

HISTORY CORNER

Orcas Island Roads

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by Tom Welch

Orcas Island roads had their origin in the native paths and game trails of earlier residents and wildlife. No roads existed on Orcas Island in the late 1850s when the first white men settled on their few widely scattered homesteads. First Residents living on the island for countless generations before the arrival of the white man had no idea of the wheel, traveled almost exclusively by canoe, and had no thought or need of roads. A few trails or rough paths connected the isolated native settlements or led to a favored hunting site or lookout point, but the saltwater was the universal highway.

Early roads were "corduroy roads" made of logs laid parallel to one another, originally used to "skid" logs down to the water. Grease or fat was used to "grease the skids" so the logs could be pulled by oxen or horses to a point where they could be rolled into the water for rafting. The road to the landing at Dolphin Bay, originally called "Jotte's Landing Road," was such a corduroy road.

The booming Orcas Island fruit business in the 1880s and 1890s saw a dramatic expansion of island roads as farmers seeking to market their crops built roads to nearby settlements and docks, and the bicycle craze of the last years of the nineteenth century helped stimulate the call for good roads. Since local taxes and levies paid for road construction, built-up areas such as Eastsound enjoyed good roads, while more remote parts of the island remained virtually roadless for many years.

Early island road crews were local men supervised by a local foreman, each man paid 25 cents per hour to "brush" the trails and widen and level the paths for wheeled vehicles. The Eastsound crew gathered hoes, shovels, grub-axes and other tools on Monday morning, departed for the end of the previous week's roadwork, and camped out all week as they worked on the road, coming home again on Saturday.

When Robert Moran moved to the island in 1905 he proved a great benefactor to island roads. More than once he bought equipment the road crews sorely needed and donated it to the county, and his reputation was burnished even brighter when he personally paid for paving the road from the Orcas ferry landing to Eastsound.

Orcas Historical Museum

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