

Samish Island, by James Squires, Jr. & Gladys Squires
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For countless ages our Island lay quietly in the mouth of the Samish River. Shaped like a great fish, its open mouth headed upstream and its great tail stretched to the west. If you have visited the Island recently you will question the use of the term island. It was an island until 1932 when the county put a fill across the last quarter of a mile of salt march to build the present road. With one end off his marshland being enclosed, the thrifty farmer then diked in the west end making Samish Island a peninsula. When the pioneers came, Siwash Slough connected Alice Bay on the east with Padilla Bay on the west. The channel was deep enough for the passage of tug boats. Cattle now graze where once these boats anchored.

The Island's sandy beaches welcomed the Indians. Two natural springs on the north shore and two on the south provided fresh water. Today deposits of clam shells attest to the fact that many Indians once camped there. Forests of fir, cedar, and hemlock covered the upland. Clams and crabs flourished along the northern beaches and unnumbered waterfowl lived in the marshes to the south.

Nearby Samish River was teeming with salmon. Sometimes the Indians trapped fish. My brother once turned up one of their traps while plowing the land that had once been the mouth of Siwash Slough.

The Island was part of the territory of the Samish Tribe. Stories vary as to the number who made this their home here, though they generally agree that there were three great long houses near the springs. The Samish were master craftsmen. They built fine canoes (dug-outs) and carved Totem Poles. They were noted for their great Potlatches. We have been told that "Chief Harry Samish always had money - not much - but enough." Should one of his people need help they came to Chief Harry and never failed to receive aid. Their tranquil life on the Island was disturbed only by an occasional raid from their warlike neighbors to the north.

The first white men to see our Island came in 1791 when Spanish ships cruised the sound hoping to claim the territory for Spain by right of exploration. Captains Fidalgo and Francisco Eliza gave their names to Islands. They saw the west point of Samish Island and named it Salona, but this name did not stick.

Then in 1798 the English captain, George Vancouver, made a more thorough study of the Sound, naming it after his first officer, Peter Puget. Hood's canal and Whidbey Island were named after captains of other ships in his fleet. They saw the point of land named Salona by the Spanish and named it Point William after another ship's officer. Today we are reminded of these early explorers each time we vote, for Point William is the name of our voting precinct.

For the next fifty years, only adventurers came to the area. Prospectors, hunters, trappers and traders came for a season and drifted on. Hudson's Bay men kept an eye on the area, wishing to hold it for their country.

The U.S. government began surveys on the Sound in 1853. Gold was discovered in California in 1848 and in 1858 came the Fraser River gold rush. These things combined to encourage the migration to the great northwest. And Samish Island was one of the chief shipping points.

Daniel Dingwall

The first white men to establish themselves on the Island were Daniel Dingwall and Thomas Hayes, who in the fall of 1869 built a store and hotel on its northeast point (now Fish Point) The location had the advantage of being on the deep water of the river's mouth (Samish) with two thousand Indians living nearby engaged in hunting and fishing. Shortly thereafter, Hayes sold his interest to Dean. Dean then, in 1873, sold his interest to Dingwall and started a store of his own at the other end of the Island where a wharf had been built.

Dan Dingwall was an interesting personality. In the stories that have been handed down to us, he is called "Dan Dingle." The writer well remembers hearing a great uncle tell of rowing his boat from Dewey to Samish Island to trade at Dan Dingle's store. He brought butter and potatoes and among the items he took home was a tin milk pan with a seam around the bottom and up the side.

Dingwall's homestead covered most of the eastern end of the Island, then covered with forest. He was one of the early loggers and used ox teams. He diked in the lowland between his store on the point and the upland, seeded it to grass to raise hay for his oxen. The soil, being sandy, was not usable for dikes so Mr. Dingwall barged earth from the marsh farther up the river's mouth. He built a barn not far from his store to house his oxen. Some of our older citizens remember seeing remains of that old barn and parts of the broken ox cart and yokes, now regretting they were too young to appreciate their value and preserve them.

