

History Nook

Compliments of the W. I. I. Orcas 1909

by **JESSE CLARK MCABEE**

for the Orcas Island Historical Society

These words and initials are embroidered in gold thread on a crazy quilt in the Orcas Island Historical Museum's current exhibit. They are a century old puzzle that speaks to us in the present from a time before smart phones, state run ferries and island airports. The quilt does show its age with a stain here and a thread bare block and a minor tear there. I confess I am not a quilter or have ever expressed much interest in them other than their warmth factor and visual aesthetics. As a curator, in helping to set up our latest exhibit I have learned much about these cultural objects, their variety and their role in the broader tapestry that is our heritage. It seems to me that a quilt is quite personal, for its creator and also for the owner. A signature quilt like the W.I.I. quilt exudes the creativity of the individual artisans who created it. The ladies, children and sometimes men who gathered together "to quilt" would combine their talents, materials on hand and imaginations in a sort of textile Chautauqua. A shared experience where the participants imparted their skills to others less

seasoned, learned new techniques caught up on the latest goings on and simply visited. But they never lost sight of the goal, the quilt, and the synthesis of their co-creativity both artistic and oh, so very practical. Many quilts on Orcas were made as raffle prizes to benefit someone or some place, or "fire quilts" for families who lost their belongings in fires, or simply to provide warmth and beauty in a home.

It is no wonder that quilting today is perhaps as popular in America as it has ever been. This writer would not presume to convey the history of quilting in so short a space as this column. Our purpose here is to solve a mystery, this mystery of the W.I.I. quilt. We know the "Where", Orcas, most specifically Orcas village. We know the "When" since the embroidered 1909 proudly glistens center stage on the quilt even after a century. We even know many of the authors of this historic "text" that speaks to a different time and place on our isle, answering the "Who". The answer to our question of the "What" was surely known at one point, but today, professional and amateur historians, staff and volunteers, highly skilled

quilters, natives to Orcas and transplants all wonder.

What does the W. I. I. stand for? Because it is in cursive we initially struggled to determine if the I's might not be an S or an L or even an F. Our valued volunteer historian Virginia Jensen solved that part of the puzzle by finding an article in a 1907 newspaper that talked about Orcas village's "W.I.I. club". We now had a specific "Where" not simply island wide. Scratching our heads and blurting out possibilities we still search for the meaning of those initials. Can you tell us? Was one of the quilt's creators listed here a great grandmother or an aunt that you once heard mentioning the W.I.I. club? Signed with needle and thread on some of the quilt's blocks are the following names and initials, some quite easily read, others not so clear: O.V.M, M.I.C., Della Orlov Ganson, Mollie Sanders, Mrs. Octavia Van Moorham, Doree, Madeline McNulty, Cecil Sanders, Nulty, Elsie Loren?, L.M.K., Lizzy King, McN, Cecil, Mrs. Emma Ganson, M.C.C., Boots and H. P. Walrath. If you can solve our mystery please contact the Historical Museum at 376-4849 or drop by and see this amazing piece of Island history.

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181 N Beach Rd
Eastsound village, WA
376-4849