



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

Deception Pass (DP) is internationally renowned among sea kayakers as a place to learn to paddle in the tidal flow. Currents, listed on the NOAA website, often reach 6 knots and occasionally higher. The state park is one of the earliest established and most visited, and the park has been expanded to include not only Bowman Bay, Rosario Beach, the north Whidbey shore, and Cornet Bay, but also Hoypus Forest and the Kukutali reserve on Kiket Island. The DP bridge is on the National Register of Historic Places. The Cascadia Marine Trail site at Bowman Bay, established in 1993, is nestled into a park with some of the most iconic views of the Pacific Northwest.

Indians called Deception Pass “steuds”, meaning “dangerous”. It is the traditional territory of the Samish and Swinomish people. There were three Samish villages at the Pass, including one at Bowman Bay, that have been dated to 10,000 to 12,000 years old. A Swinomish village was located east of the Pass.

The Rosario Beach area, just west of Bowman Bay, has a cedar “story pole” depicting the Samish history of the Maiden of Deception Pass. The chief’s daughter, Kookwalaloot, was gathering food, wading in the water, and attracted the attention of a water spirit. The water spirit wooed her, and asked her father to allow her to live with him, promising that the people would have abundant fish and shellfish if she did, but would not if she didn’t. Her father initially objected to the spirit’s request, but then relented when the prediction proved true, asking only that she visit once a year. With each passing year she seemed more reluctant to leave the water and more a part of the marine environment, until all agreed that she need not return again from the water. The carving and siting of the story pole was completed in 1983 with the direction and participation of the Samish people, and they note that both their tribal prospects and marine life in the area have improved since the story pole was erected.

The first Europeans known to have visited the area were Spaniards of the Quimper expedition who sailed by in 1790. They thought DP was an inlet and called it “Boca de Flon”. It was Ship’s Master Joseph Whidbey of the Vancouver Expedition in 1792 that discovered that it was in fact a narrow passage, and Vancouver named the island after Whidbey and the Pass “Deception” because it had deceived mariners.

Although traders and missionaries were known to be in the area in first part of the 19th Century, the next recorded explorer of Deception Pass was Lt. Charles Wilkes, U.S.N, who was surveying the Pacific Northwest coast in 1841. Although many local historians have identified various ship

captain settlers as the first to sail a full-masted ship through the Pass, Lt. Wilkes sailed through in 1841, predating all others identified.

Settlers began to arrive in the 1850's. Bowman Bay is named for Dr. Abram Clemens Bowman, the brother of the founder of Anacortes, who homesteaded 500 acres north of the area. The DP area had been designated a military reserve in 1866 and Bowman Bay was originally called Reservation Bay. DP saw very limited military activity. During World War I, 300 troops marched up from Fort Casey to defend it from German U-boats that never appeared. They set up gun placements and installed 5 inch field guns and searchlights. In World War II, temporary batteries of 90mm and 37mm guns were installed at the Pass but never used.

To the east of DP in Cornet Bay is Ben Ure island, named for the 19th century Scots settler Ben Ure who lived there with his Indian wife. He was known for stealing rum from the British and supplying it to both the American and the British troops in the San Juan Islands. Ben Ure ran a dance hall and saloon on the island, and among his friends and customers were notorious smugglers such as Scotty Ferguson, known as "the Flying Dutchman" and Lawrence Kelly, "the King of all Puget Sound smugglers". Deception Pass was part of a route from British Columbia for smuggling Chinese laborers, opium, liquor, and other contraband. Ben Ure's wife would build a fire on Strawberry Island, and if the government patrol boats were around, she would sit behind the fire. If it was safe for the smugglers to come in through the Pass, she would sit in front of the fire. Ben Ure was arrested in 1902 for receiving stolen goods. He spent a few days in jail, and then spent his last years living quietly on his island, cared for by the island's lighthouse keeper until his death in 1908.

