

Spindrift Magazine

Spring 1996

\$1.00

Volume 19 Number 3

The old town ain't what it used to be

The recent news that the old Hill General Store building on Pioneer Way (later the "five and dime" then for many years the "variety store") is in imminent danger of being razed brought home to us just how changed Oak Harbor is from the town we first met.

It was to a very tiny hamlet that we arrived in 1925 to make our home here for goin' on three quarters of a century. A dusty road led from the "highway" across a slough where cattails grew, and into the "business district." On the right was a photography shop, a garage, Maylor's General Store, a drug-store, doctor's office, post office, dentists' office and H. T. Hill's store. On the left side of the street was the newspaper office, the bank, a paint store, baker, garage and the Co-op Store; then Bert Nunan's Pool Hall, Bill O'Shaughnessey's barber shop, a restaurant and a meat market.

All of the necessary establishments were there for the well-

being of farmers and townspeople of North Whidbey. "Up the hill" a bit was the Oak Harbor Hotel, the Methodist church and the IOOF Hall. The school, both high and elementary, was built "far away" at the north edge of town on 10 acres donated by a generous resident.

Pioneer Avenue was then Barrington Avenue, and 300th was Izett Avenue, and one could find an address without the aid of a calculator or a magician. And between Izett Avenue and Neil Road, which was on the edge of town, now known as 700 Ave. West, there were no cross streets. Just meadows and woods, a wonderful place where blue "flags" and dogtooth violets and shooting stars and wild currants and daisies bloomed in the springtime.

Downtown, the post office was a small building on the water side of the street, where the mail was distributed every evening after the steamer *Atalanta* arrived. The steamer's

whistle blowing as she rounded the Crooked Spit was the signal for everyone to congregate "downtown" to await the mail. It was a "big night on the town" at the post office.

A favorite spot on downtown's Barrington Avenue was Bert Nunan's Pool Hall, where men of the community played pool and poker. There were punch cards too, where one paid 10 cents a punch and had the opportunity to win a box of candy or an inexpensive bracelet or tie pin.

Besides being a "den of iniquity" by some standards, Bert Nunan's Pool Hall sold ice cream and was open on Sundays, the only one in town with such a schedule. Nunan was a tall lanky Irishman who loved kids, and to buy a nickel ice cream cone at the Oasis was to get a fifteen-center for the nickel.

Kids had it pretty good in Oak Harbor.

The meat market owner was Elmer Jackson, and he, like Nunan, didn't have any children, so he made up for it in some measure by seeing that every kid who came in with parents to buy meat was given a wiener. No matter the wiener wasn't cooked, it tasted better right over the counter.

Those early days found a new druggist in town, "Old Tullies" to the kids, who must have been in his early 40s and made the best ice cream soda in the world, not just in Oak Harbor. For five minutes he would stir a scoop of ice cream in a tall glass with some soda water and flavoring, then add a little more soda, and more stirring, topping it off with a hefty scoop of ice cream. No

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Oak Harbor's main street had been paved by the time this photo was taken in the late 1940s. The Navy's arrival in 1941 had revitalized the town after the Great Depression and it boomed for awhile. After the war, the base went on caretaker status, and its future was uncertain. In the later 1950s, due to the efforts of Senator "Scoop" Jackson, the base, and the town, got a new lease on life and resumed full operations. This photo looks west from between 30th & 40th.

milk shake could touch it. Sodas were 20 cents.

Every store had its "character" . . . the banker who chewed tobacco and kept a spittoon alongside the bank window where he personally dispensed funds and tobacco juice . . . the dentist who wore a red wig and advocated "no pain killers" with his dental work (said they were dangerous to one's health) . . . the well loved photographer who refused to let his subjects smile for a picture . . . jovial "Pop" who ran a paint and plumbing supply store and never missed a dance in the IOOF Hall accompanied by his family . . . the barber, Bill O'Shaughnessey, the town wit . . . "Doc" Car-skadden, the island medic who carried a hand saw in his car to help clear the Island's one road in the wake of a tree-downing storm . . . and dozens of others who made up the "business

district" of one awfully small town.

