

# County park has a colorful, rich history

This is the second of a series on San Juan County's parks.

By Sharon Wootton

Colorful kayaks and brightly dressed kayakers were eye candy on a drizzly day at San Juan County Park on the west side of San Juan Island.

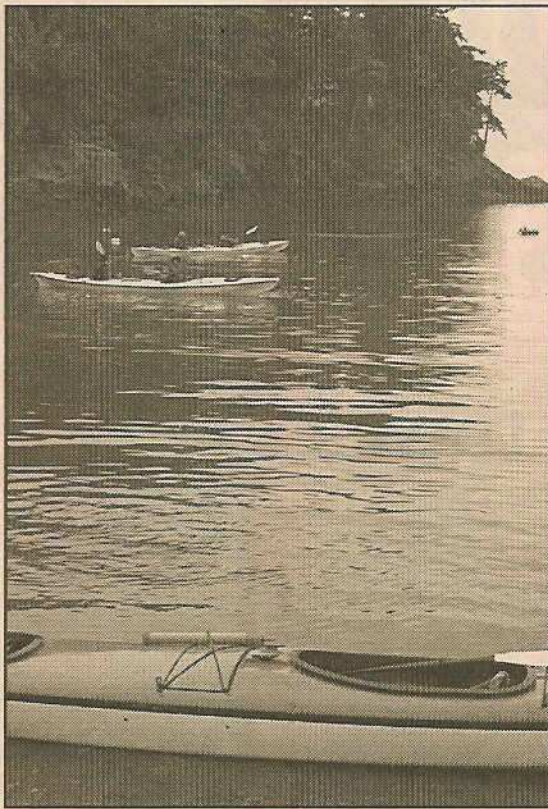
The paddlers were too busy listening to the guide's instructions to notice a nearby family of Canada geese, the babies paddling fast to keep up.

Did the kayakers know that they were on the shores of Smallpox Bay, where Native Americans, burning with smallpox fever, waded in to cool off? Some of them died from hypothermia or drowning, others from the disease.

Or that smugglers came here to drop off moonshine, opium or other illegal items; that the Navy put a small base on the property and anchored a P.T. boat; that divers have explored the park's edges; or that Warner Bros. filmed a few scenes on the open bluff for the Sandra Bullock/Nicole Kidman film "Practical Magic"?

The 12-acre park is usually full of visitors Memorial Day to Labor Day, said park manager Joe Luma, with visitors from as far away as New Zealand, South Africa, and Iceland.

Campers often are greeted by the black-and-white park



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Sharon Wootton photo

cat, Vinny. Luma said campers miss their pets.

"They're feeling pretty guilty about leaving them behind (so) they pet Vinny."

San Juan County Park host Sandi Ugrin of Seattle, 86-year-old mother Edna and white Samoyed Jazzmine live in a trailer next to the office.

"I love this place," Ugrin said. "Any morning I can see eagles, seals, river otter, herons

coming out from their roost, orcas going by. What more could you want?"

Ugrin's favorite sites are 18, just off the beach and away from other campers (\$34/night); and numbers 15 and 16 (standard \$25), with views across an open field to Haro Strait.

Ugrin fields many visitors' questions, including the frequent "What time do the orcas

go by?" She said that whale researcher Bob Otis determined that, statistically speaking, 3-5 p.m. is the busiest time slot.

Another good bet is on an incoming tide because it pushes fish against the island shelf, which drops several hundred feet about 1/4-mile offshore.

The park has two short trails, one through the woods off the south side of Smallpox Bay. Another starts near the boat ramp and follows the bluff edge, ending in the day-use area. Just offshore is Low Island, part of the San Juan Islands National Wildlife Refuge.

A beach walk on the north side of the bay is usually short except during an extremely low tide, but there's more tidepool life on this side than the south side.

Park manager Luma appreciates all of the views, especially from a bench about halfway along the bluff trail.

"It's the best spot in the park for sunsets."

He wants to see an interpretive center in the park, but for now, plans are to build stairs to the north-side beach and to restore the 1890s two-story Lewis Brann cabin.

The county, according to the parks department, bought the original homestead cabin and land in 1937 from Jim and Peg Marshall.

It may have seemed a foolish move, even for the \$1 purchase price; now it seems visionary.

— *Writer/photographer Sharon Wootton is co-owner of Song & Word (www.songand-word.com), offering creative workshops on Shaw Island.*