In 1909 a convict labor camp started operations in the Deception Pass area. Prisoners from Walla Walla State Penitentiary, who had volunteered for the transfer, were housed at a camp near Dewey and worked in a rock quarry 200 feet up the rock face just east of the Pass on the Fidalgo side. The quarry was originally a natural cave that extended 150 feet back into the cliff. The prisoners would be brought to the site by boat and then raised to the cave entrance on a platform suspended on cables. The quarry provided rock for the Seattle waterfront and the expanding roadways being built, and also housed a carpentry shop that built furniture. The facility had about 50 prisoners at any one time and closed in 1914. It is still possible for a sharp eye to see the tailings from the quarry on the rock face, and the entrance now has bars to prohibit entry and deter the curious, after a 13-year-old boy fell and died trying to climb to it in 2006. The cave is now home to endangered Thompson's long-eared bats.

In 1922, Federal legislation transferred much of the park acreage from the Army to the State for park purposes after lobbying by the Anacortes Chamber of Commerce. The area had been a favorite picnic spot with locals and tourists for many years, and both Whidbey and Anacortes community leaders wanted a state park to attract more business and visitors. For the same reason, there was also much local support for building a bridge across the Pass.

The idea of a bridge across the Pass was first proposed by an early Whidbey settler, Captain George Morse, who told his children that Pass Island was there to become a pier for a bridge. Morse became a state legislator in 1907, and the legislature first authorized the bridge but then the

funding was taken for another project. At the local level there was full support, and the Farm Bureau would hold 4th of July picnics at Cranberry Lake, invite politicians, and rally support for bridge-building. At the state level there was little enthusiasm. A bridge bill passed in 1929 but Governor Hartley vetoed it with a message to the effect that, if we build this for them, everyone will want one. State administrators didn't see the utility of the bridge. With the Great Depression in the '30's, approval and funding for the bridge was found when the Federal Government kicked in some of the funds and provided much of the labor through the Civilian Conservation Corps.

The Civilian Conservation Corps workers were unemployed young men who were put to work on public works projects by the Roosevelt administration, and a CCC interpretive center is located in the Bowman Bay area. There were two camps at Deception Pass, one at Cornet Bay with workers mostly from New York and New Jersey cities and one at Bowman Bay with workers mostly from the Pacific Northwest. They were separated because they had different ethnic backgrounds, different lifestyles, didn't eat the same food, didn't get along, and would get into fights. The Northerners from the camp on the south side liked to party and preferred the seaport of Anacortes to Oak Harbor, with its pious Dutch farmers. Once the planks were laid across the steel girders for the bridge, they would walk across the planks at night and walk to Anacortes. When asked if the height was daunting, one commented that "two feet down or 1000 feet down, you can't tell the difference in the dark".

On a hot summer day, as the center span was being lowered into place, it was discovered to be just a few inches too long. The engineer made a few calculations and determined that the beam would fit if the temperature dropped 30 degrees. Just before dawn the next morning, working by floodlight, they tried again, and the beam slipped into place.

The bridge was completed and opened in 1935. Politicians made speeches, drum and bugle corps played, a rocket shot an American flag in the air and it floated down into the Pass. An estimated 12,000 people came to watch the dedication and picnic in the park, and more than 700 cars crossed the bridge in its first hour open. The bridge now carries state highway 20 traffic, and connects both sides of the park, as well as Whidbey and Fidalgo Islands.

Bowman Bay saw another development in the 1940's, when the state fisheries agency established a marine research station and fish hatchery there. It was short-lived, as the fresh water, coming from Pass Lake to the north, was too warm for fish spawning. The station ceased operation in the 1950's and was demolished in 1972. A recent project is removing the shoreline armoring rock, which had been put in place to protect the hatchery, to enhance fish habitat along the beach.

As with virtually all accessible shoreline in Puget Sound, Bowman Bay has seen many decades of logging activity. It has been, and occasionally still is, used as an area for tugs with log booms to wait for favorable weather and slack tide to go through the Pass.

