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Page's marina—sixty years ago

by Phyllis Reeve

For those unfamiliar with Gabriola, Phyllis and her husband Ted run a marina and resort—with cottages, campground, bookstore, and art studio—at the south end of the island in Silva Bay.

EDITOR

With our acquisition of Page's in 1987, we assumed responsibility for a place that had been known, visited, and loved since 1943, when two young brothers, Jack and Les Page, bought the Japanese fish camp in Silva Bay. Les Page graciously allowed us to keep the name. Most of the following is adapted or quoted from typed memories generously provided by members of the Page family, especially by Les and his wife Joan; and by Jack's widow, Joan Berry, and their daughter Gail Page.

Before Page's

In the mid-1930s, two Japanese families, named Haminaka and Koyama, began a fish camp and store in Silva Bay. Most of the business was on floats, with a tiny piece of land leased from Art Millward. The camp included a 5000-gallon gas tank on the bank and one 8 × 10-foot shed which housed their only source of electricity—a 5-kW DC generator, supplying power at a cost of about one dollar per day.

The Haminaka family lived on the dock in a building 16 × 24 feet, constructed of dark shiplap, with a cedar shingle roof and heavy wallpaper interior. A separate building, 20 × 24 feet, also on the dock, was the first store. They maintained an inventory of approximately four to five hundred dollars, brought over difficult roads or, whenever possible, by boat. The stock consisted of such non-perishables as canned goods,

tobacco, soft drinks and candy, and a few bakery items, as well as household cleaners, bits and pieces of hardware, lamp mantles, wicks, candles, kerosene, naphtha, and motor oils.

A pot-bellied wood stove heated the store, the stovepipe sticking straight through a hole in the roof. Shelves lined the walls. Bins beneath the counter held bulk products, and atop the counter sat a large bronze scale. One of the few remaining objects from the early days, the scale still gives accurate weights. Engraving identifies it as a product of the Brantford Computing Scale Co. Ltd., of Brantford, Canada, and a small metal label gives its registration date as May 31,

1917. It was apparently purchased at 365 Cordova Street, Vancouver. We also inherited a Burroughs adding machine of obvious but unspecified antiquity.

The living quarters were furnished with bare essentials—



beds, stove, table and chairs, storage shelves, no running water, and a primitive "sanitary" facility. "Joe Pokes", poles secured from the bank by eyebolts, anchored the floats; and the buoyancy of teredo-eaten cedar logs provided flotation.

In 1943, as a consequence of wartime measures, the family were forced to move from the Silva Bay fishing camp to somewhere in the Canadian interior. They never returned, although soon after 1945, Japanese fishermen again became frequent visitors to Page's. Wilfred Taylor and his family took over the water and upland lease from the Koyamas, but stayed only briefly—just long enough for their young child to come within a hairs-breadth of drowning, and for the Taylors to decide this was not the place for them.

The Page family

Jack Page, who was 27 years old in 1943, and his brother Les, who was 25, grew up on Galiano Island and worked on fishing boats and in canneries, from the Gulf Islands to the Skeena River. They operated a fish-buying camp at Otter Bay on North Pender Island, to service the briefly lucrative dogfish industry, transporting and selling the vitamin-rich livers to a small firm on Centennial Pier in Vancouver, and taking the rest of the fish to a fertilizer plant in Shingle Bay, a mile or so from their camp. No one seemed to know or care about missing all those feeds of fish and chips.

Fishing was declared a wartime essential service, and the young fishermen who did not go overseas worked year-round to harvest fish and desirable by-products.

Jack worried about a permanent home for his wife Joan and their young son Terry. He and Les shared an enterprising spirit that drew them to the opportunity at Silva Bay. And so, they closed the Otter Bay Camp in May 1943. Jack and his family spent the summer on the Skeena, while Les packed fish to Campbell River and Vancouver. At the end of the season, Page Bros. Store and

Fish Camp became their home and headquarters.

To begin with, Joan and Terry remained on Galiano with the rest of the extended Page family, and Jack continued to work for the excellent seasonal pay at the cannery. In September, 1944, Joan went to Victoria to await the birth of their second child, and Jack packed their belongings on their boat the *Sea Rock*, and with Terry, Joan's mother Dora Bishop, and the dog Mickey, moved to the new home at Silva Bay.

