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1-25-2003

## Ivan Olson Interview 1

By: Roger Sherman

September 28, 1999

Interview was done in Anacortes at the home of Ivan and Marjorie Olson.

Note-----We started out by looking at pictures.

I-----We had one ferry, the "Clatawa," was a 135 footer, I guess, we had to have a different license, I guess, I had a 150 ton mate and second class pilots license. Otherwise, 65 foot, you only needed an operators license. We had this bigger ferry, so my Uncle Andrew and I each got mates and second class pilots license to handle that one.

R-----What was Andrews last name?

I-----Olsen, my mothers half brother, really. He worked with us a good many years, Andrew.

R-----Now, is that the house Eloise said that you moved from Whidbey Island to Hood Canal.

I-----No, no, ah, when we went to work, ma and dad, they took a partner, Roy Neil, he was their partner when they started the ferry. Mother got dad; Dad was out fishing with the trawler, up in Alaska, and they were going to put out bids so someone could get a ferry schedule here. Lang's had it. If you raised the flag here on the point, they'd come and get you. And there was no schedule, so they put in a bid to see who would run a ferry with a schedule. So ma put in a bid, she was pretty young, and they gave it to her. So she wired dad up in Alaska to come on home, "I've got a job for you." Now dad was handy, he could build anything with his hands. So they come here and they built the dock and he took a partner, Roy Neil and they had lots of money. They owned all kinds of land and they had lots of money. They're still around.

R-----Yeah, Dorothy Neil still writes for the paper over there.

I-----Yeah, she's married to Mel, I think, Mel Neil.

R-----Now, you said there was somebody that had that ferry service before that, the Langs operated it. Now what did they have in the line of boats?

Moved into adult  
came home (Alliance?)  
May or June  
2002  
Anacortes??

Ivan Olson  
1919  
Anacortes, WA 98221  
360 293 6096  
04 Jan 2003  
He is 85

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I-----It was more or less a big raft. I only seen a picture of it once. They could make trips, but it was only sketchy. They lived in Cornet Bay. There was a bunch of Langs on Whidbey Island.

R-----There's still a bunch of Langs over there.

I-----Most of them were pretty good guys.

R-----Well now, you actually, with Neils help, you built both docks then at Hoypus and---

I-----Yeah.

R-----Well the first dock was at Cornet Bay wasn't it?

I-----Yeah, but when we started, right across Whidbey Island, I'm thinking of Dewey now, where I lived, right across----there's still a big cement pillar out to the end of that road when you go past Cornet Bay and drive out to Hoypus Point. There's a great big cement pillar where the dock hinged, still in the sand over there. That's where Neil and dad built the dock. There's one of them and the other is right out in Dewey right inside Yokeko Point.

R-----Is there any sign of that left, where that dock was?

I-----No, no. Another fellow built on the point, he bought some lots on the point and he put in a pillar there. Actually there's nothing there. They've got a dock, a private dock there now. So after a couple of years----They started with an open barge, scow, and they each had a launch, so they towed it, every other week, one would be towing it back and forth.

R-----Now who had the launch?

I-----Dad had a launch named the "Rainbow" and Neil had a launch named the "Favorite" and after two or three years, dad bought Neil out. The first ferry they built was the "Deception" and it had a big old Frisco Standard in her and it didn't have enough power. I don't see how dad ever let them put that poopless engine in that nice boat, the "Deception." So finally he, after he got the ferry in his own name, he and ma, why they went to Ballard and had a Fairbanks Morse put in, a semi-Diesel. That's a three cylinder and that had lots of power. It was a cute little engine, three cylinder, double ender.

R-----Was that a direct reversible?

I-----No.

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R-----It had a transmission?

I-----Yeah, it had a clutch on each end, a wheel on each end, a double ender for such a short run and this L. H. Coolidge, he was a draftsman and he was a smart man. He was related to the Coolidges too. Lee Coolidge designed this ferry and it was built for model Ts, twelve-fourteen model Ts. Towards the last, it would only hold six cars when they got so big. And then dad and his brother Albert. He ended up working at the base and in the 30's and the 40's he sold Hudsons there. He had his own garage in Oak Harbor. Albert Olson. He was a real nice guy.

