

Valhalla Tree Farm

By **Brendan Whyte**, Forester, Washington State University Extension, brendan.whyte@wsu.edu

Published in Forest Stewardship Notes, Spring/Summer 2021

All photos courtesy of the Ingebright Family.

Finding the Family Forest

When Earl and Laurine Ingebright found an ad in a local paper for a property near Arlington in 1958, they knew it would be a place for family fun, relaxation, and a quite a lot of work. What they could not have anticipated was the sheer diversity of endeavors, parties, and fun that the family would pursue on the property over the coming generations. From forest stewardship and timber harvesting, to electrical engineering and avian eavesdropping, to rock concerts and winemaking, Earl and Laurine could not have known what was to come.

After purchasing the 63-acre property an hour north of their North Seattle home, the Ingebrights set to work on their first major project: fixing up the old two-bedroom homestead house. Built circa 1900, the old house was in rough shape, but it had good cedar bones. In fact, the house was built entirely of clear tight-grained cedar, from the board and batten siding to the interior wallboards, and the sawdust insulation in between. With help from friends, the family set to work, and soon had the little weekend home in livable shape and furnished with donated furniture. Before long, the Ingebrights had a sizeable vegetable garden, and a family of beavers moved in to join them on Jordan Creek — probably encouraged by Earl regularly going to “hike to the back” and kick out the regular trappers and other poachers — creating a 5-acre pond with good trout fishing.



Figure 1: The Homestead House in 2012.

The forest itself was something to behold. Last steam-logged around 1900, the property was dominated on to the east by the 900-foot cliffs of Deer Mountain and blanketed under a canopy of tall Douglas-fir and western redcedar. The streams and small lakes made the property a joy to explore, and soon the Ingebrights spent every opportunity they could on the property, often joined by friends, family, and co-workers. They named it “Valhalla.”

The Ingebright family’s connection to Valhalla only grew from there, but not without some trials and tribulations. There were years away, there was burglary, and there was vandalism. However, eventually, the now-retired Earl and Laurine were re-joined in their work on the property by their son David, now grown and returning from university and a stint in the Coast Guard in 1976. The full history of Valhalla and the Ingebright family could fill several books, but we would like to focus on some of the projects, small and large, that Valhalla has seen over the years.

Forest Stewardship

Our mission is to become stewards of the land and manage our forest to maximize the production of timber over the long term while giving consideration to other forest benefits such as unique sites, aesthetics, clean air and water, wildlife and recreational opportunities. – Mission Statement of the Valhalla Tree Farm

With a focus on sustainability, recycling, and reuse, the Ingebrights have been dedicated stewards of their land. The first foray into active management came in mid-1980s, when the family discovered that their “front 20” of relatively young Douglas-fir was badly stagnating, and slowly succumbing to large pockets of laminated root rot. In 1987, the stand was clearcut and replanted to 400 trees per acre, with the proceeds used to bring power back to the property and to build a 20-by-30-foot pole building. As a part of this process, Valhalla also got its first long-term management plan.

In 2007, the Ingebrights began considering more active management measures, including the harvest of several stands of mature red alder before they began to fall apart. Earl and Dave enrolled in WSU Extension Forestry’s Forest Stewardship Coached Planning Class, which gave them the knowledge and tools they needed to update their management plan and navigate the Washington State Department of Natural Resources’ Forest Practice Application (FPA) process. With their FPA approved, and an “alternate plan” in place for their riparian areas, the harvest took place in 2008. The harvest areas were then replanted with western redcedar, with a mind to both long-term timber values and reducing the damage from the laminated root rot still present on the property. Additionally, DNR awarded the Ingebrights a Family Forest Fish Passage Program grant, which paid to replace an old fish-blocking culvert on Jordan Creek. The coho returned, and, in this time of new beginnings, David married his wife, Jan Stevenson.



Figure 2: Harvesting Alder by the Picnic Pavilion in 2008.

In 2010 Earl, Laurine, and David were named Washington State Tree Farmers of the Year by the American Tree Farm Program. This award recognized the dedication to stewardship and forest management that the Ingebrights had been adhering to for decades. However, their work was not finished. After purchasing an additional neighboring lot in 2012, Valhalla Tree Farm now spanned more than 100 acres, and there was so much more to do. Sadly, the family lost Laurine in 2013 at age 95, and Earl chose to move to a nearby retirement community in Granite Falls. From his new home, Earl hired a young man, Scott, to drive him up to Valhalla every single day, so that he could still work and play in his beloved forest. The same year, Dave retired from Boeing, and took an even more active role (if that was possible) in the ever-evolving creation that was Valhalla Tree Farm, aided by Jan, and his daughter Shannon. Jan also re-established a world-class vegetable garden that kept the family plied with fresh fruits and vegetables all summer long, supplementing the garden’s supply with gathered berries from the tree farm.