In spite of Dingwall's many activities and land deals, he lost the whole of his Samish Island property through a mortgage to Granville O. Haller. The larger part of this property is now the R.L.D.S. Camp. (Reorganized Latter Day Saints)

Thomas and George Dean

The new store of Thomas Dean was located on the north bank of the narrowest part of the island where a small settlement had grown up around the wharf. Here steamboats landed several times a week bringing supplies for the whole Samish area. Goods had then to be scowed to Edison for the land to the south was a morass of marsh and roads were passable only in summer. When the Samish Post Office was established in 1870, Dean became its first postmaster. Dean also took up land on the west end of the Island, and for years the sand spit extending southwest was called Dean's Spit. (Now Camp Kirby)

A good example of the vicissitudes as well as the opportunities in the raw, new land may be seen if we trace the lives of some of the first settlers. For every man who left his mark on the Island there were hundreds who came, worked a season in one of the logging camps or canneries or spent a winter in an Indian Village, and then moved on.

Consider George Dean, apprenticed as a boy to learn the trade of shipwright, coming from Scotland in 1875 and by the end of the year arriving at Samish Island to join

his brother, Thomas Dean, who had the store at the end of Wharf Street near the steamboat landing. All transportation was by water and Samish was the distributing point for the whole valley. Goods were landed here and taken by small boat or scow to Edison. Mail came from the south once a week on the boat, "J. S. Libby" and once a week from the north by the steamboat, "Dispatch".

George Dean was not long idle. He built a sawmill to be run by wind. All parts were made of wood, even the cogwheels. With lumber cut in his mill from trees felled on his land, he built a schooner "The Maggie", which he sailed for nine years, then he built another ship the "Mary Perley" and operated that for three and a half years.

When his brother Thomas died, he took over the store, post office, and dock. Trouble developed with the ship owners and trade diminished. Only independent boats would stop at this wharf. In 1897, he closed shop and went with J.F.T. Mitchell to Onalaska to build riverboats.

George Washington Lafayette Allen

Another pioneer promoter on the Island was George Washington Lafayette Allen. He came to this area from Georgia in 1883. He soon took up land and platted the town of Atlanta. He built a large three-story hotel, secured a post office, and also built a store and wharf. From his orchard he made apple cider and stored it in whiskey barrels. Added whiskey to put a wallop to it, and sold it to his customers. He then sat down to admire his view and await prosperity.<

In November of 1884, the County of Skagit held its first election for county officers and to determine the site of its county seat. The four leading contenders were Mount Vernon, Avon, Bayview and Atlanta. Mount Vernon won the honor by a majority of 250 votes. Here we might note that Washington Territory had Woman Suffrage at that time.

When Mr. Allen built his "Atlanta Home Hotel" the spirit of competition was aroused in the heart of Mr. Dean. He looked at his logged land adjoining and to the west of Atlanta and promptly platted the town of Samish naming the streets after his brothers and sisters in Scotland. A few lots were sold, but the two dreams came to nothing. I remember the Dean plat as one big hay field where my father used to cut hay for Mr. Dean. Mr. Allen's wharf washed away in winter storms. His hotel stood for many years and catered to duck hunters in winter and vacationing families in summer. It finally burned in 1933. The Post Office was moved to another home and was discontinued in the early 1900's.

Other homesteaders were S.W. Schenberger, who took up 160 acres in 1884 and Watson Hodge whose homestead of 80 acres was near the Dean's.

By 1886, mail came to the two post offices four times a week. That same year a mail contract was granted to E.C. Brown to carry mail to Edison and back three times a week for \$135.00 annual salary. (Easy money)

While it is reported that at one time, Samish Island boasted three docks, three hotels, and three saloons, there is no record of a church. Now and then a home missionary came through the area and held services. The earliest recollected by this writer was a Presbyterian gentleman who came in the early 1900's and we had "preaching" in the schoolhouse. It was not until 1912 that a Sunday School was

started by a group of Irish women. In 1913, the Methodist minister from the Blanchard charge began holding regular services. In 1918, the present church was built.