Johnny Hart, our favorite cartoonist tells it:
*Often times when I hark back
 To those wondrous days of
 yore,
 When women curled their
 hair with bones,
 And tribesmen hunted boar;
 Most everyday we'd romp and
 play,
 And frolic at the shore,*

*And then at night by firelight
 Swap tales of yesteryore;
 How unencumbered life was
 then,
 Devoid of stressful chore.
 The land gave forth
 abundance,
 And the seas held fish galore.
 Things may have gone on just
 that way,
 Perhaps forever more!
 Had not some dastard
 opened up . . .
 A Five and Ten Clam Store! ❀*

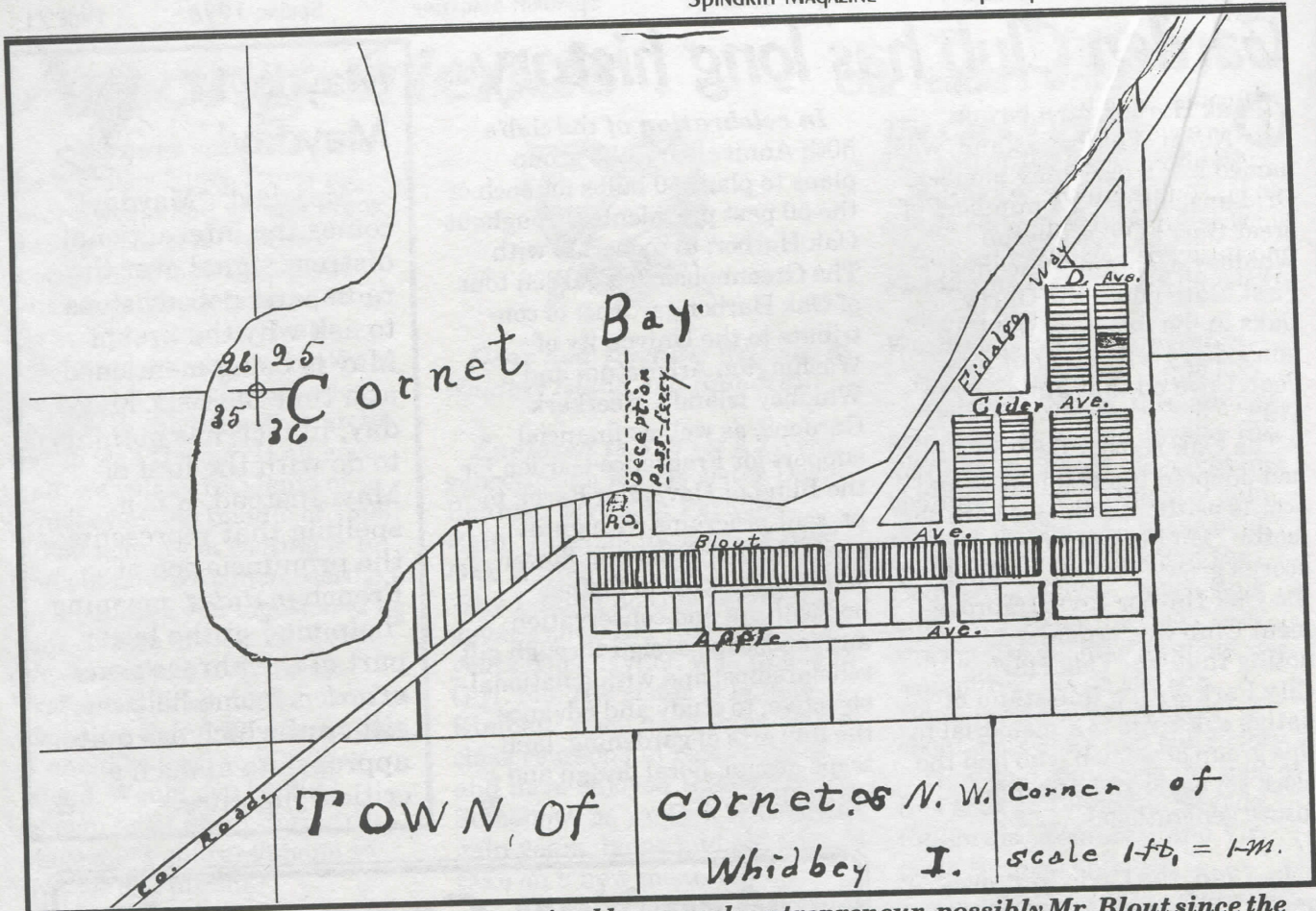
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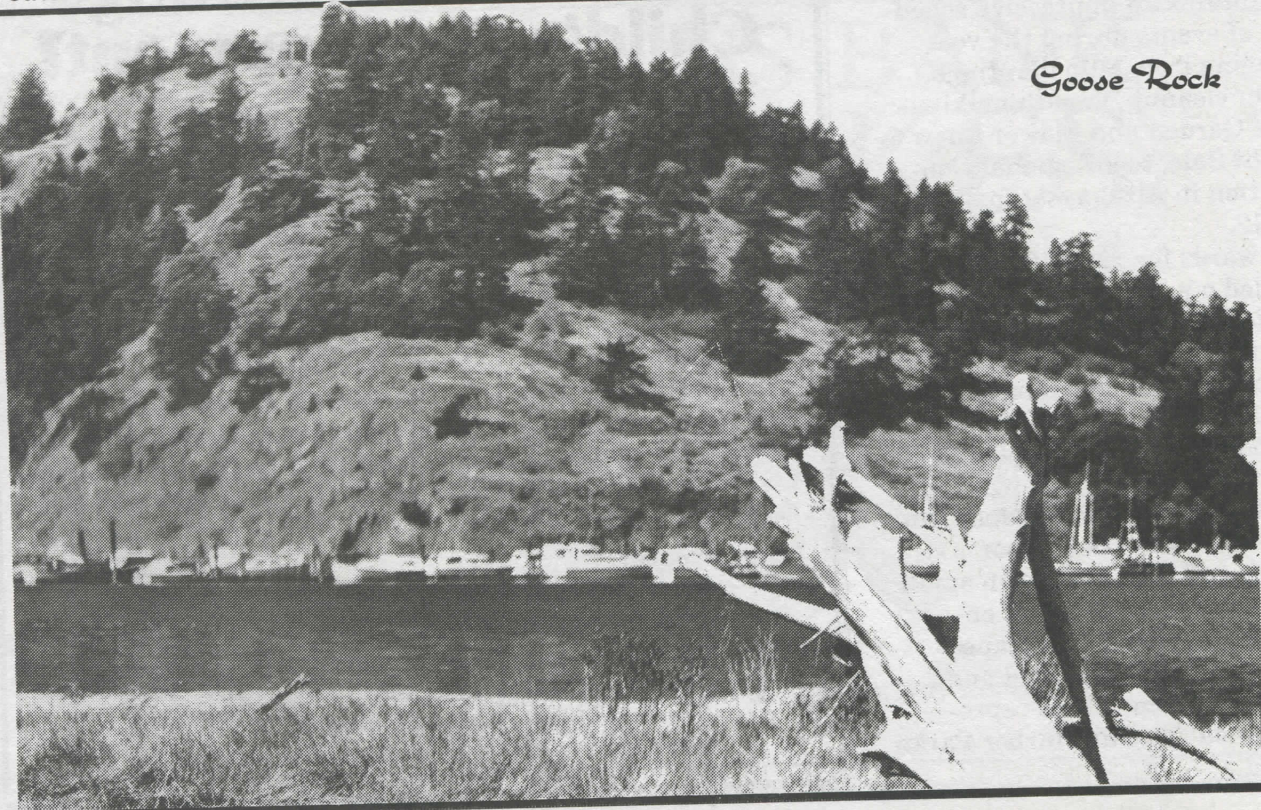
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The plat of the Town of Cornet, as conceived by an early entrepreneur, possibly Mr. Blout since the main street has that name. Blout owned a store at the ferry landing on the Fidalgo side of the Pass he called Blout's Bazaar, Gas, Oil and Other Stuff.

