

## Our Valley's Fluffy June

When the calendar reaches June there is no more snow season in our area. The passes are open, the mittens and skis have been put away. People are jogging, not slogging, down running paths.

Yet every year from end of May through June, floating white fluffy stuff gathers in small drifts in gutters and other areas that allow floating fluffy stuff to accumulate.



People new to the area post questions on social media. What is it? Where is it coming from? Is it dangerous?

Old timers explain, it's cottonwood season and the trees along the Puyallup and White river are just doing what they have done for centuries. Propagating the species. Deploying fluffy spores that drift for miles.

There used to be many of them in the valley. The Ryan farm land had a grove of cottonwood that was harvested soon after George Ryan acquired the property.

The black or western cottonwood (*P. trichocarpa*) found around Sumner has been lucky. No one has done a lot of serious harvesting for about one hundred years.

In the early 1900s our cottonwoods were threatened by a wood processing plant named the **Sumner Excelsior Works**. The plant chewed up, peeled and nibbled cottonwoods to make excelsior. Fine curled, softwood shavings used for packaging fragile goods or stuffing furniture, toys and mattresses. There were different grades of fineness.

Shredded cottonwood does not get hard and brittle as it dries. It stays pliant and flexible which made it excellent for packing material.

The business was started around 1890 by a couple of New Yorkers, A. Grossman and C.E. Stewart. it was incorporated in 1892 with a value of \$10,000. The trustees were George E. Hart, John F. Hart and A.S. Kelly.

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Hwy 410 &amp; Puyallup River

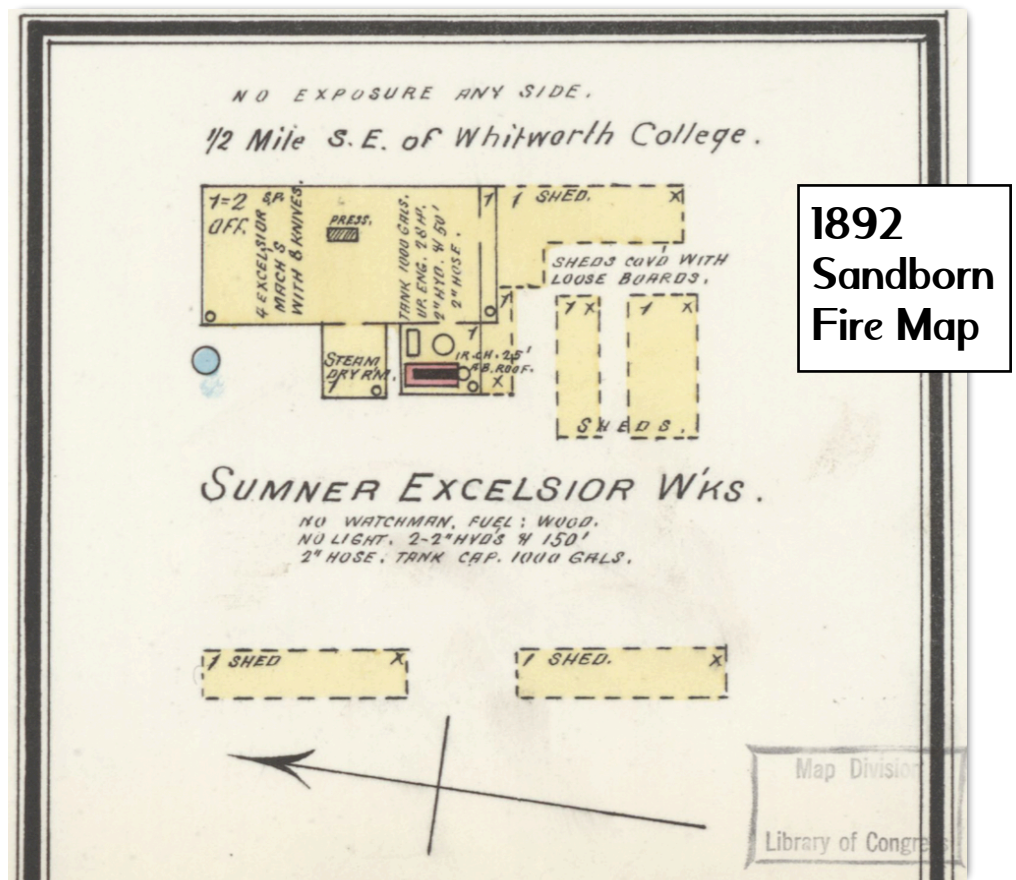
These maps were used for insurance purposes so they focused on aspects of a company that could apply to a claim. Dangerous machinery and fire prone processes. The sketches of buildings were used to determine the scope of losses.

The map tells us there was an office on the interior north side of the plant. The plant had four excelsior machines, each with 8 blades. There was a press and a 1000 gallon water tank with a two inch hose for plant use and for fire

Grossman built the plant and it was said to be one of the best paying in Sumner. The plant was located south of Maybelle Street about a half a mile from Whitworth College and about the same distance from what is now the Sound Transit parking lot. It was very close to the Puyallup river where cottonwoods were plentiful and still hang out.

There was about thirty acres of cottonwood adjacent to the plant. The crews harvesting the cottonwoods would saw the trunks into smaller bolts, suitable for loading into the excelsior machines. The bolts would be "sun dried" before processing. At times, crews would probably float bolts down the river to an area closer to the plant. A common practice at that time.

One of the workers was Willard Gross, Dick Shotrell was the engineer and a Mr. Powers delivered the excelsior bales to the depot with a wagon pulled by a white horse. Not much else is known about the business except a detailed illustration of the plant layout in a 1892 Sandborn Fire Map.

1892  
Sandborn  
Fire Map



protection. There was a boiler room and a steam heated drying room. There were five sheds on the plant property. It also noted that there was no watchman. Understandable because in 1890 Sumner, who would pay someone to sleep.

The Sumner Excelsior Works had a short life. It went into receivership in 1893 with a value of \$3,253 in machinery and stock. After that our valley's cottonwoods could rest a little easier. Those that were still harvested by local mills were shaped into boxes, pallets and other small wood items.

In the mid 1920s, the use of cottonwood for "excelsior" was greatly diminished thanks to a Seattle inventor, C.C. Rafter, who developed a viable way to process unwanted paper stock into excelsior used for packing material.

#### Notes about Cottonwood and Excelsior:

Cottonwood buds have a sweet fragrance and have enjoyed a long relationship with herbalists who use the buds for medicinal purposes.

One of the first excelsior machines carried the brand name "Excelsior" and the word evolved into a generic term for shaved wood pieces.

Excelsior is a Latin word meaning "Ever upward" It has also been used as a descriptor for excellence.

Stan Lee used the word Excelsior as a sign off for his columns.



***Ever Upward!***

