

Birch Bay in History... A Timeline

v.9

Birch Bay is 2.5 miles wide with approximately 19.1 miles of marine shoreline. Glaciers over one mile thick repeatedly covered this area during the ice age from 2,000,000 to 15,000 years ago. Hundreds of feet of clay, sand, pebbles, and giant boulders carried by the moving glaciers accumulated here as warming temperatures melted the ice. Once the ice melted, waves and winds from the Strait of Georgia sculpted the bay into the forested bluff and cobble beach as we see it today.

10,000 Years Ago... after the glaciers receded, **the Coast Salish People** began visiting summer villages at Birch Bay to exploit the local food resources such as clams, crab, fish, berries, game and waterfowl hunting. Birch Bay was part of the Coast Salish "homeland" and is vital to their cultural identification and material existence. The **Lummi** called the area Straf-a-wa, which means "the place for clams". They dried and smoked the clams in large quantities to preserve them for winter.

1792... **Captain George Vancouver** stopped in Birch Bay in 1792 following the earlier **Spanish** exploration and promptly reclaimed the territory for **England**. Since Vancouver's ships outnumbered and outgunned the Spanish, the Spanish withdrew.

Vancouver stayed on in Birch Bay to calibrate instruments used to map their location and to brew beer, a common staple of the long voyages. Vancouver's **botanist Archibald Menzies** named the bay "Birch Bay" because of the thick stands of birch trees that grew in abundance near the shore.

1841... The surveying crews of the **US Exploring Expedition** charted the Birch Bay area. The prominent point at the south end of the Bay was named for **Daniel Whitehorn**, a gunner on the expedition.

1871... **Charles Vogt** arrived in Birch Bay in 1871 and staked a homestead claim for 160 acres of waterfront property in the center of Birch Bay. He built a cabin on the flat just north of the later **Birch Bay Roller Rink**. He became part of a small group of settlers including Henry and Dorothy (**Herpst**) **Henspeter**, HB and Carrie (**Fingalson**) **Halverson**, and the **Bruns** and **Gischers**, who formed the first permanent settlement in the area.

Late 1870s... More settlers arrived in the area in the late 1870s and established canneries, and saw mills and lumber mills that produced shingles and lumber from the huge fir trees that grew in the area. The trees were logged with oxen and horse teams leaving behind large old-growth stumps with spring-board marks that still remain today.

Like other settlements on **Puget Sound / Salish Sea**, Birch Bay planned to be a city known as **Birchpoint** and established a **U.S. Post Office**. The city was to be the terminus for the **Union Pacific Railway**. The plans were carried out to the extent of building wharves and the kitchen of a proposed deluxe hotel - though, like numerous other speculative railroad developments at that time, the railway connection never occurred.

1891... Residents from the nearby town of **Lynden** travelled all day by wagon to Birch Bay to collect butter and horse clams by night when the tides were low enough and celebrate with a community clam bake the following day when they returned to Lynden.

1920s... Birch Bay became a tourist destination and many beachfront cabins were built to accommodate visitors and seasonal residents.

The construction of the **Peace Arch at the Canadian border** in 1921, and the acquisition of **Lake Terrell** in the late 1940s to preserve wildlife habitat and provide recreational opportunities enhanced the area's tourist interest.

In 1929, volunteers constructed the **Birch Bay Grange Hall** on Birch Bay-Lynden Road. The building was constructed for the **Birch Bay Parent-Teachers Association (PTA)** who wanted a gymnasium, theater, and social hall next to the **Birch Bay School** - which had been constructed from a previous donation in 1888 by **Charles Vogt**.

When the school district consolidated with **Blaine**, the district left the building for the community and it was accepted by the **Birch Bay Grange**. In the years following, this historic building (the only one in Birch Bay) has been used by the PTA, Grange, **Western Washington University**, the **Birch Bay Fire Department**, the **Birch Bay Water District**, and as a **voting place**.

1941... A salmon attacks a 12-year-old boy in Birch Bay on July 9, 1941.

On July 9, 1941, a 35-pound Chinook (king) salmon attacks a 12-year-old boy who is fishing for crabs in Birch Bay (Whatcom County). The boy survives the encounter none the worse for wear, but the fish finds itself belly up on the barbeque.

Bold Gladiators

In the early 1940s Birch Bay, located in extreme northwestern Washington, was a popular resort destination, and fish and man in the bay were long since used to each other. So it was a real surprise on July 9, 1941, when a 12-year-old Lynden boy, Walter Richmond, suddenly found himself confronted by an angry king salmon in the waters of Birch Bay.

Young Richmond was walking through the water just offshore, fishing for crabs, when he happened upon two large salmon, one a little larger than the other. He watched expectantly for the fish to swim away. But the bigger one did not. Instead it made a mad rush at the lad, who dropped a sack of crabs he was holding and fought back with a potato fork which he had been using for crabbing. The fish retreated -- but not far. Likewise undeterred, Richmond stood his ground.

