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Fidalgo Living

Celebrating Life on Fidalgo Island

SHERRY CHAVERS AND MOLLY STROHSCHNEIN:
THE TEACHER FEATURE



Best Version Media
Cover shot by Laura Nichols

Friends of Skagit Beaches



THE TALE BEHIND THE 'TRAIL TALES'

BY ARLENE COOK

Walkers, bikers and other users of the Tommy Thompson Trail, between Cap Sante Marina and March Point, may—or may not—be aware that wandering along the waterfront also offers educational opportunities. These occur in the form of Trail Tales: a series of thirty-three interpretive signs along the route that present facts and stories about the history, ecology, native culture and natural features of Anacortes and Fidalgo Island. Collectively, the Trail Tales tell of the rise and fall of our town as the proposed terminus of a transcontinental railway project; the home of sawmills, pulp and shingle mills, as well as fish canneries; and the site in recent decades of major ecological clean-up efforts, to help restore the local ecosystem for the numerous species of birds and marine creatures that call it home.

The Trail Tales signs first began to appear along the Thompson Trail in 2012. As with all such endeavors, they did not spontaneously arise, but represent the work of dedicated individuals who conceived of the project and then brought it to fruition with the assistance of other community members and organizations. The prime instigator in this instance was Betty Cartaret, a member of Friends of Skagit Beaches, a local nonprofit organization which sponsors educational programs and provides funding for volunteer-instigated shoreline preservation projects.

Betty came up with the idea of an interpretive trail to raise awareness of the richness of the marine environment in Fidalgo Bay, as well as the clean-up efforts being led by the Washington State Department of Ecology after decades of physical damage and pollution from the industries along the waterfront. After successfully applying for a grant from the Department of Ecology Public Participation Program, Betty and her friend Jan Hersey set about creating the first of the Trail Tales signs. The two women worked with Bret Lunsford at the Anacortes Museum to obtain historical information and photographs relating to the waterfront industries, and with the Samish Indian Nation to present aspects of local native culture. They also did some of their own research, interviewing people such as Dale Fowler, the longtime director of Cap Sante Marina. "We drew on a lot of sources of information overall," Betty said. "I came up with the ideas, and Jan, as the writer, built the stories around them."

The signs themselves were designed by EDX, a Seattle-based graphic design company, and manufactured in Texas from highly durable, non-fade materials coated in high-pressure laminates. The first group of seventeen signs appeared between 2012 and 2013. Sixteen more were installed in the following two years, with a commemorative ribbon-cutting ceremony held in June 2015. Overall funding for the project was provided by two successive grants from the Washington Department of Ecology, with additional support from the City of Anacortes, Port of Anacortes, Samish Indian Nation, and generous local donors.



Betty mentioned the Port's Executive Director, Dan Worra, as "an enthusiastic supporter, who helped obtain donations for the signs in the marina area." She also acknowledged the contribution of Anacortes Parks and Recreation Director, Gary Robinson, whose department helped situate the signs: "We didn't want to 'litter' the Thompson Trail with our Tales," Betty said. "Instead, we grouped them to tell different components of the story."

"Our overall goal," Betty explained, "was to use the signs to engage the public in the ongoing story of the waterfront as a historical site, and also as a place of great natural richness and beauty that is being restored and reclaimed."

Arienne Fernandez, of the Department of Ecology Toxics Cleanup Program, observed at the June 2015 ribbon-cutting ceremony, that the signs "might not seem like they're a big deal. But we've spent millions of dollars on this community, and we need to prove why it was important."

"Anacortes is a beautiful place," Ms. Fernandez added, "And people here will forget the clean-ups ever happened—or ever needed to happen—unless they were personally involved in the process. But the signs won't allow you to forget."

Readers keen to see—and read—the Trail Tales for themselves can find them in twelve installations along the Tommy Thompson Trail between Cap Sante Marina and the railroad trestle across Fidalgo Bay. There is also an installation near Curtis Wharf, on the Guemes Channel, celebrating the history and restoration of the Guemes waterfront.

A map and brochure on the Trail Tales is published by Friends of Skagit Beaches and is available from the Anacortes Visitors Center, 819 Commercial Avenue. Further information can be obtained at www.skagitbeaches.org/trail-tales-home, or on Facebook (www.facebook.com/TrailTalesFidalgoBay).



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