R-----Ok, well that explains one thing because Eloise Mackie had a picture of the Oak Harbor Garage.

I-----See that was grandpa's blacksmith shop to start with. When he came to Whidbey Island before 1900, he was a blacksmith, my grandfather and he had a blacksmith shop right at the base of the big dock.

R-----I can remember that That blacksmith shop was still open for quite a few years after the dock burned. The dock burned in either 64 or 66. It was a Halloween night. Somebody set it on fire.

I-----We moved away from here in 37 and went to Port Gamble and then I came back in 1960. I had a twin brother, Gib. And then dad and his brothers had a ferry built, only a single ender (the "Acorn") and that went to Utsalady, over to Whidbey Island, it used to be Olson's farm.

R-----They call it Mariners Cove now, but at that time it was called Olson's Landing. Do you remember that, it being called Olson's Landing?

I-----Yeah, they put a great big ship in there and sunk it, the wind was terrible there, so they could have a breakwater so they could land the ferry at the dock.

R-----Ok, that explains that then. I thought it was an old barge or something.

I-----No, they brought in a great big old wooden ship and sunk it and that made smooth water behind the dock so they could get in.

R-----Well now, are you familiar with that area now. There's some old pilings out there kind of close to the breakwater. They put a rock breakwater in there.

I-----I haven't been over there for quite awhile, but don't think there's anything there because they cleaned that out and dredged the channel into that little cove. Pretty place over there now.

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R-----You called that Utsalady?

I-----Over on Camano Island was the Utsalady landing.

R-----Ok, because I've heard all kinds of pronunciations of that and never did know what was right.

I-----I've always known it as Utsalady (Ut---rhymes with Up), (lady, as in lad). That's what we called it back in the old days. They operated that for dad and his three brothers, Trix and Art and then dad furnished a man and that was a Grasser. And of course when the bridge was built, that ferry run went out too. People didn't travel it. That wiped two ferry runs out. So my dad and mother split up about that time. They were getting to far apart in their ways.

R-----What year would that have been?

I-----36 I think, they split up. And then dad went down below Port Orchard at Longbranch and started a ferry run there over to the Olympia side. And that didn't pay off like it should because a fifty mile drive, you could drive around to Olympia from Longbranch. But he did make a little money and then he had a friend, she was a friend of the family, she worked in Olympia, in the capital, and she found out there was going to be some bids for a ferry to McNeil Island. She told dad how much money to bid and dad bid on that and he got the bid. So he went to the Tacoma shipyard, times were tough then in 39, I guess, he went to this shipyard and showed his contract. He said I haven't got any money. I got a contract, I get so much a year, I need a ferry boat. So they built him a ferry boat. I'll show it to you. This is the ferry he had built.

R-----The "Tahoma?"

I-----That's a neat one. The passenger cabin, they get out of the weather and this is McNeil Island and they stopped at Steilacoom and Anderson Island. He sold out in the 50's because he retired and went down to Grayland.

I-----Herald and I worked with dad right from out here at Dewey and when they split up, Herald went with dad and Andrew, mothers brother, went with ma to start on the other ferry. These guys each worked, they're good workers and honest and Herald stayed with dad and they went down here and Andrew went to Port Gamble with my mother. Now, see we went to Port Gamble and bought a franchise from Peabody and he threw in the "Clatawa" and this was the "Lake Constance." This is at Port Gamble now and this here is the "Acorn." This one used to run at Utsalady over to Whidbey Island. This was the money maker. It had an Atlas in it. We had a Fairbanks in there first with four cylinders. And this is a relief boat. This one run up at Seabeck-Brinnon and that went out during the war. No one traveled it.

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R-----Ok, now, the "Acorn" was on the Port Gamble-Shine run?

I-----Yeah, this is down at Port Gamble, right here, right in front of our house.

R-----Was the "Acorn" renamed when it was on this route?

