

CURIOSITY CORNER

Islands of the Strait and Narrows

~ by Sandi Bumpus

Curiosity may have left the proverbial cat a little less lively, but in most cases, it has served us humans well. In the series of articles that will follow in upcoming newsletters, we'll explore a variety of historical details unique to our little corner of the world. Island County, and indeed the Pacific Northwest in general, is a treasure trove of interesting and otherwise gee-whiz-worthy anecdotes and facts. If you are the curious sort, and not a cat, please read on...

Island County, created in 1853 by the Oregon Territorial Legislature, originally encompassed all of Snohomish, Skagit, Whatcom, and San Juan counties. Today, it is the second smallest county by area in Washington state.

There are eight islands that make up the Island County archipelago. Whidbey Island, named Tscha-kole-chy by its original inhabitants, is one we know fairly well, but there are seven sister islands within the county, each with its own unique stories, each worthy of a chapter in the annals of Washington history.

Camano Island may sometimes be overlooked as it reclines there in Whidbey's shadow, but further exploration highlights many factors that make it special. In Island County, Camano holds the distinction of having had the most names over its documented history. Called Kal-lut-chin ("land that juts into a bay") by the indigenous Snohomish people, it was renamed during a 1790 Spanish expedition in honor of explorer Jacinto Caamano. This expedition was designed to establish, "once and for all," Spain's rightful ownership of the North American coast. Possession was challenged again and again, however, until in 1791, the Spanish ceded what would soon be named Puget Sound to the English.

In 1792, George Vancouver was sent to map the area, but entirely missed the island known as Caamano because of a stubborn bank of fog that shrouded it. In 1841, the Wilkes scientific expedition "rediscovered" the island and named it McDonough Island after a hero of the War of 1812. By 1847, the verdant land east of Whidbey and west of the mainland again had its Spanish moniker restored, although it was anglicized to "Camano." Not one to keep a name for more than a decade or so, in an 1855 treaty, then Governor of the Washington Territory referred to Camano as Perry Island, much to the consternation of cartographers and navigators alike. Someone, somewhere finally landed on Camano again, until the turn of the 19th century brought a flurry of logging to the Pacific Northwest. Loggers like Peg Leg Anderson, who built the historic Camano Mabana Schoolhouse from his own lumber, began calling it Crow Island, a nickname which stuck until the middle of the 20th century.

While Camano was suffering through its century-long identity crisis, the "flat top" island to our



Smith Island Lighthouse, circa 1865

northwest was enduring its own. What today we call Smith Island, was named Isla de Bonilla by Spanish explorers, renamed to Smith by fur traders from the Hudson's Bay Company, and during the 20th century, was nicknamed Battleship Island. At its 1858 population zenith, it was home to a 200-foot light-house tower, a light keeper's house, a blockhouse, and several outbuildings. While it withstood the ravages of wind and water for nearly 100 years, bluff erosion caused the lighthouse to be abandoned in the 1950s, and in

1998, the last of the lighthouse fell unceremoniously into the sea. Today the island is used by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) for weather observation, and by the Coast Guard that maintains a navigation light on a skeletal tower.

Of the many small islands that stand sentinel around Deception Pass, those within Island County include Deception Island and its glacial cousin, Pass Island, which serves as the landing pad for the north end of the Deception Pass Bridge from Whidbey, and the connection over Canoe Pass to Fidalgo Island. Pass Island is known as a hiker's haven, with the Pass Trail Loop taking center stage in any quest for must-have experiences. The most infamous of the islands within Deception Pass State Park is Ben Ure Island, near Cornet Bay. With an odd name and a swashbuckling past, it is allegedly named for the 1800s era "pirate" who smuggled rum and immigrants from China and called the little speck of land with the big views his home. Today, you can paddle over and rent a State Park cabin for the night. Strawberry Island, east of Deception Pass, was originally called Hautboy Island because of a particular kind of wild strawberry found there during the Wilkes expedition. It was briefly known as Loon Island after Wilkes and company had departed, but later reverted to Strawberry.

On the south end of Whidbey Island within Saratoga Passage is Baby Island, which today appears as not much more than a spit of sand and scrub, barely visible at high tide. In the 1920s, however, it was home to The Baby Island Resort, a fishing lodge and sometime casino that became a not-so-secret speakeasy during Prohibition. Its scant one acre not only sported the multipurpose "lodge," but also several private cabins that served as summer homes to fishermen and hunters. As erosion continued to eat away at the island, the resort was dismantled, and most of the cabins were painstakingly moved to a shoreline community on Whidbey called Baby Island Heights, then home to future entrepreneur, Eddie Bauer and other would-be Seattle notables. Sadly, for those who didn't heed the warnings, a massive storm in the mid-1970s erased most of the remaining evidence of human habitation. During times of minus low tide, a pilgrimage of locals can sometimes be seen walking through the exposed eelgrass from Whidbey to Baby. There, they forage for clams near the remnants of a log breakwater early residents erected in a futile effort to tame Mother Nature.



Baby Island Resort, circa 1950

Our own island never ceases to be a source of inspiration. With its distinct culture, micro-climates, recreational opportunities, and a rich history, there is never an excuse to be bored here. It is, however, a comfort to those curious among us to know she has seven sisters just waiting to share their secrets.