

The Guardians of Guemes

Vigilant residents and artists/minutemen of an idyllic island off Anacortes battle developers, smelters, the Navy, and aquaculture.

From the dining room of the home of sculptor Philip McCracken, high above North Beach on the Puget Sound island of Guemes, one can often watch a brief wildlife drama play itself out. Down below, sea birds—scoters, buffleheads, ducks of all breeds—dip and wheel above the bright waters of the bay. They seem wholly carefree. But close by, fate hovers in the form of hungry eagles watching for a bird to show some sign of weakness. Should an eagle spot such a helpless creature, it will swoop down and seize it, and carry it off for a light lunch.

Many of the residents of remote and beautiful Guemes see themselves in the position of these unfortunate sea birds forever beset by ominous threats to their peaceful, insular way of life. Though so far they've mostly succeeded in fending off these challenges, it's not been without cost. As with the scoters and the buffleheads, constant wariness is the price they're required to pay.

Once very much alike, the myriad islands of Puget Sound are today very different from one another. The larger among them can be divided into three rough categories, based on their means of access to the mainland.

Those islands reachable by bridge—the north sound's Camano, the south sound's Fox, even the central sound's Whidbey and Bainbridge—have lost forever much of their insular character. These Category I islands have become peninsulas, parts of larger geographic units, which their inhabitants can leave at any time they choose. Indeed, the islands near cities are sometimes hard to distinguish from ordinary suburbs.

Category II islands are those connected to the mainland by ferry. They tend to attract a more self-sufficient type of settler. Most year-round inhabitants of the four major San Juan islands, the central sound's Vashon, and the south sound's isolated Anderson don't in the least mind the separation from the greater world that reliance on ferry schedules imposes. At the same time, like small-townners of the past, they're more interdependent than residents of Category I islands. They come to know each other better and to find much of their meaningful life in contact with their immediate neighbors.

Category III, of which almost-Canadian Waldron in the deep San Juans is the prototype, is composed of islands accessible by neither bridge nor ferry. People who choose these lonesome redoubts as permanent homes are true pioneer spirits, the sort whose ancestors happily deserted the populous East to drive covered wagons to the still-empty West. Lacking

supermarkets or any markets-they tend to grow much of their own food. The old Puget Sound saying, "When the tide is out, the table is set" still has meaning for them, as they head for the beach clutching their clam shovels. Typically self-reliant, they might not be content in Bellevue (but they could always find a plumber there).

Touting the charms of Bainbridge, a proud local realtor not long ago told *The Seattle Times*, "Five years ago, you had to go to downtown Seattle to really shop or see a good movie. Now it's only a short drive to the new mall at Silverdale, and there's a new cinema there with multiple screens?' That's the sort of consideration that counts for absolute zero with a true Category III islander, who never wants to see the inside of the new multiplex.

Guemes, an eastern outpost of the San Juan group, lies just off Fidalgo, a fairly typical Category I island in Skagit County and the site of the town of Anacortes. Since a tiny, county-owned ferry joins it to Fidalgo, Guemes properly belongs in Category II, but in many ways it's more like an island in Category III. To begin with, it's small - only eight square miles. Three hundred thirty-four registered voters live there, sharing its limited space with innumerable deer and far too many bumptious raccoons. This is scarcely large enough to have drawn to Guemes all the amenities one takes for granted on an island like Vashon.

Guemes has virtually no commercial life, though at times it has supported a little store. When the store isn't operating, those who run out of sugar at mealtime must call for help from their neighbors, just like their pioneer forebears. They face the same dilemma should they run out of beer. Guemes possesses nothing like Lopez Island's Galley Tavern, which functions as a nerve center for local news and gossip. Almost the only permanent business establishment is the Guemes Island Resort, a few cabins clustered on breathtaking Clark Point.

Though the ferry crosses the Guemes Channel from Fidalgo in a brisk seven and a half minutes, it doesn't operate late into the evening, save on weekends. Travelers who miss the last boat home must either swim or spend the night in Anacortes - something that makes life tough for teenagers, whose school is on the Fidalgo side.