For a brief moment fish and boy warily eyed each other, two bold gladiators prepared to battle to the death. Then the salmon charged again. This time Richmond struck home with his multi-pronged dagger and dispatched his aquatic opponent. The 35-pound fish was dragged ashore and ingloriously barbequed.

Scrappy Salmon

No one at Birch Bay could remember ever hearing of a salmon attacking a human. Some speculated that it was trying to protect a mate, but no one really knew what caused it to go off the deep end. Maybe the kid just really freaked the fish out.

And like all good fish tales, it grew bigger with each telling. By the time the *Lynden Tribune* reported the story on its front page the following week, the scrappy salmon was mistakenly reported to have been 35 feet long.

1950s... Birch Bay developed as a crowded summer vacation destination, especially after the world economy stabilized after *World War II*. Summer resorts consisting of hundreds of little family cottages dotted the shoreline. Public rest room facilities could be found in the resort stores and there were several bath house facilities along the shoreline. An amusement park was developed along the waterfront to cater to regional tourist interests. Birch Bay was an important family vacation destination in the region.

1950... Birch Bay R.V. Resort started in 1950 under the name of **Birch Bay Trailer Park & Sales** on 35 acres of former farm land owned by **Earl Vogt**. The Red Barn and chicken sheds are still at the Resort, but today we have over 125 mobile homes, park models and trailers with people vacationing here on a year around basis.

1951 - 1979... The **Blaine Air Force Station** was a radar and communications base (no airstrip) of the **North American Air Defense Command** during the "**Cold War**" era. In the process of building the base, the **Army Corps of Engineers** created a very large hole in Birch Bay at about the **end of Alderson Road** by removing a copious amount of gravel to build the cement radar towers and double-walled bomb-proof Operations Building for the Air Force. Over the ensuing years that "hole" has migrated north in the natural beach-building process, significantly robbing the shoreline of its natural beach-building material. *See Wolf Bauer in 1975.*

The 68 acres were acquired by **Whatcom County Parks** from the **U.S. Federal Government** for use by the general public for recreational purposes only in the **late 1980s**.

1954... Birch Bay State Park was developed providing beachfront access and camping.

1954, 1966 & 1974... New industries were developed in the area including the **Ferndale Mobil Oil refinery** in 1954, the **Intalco aluminum smelter** in 1966, and the **ARCO Cherry Point Refinery** in 1974. Together, these industrial companies own over 2,400 acres designated for open space and upland and waterfowl hunting opportunities.

1963... A summer post office at Birch Bay!

ID: 2027204

Name: **Birch Bay Post Office (historical)**

Class: **Post Office**

Description: **Summer post office in operation from 1963-70; rural PO of Blaine.**

1966... The 1,000-lot gated recreational community of **Birch Bay Village** began construction.

1970s... Resort owners sold their land and condominiums began to replace the resort stores and family cottages. Another recreational boom established Birch Bay as a different kind of resort community which included the construction of houses, mobile homes, and recreational vehicle parks for use as summer homes. The warm shallow bay attracted tourists and seasonal residents who arrived with campers and boats. Essential public services like restrooms and trash cans were no longer available for the day use families, residents and visitors at Birch Bay.

1971... *The C Shop* was established when **Barbara and Ernie Jacobs** rented a section of their **Shore Acres Resort** (where Jacob's Landing is now) for a candy shop to **Patricia and Patrick Alesse**. The Shop moved to its present location in **1979**.

1975... *Birch Bay Shore Resource Analysis* is written by **Wolf Bauer** for the **Whatcom County Planning Commission**, financially aided by a grant from the **WA Department of Ecology** with funds from the **National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration** and published by **Whatcom County**. The purpose was to present the nature of the beach-loss problems, recommend approaches and solutions for partially restoring this primary resource for highest recreational, esthetic, and economic benefit as well as provide educational background for the proper understanding of natural shore process systems.

1976... The Birch Bay population forecast noted that while the population varies with the seasons, there were:

- about 3,000 permanent residents,
- about 7,000 residents/visitors on a typical summer weekend, and
- about 10,000 residents/visitors on a peak summer weekend.

1977, 1987 and 2004... From the **June 1977 Birch Bay Comprehensive Plan** as adopted by the **Whatcom County Council**, mentioned in the **1987 Birch Bay – Blaine Subarea Plan** and repeated in the **2004 Birch Bay Community Plan** as adopted by County Council:

Problems and Needs, among others

1. Bicycle paths
2. Control of signs
3. Relieving traffic congestion into and through the Birch Bay Drive area.
4. Pedestrian paths and safe street crossings
5. *Public recreational facilities including rest rooms, bath houses, picnic facilities.*
6. Protection of the natural beach.
7. Collection and controlled discharge of storm water drainage.
8. *A community center.*

Recreation Goal Objective Number One reads: Additional area or access with high value for recreation should be obtained before other development makes such action impossible.

