



View down a line of blooming rhododendrons. These plants are 15 feet or more in height. Photo by J. Hammond.



View of house showing some of the extensive camellia collection. Photo by J. Hammond.



Entrance driveway to house showing part of circle. Photo by J. Hammond.

Spruce Reach Island: The Oregon Coast's Secret Rhododendron Garden

The Hinsdale Estate, Dean Creek, Near Reedsport

Part I

*An Historical Perspective of the Hinsdale Family, their
Spruce Reach Island Property and the Development of a
Partnership to Restore a Lost Rhododendron Garden on the
Oregon Coast*

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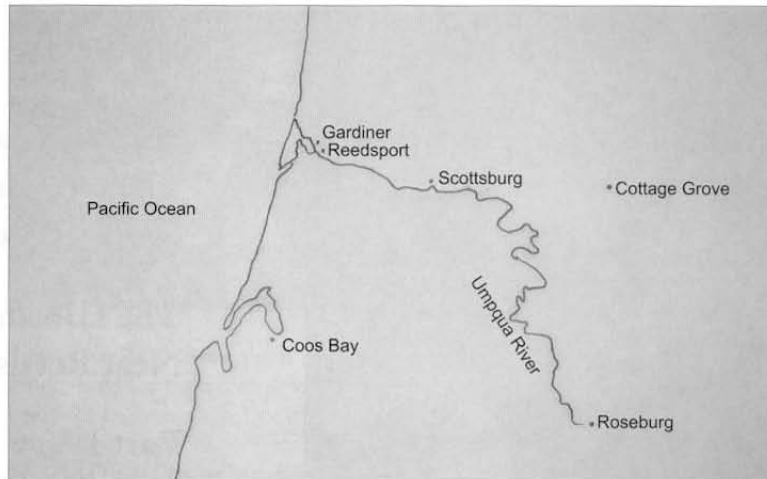


Unknown rhododendron in bloom. Photo by J. Hammond.

Introduction

Some two hundred miles south of the mouth of the Columbia River is the estuary of the Umpqua with its delta blocked by sandbars and dunes, and whose north and south forks provide a key watershed for the western slopes of the Cascades in Southern Oregon. Lying near the mouth of the Umpqua River is the sleepy town of Reedsport, named in honour of Arthur W. Reed, a pioneer resident of western Douglas County at the time the town was platted in the early-1900s. Reedsport, on the Umpqua's south bank, and the adjacent town of Gardiner on the north bank, have seen better times. Gone are many of the logging and timber industries, as are their owners who supported the community well into the 1960s. Running south is the Pacific Coast Highway #101 that, on reaching Gardiner, crosses the river and makes junction in Reedsport town centre with Highway #38, sometimes referred to as the Umpqua Highway, that was opened throughout in 1929 and heads back east towards Drain and Roseburg, along the south bank of the river. Set amidst the tree lined river bank, some four miles east of town near Dean Creek, are the remnants of the house and garden that was formerly part of the Hinsdale Estate, perhaps better known locally as Spruce Reach Island, which has gone largely unnoticed for many years.

The Hinsdale Family traces its roots to the pioneers of the early-1850s that settled in Southern Oregon and opened up transportation routes for supplies and founded a merchants store for supplying the gold mining industry. Within the space of three generations the Hinsdale Family had become wealthy entrepreneurs whose fingers extended like tentacles to effect control over many companies that operated in the wider Reedsport area, including the logging



Map showing the towns along the Umpqua River in western Oregon.

operations and mills that were supplied from the thousands of acres of forest in which they had financial interests along the lower reaches of the Umpqua and Smith rivers. They founded banks, marine transportation services, gravel and stone suppliers, and construction work companies. But, this is no fairytale. The Hinsdales had to grapple with a sequence of disasters that would have broken the spirit of a less resolute family, and central to this story is O. Howard Hinsdale, a third generation member. This private, but avid outdoorsman, whose enterprise contributed significantly to the local economy over six decades, risked his capital to invest in lumber and forestry in the Great Depression and is fondly remembered by his associates and neighbours. Howard was also an avid gardener and, using his own work "team," he completely remodelled the Spruce Reach Island property using unconventional techniques to create a major rhododendron garden, landscaped in the early-1900s style of a woodland garden that could be found surrounding the main house of a small English country estate.

