

The History Corner

Orcas Island Historical Museum in
Eastsound, Washington

E.V. Von Gohren and the Island's Fruit Growing Boom

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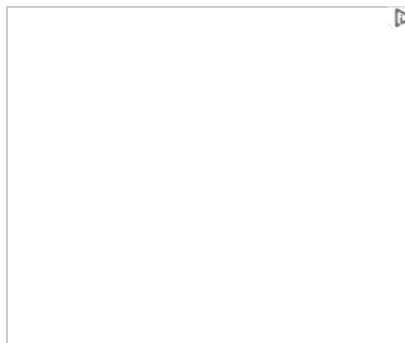
Settlement on Orcas Island was slowly increasing in the late 1870's when E.V. Von Gohren and his family arrived in the small village of East Sound (changed to Eastsound in 1895). Von Gohren was a Civil Engineer and surveyor, but his first love was horticulture. He quickly saw the potential in the combination of the mild climate and good island soil, and began experiments raising different types of fruit. In the early 1880's he planted the first nursery on the island, with over 20,000 young fruit trees of different varieties.

Early settlers used to joke that nobody would starve on Orcas Island if he could wait until the tide went out, but finding a way to make money from agriculture was difficult until Von Gohren succeeded in demonstrating the commercial possibilities of raising fruit. He experimented with different varieties of apples, raised pears, peaches, apricots, plums, cherries and strawberries, but concluded that the Italian prune had the greatest commercial potential.

Sidney R.S.Gray, the Episcopalian minister, interested a group of Seattle investors in Von Gohren's work, and they bought two homesteads near Eastsound, cleared the land, and planted prune and apple orchards. This was the beginning of Orcas Island's first economic 'boom', and soon orchards were being planted wherever islanders could clear enough land to put them. By 1898, many islanders worked in the prune 'dryers' and orchards, and the island economy was thriving. Thousands of tons of prunes, and over 160,000 boxes of apples, were shipped that year on the three daily steamships sailing from the Eastsound docks.

Economic downturns, difficulty in transportation, and the rise of Eastern Washington orchards with improved irrigation and better proximity to railroads eventually spelled the end of the fruit farming boom on Orcas Island. Resorts and tourism became the economic force on the island, but their popularity was enabled by the improved transportation services built on the success of E.V. Von Gohren's experiments with fruit trees.

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