

History Nook

The Grand Scenic Highway

By: TOM WELCH

For the Orcas Island Historical Museum

The San Juan Islander newspaper reported in 1910 on plans developed by Robert Moran and a nationally-prominent 'good roads expert' named Samuel C. Lancaster to build a 'Grand Scenic Highway' on Orcas Island from Doe Bay to Deer Harbor. The proposed road was to be 25 miles in length, would start at the Doe Bay waterfront, go up and over Mount Constitution, through Eastsound, up and over Turtleback Mountain, and would end at the waterfront in Deer Harbor. Lancaster studied the contours of the land during a stay of several weeks at the Moran mansion at Rosario, and considered the project entirely feasible. He claimed Mount Constitution was 'easy of ascent', and thought the topography of the island no barrier to road building. While Lancaster drew up plans and went to Washington D.C. to try and interest the federal government in the project, Moran was reported to be considering financing the entire project himself, under 'certain conditions'. Expected to cost about \$100,000 each way for a two way road, or a total of \$200,000.00, and to be paid for by government and state aid and private subscription, the completed road would "...rank with the great scenic highways of the world." Wealthy island residents, including Charles F. Roehl, became interested in the local possibilities such a road would bring. Roehl announced plans to build on his property between Olga and Doe Bay a "...complete summer resort, equipped with baths and accommodations that are attractive to the tourist," and to seal the mouth of Doe Bay with a water-tight bulkhead that would have closeable gates and trap 'warm' tidal water for bathing. (The author supposes that Mr. Roehl spent very little, if any, time in our local waters.) Convinced that the San Juan Islands in



Robert Moran



Samuel C. Lancaster, a pioneer in hard surface highway construction including the Columbia River Scenic Highway

general, and Orcas Island in particular, were under appreciated for both their natural scenic beauty and low land prices, Robert Moran 'boosted' the islands every chance he got. He had powerful connections in many places, not least with the transcontinental railroad lines, and their publicity departments all promised to advertise the San Juan Islands throughout the East in 1911. Moran stated that Orcas and the neighboring islands were to become one of the "... great summer homes sites of the earth, and Puget Sound is to become in summer what California is in winter."

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