

History Nook

Civil War Veteran, Master Carpenter-Michael Donohue

by JAN KOLTUN

for the Orcas Island Historical Museum

Michael S. Donohue (1842-1916), one of Orcas Island's first builders, was born near Limerick, Ireland. According to his obituary in the Friday Harbor Journal, Feb.10, 1916, he came to a New York farm with his parents in 1847. He stayed there until the Civil War called; in 1862 he enlisted in the Union Army, Company K, 123rd Regiment of volunteers. Serving until the end of the war, he marched with Sherman to the sea.

How and why did he come to Orcas?

Here the differences between oral history and print-authority begin to show. Somebody told me, many years ago, that he rowed from Bellingham to Orcas with two other pioneer progenitors: Peter Bostian and Martin Luther Kimple. After the war, he tried homesteading in Kansas, where his son, Harry, was born. Then he revisited the New York farm, returned to Seattle and came to Orcas.

I would love to substantiate the story of rowing to Orcas. It could be!

A article by his son, Harry, in a 1944 Orcas Islander, doesn't rule out the story, because he said Michael came to Orcas first and then brought his fam-

ily, which by this time included his wife, Myra, whom he had wed November 15, 1870 in the Kansas/Missouri area. Harry was 11 years old when they came up from Seattle on the steamboat Evangel in 1883. They stayed in an East-sound boarding house while he claimed homestead land adjoining the property of his old friend, Martin Luther Kimple. (Donohue's is the site of the present Orcas Gun Club.)

In 1890, he bought land on North Beach Road from Walter and Rozilla Sutherland. The Donohues planted an orchard and sold apples through a commission merchant, Jackson & Son, in Seattle. Michael built Emmanuel Episcopal Church, the Methodist Church and its next-door manse (the latter church became Orcas Island Community Church many years later). He served as county commissioner in 1904 when the new courthouse was built in Friday Harbor (using Kimple brick). He was Master of the Grange in 1914. That same year, he attended the reunion of the Blues and Grays on the field of Gettysburg.

According to Harry, Michael and Myra made the first wheeled vehicle trip from East-sound to Deer Harbor. Previously, before the road was

blasted from the cliffs between West Sound and Deer Harbor, freight had been sent by boat between the two places.

The Donohues' life was marked both by joy and sadness. Their younger son, Emil, died in 1902. He had attended Pacific Lutheran College, and worked as a proofreader for the Seattle Times. In the 1918 flu epidemic, their daughter Isabelle, died. She was the first person to be buried in the Mount Baker Cemetery.

Still, there were happy times. The San Juan Islander of Nov. 18, 1910, reported that about forty friends and neighbors gave them a fortieth anniversary surprise party at their home. Ben Harrison presented them with a set of cut glass water glasses, pitcher, and large bowl, remarking that "Mr. and Mrs. Donohue are busy, useful people. . . in the 21,024,000 minutes of their married life they have built a monument of things done which we, their friends, can see and greatly appreciate."

Upon Michael's death from pneumonia, after a brief illness, the Feb. 10, 1916 Friday Harbor Journal reported: "Mr. Donohue's kindly disposition and lovable character attracted to him many friends, by whom he will be greatly missed."

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