On Thanksgiving weekend, Jack travelled by train to Victoria to fetch Joan and baby Gail. The daylong journey was made festive by a turkey dinner at a Nanaimo hotel before catching the ferry *Atrevida* to Gabriola. Bill and Catherine Coats with their brand new red pick-up truck met Jack, Joan, and Gail at the north end ferry dock and drove them the length of the dusty, bumpy island roads, and through the Millward property to Silva Bay.

Joan's first thoughts on arriving at her new home were: "God forbid, what is this?"

She carried her two-week-old baby down a rickety ramp into a shack, consisting of two bedrooms, a kitchen area with a combined dining/living room area, and a toilet, which was two holes in a bench where you could look down and see the perch swimming in the sea below.

The main bedroom had green building paper tacked on the ceiling at either end, and it swooped down in the middle of the room, touching the bed. The other bedroom, where Joan's mother slept, had raised slotted boards to walk on where the floor was frequently under water.

The kitchen was lit by hissing gas lamps and had a wooden sink. The wood stove burned bark that Jack salvaged from log booms anchored in Silva Bay.



Courtesy the Page family

One corner of the dining/living area was partially submerged where the supporting logs had become waterlogged. A small tin heater constantly smelled of creosote.

Water had to be carried down from the well to boil baby bottles, make formula, cook, wash clothes, and bathe the children. The Japanese had dug a well approximately 100 feet from the water's edge. It was about 12-feet deep and lined with granite boulders each the size of a small loaf of bread.

Worked by a hand pump on a stand on top, the well supplied plenty of water in the winter, but went dry in the summer. The Pages dug another well on the edge of the field, about 400 feet from the shore, but it was almost thirty years before they achieved an adequate water supply.

Terry's play area was a boarded enclosure with cracks on the floor. Remembering the near loss of the Taylor child, they tied a long rope around his waist. Not surprisingly, he came down with typhoid fever and spent many weeks in hospital in Nanaimo. It was a long trek then, too long for Jack and Joan

to make frequent visits. The little patient finally came home, pale, thin and with a shaved head.

When the tide was very low, the logs on which the house sat sank into the mud at the bottom of the bay. In Joan's nightmares, the tide came in and the logs stayed stuck.

The new business, like the new family, went through growing pains. Suppliers supplied mostly broken contracts and broken promises; ice and even boats failed to materialize when required.

At last the Pages made a deal for 1944–5 with the London Fish Company for the use of a packing boat and the sale of fish. A new 8000-gallon diesel tank serviced the many tugboats working in the area. Standard Oil brought in fuel by barges as required.

Fish prices took a jump, and both Jack and Les returned to the Skeena River and the North Pacific Cannery. In their absence, Joan exchanged homes with Jack's older brother Ron; so she and the children were on

Galiano near the grandparents, while Ron and his wife Ida ran the fish camp in Silva Bay.

The float home became increasingly unsafe and uncomfortable. In 1946, Joan and Jack, and later Ron and Ida, rented a house from Mrs. Morrical, a few minutes up Coast Road, while they dismantled the clapboard shack, and recycled every salvageable piece of it into a three-room, 500 square-foot cottage on the shore. A path led past an arbutus tree and down the cliff to the floats. The cottage remains, after several drastic renovations, as the cosiest and most private of the rental units at Page's Resort.

With safe, if crowded, living quarters on land, the Page family began planning and building a larger house and store.

Construction went on over several years, whenever time and labour were available. Les and Jack's sister Dorothy, [later Dorothy Griffin] helped in the store. Another brother, Ken, still keeps in touch with Gabriola. A little wooden "laundromat" building on the edge of the present parking lot was equipped with two cement tubs, a wringer washer, and a clothesline strung from tree to tree.

The main business of Page's was the buying and selling of fish and the fuelling of workboats. But the store and fuel pump soon became important to the growing community at Gabriola's South End. Page's purchased eggs from the McDonalds and milk from the Stalkers—and in the summer, fresh berry pie from Frances McDonald. Often in winter, the milk was delivered by horse-drawn sleigh, and the frozen cream pushed the cardboard tops out of the glass bottles. More prosaic groceries came from Malkin Brothers and Slade & Stewart in Nanaimo. Mail was delivered only as far as Gossip Corner. Jack drove Millward's old Ford truck, nicknamed the "Hesperus", to

fetch mail and groceries, deliver gas and transport people to the ferry and the local dances.

