

History Nook

Crushing Turtleback Mountain

by TOM WELCH
for the Orcas Island Historical Society

When notice of the incorporation and plans of the "Puget Sound Cement & Lime Company" was published in the "San Juan Islander" newspaper of May 23, 1913, it was big news for Orcas Islanders. One thousand acres on Turtleback Mountain had been purchased for the location of crushing and screening plants capable of processing more than 2,400 tons of limestone rock per day. A townsite on President's Channel had already been cleared of timber, and the newspaper article stated that work would begin within ninety days. Capitalized at \$3,500,000, the company promised employment for islanders desperate for income to add to the meager farming proceeds most families relied on.

The engineers who drafted the plans described the plant in great detail, including the advantages the steep slopes

and natural reservoirs atop Turtleback would provide. Power and lighting was to be produced by a 450 horsepower distillate oil engine, and two sixty-ton power shovels would move the crushed rock from the limestone ledge quarries directly into dump cars. A twenty-ton locomotive would move the cars to a ninety-ton jaw crusher, with a capacity of three tons per hour. Gravity would carry the product flows down the mountain to two "Number 6 Gyrotory Crushers" which would reduce the rock to two inches and finer.

Circular concrete storage bins, each with a capacity of six tons, would store the finished rock material on the mountain. Transport of the material from the storage bins would require the installation of 1,200 foot aerial trams, which would move the rock to 2,000-ton barges a tug would tow to Seattle. All told, this was to be a transformative in-

dustrial change to one of the most prominent sights of the San Juan Islands - Turtleback Mountain.

The tourist industry on Orcas Island was still in its infancy in 1913, and farm incomes rose and fell with the volatile banking fortunes that prevailed in the Pacific Northwest of that era. News of a big industrial plant that would provide local employment undoubtedly overshadowed any concerns most islanders felt for protection of the undeniable beauty of Turtleback Mountain.

Despite the impressive plans and promising news, the "Puget Sound Cement and Lime Company" failed to materialize on Orcas Island. The land on Turtleback Mountain was eventually sold, and the steep slopes and ravines of the most prominent feature on western Orcas Island retained their verdant covering. "Progress" may have suffered, but future posterity was rewarded in the end.

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