Physically, Guemes is mostly flat, a wooded island of bay cedars and lilacs, with a few spots possessing extraordinary beauty. At Square Bay-which many islanders would like to see preserved as is-wild, untenanted cliffs drop sheer into a windswept sea. Seaway Hollow is reached by a narrow road through a regal stand of cedar. It's a charming little waterside enclave where 14 houses, embowered- in Gravenstein apple trees, overlook a splendid, low-bank beach. According to Seattle's

Barbara Stenson, a part-time Hollow resident, a single landlord once owned all these houses. He rented them exclusively through ads in the Saturday Review of Literature, and the place still retains an academic flavor.

Nearby is sun-drenched North Beach, another broad stretch of waterfront commanding a spectacular panorama of mountains and sea. Just offshore lies tiny, uninhabited Jack Island, a nature preserve that serves as home to wild river otters, eagles, and all manner of sea birds. The waters surrounding it hide one of the great crabbing grounds of Puget Sound. Southward is low lying Samish Island, named for the Samish Indians; to the north, high-rise Lummi Island, named for the neighboring Lummis. Dominating all is 10,740-foot Mount Baker and its train of lesser peaks, which in winter are so laden with snow that they look like the Pamirs.

It's this quintessential Puget Sound ambiance, along with the island's still-wild character, that has drawn most of the residents to Guemes. Though some fishermen and small-boat builders prosper there, the island-once known for its pears, strawberries, and arid chickens-supports little agribusiness beyond the raising of Black Angus and Hereford cattle. Artists such as the noted painter Max Benjamin are attracted to Guemes; so are writers and craftspersons, pensioned retirees, summer people and weekenders. Many year-round residents commute to Anacortes, but they are a special breed, Category II personalities at the least.

To the casual visitor, Guemes seems very laid-back and low-key. Like nearby Lopez, it's one of the few remaining Puget Sound islands where pedestrians customarily wave a friendly hand to passing cars. Prevailing community rituals are the outdoor barbecue, the potluck supper, and the happy hour on the beach. Unassuming Guemes boasts nothing to compare with the Bainbridge Island summertime cocktail party, still less to compare with the San Juan Island dinner circuit, composed of affluent refugees from New York, Honolulu, Cuernavaca, and similar haunts of the privileged.

Nevertheless, the island is more complex than it might at first appear; it is not entirely a repository of all the rural virtues. It's quite tolerant of eccentric or offbeat behavior; it suffered and survived a hippie invasion and was once written up in High Times as producing the best dope in the United States. Far more than most citizens of neighboring Anacortes, Guemes residents are a fiercely independent lot, whose motto might be, "Don't tread on me." "Guemes," says one of them, "has a reputation of being a thorn in the side of anyone who chooses to mess with it." That thorn recently drove off another unwanted enterprise, as we shall see.

For the white man, the history of Guemes begins with Spain. In 1791, colonial Mexico was governed by an Iberian grandee imposingly named Don Juan Vicente de Guemes Pacheco de Padilla Horcasites y Aguayo, Conde de Revillagigedo, considered by historians to have been possibly the ablest of all the 64 viceroys of New Spain. It was under his aegis that Francisco de Eliza explored the islands at the head of the Straits of Juan de Fuca, a grouping he called "Islas y Archipelago de San Juan:" Eliza scattered the various names of his noble patron on physical features all over the area. Unlike such names as Gran Montana de Carmelo which the Spanish bestowed on Mount Baker, many of Eliza's choices stuck. Guemes though ever after known by the American pronunciation "Gwee-muss" - was the only island to retain a Spanish name.

The Samish Indians, intellectual leaders and producers of especially handsome baskets, once occupied a village on the island's western shore. They were highly respected by their peers. Their Guemes village was famous for its grand regional potlaches, at which they entertained guests from all over the area. Earl Cahail went to school on Guemes, spent 25 years doing public relations for the United Nations in New York, and has since retired to the island. When he was a boy, many Samish still lived there. "I went hunting and fishing with them:" he recalls. "They were my friends."

At night, the young Cahail would sometimes sleep in a bedroll inside what still remained of the village long house-most of the roof, some of the split-cedar siding, and the supporting posts (which, he remembers, were "carved and painted in a rudimentary way"). Unhappily, this historic structure has long since been torn down. Today no sign can be seen of the long years of Samish hegemony, save that now and then an arrowhead, fishhook, or stone anchor turns up on the beach where the potlaches were held.

