

# HISTORY CORNER

## Jack Barfoot and Barfoot's Blockhouse

*by Tom Welch*

Barfoot's Blockhouse nestles quietly in the side of the hill across the street from the Olga Energetic's Club. The peaceful scene belies its early days when it served the Barfoot Family Chicken Business, processing 20,000 "Birds from Paradise" each year for mainland meat markets. Now serving as a temporary storage facility, the Blockhouse appears to be a simple building constructed of cinder blocks and wood; close examination reveals a more fascinating story.

Jack Barfoot's picture isn't in the dictionary next to the word "Remarkable," but it very well could be. Born in 1902 in a tent in Tres Piedras, New Mexico, to a professional gambler and his wife, Jack lost his left arm following a motorcycle accident at the age of 18. Following numerous operations to fix his legs, which had also been badly broken, Jack worked riveting oil tanks in Texas, then sold washing machines in Boise, Idaho. After moving to Orcas Island to visit a relative, Jack met Jane Willis at a dance in Olga in 1932. They married in 1937, and Jack went to Alaska with her brother, John Willis, looking for work in 1938. Following a stint as Watchman in a gold mine, Jack hiked 800 miles alone to the Arctic Circle from Valdez, Alaska, just to prove he could do it. After the war, Jack and Jane settled in Olga to raise their family of three children, Fran, Irene, and Harold.

Jack Barfoot built Barfoot's Blockhouse of solid concrete blocks. He built a concrete batch plant on his land, used a small Sears electric mixer to mix the cement, and poured the footings, foundation, and floor for the building by himself. Jane's other brother, Culver Willis, operated a small sawmill on the property and supplied the lumber for the second floor of the building. Having seen poorly-cured concrete fail before, Jack made sure each block was cured for an entire year before using it in construction. He made the molds, poured the cement, carried each block and built the Blockhouse by himself, although he did have additional help from his 75-year-old mother. This would be an achievement for anyone—it's remarkable for a man with one arm.

Changes in the industry forced the family chicken business to end in 1960. Jack then opened and operated a Secondhand Store in the Blockhouse. Jane continued to operate the store following Jack's death in 1970, eventually closing it in the early 1990s. Barfoot's Blockhouse sits quietly now, the handmade concrete blocks securing the property of others, mute testimony to the remarkable efforts and accomplishments of Jack Barfoot.

## Orcas Historical Museum

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