Samish Island School

"The Statues of the Territory of Washington" passed by a Legislative Assembly in Olympia in 1871 provided for the organization of school districts, the election of three directors and their duties. It was their duty to make out a tax list for the district, determine the percentage to be collected and then collect it. They were to purchase or lease a site for the schoolhouse and to "build, furnish, and keep in repair such school house with necessary fuel and appendages, and such privies and out-houses as decency requires." The directors employed the teacher and it was their duty to visit the school at least twice each term.

The first school was built by the side of the road, date unknown. A few years later another building was erected farther west in a wider place in the road. This is the building I remember.

The one room building had two blackboards, which were exactly that - two polished boards, painted black. There were small-paned windows on the sides of the room. In the hard packed earth before the door, there was room for the flagpole and a marble game. Across the road and down the hill, the beach provided more play and exercise area and also, the two very necessary outhouses, as required. One of the larger boys could be depended on to go willingly to the hotel's well on the corner to fetch the drinking water.

The date District #5 was organized is unknown. In 1888, ten families had 26 children in school, although the average daily attendance was only 12. Children, ages 5 to 20, might attend school. As some aged 19 or 20 did attend, one might guess they skipped school whenever they had a chance to earn a few dollars. My brother remembers hearing the teacher ask a small boy why his big brother was absent and hearing the reply: "He's down at the logging camp greasing skids!" Total expenses for the term of three months were: Teacher's salary \$120.00 and building repairs \$5.10. The teacher was the janitor.

Expenses rose in 1891. Evidently, there was a fall term and a spring term. And shades of women's lib: the lady teacher of the fall term received \$45.00 per month, but the gentleman who taught the spring term received \$50.00 a month. There were 30 pupils that year and the building had seating capacity for only 20, so it was a good thing attendance was poor. That year fuel cost the district \$14.10. The one-room schools were under the direct supervision of the County Superintendent of Schools and the report was signed by J. W. Shields.

In 1892, the report notes, "Average number of daily recitations - 24".

Some school years were shorter than others. In 1897, there were only twelve weeks of school. Nora See taught four weeks and Emma Whitworth taught eight, each receiving \$34.00 a month.

In 1905, a new question was added to the report. Give total number of people living in District #5 on June 1, all ages, sexes and races. There were 85. In 1906 the total was 93.

In 1908, the form of the annual report changed again and became "Census of children, aged 5-21, living in District #5 on May 1". The signature of the parent was required. Some children went to "no" school, some attended District #5 and some attended other schools in the county.

By 1919, there were 33 children of school age on Samish Island and about ten were attending school in Edison. A few on the census had finished high school and were working. The last record on file was for 1920. That year the Samish Island District was consolidated with the Edison School District.

Business & Industry

Boating, logging and real estate were not the Island's only activities. It also boasted a Brick Kiln and a Fish Cannery. An Anacortes man, cruising by one day, noticed a clay bluff near the mouth of Siwash Slough on the George Eckenberger home stand and built a brick kiln there. It did not operate many years and no records have been found on it. The Eckenberger property did not change hands until after the old gentleman's death. We are told the fireplace in his log home was made of brick from that kiln and faced with stone.

Buel Streeter was one of the early settlers on Samish Flats. He had worked in a brickyard in Seattle before coming here in 1886. Years ago he was heard to tell of working in this brick kiln the first year after he came. So the kiln had to be in operation in 1886 to 1887. A recent walk on the beach turned up some weathered brick, speckled with air holes and tiny stones and of a beautiful color. They had to have been made a long, long time ago.

We have been told the bricks were shipped to Seattle and used in paving streets. However, the clay was of inferior quality and the business was discontinued. There is no sign of the kiln on that spot now. Rather one sees a comfortable summer home on a grassy knoll.

Fish Cannery

Of the most fascinating tales of the past I heard as a child concerned the fish cannery and the Chinese who worked there. The storyteller told of going to the beach with a gang of boys and hanging around the cannery to watch for the Chinese. The men still wore the queue (pigtail). They would wait for a man to come outside. They would sneak up behind him, jerk that queue and "run like the devil!" He told how angry the man would get, how he would berate them in his native tongue and how delighted the boys would be at the sound of the strange jargon.