CREDO

We believe in the one message
like a fever chill
in each mushroom, inside
the chanterelle, the morel,
the rose coral and shaggy mane.
We believe plankton travel the sea's veins.
We believe the movement of a lake trout
takes on the sanctity of number
as the osprey dives. We believe the towhee.
We believe the alpine snow water, when it teases the crags

and outcrops like clear giggling crystal,
is memorizing sunlight to help the oysters grow.
We believe in synchronicity. We believe that when a poem is
conceived
the beloved knows. We believe Jupiter touches us with luck
as we live again and again, and that Jesus knew.
We believe sod holds. We believe there are
in each of us particles that once
were stars, that matter is thought,
and that this belief is the way
of breathing in.

—James Bertolino

First published in *First Credo*, 1986, in the Quarterly Review of
Literature Poetry Series at Princeton University.

As for descendents of the long-house builders, most have vanished from the island. Living in other parts of their traditional territory, many are actively seeking federal recognition of their tribe through Hawaii's Senator Daniel Inouye. Sometimes Cahail visits Maude Mathews Wooten, an elderly Samish woman who has survived her husband and sons and still lives on Guemes. "I've tried to get information from her," he says sadly, "but she always says, "I don't remember."

Permanent occupation by white Americans began in the 1860s. Many newcomers established homesteads, some of which are still in use. They planted the lilacs one sees everywhere, and introduced fruit trees that today provide Guemes with a flowering springtime landscape and, later in the year, with a rich source of food and fresh apple cider. Early on, many of the settlers displayed the independence that has distinguished their heirs. Most notorious among them was one "Smuggler" Kelly, a brigand with the ethics of today's Medellin cartel, who made his living smuggling by sea contraband furs, opium, and Chinese laborers from Canada.

It was said that when Kelly was pursued by US Customs men, he would simply tie up his Asian clients and throw them overboard. If the officials caught up with him, no incriminating evidence was to be found. Old-time Guemes parents terrified their kids by telling them Smuggler Kelly would get them if they didn't behave. Though Kelly spent some time in jail, he met a peaceful and wholly undeserved end in a home for Confederate veterans.

Somewhat more typical of present-day Guemes inhabitants was another highly individual character, Charley Gant. Gant was editor of the first island weekly, the *Guemes Tillikum* (1912), and owner-publisher of a successor, the *Guemes Beachcomber* (1916). Subscription cost for both papers was a dollar a year. Like many other print executives, Gant seemed to relish journalism chiefly because it gave him a chance to broadcast his often idiosyncratic way of looking at the world. His newspapers were hardly conventional. "Dog Mothers Little Raccoons" was a typical *Beachcomber* front-page headline.

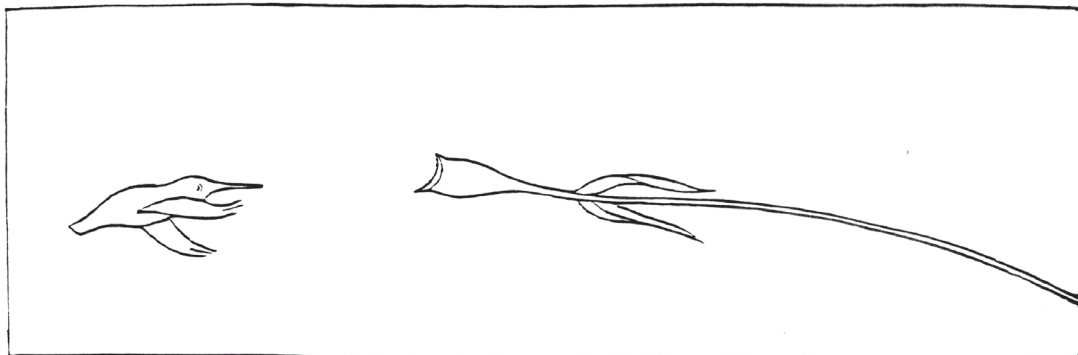
Gant was a drunk, but a happy drunk; more to the point, he was a litterateur of no mean accomplishment. Both his papers featured a lot of poetry, all of it composed by him. If his verse posed no threat to T.S. Eliot, a comparison to Alaskan bard Robert Service doesn't seem too far out of line.

