office was in the Reard-Freed Farmstead, built in 1895 by Jacob D. Reard, a German immigrant. The house is a two-story gable ell with a one-story wing, built in the "National" style but with Queen Anne detailing. Vacant since 1996, the house was recently saved from demolition through the efforts of the Sammamish Heritage Society. Today (2005) the house is sitting on blocks at its original site, awaiting a possible move to the new Sammamish Commons site after construction of Sammamish Commons is complete (scheduled for the summer of 2006).

Growth in the district was relatively slow until 1975, when in the last few years of Freed's tenure, development began to increase. By the time he retired in 1977, there were more 1,300 customers in the district. Freed became concerned with the rapid growth in the area and advocated slower growth and planning.

People continued to move to the Sammamish Plateau. With consolidation with other water districts, the Sammamish Plateau Water District, as of July 2005, had 15,500 customers.

Oscar Freed died on February 6, 1979 -- his 85th birthday -- but his memory lives on in Sammamish.

Sources:

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By Phil Dougherty, December 14, 2005