

History Nook

The Mighty Candlefish

By: TOM WELCH

For the Orcas Island Historical Museum

Orcas Islanders today best know the Candlefish as an attractive Bait fish for salmon, and we see them occasionally in West Sound or near Deer Harbor as they school in the nearshore shallows.

Small (5-6 inches long), narrow, silver-colored fish that spawn only in glacier-fed rivers, the Candlefish has a long, rich history closely intertwined with the lives of the First Peoples on Orcas Island. An edible fish extremely rich in oil, the Candlefish, historically, known as Eulachon (Yew-luck-on), and scientifically known as *Thaleichthys pacificus*, are the famously storied "grease fish" of native legend.

First Nations people, including the Northern Straits Salish tribes of the Lummi, Semiahmoo, Saanich, Samish, Swinomish and Songhee peoples living in and around the San Juan Islands, traditionally used the Candlefish to make "fish grease", a coveted delicacy and valuable trade item. Eulachon oil, or 'grease', was a major component of many native trade networks: the early trading trails on the Skeena, Nass, Fraser and other northern rivers were called 'grease trails', indicative of the high value the native tribes placed on this valuable trade resource.

Local tribes used the oil of the Eulachon (known as the "Hooligan" on Vancouver Island) in their diet and as valued gifts in the potlatches held with neighboring groups. Some information points to the central part the Candlefish, or Eulachon, played linguistically in the origins of the word "Oregon": supposedly, the native traders of the 'fish grease' told the inland



tribes the valuable

oil came from the Eulachon, which the inland group was unable to pronounce correctly. Not accustomed to using the "L" sound in their speech, these natives relayed the name as "Eura-chon" in their dialogue with the first French-Canadian voyageurs who came to trade with them. These men, in turn, carried back to the eastern white settlements tales of the fabulous wealth coming from the "(O)0-ra-chon" (Oregon?) country to the west.

Whether the linguistic parent of Oregon or not, the Eulachon is an important part of the history of Orcas Island, not least because of a valuable attribute this fish possessed that the early settlers knew very well: nicely dried, with a wick in its mouth and standing at attention, the Candlefish provided excellent light for a small cabin on a dark and lonely island.

Photo Caption Eulachon (Candlefish), *Thaleichthys pacificus* as drawn by Capt. Meriwether Lewis

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