



WILLAPA BAY: STRUGGLING TO RETAIN HER VIRTUE

STORY & PHOTOS BY JACK SCHARBACH

Ice ages came and went. Oceans fell and rose, moving the mouths of rivers to the edge of the continental shelf, and then tucking them back into the inlets of fjords and bays. Forest and tundra rolled back and forth across the land. About 7000 years ago the Pacific was rising again, as the glaciers of the most recent ice age melted. In the Near East people were growing grains and living in villages. In the North American plains people had been hunting giant bison for 3000 years. Generations of conifer forest blanketed the Pacific Northwest. Enormous quantities of water and debris gushed from the mouth of the Columbia River as it flushed the remains of the ice sheet. It thrashed about like an unmanned firehose, exiting torrents of ice, rock and water into the Pacific at several places on the Oregon coast. It settled into its present position. As sea levels rose, sediment filled its valley on the continental shelf, and currents continued to move alluvium offshore and into the north-bearing Japanese current. Over several thousand years the Long Beach Peninsula extended a protective arm around the shallow basin on the western edge of the Willapa Hills.

Natural selection, having put the refining touches on conifers nearly one hundred million years before, now honed and adapted organisms to the new Northwest Coast. Salmon of the genus *Oncorhynchus* became adapted to the hydrology and climate of individual rivers. They became an interwoven part of two ecosystems, as much a byproduct of forest as of the sea.

Estuaries of the west coast are newer and consequently less diverse than those on the east coast but what they lacked in numbers of species they made up for in numbers of individuals. Propagating for millennia, the Olympic oyster, *Ostrea lurida*, formed shoals in large areas of the intertidal zone. Other parts of the zone served as nursery for ocean dwelling fish as a food supply for migrating birds. Crabs scuttled over the acres of eelgrass. Beneath the ooze shrimp and worms burrowed, eating and recycling nutrients. Flocks of Dunlin and Sandpiper probed the sand and scurried like armies of windup toys, then flew in tight formations with dazzling synchronicity. Life was so abundant that ancient peoples grew rich without agriculture and competed in giving away possessions.

The Chinooks came from upriver. They established territory from The Dalles to the mouth, then expanded down the Oregon coast to Tillamook, and up the Long Beach Peninsula. The resources of Willapa Bay were shared among groups from as far as Puget Sound, but intrusions from inland and upriver groups were dealt with forcefully. Willapa was important not just for its resources but because it was a crossroad linking people from the Columbia to Puget Sound. For the next several thousand years this was their home. They traded manufactured and natural resources: boats, cranberries, smoke salmon, sturgeon and oysters.

Then this corner of the world was discovered by another culture. It's "discovery" by Captain James Cook paved the way in 1788, but by then fur traders had made contact, leading to the

