

Fire Canoe

by Skip Bold

Seeing this photo of *Fire Canoe* on Johns Island, collecting driftwood and stone, brought back a flood of memories of Tommy Thompson and *Fire Canoe*.

After Tommy graduated from the University of Washington in the late 1940's with a degree in mechanical engineering, he needed to get the cobwebs of academia out of his head, so he took a couple of years off and headed for the San Juans.

During this time he constructed his father's lovely, architect designed, home on McConnel Island. This place was unique, not only in its site sensitive placement and form, but also in that it was massively constructed almost entirely of beach combed materials. Floors were sand stone flags from Stuart Island, roof beams were large fir timbers from many island beaches, and walls and fireplaces were beach granite. All of this was hauled to ...

What you see in this photo is one of the many collecting expeditions. the double ended steamer is an ex-Coast Guard, wooden, lapstrake, surf boat. Tommy built the Roberts style boiler from iron pipe and burned driftwood for fuel. The engine was a 1905 Thorneycroft compound of 12-15 HP +/-.

The boxey boat alongside is actually two boats. These were World War II surplus assault boats. The two are bolted together transom to transom. I suspect in this elongated fashion they towed easier than two separate boats. the military used these boats for everything from ferrying troops across rivers with paddles or outboards, or even as pontoons for floating bridges. They were built light of plywood with little framing and could be hand carried with enough men. They might also have been "nested" like a Banks Dory? The last I remember of these they were upside down, side by side, next to the lagoon on McConnel ca. 1960.

Col. Thompson, Tommy's dad, passed away about 1961 and Tommy inherited the house he had beachcombed. Tommy and his young family (6 kids?) lived and worked on Fidalgo Island and for the next 35 years +/- they would commute to McConnel on summer weekends. They put so many miles on *Fire Canoe* that they wore out three or four boilers. Of course, it didn't help that the fuel of choice was salt soaked wood! Enroute, stops at beaches of James Island or perhaps Spenser Spit were mandatory to keep up steam.

One of the joys of living on Wasp Passage was watching for *Fire Canoe* west bound, towards dusk, on a summer Friday evening. If we happened to be about in the boat we would get an enthusiastic whistle! More commonly we would just see her slipping along the Crane Island shore with the flood. It would usually be calm and could just make out the sweet, quiet, thump thump thump of the compound engine. On rarer occasions, someone might be practicing on the ten whistle steam calliope! There was a peaceful appropriateness to that kind of boating that always had its charm.

Tommy passed away in the mid-1990's and *Fire Canoe* is mouldering away in the trees on McConnel. Steam has not left the Wasp Islands, however. But that is another story!

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