In Guemes, Gant believed he'd found paradise, but in one crucial respect he veered 180 degrees from later writers on the island. He was a born booster, eager not only to promote the island's natural splendors, but to attract to it all the population and industry possible. In that innocent era, he perceived no risk of conflict between these goals. "Ships were building, big, deep, and strong-our gospel hymn is a commerce song and the note of the hammer and saw and plane all harmonize the same refrain:" he sang in a 1917 issue of the *Beachcomber*, a copy of which has been preserved by Guemes historian Gertrude Howard. "Build a city, clear more farms to add provision and rural charms, build more homes and build more schools and join in the song of the shipyard tools."

A Guemes shipyard did indeed construct three ships during World War I, but it later languished, and today has gone the way of the Samish long house. The attitude of Gant's literary heirs is very different from his. If there's a poet laureate of contemporary Guemes, it's certainly the dedicated environmentalist James Bertolino, whose 1986 *First Credo* was published by Princeton University's Quarterly Review of Literature Poetry Series, and whose individual poems have appeared in such mainstream publications as *Paris Review*, *Partisan Review*, and *Poetry*. Bertolino and his wife, Lois, a silversmith and jeweler, left Ohio and moved to Guemes largely because of the island's unspoiled natural beauty. The underlying theme of *First Credo* is the unity of nature and man, a concept intellectually conceivable in Ohio but emotionally much more meaningful on Guemes. "At night in Cincinnati we heard sirens:" Bertolino says. "Here we hear owls."

Bertolino made an unsuccessful foray into politics in 1988. He ran for Skagit County commissioner on the Democratic ticket, stressing such

concerns as the importance of decreasing the use of polluting pesticides and encouraging only those commercial developments that did not “make unreasonable demands on the environment.” It was a platform that would have drawn considerable support in contemporary King County, where the electorate has become increasingly sensitive to the risks inherent in uncontrolled growth. In Skagit County, he easily carried Guemes and, on the mainland, the avant-garde community of La Conner. But he lost in larger towns like Anacortes, where prominent pro-development Democrats came out against him.



Guemes Summer—Philip McCracken

Probably the best-known of Guemes residents is Anacortes-born Philip McCracken, who has worked with Bertolino on various artistic projects and whose quiet way of life in many ways epitomizes the Guemes style. As a young man, McCracken wrote to the late English sculptor Henry Moore, sent him a few sketches, and asked to be taken on as a pupil. Moore assented, and McCracken studied with him in 1955. Critics have detected little of Moore’s artistic influence in McCracken’s subsequent work; perhaps the chief lesson the great sculptor taught his student was by example: his manner of living. Moore led a happy existence as an artist while participating fully in the life of his family and community. McCracken, familiar with the tortured careers of many artist-loners in the United States, saw him as a role model. In England, with Moore as best man, he married Anne McFettridge, a young Mount Holyoke graduate. They moved to Guemes to make their home. The island proved an ideal environment for them, a place where they raised three sons and pursued separate careers, Philip as an increasingly successful sculptor, Anne first as a teacher in Skagit County schools and today as a fledgling printer who operates her own small letterpress.

Inevitably, Guemes has its effect on the work of artists living there. Max

Benjamin's powerful abstract oils would be very different, believes his Tacoma dealer, Rick Gottas, had they been produced anywhere else. In the case of McCracken, Guemes was vital to his development, the island's forests being, in the words of one critic, "the ultimate source of his mythology." The raptors scoping out the sea beneath his dining-room window are immortalized in such works as his cast-stone Restless Bird in Seattle's Norton Building plaza. Poems is a carving shaped like an open book, in which humble objects from Guemes—a snail shell, limpets, a leaf—are embedded like fossils in an ancient cliff, somehow encapsulating the whole of the island's history.

LETTER FROM THE ISLAND

This morning another grey bird
on the path to the well. It gave

its last shudder, and as I knelt
the light blue eye moved once and closed.

This I know was meant for me.
For the first time I understand

the patterns, the sequence of clouds,
the curve of red stones like a sine-wave

along the beach. This afternoon, sitting
below the mountain, I feel the planet move.