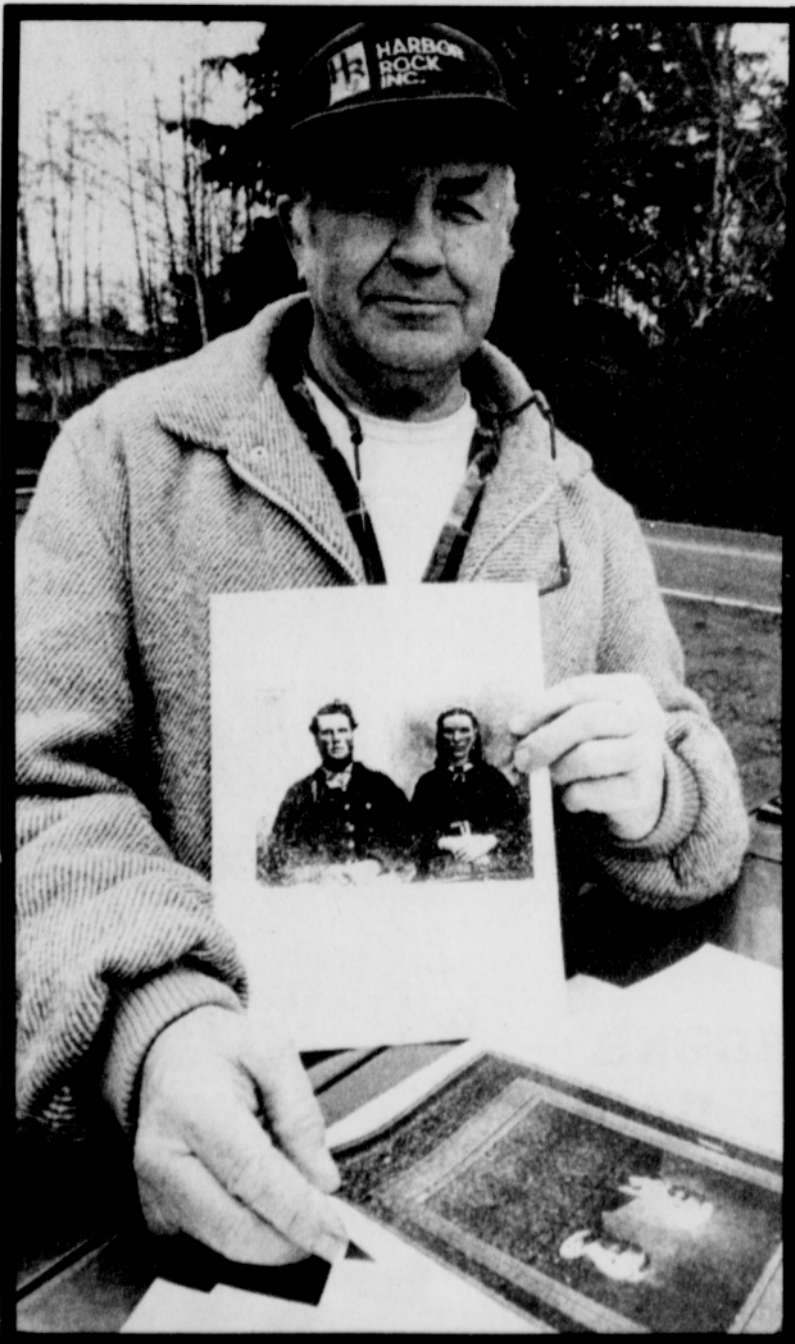
first epidemic of smallpox in 1782 and 1783. When Lewis and Clark arrived in 1805 the Clatsops and Chinooks were reduced in number and their culture was beginning to unravel. By the 1850s a large influx of whites, many of the overflowing from the gold rush in California, swept into western Washington. The number of the native population living around Willapa was estimated to be reduced to 116. By 1855 oysters were being shipped out at the rate of 30,000 bushels per year, a decline so precipitous that in 1860 the white population banned "foreign Indians" from gathering oysters to sell. By 1900 the *Ostrea lurida* was nearly gone. In 1919 Willapa was described as "a desert of mud." Some of that mud was new, contributed by the first clearcuts and washed down in generous draughts by splash dams. In the 1980s we cut all but the last remnants of the original forest, and in 1995 declared salmon too diminished for further exploitation.

Now a new wave of settlers have found the shores of Willapa. Some are urban escapees, luxuriating in the relatively clean and crime-free environment, and some from Mexico and Central America, looking for jobs processing crabs and oysters or thinning and planting trees for industrial landowners. Like the Native Americans before them, people who have their roots here are trying to preserve what they can of their old way of life.

Keith Rhoades has spent his working life on the water. "I had two boats go out from under me on the Willapa bar," he said. "It's an occupational hazard." His great grandfather, Lewis, settled here in the 1850s, one of the first in the oyster business. His grandfather, Rufus, was a fisherman and boatbuilder. Keith fished for crab and salmon, ran charterboats and a boatbuilding shop for commercial fishermen. "We sometimes had three or four boats being built at the same time. There isn't much going on there now."

We talked in the bar of the Blue Heron Inn. The back of the building drops down to the docks, where workboats bobbed and swayed. From time to time men in rubber boots and rain-gear came through the door. Conversations began and ended

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