Most old gardens, whose owners no longer have the means to maintain them, gradually go to sleep and become overgrown and wild. After the better

part of half a century of nature having its own way the original plantings will have been smothered and killed-off by weeds, brambles and vines, whilst the overhead canopy will have become dense as the trees reached maturity and thus cut out the majority of the sunlight. Beneath the overgrowth will be the remnants of any hard-landscaping features, and it is these that often provide an insight to the layout of the garden in its heyday, whilst the main fabric of the house will usually endure the ravages of time. Spruce Reach Island, home of the Hinsdale Family for more than half a century, has a most unusual garden and, as will become apparent, is an exception to the rule for all sorts of reasons.

Several years of research have not identified any previous publications in the public domain that detail either the history of the house and garden, or that of the Hinsdale family. With a view to creating a relatively accurate timeline for the evolution of the garden it has been necessary to establish the historical background of the family, particularly in regard to their business and financial interests in the Lower Umpqua Valley, and this in turn has enabled a wide range of references to be collated to create an historical perspective for the development of a most unusual garden.

Historical Background of the Hinsdale Family

The Lower Umpqua region, which includes Reedsport, Gardiner, Winchester Bay and Scottsburg, is proud of its rich heritage. Recorded history first mentions the Umpqua River in the year 1543 when the Spanish navigator, Bartolome Ferrello, is said to have reached the mouth of the Umpqua. In 1578 Sir Francis Drake sailed north up the Pacific Coast searching for the mythical Strait of Anian, but some authorities doubt if Drake actually sailed up the Umpqua River.

Spanish archives record that a disabled ship took refuge in the Umpqua in 1832 and ascended as far as the site that later became the town of Scottsburg. Early settlers found the stumps of a large number of trees that had been chopped down to repair the ship and the local Indians confirmed that the first "visitors" to sail up the Umpqua were "white men with white beards." So, who were they? (1).

As early as 1832 the Hudson's Bay Company (H.B.C.) had a trading post in the Umpqua Valley, having acquired possession of the North West Company's fur trading operations, stretching from Vancouver, British Columbia, to the mouth of the Columbia River, in 1821. Fort Umpqua, on the south bank of the Umpqua River, was established in 1832 by John McLeod, a Chief Trader, and Michael de Framboise, his assistant. This was the principle H.B.C. post south of the Columbia and was located 40 miles from the Pacific Ocean, three miles below Elk Creek; it was a trading station for beaver and seal furs, mainly obtained from the Indians (2).

In August 1850 the expedition of Winchester, Payne & Co., a group of investors from San Francisco, entered the Umpqua River, aboard the Samuel Roberts, where they were instrumental in platting the town sites of Umpqua City, West Umpqua and Scottsburg. Winchester Bay was named for Heman Winchester who led the expedition, and Scottsburg, at the head of tidewater and navigation on

the Umpqua, was named after Levi Scott, the mountaineer, who laid out the new town site. But, the key to these investment activities was the establishment of a route by sea to a primary supply point to serve the gold mines of the Rogue, Illinois, Klamath and Shasta valleys (1).

Meanwhile, in the East Coast state of Connecticut two brothers, George S. Hinsdale (b.1823) and Sylvester D. Hinsdale (b.1824), left home in 1850 and headed out for California to seek their fortune in the gold rush. In 1852 they sailed to the Umpqua River, probably on one of the merchant ships from San Francisco bound for Scottsburg with supplies to feed, clothe and equip the scattered gold mining populations. The Hinsdale brothers settled in Scottsburg, which by the following year had around a dozen businesses in operation. George married Catherine Alice Putnam on August 16th, 1854, but tragically his young wife died two years later. Sylvester married Frances Burnap in 1860 and they had at least four children prior to 1869 (3). In 1854 the Hinsdale brothers set-up a transportation and freighting business, Hinsdale & Co, of South Scottsburg, later to become Chadwick, Hinsdale & Co. While George maintained a warehouse and a merchants store in Scottsburg, Captain Sylvester went north in the same year to purchase and bring back a metal-hulled steamboat, the Bully Washington from the Columbia River. Originally built in San Francisco, then shipped to Oregon City for final assembly, the boat had two previous owners before it was sold to Sylvester to run between Gardiner, at mouth of the Umpqua, and Scottsburg.

