

HISTORY CORNER

THE RISE OF THE RESORTS *by Tom Welch*

The orchard business was booming on Orcas Island by the mid-1890s, culminating nearly two decades of bustling growth and development. Three steamships called at the Eastsound docks each day, carrying tourists and businessmen to the island, and returning laden with boxes and barrels of island-grown fruit for mainland markets. The "excursioners," as tourists were called in those days, arriving from Seattle, Fairhaven, and other mainland points, hiked or rode up Mount Constitution, beachcombed on Crescent Beach, explored the woods and fields, and shopped in the small village of Eastsound. Some made repeat visits, and Orcas Island gradually became known as an idyllic locale easily reached for a brief excursion away from home.

By the time a worldwide "credit crunch" occurred toward the end of the 1890's, spelling an end to the island orchard industry, many of the early excursioners had grown fond of time spent on Orcas Island. As the island orchards, prune dryers, and apple barns fell into disrepair with the end of the orchard era, islanders turned to subsistence farming with large gardens and crops for local markets. The bustling wagon roads and loading docks grew quiet as commerce rapidly declined, and the natural beauty of the island attracted a new set of visitors eager to experience the quiet peace of this remote, yet reachable, dot of land anchored in the Salish Sea north of Puget Sound.

The Orcas Island resort business was born in the early 1900s when a group of Seattle teachers began boarding each summer with Patrick and Mary Norton at their picturesque farmhouse overlooking the harbor in Deer Harbor. The Norton Inn became a popular summer destination where Mrs. Norton cooked the meals and cleaned the platform tents they built to house the guests, while Mr. Norton did the farm chores and helped entertain the visitors with fishing, boating, hikes and other island pursuits.

Other resorts, including the Madrona Inn, Waldheim, Beach Haven, and the North Beach Inn soon joined the Outlook Inn, Orcas Hotel, and Island Lodge in offering accommodations for vacationers, and the tourist business began to replace the former agrarian pursuits that had stimulated and supported life on Orcas Island. News of trophy salmon caught in nearby waters stirred the interest of recreational fishermen, mailboats provided safe and reliable transportation from mainland points, and Orcas Island quickly developed a wide reputation as a family-friendly, natural haven for vacationers.

ORCAS HISTORICAL MUSEUM

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