Goose Rock



A Town of Cornet was once platted

It could have been a city. True, there wasn't much room for a "city" as one envisions a city today, but there was an enclosed harbor, a ferry landing for transportation between Whidbey and Fidalgo Islands, plus a shoreline that would take kindly to streets and businesses. Above all, the hooded hills rose to the skies on the east, and Goose Rock on the west side. It was a haven, a refuge, named by the first settler on that part of North Whidbey, John Cornet.

It was Cornet Bay, destined in the dreams of a visionary to become Cornet City!

Little is known of John Cornet, but his name remains. Newcomers often use the name "Coronet" to describe the area with its quiet little cove almost surrounded by a crown of hills and tall trees. Ben Ure, another very early settler, gave his name to the little island bisecting the entrance to the bay. Ure manned a lighthouse on his Island for many years.

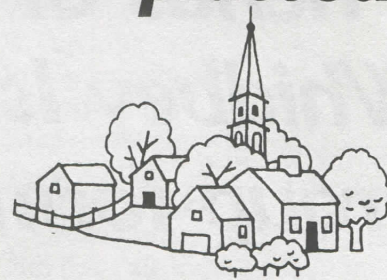
On the western perimeter of Cornet Bay is Goose Rock, a grass and brush-covered rock hill that rises steeply to hold the Whidbey Island approaches to Deception Pass Bridge on the rock's west side, and to tower above the bridge.

Within ten years after the turn of the century, a ferry ran from Whidbey to Fidalgo Island, just east of the Pass. The first ferry was a barge, pulled by a small launch. The Whidbey site was at the end of a narrow country road that still remains, for those looking for an area of rare beauty. Ferns and tall trees mark the area, and a rare view of the Bridge itself can be seen, a special treat at sunset. It is now a state park.

As *antiquities* are unearthed, a set of maps, complete with

named streets, 100-foot wide lots and businesses came to light through Mrs. George Dana of Coupeville. The maps were possibly done by a Mr. Blout, who owned a general store on a rise of land on Fidalgo just above the ferry landing there. The store's sign read: "Blout's Bazaar, Gas, Oil and Other Stuff," a sign not easy to forget. Blout's Bazaar was a Godsend to the settlers on that part of Fidalgo Island near Deception Pass in the first part of the twentieth century. Perhaps the map-maker was influenced by the rise and fall of such "cities" on Whidbey as Little Chicago, near Fort Casey, or even San de Fuca, the "boom town" of the Island in the 1890s.

We remember well in the 1920s, coming from Mount Vernon to Whidbey via the ferry, landing at the ferry dock at the northeast shoreline of Cornet Bay, a place scooped from the woods to join a road that led next to the Bay itself, then onto Oak Harbor roads. It was a lovely introduction to a lovely Island, and someone with a sharp sense of business and opportunity could, with a little urging, urge the settlers on this lonely Island in the Northwest, to create their own village, or so the mapmaker thought. It was a natural harbor,




pictorial as well as practical.

Names of streets and parks pencilled onto the map included Blout Avenue, Ferry Avenue, Nellie Bly and Muck-a-Muck Parks; Bottle Avenue, Apple and Cider Streets and Town Road. A prospective post office was sketched in.

Cornet City never materialized, but during the ensuing years boating enthusiasts and fishermen have found moorage at the Cornet Bay Marina. At one time a small gift shop, a restaurant and other small ventures found a foothold. On the hill opposite Goose Rock homes are being built to take advantage of the spectacular view. Bay Printing is a new business at the head of the cove.

The ferry doesn't run since the building of the Deception Pass Bridge, but the ferry road is still there, leading fishermen to sites just off the Pass. Blout's Bazaar, Gas, Oil and Other Stuff is no more but one never knows what the future holds. ❀



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