In the midst of the Indian Wars of 1855-56, another group of Scottsburg businessmen who had funded the building of the clipper-rigged schooner Umpqua, the first vessel to be built in Oregon south of the Columbia River and launched at Scottsburg in 1856, were looking for a competent captain to run the vessel in the San Francisco trade. Captain Sylvester Hinsdale, aged 32, assumed command in June of that

year and made many successful round trips carrying freight and mail from San Francisco (3). But, the Hinsdale brother's greatest assets were the 1,500 mules and freight wagons they employed in pack-trains to fulfil their contracts to supply the gold-mining camps located well inland. Captain Sylvester's previous steamer, the Bully Washington, did not remain in service for long as a boiler explosion, just after departing from Scottsburg, sent her straight to the bottom of the river on December 12th, 1857. Captain Josiah S. Leeds may well have been in command at the time of the explosion, which scalded and injured five persons, as he had purchased a half interest in the steamer from the Hinsdale brothers. The boat was said to have been in good condition and the cause of the explosion was not discovered; however, records indicate that during the gold rush days many ships were lost on the Pacific Coast and that being a merchant seaman was somewhat risky work. Perhaps Captain Sylvester thought he was running on borrowed time, as in 1860 he gave up the sea and took up permanent work with his brother in the successful mercantile business; however, the 1860 Census still lists Sylvester as the captain of a steamship.

During the winter of 1861-62, a disaster occurred which caused more damage to Southern Oregon than the whole of the Indian wars of 1855-56. A deluge extended from the Columbia River to the mouth of the Sacramento in California and reached the Umpqua Valley in mid-December 1861. The waters of the Umpqua were 10 feet higher than was shown by the high-water mark on their banks, and higher than had ever been known in the traditions of the Indians. On the Umpqua the torrent carried away a recently completed bridge on the north branch of the river at Winchester, which had cost \$10,000 to construct. It carried away the mills of Markham & Kellogg, nearly all the ferryboats, the original lighthouse built in 1856 at Fort Umpqua, and at Scottsburg entirely washed away the middle and lower areas of the



View of house and blooming rhododendrons and azaleas northeast of house. The photo by the late Tom Drake was believed to have been taken in the 1970s. Photo courtesy of Ann Drake.



The authors Gordon Wylie and John Hammond in the garden during one of their early visits. Photo courtesy of the authors.



Galen Baxter in the garden during the rhododendron identification trip in May 2006. Photo by G. Wylie.



ARS members from the Southwestern Oregon and Siuslaw chapters and Bureau of Land Management staff during the garden visit in April 2007. Photo by G. Wylie.



View north along slough showing Umpqua River in the background. Photo by G. Wylie.



'Mrs Furnivall' in the garden. Photo by G. Wylie.

town, including the Hinsdale brothers mercantile business (1).

By 1864 the entrepreneurial George S. Hinsdale was selling logs to the Gardiner Mill Company that had been founded in 1863. George had probably acquired a financial interest in the mill, only to see it

wiped-out by a major fire in 1867. The site was sold in 1868 and the mill rebuilt.

But worse was to come. Records suggest a fire was started in 1868 by settlers clearing land at a place known as Greenacres, then a separate community but now a part of Scottsburg, in an area

now encompassed by the Siuslaw National Forest. For several miles the fire spread rapidly westwards along the north bank of the Umpqua until it jumped the river near the mouth of Mill Creek from where it headed southwest and burned almost all of the Elliott State Forest, stopping

only when it reached the sands and water around Coos Bay and Reedsport. An estimated 300,000 acres of forests were burned in what came to be known as the "Coos Bay Fire" (4).

In the same timeframe Capt. D. Sylvester Hinsdale and Capt. Josiah S. Leeds laid out the town of Gardiner and acquired an interest in the Gardiner Mill Company. Sadly, Sylvester passed away unexpectedly at the early age of 47 on December 13th, 1870, on a Union Pacific train at Laramie, Wyoming, whilst travelling to visit his family in Connecticut (5). The mill was sold in 1871 to a Capt. Asa M. Simpson of San Francisco, an investor in lumber production for the Californian market, and renamed the Simpson Bros. Mill.