If you paddle in Deception Pass, you may wish to give some thought to the marine life there, as well as watching out for other boat traffic. Seals are common. Orcas and sea lions may occasionally appear. Fishing is good and many fishing boats frequent the area. Over the years other marine life has been seen. Basking sharks, which may be huge and heart-stopping but are

plankton eaters, have been reported. There have also been reports of a “sea serpent”. In the 1950’s something looking like a giant snake washed ashore, with a tuft of stiff, black hair-like growth on top of its head. A park ranger reported seeing something “coil and dive” in the 1960’s. In September, 1963 the remains of something about 25 feet long washed up on the shore. It had a long horse-like head, rubbery hide, spots from which hair grew, and a rope around its neck! It does not appear that any marine scientists had opportunity to examine the carcass, but the speculation was that it was the very rare and seldom seen oarfish, which may grow more than 50 feet in length. A similar sighting of a live specimen swimming near shore occurred in 1997.

One piece of advice from the Samish Indians: They will tell you that the Maiden lives in the Pass and will wade around in the water behind their canoes. What looks like seaweed is her hair floating in the Pass. The Indians say that if they think of the Maiden, the waters will settle down and they will be able to paddle against the current. If they don’t, their canoes will get sucked down a whirlpool. Happy Paddling.

© Karen L. Borell

Sources and Acknowledgements

Anacortes Museum Research Files, Anacortes, Washington, reviewed February and May, 2017.

At Home on Fidalgo: A Treasury of Stories, Facts, Art and Poetry about Fidalgo Island. n.p., 1999.

Barkan, Frances B., The Wilkes Expedition: Puget Sound and the Oregon Country. Washington State Capital Museum, 1987.

Hansen, Kenneth C., The Maiden of Deception Pass: A spirit in cedar. Samish Experience Productions, 1983.

Hayes, Derek, Historical Atlas of the Pacific Northwest: Maps of Exploration and Discovery. Sasquatch Books, 1999.

Island County Historical Society, Janet Enzmann Archives and Research Library, Parks, Coast Salish, and other record groups, reviewed October, 2015, and September, 2016.

Kellogg, George A., A History of Whidbey's Island, George. B. Astel Pub., 1934.

Long, Priscilla, “Deception Pass and Canoe Pass bridges are dedicated on July 31, 1935,” Historylink #5698, <http://historylink.org>, 2004, accessed December, 2016.

McDaniel, Nancy L., A Sound Defense: Military Historical Sites of Puget Sound, Nancy L. McDaniel Pub., 2013.

Neil, Dorothy, A Bridge over Troubled Water: the legend of Deception Pass. South Whidbey Historical Society, 2002.

Neil, Dorothy, My Whidbey Island, as seen and reported in the Whidbey News-Times, 1946-1975. n.p., n.d.

Rivers, Sara, Touring Deception Pass of Whidbey and Fidalgo Islands. Meeting Ground Journal Productions, 1990.

Slotemaker, Terry, The Exploration of Whidbey, Fidalgo, and Guemes Islands and the Origin of Local Place Names. Anacortes Museum, 2015.

Thompson, M. Terry and Steven M. Egesdal, ed., Salish Myths and Legends: One People's Stories. Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2008.

Waterman, T. T., ed. Vi Hilbert, Jay Miller, Zalmai Zahir. Lushootseed Press, 2001.

Webber, Bert, Retaliation: Japanese Attacks and Allied Countermeasures on the Pacific Coast in World War II. Oregon State Univ. Press, 1975.

White, Richard, Land Use, Environment and Social Change: The Shaping of Island County, Washington. Univ. of Washington Press, 1980.

I owe many thanks to the local historians who have preserved the artifacts and stories of their communities and made them available to the public. Bret Lunsford and Terry Slotemaker at the Anacortes Museum are doing excellent work for their museum and have been very helpful to me. Once again, I must thank Sarah Aldrich at the Island County Historical Society Janet Enzmann archives as well.