

HISTORY NOOK



*The Buffalo towing the disabled steamer Islander to Reed's shipyard on Decatur for repairs.
Orcas Island Historical Museums Collection.*

Henry Cayou's "Buffalo"

By: CLARK McABEE

Henry Thomas Cayou, (1859-1959) was one of those rare and gifted individuals who became a local legend during his own lifetime. He was the son of a French hunter, trapper, and bull whacker named Louis and his Lummi wife, Jennie. Louis had moved from Louisiana before the California Gold Rush and later came to Orcas as a deer hunter for the Hudson's Bay Company. Henry was born at Deer Harbor in 1869 and learned to fish from his uncle Pe El, chief fisherman of the San Juans. Henry was nine years old when he learned the trade. It is said he caught more than five million fish in his lifetime, more than anyone ever in the state of Washington. Extraordinary at setting fish traps and beach seining Henry had several fish trap locations in the San Juans and also ran his own cannery.

A master of many diverse businesses he raised sheep, dealt in timber and farmland, was the Decatur postmaster for a time and built a number of different vessels for coastal trade and fishing including an excellent tug boat named the *Mary C.*, after his wife. She was a 71 foot tug built at Decatur at the Reed shipyard by Cayou and William Reed. Henry later sold the *Mary C.* and the tug had a distinguished career in Northwest waters from Olympia to Comox, B.C. For two years the *Mary C.* also did charter towing as far north as Skagway, Alaska. She was renowned for her power in towing and a crewman who served on her for twenty two years under Captain Hugh Gilmore had this to say about her: "It has been said that Henry Cayou had the best in mind in 1903 when he ordered the *Mary C.* He insisted upon and got wonderful construction at the Reed Brothers shipyard. Her Heffernan-built engine was a fore and aft compound of 12" and 24" bore and

24" stroke, taking steam from a Fairhaven Boiler Works Scotch boiler at 165# pressure." Originally a coal burner she was later changed to oil. Drawing twelve and a half feet she required a skilled hand working in inland waters.



Henry Cayou's Buffalo on an excursion near Madrona Point on Orcas Island. Original photo from the collection of Bud McBride and Richard Schneider. Contributed photo

With businesses on several islands in the San Juans Henry owned a number of vessels over the years including the launches *Helen*, *Standard*, and the *Buffalo*. The *Buffalo* was used for excursions, and to haul freight and passengers during a regularly scheduled run to the community of "Ocean" on the west side of Orcas where extensive lime operations were conducted. He built a beautiful "Craftsman" style home at Deer Harbor in 1913 which has been nicely preserved. A life-long Republican, he served on the Convention Committee at state conventions as well as serving as a San Juan County commissioner for 27 years. Henry and his family lived on Orcas, Decatur and Lopez Islands during the 90 years of his life.

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