George S. Hinsdale purchased an interest in the company in July 1876, and the following year with his partners he erected a new sawmill under the name of G.S. Hinsdale & Company. By the year-end the two mills had shipped forty-four cargoes of lumber, mostly to San Francisco. But another disaster befell the company when in July 1880 a fire started in the pit of the new sawmill and spread rapidly. By the time it was put out it had destroyed the mill, the Mill Stores and thirty-nine houses; the damage totalled \$52,000. Lumber for rebuilding Gardiner after the 1880 fire was sawed at the Simpson Bros. Mill and donated to anyone who wanted to stay and build a new home.

George, who had survived a lifetime of turmoil with his business enterprises, had no intention of "throwing-in the towel" and in 1885 was an incorporator, with five Californian investors, of the new Gardiner Mill Company. The new company erected a sawmill at the north-end of Gardiner and also constructed the Gardiner Mill Store on the waterfront that became a landmark for around ninety years. One of the investors was Wilson F. Jewett, an associate of George, who was born and raised in Maine, and in 1878 bought an interest in the new mill at Gardiner and then for the next three

years managed the company's lumber outlet in San Francisco. Following the 1880 fire, Jewett returned to Gardiner in 1881, settled there and became a leading figure in the Gardiner Mill Company, which eventually bought out the interests of George S. Hinsdale & Co. George is thought to have died in 1888.

In 1889 Oscar B. Hinsdale, the late-Capt. D. Sylvester Hinsdale's son, then 25 years old and following in his father's footsteps, founded the Umpqua River Steam Navigation Company with two partners. The company's operations were initially centred on the acquisition of the *Eva*, an old stern-wheeler powered by a pair of horizontal engines. She had been constructed in Portland, Ore., and had begun service on the Umpqua in 1894 carrying passengers between Winchester Bay and Scottsburg where onward connection was made with stagecoach service to Drain. By the turn of the century Oscar B. Hinsdale had an interest in all the riverboats on the Umpqua. In the late-1890s Oscar married Evangeline Nixon and they resided in Gardiner for several years and had two sons, George Spencer Hinsdale (b. February 17th, 1899) and Oscar Howard Hinsdale (b. February 21st, 1901).

The independent Coos Bay, Roseburg & Eastern Railroad and Navigation Company, popularly called the Coos Bay & Eastern Railroad (C.B.&E.R.), was constructed in 1893 from Myrtle Point to Marshfield on Coos Bay. This 26-mile line was isolated for many years and made connection with the outside world via the Portland & Coos Bay Steamship Line whose steamer *Breakwater* provided a once a week service from Marshfield to Portland.

The C.B.&E.R. hauled a great deal of freight, logs and local passengers in addition to coal from the Bunker Hill mine and the line was extended southwards to Powers over the tracks of an earlier logging railroad. When construction of the Oregon Western Railroad commenced in 1906, its alignment had been planned to run west from a connection with the

Southern Pacific Railroad at Drain, then via Elk Creek and on down the Umpqua River, so Oscar B. Hinsdale envisaged platting a new town on the tidal flats west of Dean Creek. His property there extended more than a mile along the south bank of the river, having been purchased from the Marks Family shortly after 1900. Oscar envisaged pumping dredged materials on to the low-lying land west of Dean Creek and constructing a depot, warehouses, and other facilities for the railroad and the new town. His dreams were shattered when the Oregon Western Railroad terminated construction due to financial problems in 1907.

In 1913 the Willamette Pacific Railroad (W.P.R.) began laying tracks west from Eugene via Mapleton and headed towards East Gardiner on the north bank of the Umpqua. Simultaneously, the W.P.R. worked northwards out of Marshfield (renamed Coos Bay in 1944) northwards towards Gardiner. This was the final nail in the coffin for Oscar B. Hinsdale's plans to create a new town, as the alignment of the new railroad was directed towards crossing the Reed Family's lands and the Umpqua some five miles downstream from Dean Creek.

