

History Nook

Changing Times, Changing Names

by TOM WELCH

for the Orcas Island Historical Society

Until 1791, when Spanish explorers first named Orcas Island for the then-Viceroy of Mexico, a gentleman with thirteen names, the seventh of which was "H'Orcasitees", this island had many names. The Lummi Indians who occupied the island seasonally prior to the coming of the white man named places on the island, and landmarks such as Mt. Constitution, but not necessarily the entire island. Their villages and seasonal living areas were known, certainly, but more as individual locations rather than as part of a larger island.

In historical times we have seen Orcas Island renamed as Hull's Island by the U.S. Exploring Expedition (U.S. Ex Ex) in 1841, but delay in publication eventually consigned that name, honoring Captain Isaac Hull of the U.S.S. Constitution, to the dustbin of history. English surveyors, Captain Kellett among them, published charts and maps that

restored "Orcas Island" as the name some years prior to Captain Wilkes' publication of the charts of the U.S. Ex Ex showing this island renamed as "Hull's Island". Thanks be to Captain Wilkes' writers block...I'm not sure just how much cachet 'Hull's Island' might have, but it doesn't seem to equal "Orcas" to me.

Other local features, such as the body of water between Orcas and Lopez Islands that we know as Upright Channel, were also renamed by Wilkes and the U.S. Ex Ex. Upright Channel was called the "Frolic Straits", for example. (Personally, I prefer that name to the one in current usage). Locations on Orcas Island have seen many name changes, too.

What we now call Flaherty's Hill used to be known as "King's Hill". Buck Bay, near Olga, was originally known as 'Stockade Bay'. East Sound was historically known as Buck Bay before it was renamed to its' current designation. The small island in front of the Out-

look Inn we now know as Indian Island, but when I was in high school back in the 1960's everyone called it Jap Island. Before that, it was known as Victory Island. Before that, it was known as Treasure Island. Steamboat captains piloting mailboats to Eastsound in dense fog often used Treasure Island as a location marker, bouncing their foghorn sound off the rocks so they could tell how close they were to the dock at Madrona Point.

They say that change is natural, and necessary, but I'm not convinced that changing traditional, established names of places here is a good thing. We certainly don't want to change the name of Moran State Park to "Clearcut State Park", despite present appearances. Nor should we change the name of Mt. Baker Road to Speedway Lane just because they've widened and leveled the road. Let's keep the traditional, familiar names as long as we can - I think there will be plenty of changes to come.

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