I-----No, no, she was built for Oak Harbor but the name stayed the same after she moved.

R-----So the "Lake Constance" was a different boat that was brought in then?

I-----Yeah, it was built for the-----Joyce now is shirttail relation and they had it at Kingston and it was named "City of Kingston" that run over from Kingston to Edmonds way back in the early 30's.

R-----Ok, well I have that it was on the Hood Canal run in 1939. It was called the "Lake Constance" and it was previously named the Rubaiyat.

I-----Yeah, it was built as a freight boat and they named it the "Rubaiyat" and it got into a storm and tipped over and the Captain's wife, she was a cook on there, and she drowned. She was the only one that drowned. But I don't know where the "Rubaiyat" run. I don't know what happened to the "Lake Constance." We sold it. The "Clatawa," we sold to the Navy during the war and they run it over at Indian Island. They run it there for awhile. They took it down the Bremerton for overhaul and it got in between two destroyers and that was the last of the "Clatawa."

R-----Back to dates. When did your dad start the Deception Pass run?

I-----1920. He started with barges.

R-----Do you have any idea how long the Lang's operated that run?

I-----No I don't know. I never did hear.

R-----But they didn't have a regular route, all they had was some sort of a flag deal?

I-----Yeah, it was-----out at the end of the road the Blout's had a store there and gas service station and a little grocery store. It was a square one and up on the big writing, it said "Blout's Bazaar, Gas, Oil and other Stuff." And they sold ice cream and they had a neat little store.

R-----That was on the Dewey Beach side?

I-----Yeah.

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R-----It's my understanding that the ferry, it would have been the one that the Langs had then, operated from Cornet Bay over towards Dewey.

I-----Yeah, same place, same dock on this side. I don't know what kind of a dock they had.

R-----When did your folks start the Olson's Landing-Utsalady run.

I-----Well, lets see, the "Acorn" was built in 24, so they must have started right after that. The "Deception Pass" was built in 21. It went out in 35 when the bridge was built, maybe 36, nobody traveled it.

R-----The house, you said, I had a story that came from Eloise, that your mom had barged the house down to---

I-----Two of them. We had, this was our house, it was all rebuilt and Neil's had a big house. They had the carpenters come over and build a big home. This house is still sitting, only it's been rebuilt. It sits right above the ferry dock, right out here at Dewey. Dad built it piece by piece, room by room. We had a house here, that was smaller one and we had a great big one here and they moved them both on barges, 36, one went down to Columbia Beach ferry. Mother had some property there. She put the small one in there and the bigger one went to Port Gamble. When we moved we put everything in the house and moved the house.

R-----And you lived in it down there?

I-----Oh yeah, we lived in that house until 50. Now this is my Uncle Andrew. He come here and went to work for mother and he stayed with her all the time and he went to Port Gamble-Shine in 36 and run the ferry until the 40's and then he went up and run the, we bought the Seabeck-Brinnon ferry, so he went up and run that for ma.

R-----What was his last name?

I-----Andrew Olsen, it's O l s e n. Now they had a big farm out at San de Fuca, out on West Beach. Uncle Gilbert, he had an adjoining farm. Darst bought all of it. Now my brother and I worked on the ferry, I was deck hand purser and my brother, we were both deck hands, we were working. Get a dollar a day. 29 and Andrew was getting three dollars a day. So when he worked with us, he got the extra dollar. We worked every weekend we could. A dollar a day, that was a lot of money. Andrew just died here a few months ago. He was 96. He stayed with ma. He was a good man, a damned good man. That was in 29.

R-----The "Deception Pass," did you know that it is still around?

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I-----Yeah, I don't know if it's in Anacortes, and the "Acorn's" around too.

R-----The "Acorn" is? Do you have any idea where it is?

I-----Which one was it that was all rebuilt?

R-----The "Deception Pass" was up on the ways down here at Lovrics several years ago. They had rebuilt her into a fish buyer. She was in pretty good shape.

I-----The "Acorn" run to Hat Island to Everett for awhile. It was in the 50's sometime. I did hear that some loggers took her up north.