The Reed family assembled seven farms and by 1914 had constructed around twelve miles of dykes to encompass the fields in the vicinity of Schofield and Rainbow Sloughs. They then platted the town of Reedsport and accomplished precisely what Hinsdale had dreamed of doing at Dean Creek. Both the W.P.R. and the C.B.& E.R. were taken over by the Southern Pacific Railroad (S.P.R.) as early as 1915. In that year the W.P.R. had just completed the construction of a major bridge across the Umpqua River at Reedsport when the S.P.R. decided it was time to remove any possibility of a competitor getting their hands on the heavy freight traffic.

The S.P.R. then completed the work of the W.P.R. and reached East Gardiner in 1916 when through service to Eugene commenced along the entire branch line. An old story, still in vogue, suggests that

the S.P.R.'s income from the Coos Bay Branch alone generated enough revenue to pay all the bills for the entire Central Oregon Division. The new line bypassed the town the town of Gardiner, and some say Wilson Jewett wanted it that way because of his financial interests in the steamers that carried lumber and plywood from the mills in the San Francisco trade.

A couple of authorities on the old logging railroads have suggested that the early history of railroad logging operations in the Coos Bay area has never been fully researched, but it does seem certain that the first logging railroads in the Northwest were built here around 1880, perhaps the first on the entire West Coast. Very primitive locomotives were used at Myrtle Point up to the early-1900s. Around this time the Gardiner Mill Company was using two logging locomotives, a "Shay" and a "Heisler," the latter named Jos Knowland, after one of the owning partners, to carry the logs from the woods to the log dump at the river bank.

The Evolvement of Spruce Reach Island House and Garden

In 1912 Oscar B. Hinsdale and his wife Evangeline erected a three-roomed house on Spruce Reach Island, part of the low-lying strip of land Oscar had purchased from the Marks family on the south bank of the Umpqua, between Dean Creek and Koepke Slough. The structure was built around crab apple trees that grew through the living room and extended out through the roof. Nancy Lee, a long-time resident of Reedsport, noted that in 1912 Oscar B. Hinsdale constructed a timber house, from planks cut from old cedar trees on the property (10). The three-roomed house was used as a summer vacation retreat when they travelled from their home in San Francisco where Oscar managed the Gardiner Mill's retail lumber store located on the Bay since around 1904. He also owned extensive ranch property on the Smith River.

In March 1914 Oscar's family

returned to live at Gardiner when he became manager of the Gardiner Mill Company, following the death of Wilson Jewett, and travelled extensively on its behalf (11). At this time he also diversified his financial interests by laying out plans to establish the First National Bank of Gardiner by raising \$25,000 in shares (12). At Koepke Slough to the west of Spruce Reach Island, and at Dean Creek, the Hinsdale dairy farm operations were created from the construction of dykes and tide-gates to convert salt-marsh into meadow. It is probable that Oscar had erected a residence and a barn at both Koepke Slough and Dean Creek and he engaged tenants to take care of the dairy farm operations.

Around this time additional trees were planted at the western extremity of the Spruce Reach Island property to create a shelterbelt, consisting of a large stand of Deodar cedars (*Cedrus deodara*), Atlanticum cedars (*C. atlantica*) and Cedars of Lebanon (*C. libani*). Other specimen trees were planted closer to the house.

Disaster struck again in 1917 when the Gardiner mill burned down, destroying several buildings in the business section of the town and along the river frontage, during a period of tremendous disruption and difficulty for the region's forest products industry. Oscar B. Hinsdale passed away in Berkeley, Calif., on November 21, 1918, at the early age of 53, having been diagnosed with cancer eight years earlier. After her husband's death, Evangeline Nixon Hinsdale continued to return from California with her two sons to visit the Umpqua area in the summer months and stayed at the house on Spruce Reach Island. A real estate holding company, the Hinsdale Estate Company, was formed from the assets of Oscar's estate and the family's transportation company became the Umpqua River Navigation Company (U.R.N.Co).

After graduating from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1920, George Spencer Hinsdale, Oscar's eldest son, settled in the lower Umpqua area and held positions as president of the U.R.N.

