

History Nook

Pioneer author Fred Splitstone

by JAN KOLTUN
for the Orcas Island Historical Society

We are fortunate that Fred Splitstone arrived on Orcas in 1934, in time to interview many of the island's pioneers. Writing about them and including his observations in a 131-page book titled *Orcas: Gem of the San Juans* (1947; Sedro Woolley, Courier-Times Press, \$2.95), he thereby became our first historian.

"We shall be perennially grateful to Fred for weaving together the threads that make the history of our favorite island," noted the author Bea Cook, in 1948.

Splitstone (1873-1957) was born in Crawford County, Pennsylvania, where he graduated in 1891. Valedictorian of his four-person class, his speech was appropriately titled, in view of his later accomplishments, "The Pioneers."

He was probably the most seasoned journalist to arrive here. Beginning his newspaper career at 18 in his native state, Splitstone in 1922 became head circulation manager of all Hearst publications, including *Cosmopolitan* and *GoodHousekeeping*.

His interest was shift-

ing toward books. In 1926, he joined the Review of Reviews as general sales manager. In 1928 he became sales manager of the Literary Guild.

He spent his first decade on Orcas working on the book, except for four years as news editor of Frank Evans' newspaper, the *Orcas Islander* (which title Evans' son, Gary, gave the Museum permission to use as a newsletter).

In 1946, just before his Orcas book was published, Splitstone visited the East Coast for three months. The lifelong bachelor apparently returned with a wife! In January 1947, the *Orcas Islander* reported:

"Mr. and Mrs. Fred Splitstone were guests at the annual dinner given by Mr. and Mrs. Frank Evans for the staff of their . . . Courier-Times newspaper. Mrs. Splitstone said she liked the country and the people here, and gave evidence of becoming a real Orcas Islander.

However, this was not to be. Herein lies a mystery. There was no mention of a "Mrs. Splitstone" at the farewell banquet in 1948, when some 40 people including all the

founders of the Orcas Historical Society turned out to honor him.

Bea Cook, who gave a moving tribute to Splitstone at the dinner, provided a clue to the mystery about his wife, after eulogizing him:

Praising him as a host in his home, "Snake Hollow, where armloads of garden stuff, shares of extra-super seed and friendly advice on growing anything from garlic to walnuts was frequently topped off by a heaven-touched dinner," Cook said. "We recall with sorrow the tragic end of Snake Hollow days. . . ."

"Fred will be chugging (God willing) across the continent to make his home in the east. We know he will endeavor himself to his neighbors, be they westerners or stiff-necked Eastern folk, wherever he is."

From local gossip, this writer believes that Splitstone's home burned down and his wife left for her native East Coast. I do not know whether they got together again. He moved back to Washington and lived in the Veterans' Home in Retsil before he died in the Vancouver VA Hospital.

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