Note-----Ivan is showing some pictures. Hat Island is Gedney Island on the charts.

I-----This is Captain Peabody, owned all the ferry boats, Blackball. This is my mother. This is the last day of the Port Gamble-Shine ferry run, the last day. They put a new run up Hood Canal, three miles and Blackball built a new dock to put bigger ferries in. This is my twin brother here and this is the steering wheel off of the "Acorn." We kept that.

R-----Who has that now?

I-----It's right down here over the fireplace. I got it. Dad, when they were building the ferry, they brought a whole bunch of fancy wheels down to put on it and dad was a Jew. He went down in the shops, on the water front in Seattle and he bought it for next to nothing. It's a beautiful wheel. I shined that brass a lot. Every Friday we shined brass on the boat. My brother, we went trawling for ten years out at Neah Bay, had dad's trawler.

R-----Your mothers maiden name was Olsen, spelled with an e. Was she raised on Whidbey Island?

I-----They were born in Norway and she was five or six when they moved here. Then they lived in San de Fuca, out on the farm and also lived in Clinton where their father homesteaded.

R-----Do you remember the birthday of your mother?

I-----February the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1882.

R-----How about you and your brother?

I-----We were born January 12, 1917 in San de Fuca on Uncle Gilberts farm.

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R-----Do you have any stories of accidents or interesting happenings?

I-----What was his name, Miller? He had a load of strawberries coming down the Whidey Island dock and the ferry had pulled out and he didn't see it and he run off the end of the dock and we had all kinds of strawberries in the bay. They called him strawberry Lee. That was the landing over at Hoypus Point. I suppose I was five, seven, eight years old or so.

R-----Any other stories you can think of?

I-----The bootleggers used to bring a hearse across, loaded with booze.

R-----Was that on the "Acorn?"

I-----On the Dewey run, at Deception. You could have a night trip any time you called up, anytime at night. Dad took care of those trips and they would usually come across there with a hearse, loaded, tipped the ferry a hell of a long ways. Bringing it in the beaches here and putting it into their trucks. The Coast Guard was stationed here, at Dewey, at our dock and the rum runners would go through and them guys would start shooting at them, the Coast Guard. We could see the tracer bullets going and it was something. Marjories neighbor, she lived in Everett, and her neighbor was one of them bootleggers, Fairfield. He owned a trucking outfit in Everett. They were all fixed up to get rid of that booze. They'd shoot her out the end and have a long rope on it and be tied with a newspaper, a buoy. That sat down in there a long time until the paper loosened up and the buoy would come up so they'd go back and get their load of booze latter on, when the Coast Guard was chasing them. Pretty slick.

R-----What do you remember about the Water Festival?

I-----Oh that was a big celebration. We hauled a lot of the Indian racing canoes across. They hauled them on trucks from Bellingham and Nooksack. I've got some pictures of the canoes on the trucks going across on the ferry. That was a big celebration.

I-----There, this here is the barge they had. This is my Uncle Art here and this is the "Rainbow." Dad's partner owned that. That has to be 21 or so.

Note-----Ivan said, on page 2, that his dad owned the "Rainbow."?????

Marjorie-----It was really funny because he was telling about the Coast Guard shooting at them, you know. He was a good friend. He's passed away now of course. But they'd tell about carrying the bootleg whiskey, or whatever it was, and the hearse



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and hiding it in the basement of the court house. He'd been a sheriff and he was a good friend of Lew's and every time I'd have a day off from work, he'd call me up and, his wife and I were good friends, they lived just a couple of doors, he'd call me up to come over and you should have heard the stories they'd tell. It was really something.

I-----Now around the corner here, Whidbey Island, over here is Ben Ure spit. Now, dad bought that because he thought we might want to shorten the ferry run. We bought it from Troxell, the last three or four hundred feet of it. The rum runners, if they got shot up, they used to beach their boats there, but they used to drop a lot of booze off on Ben Ure spit because there was a road right to it.

