

History Nook

From Kelp to Car Carrier to Museum Model

by CLARK MCABEE
Curator O.I.H.M

The Harvester King was a famous sight in San Juan Islands' waters some 90 years ago. The kelp harvester was turned into a car ferry in the early 1920s. She was built in 1918 by the Everett Marine Ways for the Puget Sound Potash and Kelp Fertilizer Company.

The potash was produced at Port Stanley on Lopez Island for use in gun powder to support the war effort as well. This specialty work in Puget Sound did not provide a profitable commodity and so the vessel was converted to an automobile ferry here by Captain Harry Crosby in 1922 (related to Bing). This run was profitable in the summer season but not at other times. Later she was refitted as the freighter F. H. Marvin and was operated by the Puget Sound Freight lines till after WWII. John Libby of Olympia then bought her and planned to install hog fuel machinery aboard but she remained beached in Olympia ultimately being scrapped.

Kelp is a popular fertilizer today so perhaps she was ahead of her time. She was a wooden vessel of 115 tons, nearly 97 feet long, 20.5 feet wide and featured a minimal draft of just over 5 feet. A shallow draft was mandatory as the old time ferry captains used the smell of kelp as a sure sign of shallow water. A sturdy Fairbanks-Morse oil engine provided power. Sources name her as the first car ferry in the San Juans and with her bill board sized gunnels proclaimed her Harvester King VICTORIA-ANACORTES FERRY she was hard to miss. She is featured on our ship quilt as well.

In addition to a historical interest in the Harvester King we also have an aesthetic interest as well since we just received a gracious donation of a scale model of her from



the Lopez Island Historical Museum. Lopez already had a model so when their museum director Mark contacted me to see if we were interested I responded with a resounding yes, loud enough to possibly be heard at least on the northern end of Lopez!

Ralph Hitchcock built this beautiful model in 1983 in 1/48 scale or 1/4 inch equals one foot. Being a model builder myself since my youth I am amazed at the excellence of Mr. Hitchcock's design. In addition to now having models in the Orcas and Lopez Historical Museums Ralph built a 7 foot long working model of the J. M. White, a Mississippi River mail and cotton packet, featuring scale crewmen and cotton bales. That model took 8,000 hours to build over four years and resides in the Smithsonian. A scale model of the Hudson's Bay historic steamer Beaver was done by Ralph for the Washington State History Museum. Come and see the Harvester King in miniature. Our special thanks go to LIHS director Mark Thompson Klein for the kelp harvester photo and Gabriella Klein for her informative article on Mr. Hitchcock and

Thank you to the History Nook Sponsor