The cannery was built on the north shore of the Island and extended out over the water on piles. Fish was brought from the Nooksack River and the boats could come in to the dock only at high tide. As many as twenty-five Chinese worked there. A Mr. Lord was superintendent and a Mr. White was bookkeeper. The cannery ran for several years and then shut down when larger canneries were built in Anacortes and elsewhere and they had difficulty in getting fish. It was a going concern in 1888.

The old boilers lay in the sand and beach grass for years and were finally taken away for scrap in World War I.

Daily Life on the Island, 1870-1900

Life wasn't easy in the years between 1870 and 1900. First there was logging and single men and adventurers worked in the camps a season and moved on. Promoters, merchants, saloonkeepers and ship owners came to make money off the settlers and travelers alike. Homesteaders came west to better themselves. Families were scattered all over the area from Bayview to Blanchard and Samish Island had the only deep-water wharf. Steamboats made regular stops. The boats needed wood to fire their boilers. One of our senior citizens remembers, as a boy, seeing the dock piled high with engine wood until it made a wall on all sides. It was not long before the nearby area was denuded of trees for those wood burning engines.

The first thing a man did after building a home for his family was to clear the stumps for a garden plot. Without freezers or modern canning methods, pioneer women still had means of pre-serving food. Farseeing men planted orchards and in a few years had surplus fruit to sell. Almost every family kept cows, pigs, and chickens, which meant a supply of milk, butter, eggs and meat.

When sickness, death or other disaster struck there was no welfare, but there were neighbors. Men gathered to cut wood for a needy family or hauled hay for the "poor widow" who depended on milk from her cows for an income. A sack of potatoes or other produce might be left at a neighbor's door. There were the beaches with their clams and crabs. And always at butchering time the fresh meat was shared with neighbors.

Even in those early days there were taxes. In an old diary of 1898, the following item appears dated June 14: "Worked on road today, finishing my road tax for the year." A man could also work out his school tax by repairing the building or cutting wood.

Some interesting items were found in an old diary dated 1891. The young man, unmarried, bought a ticket to a "Ball" (\$1.50). Then he bought a suit to wear to it, (\$19.00), a shirt (\$1.00), a cravat, (\$1.75), and shoes (\$3.50). He paid the barber 25 cents for a haircut. The diary doesn't describe the joys of the dance. The writer only comments, "Paid 50 cents for supper." For a young man who worked on a farm for \$10.00 a month and board that was quite an outlay. Other records show he bought rubber boots for \$4.25 and overalls for \$.75. An alarm clock cost him \$1.25.

By 1900 the period of exploitation was closing. Logging had moved farther inland to taller trees. The men who felled them had followed. The land to the south of the Island was being diked and men turned to agriculture. Now riverboats called at granaries and carried grain to more populated areas.

The families who had put down roots, stayed. The men found seasonal work on the nearby farms or in mills and canneries around the Sound. There was a scarcity of fruit in the area and those who had planted orchards found ready sale for their apples, pears, and prunes. The earliest and sweetest strawberries grew on Samish Island. As the settlers cleared their land they sold wood from the trees left by the loggers. Flat land farmers need lots of wood. They needed stove wood for cooking and heat, engine wood for the steam engines that ran their threshing machines and balers. Most of all, they needed ditch timber. These great slabs of cedar were used in the network of under-ground ditches that drained their land.

The Great Northern Railroad had been extended from Seattle to Bellingham and there was less water shipping. Boats seldom stopped at the wharves now. Unused and un-repaired they soon fell apart. With the workers gone, there was little business for the boarding houses and saloons.

When my parents moved to the Island in 1898, there were about twenty-five families still living here.

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The Squires' "History of Samish Island", was published in SamishGold Memoirs: Samish River Adventures and History, ©1999, by Lawrence E. Hansen. Mr. Hansen is a native pioneer of Skagit County, son of Walter & Nellie Hansen who lived in the Belfast and Allen areas. The book contains history and stories of the Samish River watershed, from the 1870's to the 1990's.