

History Nook

Get Rich – Grow Apples!

by TOM WELCH

for the Orcas Island Historical Society

Farming and fruit-growing supported many Orcas Island families, and were the mainstays of island business, since the earliest days of white settlement. Our salubrious climate, and a good deal of plain, old-fashioned hard work, enabled islanders to grow almost any crop they desired. Apples, pears, plums, peaches, and apricots all seemed to grow with wild abandon, almost matching the berries that sprung up on every fencerow and unplanted acre. One early farmer even grew tobacco, if only to prove that it could be done. He got – and smoked – a hearty crop his first year of planting the ‘evil weed’!

E.V. Von Gohren proved to everyone’s satisfaction that the ideal crop for our latitude, soil, and climate was the Italian Prune...but apples won the day. Italian Prunes

did thrive here, it’s true, but not everyone had the location or patience to grow them. Apple trees were easy to grow, came in many varieties for almost every season of the year, and the fruit could simply be boxed and shipped once it was picked. Prunes required dryers to reduce their weight, and were only profitable in larger operations. Anyone, it seemed, could grow apples.

Farming on an island can be a risky business. You may be able to grow almost anything you desire, but selling it could be another matter entirely. Getting freshly-picked fruit to market from Orcas Island required a seriously labor-intensive effort, and more than a little expense. Apples had to be picked, and although island labor was cheap, grading, sorting, and packing the crop required many hours of hard work. Shipping was usually done by mailboat, at variable but mostly affordable rates, to the

mainland ports of Seattle and Whatcom. Shipments were consigned to Agents at the port for forwarding to buyers and distant markets.

The Commission Agents in Seattle became known throughout the San Juan Islands as the “Commission Pirates”. Shipments of beautiful, perfectly-ripe island fruit arrived at the docks in Seattle and often remained there, in the open, for days at a time. Agents found every reason imaginable to reduce payments to the growers, including claims that the fruit had a ‘poor appearance’ and could not be sold. One island grower told of “..sending 77 boxes of A-1, 3 ½ and 4-tier, apples to Seattle and receiving in return the grand sum of \$15.15: a little over 19 cents per box. With 9 cents for the box, that left me with 10 cents per box for growing, picking, packing and hauling. This is how we get rich growing apples.”

Thank you to the History Nook Sponsor

"Salish Bounty Friendship Feast"

Join Us! 1:00 to 4:00 "@ Outlook Inn

Tickets at the O.I.H. Museum ~ call ~ 376-4849