



A Cascadia Marine Trail Site History Honoring over 5,000 Years of Marine Travel

The Cascadia Marine Trail site at Ala Spit County Park is located on the northeast coast of Whidbey Island, with Hope Island about 500 yards to the east, Hoypus Point about one nautical mile to the northwest, and Cornet Bay the closest community by land. There can be significant currents along the spit, and kayakers occasionally play in the tidal stream there. Current speeds for Ala Spit are listed on the NOAA website. Ala Spit became a CMT site in 1997.

Samish and Swinomish Indians have fished the Ala Spit area since time immemorial, and there are shell middens in the area. The Indian name was TLEqtE'qsd, suggesting “closed up” or “shut up”. A village site in Cornet Bay has been dated to 10,000-12,000 years ago.

The earliest known European explorers were crew members of the Vancouver expedition in 1792. Fur trappers, Hudson’s Bay Company traders, and missionaries were in the area in the first half of the 19th century. It was Lt. Charles Wilkes, U.S.N. in 1841 that, for unknown reasons, named both the spit and Hoypus Point. Ala Spit has also been known as Ben Ure (or Urie) Spit, and some charts still show it as such.

Early settlers on the north Whidbey coast traveled primarily by water and their nearest trading centers were across the water at La Conner on the mainland or on Fidalgo Island. It was safer to row to La Conner than to brave the woods and the wolves for the ten-mile walk to Oak Harbor. Though there had been talk of a bridge over Deception Pass for many years, the bridge was not built until 1935 so, around 1912 a ferry business was started, first from Cornet Bay, and later Hoypus Point, to Dewey Landing.

At first there was no ferry slip—planks were laid down between shore and boat and horses would be led up the planks and wagons pulled up. The ferry was actually a scow pulled by a motor launch and it would operate when requested, depending on tides. To get the ferry, a flag was raised to signal the boat. The first car, a 1914 Buick, came across on the ferry about 1915.

By 1918 the State of Washington had taken responsibility for the ferry and put the route up for bid. This was won by Berte Olson, who was the first woman licensed as a ferry boat skipper in Puget Sound. Berte summoned her husband Agaton in Alaska to join her to run the business. Described as strong-willed and colorful, her nickname was “Little-But-Oh-My”.

The Olsons proved adept at the business. They established rhododendron parks on Whidbey and brought tourists on the ferry with the promise that they could picnic there and then take rhododendrons home. In 1921 the Olsons had a real ferry built that would take up to 12 Model T’s,

and in 1924 the ferry carried 16,167 cars, 50% of them with tourists. Island County built a road to Hoypus Point to accommodate the visitors and a foot trail was cut to Ala Spit. During Prohibition there were many reports of late-night ferry runs carrying suspicious vehicles, such as a large, heavily loaded hearse.

Berte Olson was the only local opposition to the Deception Pass Bridge but with intense lobbying, she managed to delay its approval for five years. After the bridge was built, she divorced Agaton, loaded her house on a barge and moved to the Olympic Peninsula where she established two ferry routes and became known as the "Tugboat Annie of Hood Canal".

About this time, Ala Spit was developing as a base for a salmon fish trap business. It had been a gravel mining site when it was acquired as part of a 50 acre parcel by John Franklin Troxell in 1920. Troxell owned, operated, and built fish traps. He moved his fish trap construction business to the spit and built a summer home there for his family. His business at Ala Spit contributed to making manufacture and construction of fish traps one of the most important industries on Whidbey Island in the first decades of the 20th century.

Fish trapping was a capital and labor intensive business. An area would be surveyed for its potential by observing where fish would school up before migrating inland, and checking currents and water depth. Currents could affect the amount of debris that could foul a trap. The optimum water depth for traps was about 60 feet at low tide. In March, piles would be driven into the seafloor. Galvanized wire mesh with cables, ropes, and tarred netting would be combined on land and then dropped in place before being connected to the piling. More equipment would then be installed and brought to the trap: scows, winches, brails, etc. The last construction would be a 6'x6' cabin built on top of the trap for the watchman.

The last step for installation was to send a diver down to inspect each trap to ensure that the wire mesh had fallen in place properly and reached the seafloor so fish could not escape. Old photos show divers in heavy suits and spherical helmets with hoses connected to a surface air supply. Large octopi would sometimes be encountered or get caught in traps, and the divers sometimes had harrowing tales of escape.

By late April the traps would begin to catch a few salmon. The watchmen would open and close the tunnel into a trap, clear drift debris, and keep a lookout for fish pirates and seals. Seals were shot and the watchmen would collect 50 cents bounty from the State for each dried seal snout at the end of the season. Fish pirates were always a problem and loyal watchmen were hard to find. Early in the season the traps would be emptied twice a week. When the heavy runs of salmon started, they would be emptied every other day. The legal time limit for taking fish from the water and getting them in cans was 72 hours. Emptying a trap required a crew of several men working the winches, brails, scows, nets, etc. At the end of the season in October, a trap had to be removed, including the pilings. The cost for putting in, operating, and taking out a fish trap in the 1920's was about \$10,000 per year.

Between 1894 and 1934 fish trapping was a multi-million dollar industry. Over 400 traps were operated in Puget Sound and they were licensed and closely regulated by the State. During the

heavy salmon runs, the catch from one trap in two days could be seven tons. But by the 1930's the big runs of salmon were over, primarily due to overfishing and river obstructions. There had always been friction between the sport fishermen and the commercial fishermen, and between the fish trappers and the purse seiners. That and diminishing returns led to fish traps being outlawed by a State referendum in 1934.

After the demise of the fish trap business, the Troxell family expanded their summer home and moved in full time, living there into the 1950's. The property was sold and platted in the mid '50's and housing development in the area gradually increased. Around 1960, a few owners with development plans added riprap and other barriers to deal with erosion and water flows at the spit. In 1995 the County purchased the property and created Ala Spit County Park with the assistance of a Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program (WWRP) Water Access grant. Over the last few years, Island County has undertaken a major restoration effort to stop the erosion, reduce impediments for salmon spawning, and improve safety, which has led to the park being temporarily closed. The local residents are pleased it is open again, as the park is popular for birding, nature walks, clamming, and fishing,

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Sources and Acknowledgements

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