The Ingebrights and their surrounding community were saddened by the further loss of Earl in 2017, but his ethos has continued in this current generation. Shannon graduated in 2018 with a master of

environmental horticulture degree from the University of Washington's School of Environmental and Forest Sciences, and has continued to help David and Jan manage their family forest.

While Shannon was finishing her studies at UW, she and David developed a plan for another timber harvest.

Over the years, David and Earl had been learning from some earlier mistakes. The Douglas-fir stand planted after the 1987 20-acre harvest was suffering from the same laminated root rot as the previous rotation and was stagnating, having not been thinned. Embracing this as an educational opportunity, the Ingebrights harvested it again in 2018 and replanted with western redcedar at 320 trees per acre. Additionally, it was decided that the back stand of mixed conifers, regenerated from the original 1902 harvest, could use some thinning to enhance forest structure, wildlife habitat, and provide for continued growth of timber values. In 2019, this back stand was thinned by between 30 and 40 percent to meet these objectives.



Figure 3: 65-foot cedar poles were the most valuable timber harvested in the 2019 thinning.

Timber management, however, is only a small part of the story of Valhalla. Throughout their ownership, each generation of Ingebrights have been tinkering, building, gardening, playing, and bringing friends and loved ones to the property. Just as much of the forest, these people, projects, and parties are what has made the tree farm a magical place.

Friends, Family, and Rock'n'Roll

Salmon Barbecues

Beginning in the 1950s, the Ingebrights have hosted salmon barbecues. Inviting friends and co-workers, Earl would show off the barbecuing methods taught to him by members of the Swinomish Tribe. Over 100 people would sometimes gather to taste the slow-alder-smoked salmon. While the salmon was smoking guests would take part in treasure hunts, egg tosses, and "dowsing" for water.



Figure 4: Earl and his son-in-law Bill Messecar tend the salmon barbecue, made from red alder saplings.

Rock Concerts

The first rock concert at Valhalla took place in 1970, featuring a little-known band from the wanted ads, named Little Nickel, playing for friends and family. However, in 1990, Dave got serious about realizing “his (1970s classic rock) dream.” Inviting his musician friend Chris Svehaug’s band, he made it into a yearly tradition, featuring multiple bands, kegs of beer, and, sometimes, helicopter rides. While the last rock concert took place in 2001, they were parties the family remembers fondly.



Figure 6: Invitation to the 2000 "Rock'n'Roll Summer Party



Figure 5: "Anthem" plays on a homemade stage in 1992.

Wine

Also in 1990, the Ingebrights sat at Valhalla, “looking at all the luscious blackberries growing all over Valhalla and wonder(ing) what we could do with them.” Soon enough, they became members of a local winemaking club and took a class. After a few years, they perfected their first recipe, a “light-dry Blackberry wine. Pleasing to all who taste it. Hints of black cherry and smoked meats.”

Soon enough, the family started using other fruit, such as plums, before clearing a 1/3-acre area to plant European starts of Madeleine Angevine, Siegerrebe and Müller-Thurgau grapes. A real vineyard! After installing drip lines and cultivating the vines to maturity, the vineyard began producing abundantly, despite regular battles with raccoons and birds. In 2014, the vineyard was expanded with three tiers of vines on a south-facing slope, and winemaking had begun a yearly event for the Ingebrights, putting six to eight cases into the wine cellar each September.



Figure 8: The North Vineyard.

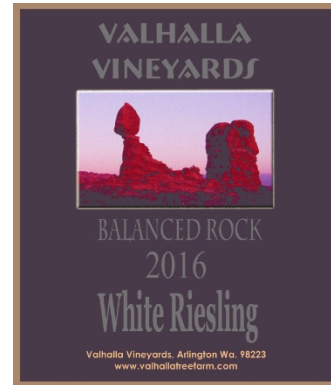


Figure 7: A Valhalla Vineyards White Riesling label.

Shooting Matches and Golf

Another yearly event on Valhalla has been the “Shooting Match.” Setting up rifle, trap, and pistol ranges, the Ingebrights have invited enthusiastic friends to come and compete, test their guns, and have a day in the woods. For those with other interests, Valhalla has also been known to host a golf tournament, too!

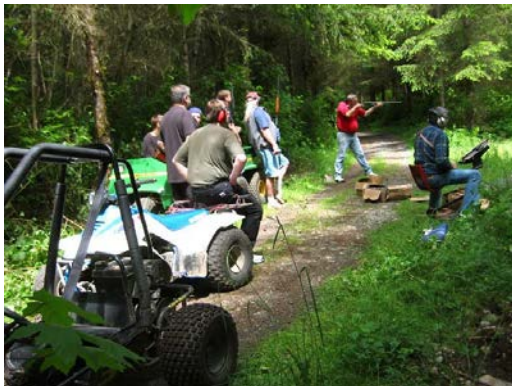


Figure 9: The trap range.