Co. and secretary of the Hinsdale Estate Company. In 1931 he married Frances S. Honeyman Scott, granddaughter of Harvey Scott, the editor and driving force behind the *Oregonian*, and they lived in Reedsport in the 1930s. By 1930 his mother, Evangeline N. Hinsdale, was living permanently at Spruce Reach Island (1930 Census).

Oscar's second son, O. Howard Hinsdale, graduated from the University of California in 1924 and joined the First National Bank of Gardiner and sustained decades of commitment to the bank. Howard pursued other business interests in the region, purchasing and operating the Cathlamet and Westport car ferries that ran across the Umpqua between Reedsport and Gardiner on the Roosevelt Highway, later to become Highway #101. The ferries operated until 1936 when the Umpqua Highway Bridge was constructed. Howard married Jane Fales and they had two sons, Spencer Hinsdale and O. Howard Hinsdale, Jr.

Howard also nurtured and operated for most of his life the U.R.N. Co., and he was instrumental in the company's 1920s shift from passenger and freight services to log hauling and gravel production to meet the needs of highway construction. The new roads included Highway #38, a route graded and gravelled west from Drain to Reedsport, and the first section was opened to traffic in 1923. In the late-1920s, when this highway was being constructed in the Dean Creek vicinity, Howard used one of his "teams" to raise the foundations of the entire three-room structure at Spruce Reach Island to counter the possibility of flooding. Reedsport and the surrounding area had flooded in 1927 and this work was probably a direct result of the Umpqua breaking its banks. The driveway and immediate areas of the garden were raised in level and a number of specimen trees planted.

On October 29, 1929, the collapse of the stock market signalled the onset of the Great Depression, but this meant little to tens of thousands of Oregonians who were already living in depressed circumstances.

Through deficit spending and passing on payment to subsequent generations, Congress authorized programs that helped change the face of Oregon. One of these was the construction of five stunning bridges spanning major estuaries on the Oregon Coast. The Umpqua Sand & Gravel Company, another Hinsdale Family operation, was able to meet the need for gravel for use in the aggregate for building the bridges, whilst the U.R.N. Co. hauled the material to site. The local mills needed tugs to tow rafts and to guide their vessels over the bar of the Umpqua and the U.R.N. Co., which operated a fleet of tugs and barges that plied the coastal waters of Oregon and Washington, handled this business. Some of the barges were fitted with cranes, for loading and off-loading purposes, and these were used to ship the sand and gravel from the extraction facility. These facilities would in due course prove key in the development of the house and garden on Spruce Reach Island.

Meanwhile, the Gardiner Mill Company had lain idle since the fire of 1917 and Wilson F. Jewett, the driving force in the company, had died three years earlier. Howard realised there was an opportunity to resurrect the mill and, in the midst of the depression, he embarked on securing capital to bring the mill into operation in 1936. He sold the eastern end of the dairy farm operation at Dean Creek to Ralph Foster for \$30,000, took in other investors and the Gardiner Lumber Company's employees overhauled the old sawmill. The company prospered and gained contracts during WWII, but several of the partners were eager to sell and Howard had insufficient capital to buy them out.

In the aftermath of WWII the mills and plywood industry in Washington State had difficulty in securing good quality logs and many of log buyers turned to Oregon to meet the demands of the mills. Ray Stiger was the log buyer for the Vancouver Plywood Company, located on the Columbia on the western edge of Vancouver, Wash. A. Stiger

needed to travel an increasing distance from the plant to locate supplies and in the late-1940s his quest for logs stopped at the Gardiner Lumber Company where he spent a day with O. Howard Hinsdale.

Stiger learnt that the company was cramped financially and willing to sell part interest. He flew over the company and found that it included a well blocked-out area of timber and a first-class logging operation. Stiger returned to Vancouver, reported the opportunity and after further negotiation the company acquired a one-half interest in the Gardiner Lumber Company for \$450,000, thus bolstering their sources of logs (16). In 1948 all parties with an interest in the Gardiner Lumber Company, including the Vancouver Plywood Company, sold out to the Long-Bell Lumber Company for a reported \$5,000,000, the sale including 75,000 acres of timber holdings in the lower Umpqua region.

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