

Hood's Canal Memories (Mountains & Oysters on a Half Shell)

This is a snippet of my life on Hood Canal located on the eastern slopes of the Olympic Mountains. I couldn't have been more than 4 or 5 years old when the memory making of my mind starts to unfold. There are several clear and memorable details of these holidays that stick in my mind, that being the sand in the cabin, Seal Rock State Park, Rainbow Lodges, mom shucking oysters, first fish, hiking up the hill to Lake Constance, first coffee, the big boulder at the head of the creek, fishing from a makeshift raft on the lake, seeing the fish upon arrival to the lake, the snake take a fish from the water, and my dad bating my hook while fishing was busy. Little did I know that some 20 years later I would be chaperoning a group of Gig Harbor Boy Scouts on two hikes across the Olympic Mountains, nor that some sixty years later I would visit Seal Rock State Park and find changes, namely much of the land where the cabins stood, was eroded or had somehow disappeared.



I have some vague recollections of my folks and their friends vacationing on Hood Canal in Washington State in the early 1940s, my folks renting cabins, which I believe, were built as part of the CCC or WPA in the 1930s. If the picture of my sister and myself, at the left is any indication, I was about 4 years old and my sister was some 18 months younger. This particular scene I recall as it was sunlit and I had no idea why I was being put to bed while it was still light outside, but somehow my folks managed and most likely enjoyed the respite with us kids demanding their attention. It was from this state park that my trek to a high lake in the mountains behind the cabins would take place and this is the place I would catch my first fish. This is the place where mom would shuck fresh picked oysters and occasionally pop one into her mouth. Little did I know that

in those days, unlike today, doing so was safe as no contamination of wildlife had an opportunity to occur. These were the times that penicillin replaced the sulfa drugs at the doctors office, these were the days that much of our food was purchased fresh and from local grocery stores, these were the days when a portable radio was one that could be lifted from one table to another if you desired the news in the kitchen rather than the living room, these were the days that... I need not continue, as this was the early 40's. Seal Rock State Park was well suited for the casual fisherman as there were several small row boats available to rent to the patrons who wished to try their hand with a small motor which my dad had (an Evinrude as I recall). There was a dock that rose with the tide as the daisy chained floats were buoyed by



big (or what I thought was big at the time) logs and a bigger flat float at the tip that served as a place to turn the row boats over for seasonal storage and still have room to walk between them, remembering that I was a small child at the time so my perspective was one of looking at the big things of the adult world.

First Fish

It was from this dock, the part that stored the overturned boats, that I caught my first fish, a reddish colored rockfish that most likely was a Rock Cod. I hold a very vivid memory of not



wanting touch the fish once it was landed, but that is getting ahead of myself. I recall putting a drop line in the water, as I was fishing from the end of the floating dock, sometime between low and high tides. I remember bothering my dad with a worry that nothing was biting so in my usual 4-5 year old patience, I wanted to know when. Eventually, most likely within a few minutes, most certainly less than an hour, I felt this tug on the line and ran to dad, not knowing what to do with a fishing line that was being pulled on from the other end. With his help, I was able to land the fish, but that is as far as I took the activity because I was afraid to put my hands on this slimy, cold, moving creature, that most likely was all of 6-10 inches long (judging from the picture). My folks wanted to take a picture for posterity, but I recall my reluctance to do so and still would not put my hand on such a

dangerous creature. Eventually, dad solved the problem by bringing me a small screwdriver from his toolbox, why the screwdriver and not a stick I don't know. This screwdriver fit nicely into the gill slots of the fish, which was now dead from lack of sufficient wet oxygen to breath. As my folks were prone to do, they insisted sister come get her picture taken looking at the fish with her big brother, helping to encourage, enforce, and cement a kinship between the two of us that lingers some 65 years later.

Unexpected Stay

Sometime the next year, Dad and his friend Bob Boepple (pronounced Bibplee), decided to take a day hike to a picturesque lake, nestled into a glacier bowl at the flanks of Mount Constance, the closest and highest peak one can see from Seattle on a clear day. The men left their wives at Seal Rock State Park with word akin to "see you tonight", but that didn't happen because of a mid-summer snowstorm that hit the mountain. Dad and Bob hunkered down under a huge boulder that rests at the head of the creek where it attempting to drain the lake. Preparation for an overnight stay was not part of the pre-trip planning and packing, so with jackets, a warm fire, and a roof of sorts, they stayed the night and came out the next morning. This was a time long before cell phones, so needless to say the wives were a bit worried as I recall and perhaps anxious about their husbands well being.