R-----They've had three names for that spit, Ben Ure, Troxell and Ala. It is presently called Ala Spit.

I-----We finally sold it to Neil Koetje and Herb Pickard.

R-----This is the Coast Guard boat in the middle and the "Deception Pass."

I-----This is Yokeko Point on the Dewey Beach side.

R-----What is this building back here?

I-----That was his boat house, big shed. We towed that to Port Gamble. This used to be our school house. We had to walk up there every day to Dewey's school. Everybody around here, the tug boat men and the whole works only knew it as Blouts Point.

I-----When the "Kalakala" was built my mother and my brother and I got a special invitation to go on the maiden voyage. I suppose it was 35 or 36. She was a beautiful ship. It vibrated so bad, these windows in the back all broke.

Note-----we talked about Elmer Grasser (Melvin's brother) of San de Fuca and his career on the ferries.

R-----I wrote up a paper on the "Acorn" and after our conversation today, I'm going to have to re-do it. I thought the "Deception Pass" and the "Acorn" were built the same year.

I-----One was a single ender, that was for the Oak Harbor run and the other short run was a double ender, a propeller on each end. The "Acorn" started out with a 60 Fairbanks, 60 horse and the other one had a 45 Fairbanks. We finally put an Atlas in the "Acorn." The "Deception Pass" was built in 21 and the "Acorn" in 24 and

**Page 10, Ivan Olson interview, cont.**

dad and his brothers owned the "Acorn" and that run.

R-----Your dad and brothers, didn't they own both of them, the "Deception Pass" and the "Acorn?"

I-----Dad's brothers was only in on and partners on the Utsalady run. Dad and ma had the "Deception Pass." And dad had his brothers on the other one. There was Al, he wound up as a boss on the base after the war started.

Note-----We spent some time talking about fish traps.

I-----My uncle used to tend one of them over there coming out of the Hole in the Wall in LaConner. He used to be a trap tender. We used to take the boat and go out and see him. He'd snag us a fish, take a wire, wrap it around and bring me one up. Some of them unloaded them pots right into the purse seiners. Some of them purse seiners never got their nets wet. They bought all of their fish from the trap guy. My Uncle Andrew was a trap tender over on West Beach. But he was an honest man.

I-----My mother bought the Seabeck-Brinnon run, just up 20 miles from the Port Gamble-Shine on Hood Canal and they secured this ferry ("Clatawa") and the "Lake Constance." Well, my uncle and I, Andrew Olsen, we each had to go and get a mates and second class pilots license, being over 65 feet. We had an operators license for anything under 65 feet. That's what I got and I could only get a tonnage of 150 tons. And my Uncle Andrew and I, I'd go up and relieve him at Seabeck-Brinnon on that ferry. When the war broke out, there wasn't anyone traveling the Seabeck-Brinnon, so we had to cut it out during the war. Then we brought this boat down and we tied it up in Port Gamble Bay, or anchored it and we used it on weekends. It would hold twelve to fourteen cars, maybe more than that.

R-----Was she bigger than the "Lake Constasnce?"

I-----Yeah, I think she was 135 feet. Seems like it. The "Lake Constance" was just under 65 feet. My brother didn't work much on the ferryboats, Gib, he was a fisherman and he married into a Poulsbo family who was a skipper on herring boats. My brother would go herring fishing, he'd go engineer on the big herring boats.

Note-----We're talking about Berte Olson.

R-----She was retired at age 69 in 1950.

I-----They offered her a big ferry so she could keep the run. Black ball was going to

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give us a big ferry, but it was too much. My mother wanted to retire and my license wasn't big enough for it, so-----

R-----You worked on the ferries for how long? I know you worked as a teenager.

I-----I started on it when I was 12 years old as deck hand-purser. Then when we went to Hood Canal, I'd work summers and go to school in the fall and I worked--- I think I was about 19 when I got my operators license. Then I went skipper on the "Acorn" and that's pilot house controlled and then you're engineer too. You take care of the engine and you're the skipper and you have a deck hand-purser. Just two of us. Later on, we got this, the "Constance." I was either engineer on that or skipper, it didn't matter. My twin brother was engineer more on there too when he was around.

