

The Pig War

There's something exotic about an island. It has a clearly-defined boundary and is surrounded by water. People who live on islands view themselves as privileged and separated from the rest of the world. They are a destination where others want to be.

I lived on Camano Island on Puget Sound in western Washington for eight years. It was the most pleasant location of all fifteen cities and towns where I've ever lived. And, I've visited other islands that also hold a mystical aura. Some are the Hawaiian Islands, England, Capri, Japan, Avalon, Vancouver Island, and Manhattan.

But, arguably my favorite island is San Juan Island in the northern Puget Sound. This island is accessed by ferries from Anacortes, Washington and Vancouver Island, Canada. San Juan Island has light houses, marinas, historic resorts, hotels, B&Bs, restaurants, farms, parks, and scenery that tourists come from all over the world to see.

Some of the main activities on San Juan Island and the other islands in the San Juan group; Orcas, Lopez, Shaw, and others; is sailing and kayaking. Thousands of people come to sail among the islands each summer and view the pod of orca whales resident there.

San Juan Island is in the most northwest corner of the United States on north Puget Sound. It's now part of the United States but was disputed territory between the U.S. and Britain in the mid-1800s. In fact, the two countries almost went to war over which country had jurisdiction over the island. The conflict was called, "The Pig War."

When the boundary lines were drawn in the early 1800s it was apparently unclear to the residents on which side of San Juan Island the boundary between the U.S. and Canada was located. Since Canada was part of the commonwealth of Great Britain a conflict arose between the two countries.

The conflict was brought to a head when a pig wandered from a farm whose owner believed he lived Britain and destroyed some of the vegetables in the garden of a neighbor who believed he lived in the U.S. The dispute escalated to a level where the local constabularies called upon their respective countries to defend their territorial rights.

Both countries sent troops to quell the increasing violence. English Fort was constructed in the northwest corner of the island and a company of troops stationed there. In response, the U.S. built American Fort near the southwestern portion of the island and a comparable number of troops sent to defend American interests.

Both forts remained in defensive positions for twelve years while negotiations were conducted to resolve the territorial dispute. At one point the British sent several war ships to pressure the American forces by anchoring off shore near the American fort. The commander of the American forces, Captain Pickett, began constructing defensive fortifications to repel the British if they chose to come ashore. Fortunately, cool heads prevailed, and no actual attacks occurred.

In fact, an interesting sidelight to the conflict was the social interaction between the two companies of soldiers. Both American and British troops were assigned to represent their countries in a wilderness far from home. There were no major settlements on San Juan Island or within a reasonable distance where they could go to let off steam and relax. So, the commanders of the two forts arranged for dances and celebration of holidays several times a year at each other's fort.

The boundary was finally established on the west side of San Juan Island in 1872 so that it was determined to be U.S. territory. The soldiers were eventually reassigned, and the forts closed. Later, the land where the two forts were located was purchased by the Department of Interior, the buildings preserved, and an historic park established on the two sites.

Jeannette and I visited the park several times and were intrigued by the history of the "Pig War." We were fascinated by the portrayal of the American commander, Captain Pickett, in a play recorded at a theater in Friday Harbor on the island. The current chief ranger at the park who played the part of Pickett did an outstanding job of revealing the mindset of a military leader during the period

before and during the Civil War. Pickett was portrayed as extremely opinionated and arrogant.

Pickett was promoted to Major General in the Confederate Army following his command at the American garrison on San Juan Island and was directly responsible for one of the worst defeats and loss of life in the Civil War at Gettysburg. Pickett's Charge in which he lost half his troops is commonly believed to be the beginning of the end for the Confederate rebellion.

The "Pig War" is a piece of American history that few people know about. Most history around the time of the Civil War occurred in the eastern half of the country, so it was enlightening to learn about local history in the Northwest that had international ramifications.