Quality time with Dad

The following year, these same two men, decided to take their sons on this hike to Lake Constance, but this time they indeed planned for an overnight stay. I can't speak for my friend Walt (Bob's son who was about 19 months older than me), but for me, a six year old boy, I didn't go to sleep for a while as my excited body would not allow me to do so, even though my folks urged me to sleep because of the long day tomorrow. Our dads outfitted Walt and myself with what they thought we could carry on our backs, packed a sack lunch for the trail, and we then set out to do the long awaited (about a day) hike up to Lake Constance. We arrived at the ranger station, at the end of the road (in those days the road did not continue to Muscott Flat, on the Dosewallips river) as it did in my later days. I remember asking dad why we needed to sign in at the ranger station, and I don't recall his response at the time because my immediate attention was getting into the hike, but as I came to know later, this sign in alerts the park ranger of who is in his area of responsibility as was the case when Dad and Bob had to stay all night.

Once signed in, the trek up hill began and I do mean uphill. According to *thebackpacker.com*, this is although short 2 miles, it is a very strenuous hike, rising some 3200 feet in those 2 miles, and while over the length of 2 miles that represents a 30% slope, this trail start up and then tends to level out some later on making the slope initially something greater than 20%. Now for a short lad of 6, that means in many cases, that by standing straight up, or nearly straight up and reaching straight out with my hands I would be touching the trail that I would soon be putting my feet on. Little did our dads prepare us for this kind of grueling work, and the length of time it took to climb to the lake seemed like forever. For someone who was eager and anxious about going on this outing with my dad, it soon became apparent that this hike was more than I had possibly expected. My dad as I learned and relied upon through life, showed a great deal of patience with me and somehow encouraged me to continue up the trail. About half way up, much to Walt's and my insistence, we stopped to eat our pre-packed lunch of peanut butter and jam sandwiches, next to a small creek, later to be known to me as Constance Creek, and then without much rest, we started up the trail again. What is this? Can't a boy of six have some time to play?



Nearing the top of the trail, there was a "cliff face", offering up a barrier, which needed to be traversed and against my insistence, dad removed my pack that consisted of my sleeping bag, remember I was only a boy of six. He then took off his pack and put me between the cliff face and himself. It was in this position that we sidled across to a not so steep place on the trail, with the insistent words of our fathers to "not look down", which we prone to do, being curious and all. Bob did the same with Walt and when we were safe on the other side of the barrier, the men went back for the gear and brought that across to us. From here it was a short trip to the lake and by now it was getting late in the evening. Even though it was summer, with a long evening, Walt and I were tuckered out from such a hard day's effort of

climbing and then an hour or so of exploration so prevalent in curious boys, that we both wanted nothing more than to sleep. We were fed a small amount of food, at the insistence of our dads, but the desire to climb into sleeping bags further motivated by the fire not being big enough to keep us warmed from the early sun setting behind Mount Constance which loomed directly above and to the west of us, led us to an early sleep. Well, with all of that, we had arrived at our destination and were ready for the next day of fishing on the lake after some well deserved sleep.

The next morning brought forth another bit of surprise, the cold that can be present at altitude, 3250 feet up from the ranger station, but the ranger station is some 1500 feet above sea level, where we left the rest of our families. This morning chill was cold enough for this six year old and his friend to stay in bed, not wanting to get up and explore, and at our continual clamoring about the cold, we were fed a cup of coffee, drunk from an old can, that was left behind by previous campers at this site, and was well sanitized by the amount of fire it had sustained, we drank. No sugar, no cream, just black coffee, the first of myriads in my life. Wow, here I was at age 6 making it into the adult world with my first cup of coffee.