R-----Now, what did you do when your mom sold out.

I-----I went to work on the ferries. I went to work on the Seattle-Bremerton run for awhile on the "Kalakala." I only stayed there for a couple of months. Then I come up here and I went to work on the San Juan Island run for Blackball.

Note-----Ivan talks about the rest of his maritime career. This is on tape if anyone wants to borrow it.

R-----Tell me the story about the "Lake Constance" when you were warming the engine up and it decided to leave the dock.

I-----You know, I don't know to this day how them lines got loose. We used it Saturday afternoon, so I'd go down around one, two o'clock and warm up the engine and get things ready so when the crew got there we'd be already to go. Well, I started this engine up, big direct reversible, no clutch and there was a lunge. I come running up on deck and sure enough, so I run up in the wheel house and headed that thing out, then I went down in the engine room and opened her up. I wanted to charge batteries anyway, so we took a cruise around for maybe an hour. So then, I stopped her out pretty close to the point and there's a deck plate in the deck and I got a ladder so I could climb up in the engine room and look out on the deck and see where the bow was. And then, I had her lined up but the current was, this back eddy was running this way so then I went down to the engine room and gave her a little nudge ahead and then I'd look up through the deck to see how the bow was doing. And then I'd back her up a little, go ahead a little and let the current take her right down to the dock, but there's a lot of running from this engine room, up here, over here and up the steps and into the wheel house. Of course I was young, but that was quite a run.

R-----It was engine room controlled?

**Page 12, Ivan Olson interview, cont.**

I-----Yeah, you had to start and stop the engine in the engine room and it was direct reversible too. You'd run the engine backwards or you'd run it front-wards. It was four cylinder, 140 Fairbanks direct reversible. My uncle was watching me, getting quite a kick out of it. If I'd been stuck, they would have dropped somebody off and we could have landed the boat. But I had to do it myself.

R-----Can you think of any other stories, things that have happened on the boats that are humorous or disastrous, crunch any docks or anything like that?

I-----We had it pretty peaceful. You know, we told the guys that hauled the big bales of hay, we told them in the summer time to not come at noon because that's a minus tide. Come in the afternoon when the tides up because the slips are so steep. But they come anyway. Now this one time, they had a great big bunch of hay. No this

was a milk truck. I said you get that thing going and keep it going. The end of the slip wasn't to far on. We had it chained. So he started out and sure enough, he killed his engine and down he come and he pushed the damn boat out and here he was, half on the slip and half on the boat. Well, Elmer Grasser was there and I said: "You know, the first thing we have to do is unload this truck." So we started unloading the big cans. The "Lake Constance" came in and docked and he (Elmer) went up and got a wrecker from Port Gamble. We got the truck unloaded and the slip up and we got the wrecker on the dock and he pulled that guy off. That was a rough one. Then we had the same thing with a big bunch of hay. Elmer had hay fever really bad and had to go home.

**Postscript:**

Thank you Ivan for a great interview. This is one of the few first person interviews I have done. Several quotes will be used in my next book.

The entire tape was not transcribed. I tried to stay within certain areas of interest.

## **Addendum To Ivan Olson Interview**

### **January 25, 2003**

Talked to Ivan on the phone about the "Deception Pass" being sold after the Deception Pass run was shut down. He said it went with his dad, Agaton, down sound. Agaton started the Taylor Bay – Puget City run. Did not pay very well. He got the contract for the Stilicum – McNeal Island run and had a new ferry built. It was the "Tahoma," 65 feet, 12 knots, 10 cars and it had an upper passenger deck. The "Tahoma" was built in 1939. Ivan did not remember just when the "Deception Pass" was sold, but probably soon after the "Tahoma" went on the route.

His new address is:

Alliance ~~?????Adult Care home~~  
Ivan Olson  
1119 26<sup>th</sup> St. Room 213  
Anacortes, WA 98221

*Alliance Living Community of  
Anacortes*

360 293 6096