Figure 10: The start of the sixth hole of the Pitch'n'Putt.

Building, Recycling, and Relaxing

Every member of the Ingebright family has left their mark on the Valhalla tree farm over the years. The most obvious of these are the building projects, large and small, that cover the 100 acres. These constructions add a sense of adventure to the forest, as a wandering newcomer to Valhalla is almost certain to discover some little wonder tucked away in a hidden place. The largest additions to the property are the several beautiful family homes that now inhabit the woods, but the most magical are the smaller projects.

Stave Chapel, Norsk Hytte, and Sauna

In honoring the family’s Norwegian heritage, Earl built the Norsk Hytte to replicate the cozy mountain cabins of their cousins in Scandinavia. Built with timber from Valhalla itself, and furnished with a bunk bed just like the ones Earl remembered from his visits to family, the Norsk Hytte is a beautiful and secluded little getaway. Since its construction in the 2000s, the Hytte has been complicated by a luxurious propane-heated shower, and an almost equally luxurious outhouse.



Figure 11: The Norsk Hytte



Figure 12: The environs around the Hytte.

With a similar nod to the family history, the Ingebrights constructed a small stave church, a homage to the traditional wooden churches that dotted northwestern Europe during the Middle Ages. Tying this heritage in to the history of Valhalla itself, the chapel was built out of material reclaimed from the old farmstead house from 1901. Originally placed in the 80-year-old Douglas-fir stand that holds the Hytte, the Stave Chapel was eventually moved to a more panoramic vista on “Huckleberry Hill.”



Figure 13: Sunrise at the Stave Chapel



In a final nod to both Norway and simple luxuries, a wood-heated sauna was added near the Hytte in 2015.

Figure 14: The sauna.

Bridges

Earl had dreamed of building a bridge across Jordan Creek for decades, and in 1999 he decided it was time. Having identified possible crossings, he found a spot where the trail would lead over the creek, and up to a perfect cabin site. Using timber harvested and milled on Valhalla, they set to work, and soon had a simple but beautiful bridge, in place. The Norks Hytte would soon be built above this crossing.



Figure 15: Building Earl's footbridge.



Figure 16: The Rail Flatcar Bridge showing its strength.

In order to gain access to the back acreage during the thinning operation in 2019, it was finally necessary to upgrade Earl's old footbridge. After seeing a recycled rail flatcar bridge on the nearby Nourse Tree Farm, it was decided that this style of crossing would provide the perfect mix of sustainability, robustness, and simplicity. The bridge also allowed ample passage for the salmon in Jordan Creek, and vehicle access to the Hytte and its environs.

In 2020, it was time for another footbridge, this time leading to one of the campsites. Again, timber from the property was used to build a robust and stunning footbridge that showcased what could be done with some of the “waste” cedar that the mills didn’t want.



Figure 17: Finishing up the second footbridge.

Campsites

As a part of Valhalla’s constant activities, and hosting of friends and family, a network of campsites has evolved across the property. These sites began as chance findings of beautiful and favorite places in the woods but have slowly been improved to provide more amenities to the Ingebrihts’ guests. Each site is unique, with a variety of views and boasting a different selection of homemade upgrades, from camping shelters and pads to running water and outhouses.



Figure 18: Some of Valhalla's camping sites.

Technological Marvels

If one had to find one word to describe the Ingebrights on Valhalla, it might be “ingenious.” A close second might be “busy.” Besides the forest management, construction projects, and restorations, the tree farm is littered with ingenious solutions to problems large and small.

Entering the property, the first thing a visitor will encounter is David’s homemade (and home-wired) security gate, complete with a working 1940s magneto phone for announcing your arrival. This phone connects to a system of similar restored antiques in almost every building on the property – and run by a small solar panel – that provides communication across Valhalla.



Figure 20: The magneto phone at the front gate.

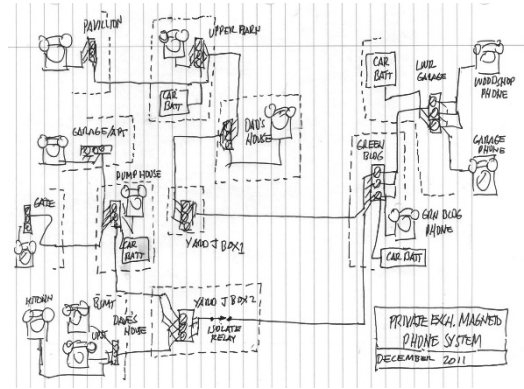


Figure 19: A diagram of the Valhalla phone system.

