



# HISTORIC NOOK

## Pole Pass Light

By: Edrie Vinson

William Cadwell in 1883 was the first to keep a light for navigation in the notoriously dangerous stretch of water called Pole Pass. The captain of the S.S. Libby had a mail contract from Port Townsend through the San Juans and on to Semiahmoo. He convinced Cadwell to hang a kerosene lantern when he was coming through the 120 foot pass at night in exchange for free transportation for his family and free shipment of produce to the market. Pole Pass, possibly the worlds' narrowest navigable channel, was so named because the local Indians used to stretch a pole with a 40 foot high net made of natural raw materials to catch birds in flight as they flew through the narrow opening. This kept them well fed in water fowl meat.

In 1887 Captain U. Sebree of the U.S. Thirteenth Lighthouse District, with advice from some of the oldest and best steamboat men on Puget Sound, established 15 aids to navigation. One of those was the Pole Pass red light, making it the first government light on Orcas Island, and among the first in the Puget Sound. Now Cadwell was paid to light the lantern every night. Since his health was failing, his son-in-law, Robert McLachlan took over the keeping of the light in 1890. In 1907 when Robert died, his son Kirk was appointed keeper of the light.

Later a light was installed at Wasp Pass, about a quarter mile away, and Kirk was also given that light as an added responsibility. He served it by row boat. "A few times the Wasp Pass light blew out on me when the wind was especially strong, and no matter how bad the weather, I'd have to go out and try and light'er again. Those were about the worst times I had, 'cause I can't swim more than a few strokes. And there were a lot of times when I thought I might be swimmin'. I've rowed out in rough water, and had to return home because



the waves were bouncing me around so that I couldn't secure my boat. Every time that would happen, I'd have to wait for low tide, where I could row in on the lee of the rocks."

The U.S. Coast Guard took over the aids to navigation, including care of lighthouses and shore lights in 1939, and in 1949 the light was made a battery operated blinker served by Coast Guard tender. McLachlan was retired at two-thirds pay, but the Pole Pass light remains as a navigational aid to this day.

Kirk McLachlan's cousin, Ivaloe Meyer had the light holder rebuilt, and along with the original lantern, donated them to the Orcas Island Historical Museum. Her story of her childhood and seeing the light is to be a part of the Orcas Voices on our Listening Station exhibit.

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