

# History Nook

## Dirty Elsie

by TOM WELCH  
*for the Orcas Island Historical Society*

It was a sunny day in May of 1909 when three men in two small boats began corraling the logs that had drifted away from Terrill's Beach on the rip tide. Attaching tow lines to each log they found, the men rowed them in toward the base of the cliff at the end of the skid road. The foreman of the crew that day was Jim Baker, who had come to Orcas Island in 1901. He was ashore with a team of horses, helping drag the logs up the beach, when he first glanced toward Parker Reef. What he saw that day became imprinted so firmly on his brain that he retained the vivid image for the rest of his days.

Seals were crowded on the rocks of the reef that sunny day, and a pod of Orcas sported out past the reef, midway between Orcas and Sucia Island. As Baker idly counted the number of seals sunning themselves on the rocks, he suddenly noticed a disturbance in the water out past the reef. As he peered at the apparent commotion in the water, he was surprised to see all of the seals flee the rocks into the water. Looking out past the rocks, he could

see that the pod of whales had also become alarmed at something. Moving much faster than they had been, they were now headed directly toward the boats. Baker ran down the beach, shouting a warning to the boatmen to beware of the whales.

As Baker ran he saw the water begin foaming out past the reef, and the head of a huge sea serpent rose from the roiling waters. Ten feet and more of the monster's head surfaced, and his undulating body rose in and out of the water as it moved with incredible speed to Parker's Reef. Shaggy, mane-like fronds ringed the monster's neck behind the head, which resembled a large draft horse. A large dorsal fin about fifteen feet behind the head stood approximately six feet high, and moved from left to right as the creature swam onto the rocks.

The creature twisted its head, evidently spotting the men in their boats, for it started at once in their direction. Baker shouted at the men again. They glanced once toward Sucia, then quickly snapped their heads about again and stared as they caught sight of the monster on the reef. Casting off the

tow lines, the men rowed for their lives toward the shore. The serpent swam to the abandoned logs they had just cast off, nudged them with its massive head, and turned to head back in the direction of Sucia. The foamy wake dissipated slowly as Baker and his crew gathered on the beach, staring at the thing one of the men named 'Ugly Elsie'.

Sea serpents have been reported in these waters for many years, including a sighting at Cadboro Bay, British Columbia, that resulted in the creature being given a taxonomic name. "Cadborosaurus Willsi" is said by witnesses to resemble a serpent with vertical coils or humps in pairs behind a horse-like head. Forward and hind flippers are paired on each side of an elongated body described as slender, and more than sixty feet long when adult. There have been more than 300 claimed sightings of "Cadborosaurus Willsi" over the past 200 years, including at Deep Cove on Saanich Inlet, B.C., and at De Courcy Island in 1968. In 1991 Phyllis Harsh claimed to have caught and released a small, 2 foot baby 'Caddy' near Johns Island in the San Juan Islands.

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## Orcas Island Historical Museum

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