Fishing boats and tugs knew Silva Bay as a convenient refuge to wait for time, tide or weather, and more and more pleasure boats were learning its recreational charms. Jack's skills as a mechanic were in demand at Withey's Shipyard as well as at Page's. He and Les went anywhere and did anything for anyone, at any time. They were Search and Rescue and Water Taxi. They salvaged logs and carried messages. Joan kept the books, did the daily summaries, paid the bills, and ran the store much of the year.

There was always a barbecue in the backyard, or lunches of big sandwiches and delicious desserts when friends dropped in. Fishermen provided fresh shrimp and crab to be cooked in a big square tub over firewood in the back yard and sold to the yachts people—or eaten by the family. Islanders, tourists, and boaters came to buy fresh fish, shrimps, and clams at the store. A few mainlanders began to bring tents and spend summer vacations on the Page and Millward properties.

The gradual change from the Silva Bay Fish Camp to Page's Resort and Marina was well underway, when, in 1957, Jack died in a hunting accident. For some years, Joan and Les shared ownership and responsibility for Page's, as did the children, Terry and Gail, for whom the docks, the store and the island were central to existence. With the purchase of the Millward land, Page's extended from the Shipyard to Fenwick Road.

But they all had their own lives to live. In 1963, Joan married Ed Berry, and in 1969 Les married Joan Potts. The family and the property divided.

When we celebrated fifty years of Page's in 1993, we received a letter from a man whose

grandfather had fished commercially around Silva Bay in the 1940s and settled on Gabriola. The younger generation—parents, aunts, uncles, cousins—used to camp at Page's. The writer remembered Les's grocery delivery service: "There were always happy times when Les Page dropped by with groceries and often gossip."

We no longer deliver groceries from Page's, but happy times continue from one summer to the next, and the gossip never ends.

Some neighbours—in more or less alphabetical order

Reg and George Band close neighbours on Coast Road, helped with the construction of the new house and store. Mrs. R. Band was a teacher.

Abe Crocker and his family lived on the property we know as the Silva Bay Boatel. When George Stewart and Gordon Burt bought the land, they put in a sawmill and built a store, which they rented to the Halvorsons.

Art Fenwick and his family lived on the Tyhursts' present land.

Ken and Vera Harrison, like many other Gabriolans, began as summer campers. First, they tented on the point near the Millward farmhouse, later rented the cabin on floats near the location of the old store, and then leased property from Millwards and used materials from the old buildings on the lot to construct a summer retreat. Their cabin served them and their friends for many years until they became permanent residents on Gabriola.

Other leasers of Millward property were Phyllis and Norton Blythe, Olaf Christensen, Fred Frederickson and Vic Clark.

Dick Hokanson later married Phyllis Blythe and continued to live near the present Fenwick Road.

Frank LePoidevan, who was employed at the shipyard, lived on Withey Road with his wife Jean.

Tom and Frances McDonald and children Ken and Gordon, from the farm on South Road, were good friends of the Pages. Tom went hunting with Jack and Les, and he and Les occupied the winter months with logging.

Tom McLeod and his wife lived on Tugboat Island and built the house on the bluff overlooking Commodore Channel.

Lou Meyer, another shipyard employee, and his wife Bea bought the "Peterson house" on Coast Road from Mrs. Morrical, and when it burned down, built another.

Art Millward farmed his waterfront acres, opposite Sear Island, and built several small houses for his and his wife's relatives, including some members of the Law family.

The Nicolls family lived in two houses on Breakwater Island.

George Redcliffe bought Sear Island in the late 1940s. Other Sear Islanders included Bill Edgett and Carl Hessey.

Norman Sear began the Silva Bay Shipyard in the early 1940s with a fish-buying scow and boat, and a small convenience store.

Les and Margaret Withey became partners in the shipyard, and then owners. Withey's Shipyard employed up to twenty men building navy boats.

Several generations of the Silva family lived at the north end of the Bay: Ed and Kitty, Joe Silva and his wife, Henry Silva, Henry's sister Mary and her husband Fritz Nelson and family.

I have based this article on other people's memories of a time long past. Our web site is www.pagesresort.com and readers are welcome to e-mail me at mail@pagesresort.com. ♦