

History Nook

Lobsters

by TOM WELCH

for the Orcas Island Historical Society

It seems we can grow almost anything here in the San Juan Islands. Orcas Island has a proud tradition of raising fruits and vegetables in staggering proportions, dating back to the 1880's when E. L. Von Gohren first experimented with the Italian Prunes. John Bowman, who homesteaded what is now Olga, grew chicory and tobacco successfully on the sunny slopes that later boasted acres and acres of strawberries for the Rodenberger family and others. The Olga Strawberry Packing plant is living testimony to the superior position that particular berry held in these parts.

The first high school on Orcas Island was called the Orcas Agricultural High School. The first graduating class, in 1922, stood under a banner that read "Plow Deep", indicating the sort of advice that parents and educators believed carried the most value. Agriculture and fishing were the primary occupations of those earlier times, and the community thrived from all the bounties of land and sea.

Salmon runs rushed through our waters at predictable times, and the cod and halibut stood the fishermen in good stead when the salmon weren't here. Clams, oysters, mussels, and crabs grew in such quantities that it was laughable to think they would ever become scarce. When John Tenant and his wife, Clara, agreed to spend a second year with the Methodist church in Eastsound for the annual salary of One Hundred Dollars, they said it was a good thing they liked clams. Money was hard to come by, but clams were almost everywhere and free for the picking. Oldtimers used to tell newcomers to the

island that they couldn't starve here, all they had to do was wait for the tide to go out and they'd have all the food they needed.

Given this incredible bounty, then, a government program the local paper wrote about in 1917 may have caused more than one person to sit up and take notice. In the "Friday Harbor Journal" of November 22, 1917, a front page article told of a railroad car load of live lobsters arriving in Anacortes on the Great Northern Railroad for distribution among the San Juan Islands. This was the fourth shipment of 6,000 live lobsters, packed in sea weed, wet straw and ice to keep the temperature as near 42 degrees as possible, shipped from Maine to Puget Sound. Captain Hahn of the National Fish and Game Commission personally conducted the lobsters and supervised their placing after arrival. They were distributed among the islands by the Coast Fish Company cannery boat, the "Sound", which had been commandeered for the purpose.

Despite the 'well-authenticated' stories supporting the planting of thousands of lobsters in the San Juan Islands, no proof exists that the crustaceans ever lived here successfully. History records no lobster feasts among the island gatherings, and no lobsters were ever seen in these waters after the attempts to plant them here. The newspaper article went on to mention what a 'great traveler' the lobster is, and how they have been known to travel many miles. And, as a last word (and judicious caveat, to boot), the article ended with the mention that "...California or China may benefit by the efforts of the Commission, but here's hoping."

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