

# History Nook

## War Canoes in Olga

By: TOM WELCH



Haida War Canoes / Contributed photo

The original inhabitants of Orcas Island that we refer to as First Peoples had a tradition of telling stories that were moral or behavioral lessons wrapped in an entertaining yarn. While we can't pretend to know or understand the depth of traditional knowledge related through the ages in this manner, we can admire and respect the wisdom conveyed in a uniquely native and natural style. Who doesn't appreciate a good story told around the campfire, even if it does contain a nugget of occasionally uncomfortable truth?

Pull up a stump and sit down while I relate a story I've heard of in these parts. I can't prove it's true, at least not in all those "documented" ways customary among real Historians, but I'm just an amateur, and I think it's a pretty good yarn. Listen, now...

It seems a sea captain named Gray was sailing somewhere off the coast far north of here when he spied a native in a canoe, went to investigate, and found a beautiful young girl lying in the canoe bottom, bleeding from slit wrists. Taking her aboard his vessel and binding her wounds, he cared for her as she recovered enough to relate her tale of returning to her village from a short trip and finding all her family dead of a disease (probably smallpox) caught from white fur traders. Heartbroken, she had cast off from shore in the canoe and slit her wrists so that she could die, too. Captain Gray nursed the young girl back to health, grew to love her,

and eventually married her and settled in Olga. Somehow, word of her rescue had traveled to the other villages of her tribe, who were all overjoyed at the news. It seems she was a Princess, the daughter of a High Chief renowned far and wide in their lands, a person adored and admired by all of her tribe.

In early settlement days Olga was even sleepier than it is today. Little traffic disturbed the dust in the old

wagon road meandering past Stockade Bay, now called Buck Bay, as the mist rose in the late mornings of early Spring. On a certain day in Spring, possibly every year but perhaps every other year, the few residents of Olga could peer out through the morning mist towards Obstruction Pass and see two large war canoes full of the dreaded Northern Indians paddling towards the Gray homestead.

In pre-settlement times, the sight of two large war canoes approaching the Olga shore would have sent the inhabitants scattering wildly into the woods, desperately seeking a hiding place. Now, the canoes of natives were welcomed warmly as they presented the gifts and tribute offerings they had carried, over hundreds of miles of dangerous waters, to their Royal Princess, Mrs. Gray of Olga.

Lucy Ketonah Gray died in May, 1894, leaving her husband, John Warren Gray (1829-1917) and nine children. Their residence, at Gray's Beach in Olga, was for many years the site of great joy and celebration when the Haida war canoes arrived to honor their Princess.

*Tom Welch*

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