

# BAY CENTER

BUSINESS AND SOCIAL LIFE IN THIS NORTH PACIFIC COUNTY SMALL TOWN STILL REVOLVES AROUND THE WATER

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illapa Bay is the most productive coastal ecosystem in the continental United States, and the town of Bay Center is the hub

of oyster production.

The Goose Point Peninsula, which juts into the bay where the Palix River enters, was the site of a native encampment and trading ground long before and many years after the arrival of white settlers. The natives called both the river and their camp “Palix,” meaning “slough covered with the trees.”

Farmers and fishermen settled the area in the early 1850s. They built a town perched on the end of the peninsula, which they also called Palix. Oyster harvesting and processing companies formed, the town grew, and in 1875 the name was changed to Bay Center. The early residents were a pious lot and built so many churches that the town was known as New Jerusalem or Saints Rest, and they rest today beneath the headstones of the Bush Pioneer Cemetery.

Like most towns in the area, roads were slow to arrive, so boats were the chief means of transportation. The town pier was Bay Center’s main street, the nucleus of social and business life. It still is.

There have been changes, of course. The population today is less than 300 and only two churches remain. Only one out of seven residents is Native American; the Chinook Tribal Office is located in Bay Center next to Bush Pioneer County Park. What hasn’t changed is that the town still survives on the harvesting and canning of oysters, Manila clams, salmon and Dungeness crab. Business is still centered on the harbor, and that’s where people still gather, at a café and bar called Dock of the Bay.

Most often you’ll find Danielle Kirpes behind the counter, dispensing opinions with the hotcakes and sandwiches. The menu is standard café with the addition of a lot of oysters, prepared by Kirpes or her mother. Whatever you want to know about Bay Center or its people, Kirpes will probably have the answer, or she’ll know somebody who does.

The decaying house at the edge of town? Ben Cheney built it and Cheney Stadium in Ta-



The two-masted sailing vessel Hero greets visitors as you approach Bay Center. The historic ship was the last wooden vessel used as a research ship in the Antarctic.

coma, although his true claim to fame was standardizing the size of 2x4 wall studs. What about that two-masted sailing vessel, the Hero? Many visitors ask because Hero is the first thing you see as you approach Bay Center. It was moved there years ago on a high tide because its draft is too great otherwise. It was to become a bed and breakfast. Never happened. Now the boat is in bad shape and probably headed for a scrapyard.

That would be unfortunate, because Hero is an historic ship. With diesel as well as sail and a wooden hull, the National Science Foundation launched the ship in 1968 as a research vessel for the Antarctic. There it served for years, the last wooden vessel used in the Antarctic, the end of an era.

Today there are two major topics of conversation in Dock of the Bay. The first is the increasing difficulty, almost impossibility, of making a living fishing out of Bay Center. Everyone seems to be semi-retired or working other jobs. “Everything’s kind of side work,” says Kirpes.

The other topic is the Shoreline Master Program, mandated by the state and implemented

by Pacific County. One of those most concerned is Nick Jambor, who founded Ekone Oyster Company with his wife, Joanne, in 1982. He fears that the plan will gradually eliminate many businesses on or near the water, and if enough of the canning and harvesting infrastructure is eliminated, Bay Center, deprived of its only industry, will fade away to be replaced by vacation homes.

Ekone is a Chinook word meaning “good spirit,” and Jambor’s company is taking an innovative route to the future by raising triploid oysters, which, like seedless watermelons, have an extra chromosome. This results in a sterile oyster that spends more time growing and less time fooling around, producing a larger and firmer oyster. Ekone is also growing oysters on long lines, a labor-intensive technique that raises the oysters above their greatest natural enemy, the ghost shrimp.

It seems that, one way or another, oysters and Bay Center will be with us for some time. Which is a good thing because, as Kirpes says, “It’s a neat little town.”



Oyster barges rest in Bay Center’s harbor.



Nick Jambor founded Ekone Oyster Company with his wife, Joanne, in 1982, in Bay Center, Washington.



Bush Pioneer Cemetery holds graves from the small town’s early residents.

# travel

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