Numbers 5 and 8 above will be addressed by the **proposed Birch Bay Community Center and Beach Park** at the heart of our community. The other issues have or are being addressed.

Until 1986... Sunday liquor sales were not available in *British Columbia* thus making the liquor-serving establishments of Birch Bay and Blaine very popular with *Canadians*. This was especially so for young ladies who enjoyed frequenting "The Club" at the *Blaine Air Force Station* from which many marriages thus ensued.

1987... The "Average summer traffic volumes can be as high as 60% above the annual average during the summer..." as stated in *Whatcom County's 1987 Birch Bay – Blaine Subarea Plan*.

The population forecast for the year 2000 suggested:

- 8,000 permanent residents,
- 32,000 seasonal residents/visitors,
- For a total of 40,000 combined residents/visitors.

1990s... The addition of time-share and condominium housing as well as the conversion of summer cottages into permanent (often retirement) residences has made Birch Bay a very desirable year-round residential and resort community with the attending need for year-round essential public facilities.

Early 2000s... Porta-potties and trash cans have lined the shoreline in the summer, an unsightly solution attempting to solve the essential public services dilemma. After the summer season is over in September, the porta-potties and trash cans are removed leaving no essential public services along the Bay until the following May.

2004... Birch Bay now has a different atmosphere with year-round residential and more *American* ownership gradually taking the place of a seasonal and *Canadian* atmosphere. Tourism and recreation-related activities are more passive in nature as evidenced by the disappearance of the roller rink, amusement park, public pool and much of the tavern market.

However the bond to *Canada* remains. Underlying the economic link which fluctuates with the values of the *Canadian and U.S. currencies*, is that of the *positive, long-term Canadian and American relationships* built at the neighborhood and family levels, some going back three, even four generations. Those relationships based on the motto inscribed on the *Peace Arch Monument* "*Children of a Common Mother*" are important cornerstones of the history of Birch Bay.

2005... The Birch Bay Neighborhood Deputy was assigned by the **Whatcom County Sheriffs Department**.

2007... The establishment of BBWARM (Birch Bay Watershed and Aquatic Resources Management) sub flood zone district to provide dedicated tax payer funding to address stormwater management and water quality issues watershed-wide including regular maintenance, replace failing infrastructure and construct improvements.

2009... A year-round 25 mph speed limit was imposed on Birch Bay Drive.
...26,000 people clamming at Birch Bay were counted by the WA State Dept. of Fish and Wildlife.

2010... Lincoln Road Phase One was reconstructed.

2010... The 2010 Birch Bay US Census Designated Place shows:

- 8,413 permanent residents,
- 26.1% of housing is seasonally occupied, highest in the County, and
- The high rate of significant summer population increases continues on typical and peak summer weekends and holidays, especially July 4th.

2011... At Bay Horizon Park, the partnership of **Whatcom County Parks and Blaine-Birch Bay Park and Recreation District** (formerly Northwest Park & Rec. District #2) remodeled the Gym into an **Activity Center** and installed a **Children's Playground**.

2012... The Whatcom County Executive and the Whatcom County Council tasked the **Public Works Department** accomplishing the **Birch Bay Drive and Pedestrian Facility** to restore 1.58 miles of the shoreline as prescribed by Wolf Bauer including a walkway on top of the berm, replace and retrofit failing stormwater infrastructure, rebuild Birch Bay Drive, etc.

2013... Whatcom County Public Works enhanced pedestrian safety on Birch Bay Drive north of Cottonwood Beach by trimming back the brambles and widening the shore side shoulder.

2013... The Blaine-Birch Bay Park and Recreation District (formerly the Northwest Park and Rec. District #2) received a new M&O levy for 4 years by **68% of the voters** within the boundaries of the Blaine School District (which includes Birch Bay) at the November 5th general election.

2014... The Port of Bellingham and the Birch Bay Chamber of Commerce have adopted the implementation project of gateway/way finding signage.

2014... *Whatcom County Public Works* has begun the construction engineering and permitting on the **Shoreline Restoration stage** as prescribed by **Wolf Bauer** of the **Birch Bay Drive and Pedestrian Facility Project** with actual construction expected to commence in 2016.

2014... The **Birch Bay Lynden Road/Portal Way intersection signalization** project will start.

2016-2036... *Whatcom County's Birch Bay UGA Population Allocation for 2016-2036* is:

- 7,737 residents in 2013 (the UGA is smaller than the US CDP)
- 14,511 residents in 2036 for total population growth of 6,414 - almost double

Many thanks to the ***Birch Bay Community Tourism Strategy***, 2011, by the **Port of Bellingham** for the basis upon which this timeline has been built.

And thanks to our intrepid researcher Doralee Booth.