

# History Nook

## The lost orchards of Orcas Island

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*For the Orcas Island Historical Museum*

In 1898 Orcas Island orchards shipped 160,000 boxes of apples. A decade later, in the year 1909, at the height of its fruit industry, the orchards of Orcas Island boasted 76,731 apple trees that bore more than 41 varieties of fruit with such exotic names as Red Astrachan, Blue Pearmain, Reinette, Blenheim, Jersey Black and Paradise Winter Sweet, to name just a few.

By 1919, just 10 years later, a third of those trees, more than 25,000, had been destroyed. The vibrant agricultural community that was projected to eventually support an urban community of over 60,000 reverted to a sleepy rural hamlet set in a quiet countryside.

What happened to those trees is a complex story, a story of the battle between temperance and the temptation of the apple.

Afraid of water borne disease, early rural Americans drank cider and they drank a lot of cider. Without refrigeration, the cider was hard.

By 1790 the average per capita consumption for adults of 15 years in age or older was 34 gallons of cider or beer, five gallons of distilled spirits and one gallon of wine.

By 1830, the average per capita consumption was seven gallons of pure alcohol per year. For cider or beer that would mean about 175 gallons a year, or almost 90 fifth-size bottles of 80-proof distilled spirits.

In the 1880s on average Americans drank three times as much alcohol as the per capita consumption of today.

With overindulgence a common sight, the Temperance Movement began as a response to public drunkenness.

Eventually the movement blamed alco-

hol consumption for all social ills—poverty, crime, broken families, and violence.

Temperance even made its way to Orcas Island. The site of Eastsound's Episcopal church was once intended to be a saloon. Temperance advocates harassed the owner of the site until he gave up the plan and left the island. The lot stood empty until the church was built in 1885.

At the same time as Temperance was growing, Orcas Island was developing as a vibrant fruit-growing community with apples as its primary export. But the apples were cider apples. Sharp, sometimes bitter, they were often russet apples. Certainly not the perfect colors and shapes of today's table apples.

In 1914, just five years after the peak of Orcas Island's apple production, Washington passed its first prohibition laws. Two years later Washington was a dry state. By 1918 Seattle soft drink sellers were being arrested if any of their cider had fermented to over 1 percent alcohol.

With passage of the 18th Amendment in 1919, the entire nation was officially dry. The Volstead Act in 1920 was created to enforce the Amendment. It declared that any substance containing more than one half of 1 percent alcohol was considered intoxicating and illegal.

Even sweet cider—non-alcoholic cider—was regulated for fear that it would ferment and become alcoholic. Orchards were restricted to 200 gallons a year of sweet cider, not much if you're trying to make a living.

The end was in sight for the orchards of Orcas Island. Four years after the passage of the Volstead Act and just 15 years after the high point of the Orcas Apple industry, almost 60 percent of the trees were gone. The Orchard industry never recovered.

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