

The History Corner

Orcas Island Historical Museum in
Eastsound, Washington

Economic Ecology of Orcas Island

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When Professor Hayner of the University of Washington published a paper entitled “Economic Ecology in the San Juan Islands” in 1927, he was interested in examining the history and future prospects of our local economy. The good professor was a nephew of Mrs. Davis, the first white woman who lived on Lopez Island, so he knew something about these islands and their history. His interest was in the progression of the economy as the local settlements grew, and the changes brought by the succeeding ‘stages’ of economic life in our islands. Hayner postulated three ‘stages’, or phases, of economic life in the San Juans: the ‘Pioneer Stage’, the ‘Village Stage’, and the ‘Island Unit Stage’. The ‘Pioneer Stage’ began with the first white settlements in the late 1850’s, and lasted until 1881. In this era, the economy relied only on available natural resources, such as fishing, lime production by the lime kilns, and logging. By the time the ‘Pioneer Stage’ ended in 1881, the settlements were well established, mail routes, schools, and small businesses were in place, regular commerce was conducted with mainland points, and the islands had transitioned to what the professor called the ‘Village Stage’.

The ‘Village Stage’ saw the rise of the “Orchardists” on Orcas Island, when nearly everyone old enough and able to work was engaged in fruit farming, commerce was booming, there were several steamships making daily stops at Eastsound, and the first ‘Excursionists’ (now referred to as tourists) began visiting the island. This was the era of road construction, building docks and wharfs to facilitate shipping, and an increasingly active social life. Visitors began camping on the beaches, and sport fisherman started to become interested in certain seasonal activity in the local waters.

The ‘Village Stage’ lasted until 1910, when the island had reached a sort of saturation point for that existing economic base of small trading villages and primarily seasonal agricultural output and employment. The islands next entered what the professor referred to as the ‘Island Unit Stage’. Lopez Island focused on agriculture and fishing; San Juan relied on business, county government, and outfitting the fishing fleets; and Orcas Island saw Eastsound firmly established as the commercial center, hotels and small resorts began operation in a few locations, and the schools were consolidated. Fish traps and lime kilns ended their work, and canneries entered a decline. By the late 1920’s, when the professor wrote his paper, this ‘stage’ had also ended and Orcas Island had firmly entered what we can call the ‘resort stage’, which peaked in the late 1940’s with more than 25 resorts and ‘camps’ in operation on the island.

One of the final lines in the professor’s paper spoke tellingly of future changes when he recounted the words of a local farmer on Orcas musing, as he looked over his land, on “... how attractive a nice tourist resort would look there, in place of that orchard.”