

FILBERT FARM

By DONALD H. CLARK

State's Largest Acreage On Samish Island

THE first impression you'll get of Fred Schram's 67-acre filbert plantation is its astonishing neatness. The trees line up in geometrical precision; every twig seems to be in its proper place; and the rich dark soil has been dragged to almost table-top smoothness. When the cover crop of vetch and winter rye comes up, the place will be an immense green lawn.

This year the nuts dropped quite early and were husked, cleaned, dried, graded and sacked before the end of October. Now they're on the way to

tually both towns suffered the fate of the Kilkenny cats.

Eight years ago, when Fred Schram needed a diversion from the routine of his Seattle business, he bought the Samish Island ranch, which consisted of a few cleared acres surrounded by heavy second-growth timber and huge stumps from the original forest stand.

Several hundred hours of bulldozer operation and a great deal of local manpower pushed back the jungle to accommodate 5,100 healthy filbert trees, a nursery for growing young stock, a large strawberry field, and a

half-dozen sleek cats. They're on shift 24 hours a day, giving the mice no time to play around Samish Island Farm.

Blackie, a wise old dog with a few gray hairs showing in his whiskers, takes care of rabbits or other varmints too large for the cats to handle and between patrols he picks up stray nuts that fall on the warehouse floor, cracks them neatly, and crunches the kernels with obvious relish.

BEFORE the nuts drop in October, the ground is dragged to create a smooth harvesting surface. When the



BEFORE THE FROST is on the pumpkin, ripe filberts cover the smooth orchard floor.



—Photos by Boyd Ellis, Arlington.

IF YOU FIND A ROCK in your next sack of filberts, you can blame one of these Samish Island women.

Christmas markets in attractive five-pound purple mesh bags with red-and-green, holly-decked labels.

Fred owns 117 fertile acres in Puget Sound's "Olympic Sun Belt." This farming zone, with moderate rainfall and many more days of sunshine than the surrounding region, spreads southeasterly from Sequim on the Olympic Peninsula to blanket the South San Juan Islands and terminates close to this filbert farm on Samish Island, in Skagit County. By Noah Webster's definition it isn't an island at all, although it originally was separated from the mainland by a tidal slough which was filled when the highway was built across.

Island or not, it's a picturesque setting for the ranch with its hour-glass shape and abundant forest. Padilla Bay stretches to the south and Samish Bay to the north, both studded with rocky islands of all sizes from that of a haystack to several square miles. Under a granite shaft in the deep woods on its highest point, old Chief Samish sleeps with scores of his tribesmen.

IN the narrow neck of the hour-glass, a long mound and fragments of building stone and brick mark the location of Atlanta, a town founded in 1883 as a refuge for persecuted ex-Confederates. For years it vigorously fought the adjoining town of Samish for the Skagit steamboat cordwood business. Murder entered the picture, and even-

reservoir for irrigation in the dry summer season.

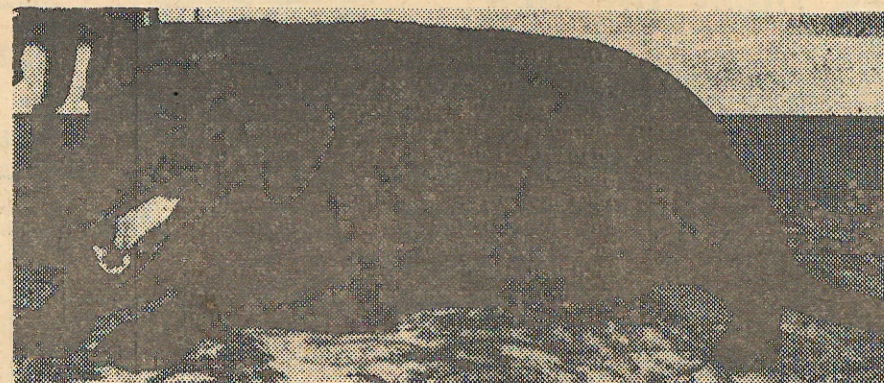
Strawberries also occupy some of the 22½-foot space between recently planted filberts, but these are uprooted when the tree tops grow together and shade the entire ground. The leafy canopy helps the labor situation, however, as it shades out the weeds and eliminates the need for constant cultivation.

BLUE JAYS, squirrels and chipmunks are public enemies in most filbert orchards, but Samish Island seems to be off their calling list. Rats and mice regard nut-storage sheds as rodent heavens, which accounts for Fred's

filberts cover the ground under the trees, they're raked into neat piles and loaded into bushel baskets.

A tractor-trailer hustles the crop into bins in the big warehouse, remodeled from an original shake-roofed barn. For the first two pickings the nuts are allowed to drop naturally, but in the third and last harvesting the trees are shaken to bring the reluctant filberts from the slender boughs.

THE filberts are fed from the storage bins into a husker that removes the leafy overcoats and drops the nuts on a moving belt. Local farm girls stand in line along this conveyor to throw out rocks and defective filberts before



—Bill Simon photo.

MOST DOGS would prefer a bone, but Blackie's meat is from Samish Island filberts, raised by his master.

the belt deposits its load on the screens of the tall drier. That drier, incidentally, gives the consumer more for his money, as filberts are sold by weight. A large sack of nuts that tips the scale at 115 pounds when "green," will weigh only 65 to 70 pounds after being dried.

Another reason for reducing the moisture content is that nearly all Samish Island filberts are marketed by mail, and there's no point in paying postage on water—even on nice clean Skagit County water. Again, from the consumer's angle, drying imparts a better flavor and keeps the nuts in good condition for as long as four or five years.

After drying the crop is fed into a long, rotating steel drum, perforated with holes of four exact sizes through which the nuts fall into bins. The small nuts, too few to warrant packaging, are screened out in the first section of the grader and are usually consumed by Blackie. The medium-sized nuts are graded out in the second section, and the large nuts in the third section near the end of the grader. The over-size "jumbos" pass out at the end of the cylinder, and are sacked as a premium grade. All sizes are according to government standards.

LAST year the Samish Farm crop graded 63 per cent "jumbos," but this year the average size is smaller because of less favorable filbert weather. Those who have collected native hazelnuts and think of filberts as just a fancy name for the cultivated variety, will be astonished at the robin's-egg size of the "jumbo." This applies to the "Nooksack" variety which Fred Schram raises, but the new "Royal" which he is starting to cultivate is a full half-inch larger in circumference.

Confectioners and bakers use a large part of the annual filbert crop, and cheese makers mix ground nut meats with their product to secure better aging and finer flavor. Growers who cater to this trade run their crops through cracking machines and sell the meats in bulk, but Samish Farm prefers to sell direct to individual consumers.

It's worth a trip to Samish Island to see this filbert ranch. Drive North on Highway 99 and take the Chuckanut Drive route (Alternate 99) just north of Burlington. Seven miles from this junction, and just before the highway starts curving upward along the Chuckanut cliffs, you'll see the Edison-Samish Island road sign pointing westward.

Edison, a sleepy little farm town, straggles along the road a mile west of the turnoff, and six miles further along the winding black-top highway you'll see row after row of regimented flat-topped filbert trees. Turn in at Fred Schram's mail box, and if he isn't home, his foreman, Paul Guderjahn, will show you around the place. If you want a five-pound bag of Samish filberts to send to Aunt Susie in Red Oak, Iowa, they always have some around the place.