A risk worth taking

Now that I made my mark on the world, being the youngest climber at the time to hike up the trail to the lake and now with my first cup of coffee in my belly accompanied by a healthy dose of hot oatmeal, I was ready to go fishing. Yeah, that was the primary purpose of the hike up the hill that included what came to be known as quality time with dad. The trip dad took a year or two ago found them fishing from the shore of the lake, casting into the ever visible school of fish, and landing their share. This trip however proved to be a little different in that a crude, and I can't emphasize crude enough, raft was available. Evidently built by some innovative fishermen before us, it consisted of several 4-6 inch diameter logs, lashed together to form a frame that floated, albeit leaky as a sieve due to the gaps between the logs. If my memory serves me correctly some 65 years later, these gaps were large enough for me to put my leg through, and although it was rickety, it carried the four of us onto the lake for some active fishing. As I stated before, the schools of lake trout were very visible through the clearness of this mountain lake water, so we set out to follow them around the rim of the lake as they went on their way, feeding on whatever food the lake provided. I was as I remember a little uncomfortable sitting on this makeshift raft, looking into the water between my legs or on either side of me, seeing the fish below, and knowing I could not swim because my swimming lessons were some 2 years into the future. Oh yeah, that was before the days of life vest requirements, but my faith in dad and his assurances that things would be all right if I would just sit still. It was at this time of writing that I considered putting my engineering talents



to use and draw a sketch depicting this raft, but on consideration I think I have presented enough risk & peril in the story that I won't do that.

We traversed the lake using hacked out paddles of sort left behind with the raft and they're being no wind in this sheltered place, these worked quite well. I kept my dad busy as did Walt with his dad, learning how to bait a hook, catch lake trout, and yes even complaining that I wasn't able to bait the hook which kept dad busy baiting my hook so I could catch some fish. In hind sight I believe the time spent on the raft was short, probably less than 3-4 hours as we needed to break camp and hike (or slide) down the trail to our cars and then on to home. I did catch my share of fish, four as the picture indicates, but that is not the most memorable part of the time on the surface of Lake Constance. It was some time in my 60th year that I was privileged to take a class on Spiritual Journaling, taught by my pastor. One of the questions was "What was my earliest spiritual experience?" and then the activity was to journal my thoughts. Well the gist of my thoughts brought forth the following experience that I now recall with vivid mental imagery, and that of dad and Bob turning and drawing my attention to a splashing sound over by the rock fall. It was persistent, it sounded desperate, it sounded eerie, as there was no one or thing to be seen that would or could raise such a clamor.

A life lesson



This noise was a considerable distance away by raft, and a time consuming one due to the crudeness of the propulsion using the paddles that were flattened branches. As you can see by the picture at the left, the rock fall is some distance from the camp site we had used the night before, and as memory serves me, well or other wise, we were just rounding the point of land between the rock fall and the camp site when we heard the din. How long it took us is an unknown because this six-year-old mind really had no reference to gage it by (most likely about 5-10 minutes), but we did paddle

until we came within a few feet of the location where the noise was being generated. What we finally discovered among the rocks on the edge of the lake was a snake with a small trout, cross-wise in it's mouth. The fish was flopping in the shallow water between the rocks as the snake was trying, and successfully so; back up the rock fall with this load in its mouth. We watched this for several minutes, as this was the first, and perhaps the only, time any of us had seen such a thing. For me, this six-year-old curiosity gave way to some compassion for the fish in my request to go and free the fish from the snake. Dad on the other hand, being wiser in the ways of nature, used this opportunity to advise teach me that if the fish and snake were left to their own devices Mother Nature would be satisfied as that is the way of life and death in the world. A heavy lesson for such a young'n I must add at this later date in life, but a very useful one that has been with me since. We finally had our fill of this life-death scene as the fish took its place in nature's food chain. We proceeded to catch more



fish before leaving Lake Constance for an uneventful trip back to the cabins at Seal Rock, where mom and sister were waiting for us.

Back at camp

I included the picture at the right to show what the seal rock campground looked like with its cabins and all, including a gently sloping beach of small gravel, driftwood and shells. Note the car in the background, certainly vintage 1940s and me being about six, this was the summer of 1944 during the latter years of the World War II. In the way of a little connection history, dad taught at Bremerton High School and during the summer



he would drive a bus in Bremerton (where we lived). He met Bob as a fellow bus driver and it kicked off a friendship between the families that lasted to the day of Walt's death in the middle 1990s. This familial bonding at my early age proved to be long lasting and mutually beneficial to both families. Walt came to spend time with us as I did with them on occasions throughout our lives.

Now one might ask what did all of this have to do with Oysters on a half shell? The mountains were obvious but this half shell bit was a memory triggered when I tasted my first oyster on a half shell in Boston, MA about 1982. At that time I remembered the picture of mom, standing by the Dock Floats at low tide, shucking oysters and occasionally popping one into her mouth. Now I have come full circle on this writing and can say this, I didn't know at the time the images that would stick in my mind, but upon reflection and writing these cherished times were in a sense relived and cherished once again as well as put down for the enjoyment of those who read them.