However, the daunting task of setting up the magneto phone system was nothing compared to Valhalla’s spring water system. Earl had discovered an exceptionally pure spring on the property in 1958, dubbing it the “fountain of youth,” and in 1994 the family decided to run a pipeline to the main house as their main source of water. Although this project started with running a ½-mile water line, the water system has expanded to supply a drinking fountain at the Picnic Pavilion, several campsites, and the Norsk Hytte, among other things. Fed by gravity alone, the system provides an average of 45 psi!

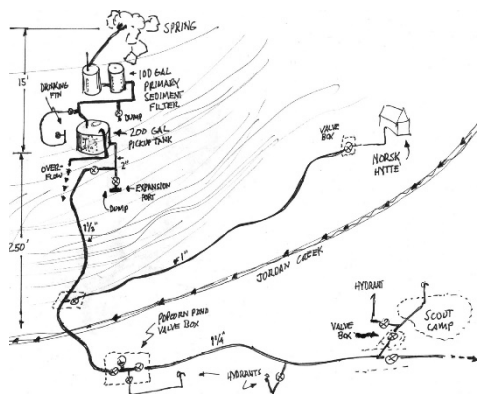


Figure 23: Diagram of the Valhalla water system.



Figure 21: Burying the initial water line.



Figure 22: A water filter installed in 2016.

While all the inventions on Valhalla offer some sort of utility, some are geared more towards recreation. The family's enjoyment of the birdsong around the tree farm led David to try and find a better way to listen and record the chorus. What followed was several years of research and development on a parabolic microphone. Starting as a microphone taped to a porcelain mixing bowl, the project went through at least five iterations until reaching its final form in 2009.



Figure 25: Phase I of the parabolic microphone.



Figure 24: Building the final parabolic microphone in 2009.

Other projects were pure fun and whimsy. The Ingebrights "thought it would be fun to have a light showing at night from our 'Lookout Rock,'" so they set about to make it happen. A light, some PVC, a plastic tub, battery, solar panel, solar controller, dusk regulator, some control circuits, and a little soldering knowhow was all it took. Easy! Valhalla had its own little star.

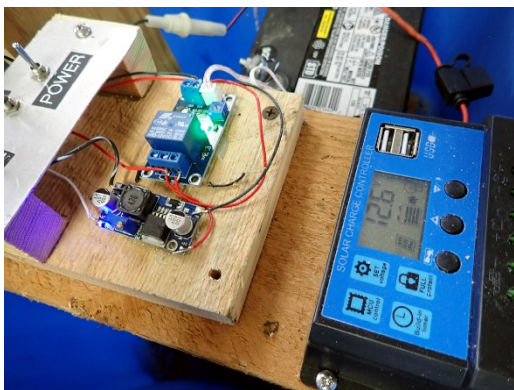


Figure 27: Assembling the light's components.



Figure 26: Shannon sets up the solar panel.

These projects only scratch the surface. Almost any activity or conversation on Valhalla will reveal more curiosities and marvels. A visitor might be surprised that they seem to have a surprisingly good wi-fi connection across large parts of the property or wonder what the large antennas around David and Jan's house are for, but those are stories for another time.

Wildlife

Habitat is a major focus of the management of Valhalla, and a constant source of excitement and interest for the Ingebrights. Walking around the tree farm with David, he is rarely as excited as when pointing out the beaver ponds or talking about his game cameras and sharing photos.



Figure 28: A small selection of the wildlife spotted on Valhalla.

There is no better testament to the passionate stewardship of the Valhalla Tree Farm than the diversity of its wildlife, the volume of its birdsong, and the sight of coho salmon swimming up Jordan Creek every single year. The Ingebrights have created a forest that is diverse and healthy, where the water runs pure, and where almost every forest species in the Puget Sound region can find its niche to call home.

The Present Day

When they found Valhalla in 1958, Earl and Laurine barely had an inkling of the joy that their family would gain from the property, nor the impact that their family would have on it. While they have since passed, these founders began something truly amazing: a tree farm that showcases the successful accomplishment of almost every objective a forest landowner could have. Timber production, wildlife, aesthetics, recreation, and forest resiliency. Valhalla embodies all these things with so little conflict as to look effortless — if you didn't know how hard the Ingebrights have worked.

The management of Valhalla has not been easy. It began as a fun recreational adventure, but evolved as each generation of the family realized the responsibilities that they had shouldered. Many mistakes were made along the way, but they were learned from, and the tree farm only grew as a result. It was often these larger mistakes that caused the family to reassess their management, shift their objectives, and truly learn what it was to steward their forest.

The Ingebright family is managing Valhalla to its fullest. With a deep commitment to sustainability, family legacy, and fun, the tree farm serves as an inspiration to any forest landowner. While Earl and Laurine are no longer with us, their ethos of stewardship, work, and play live on in the current and future generations of Ingebrights on Valhalla.