—James Bertolino

First published in *First Credo*, 1986, in the Quarterly Review of Literature Poetry Series at Princeton University.

In many of his works, McCracken has adopted the Morris Graves device of using real or imagined birds as metaphors for emotions or states of feeling. His enigmatic cedar, pewter, and jasper Visored Warrior, now in New York's Whitney Museum, seems an odd sort of spirit bird. Like Bertolino, McCracken has a special affection for owls, which in Mayan art symbolized the underworld but which for him often represent family life. Looking at his owl groupings, one is reminded that the McCrackens once made a part-time pet of a wild Guemes owl that liked to drop by for dinner.

Guemes has proven an ideal venue for other activities one might not ordinarily expect to find in such an isolated place, but which have been greatly enriched by what the island has to offer. Delphine Haley and

Thelma Palmer established Island Publishers there, which regularly turns out books on regional themes. *San Juan Classics*, a cookbook by Guemes residents Janice Veal and Dawn Ashbach, is one of their best sellers; most of its recipes, like crab fettuccine (“a visual as well as a gastronomic delight”), utilize island products. In 1988, Haley edited *A Guide to the Marine Mammals of Puget Sound*. Many of the creatures described in her book—orcas, sea lions, seals—thrive in the waters around Guemes.

Other residents make their homes on Guemes for reasons wholly unrelated to their careers. In recent years, modern technology has created an entirely new class of professionals, men and women who can function productively anywhere; some have successfully fitted themselves into the island environment. Joseph Miller is a specialist in computer graphics who could easily work in the city but chooses to live on Guemes, simply because he likes the rural surroundings. “In Seattle,” he laughs, “I feel stressed out. I’ve lost my immunity to city living.”

Miller likes to ride his bicycle out by the island’s coastal salt marsh, or past its rookery of great blue herons, those solemn signature birds of the Puget Sound shoreline. At times he has seen dozens of them airborne simultaneously. On his property he has two buildings—his home and an office set in the center of a forest clearing. Rhododendrons flourish there. Wild deer come to visit him. It’s Walden Pond; it’s Innisfree.

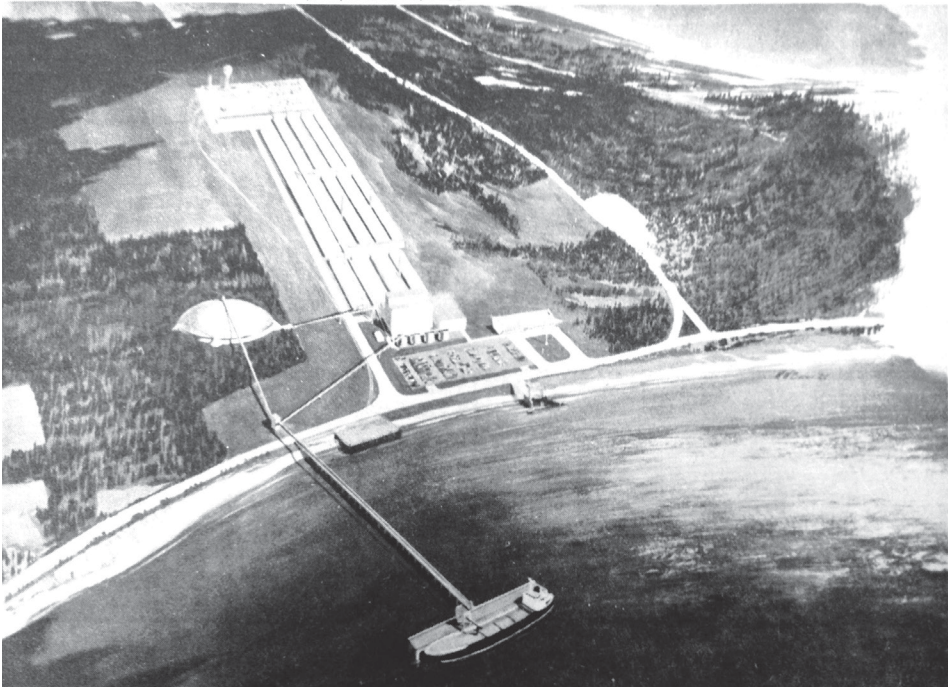
For islanders like Miller, preservation of the pristine quality of life on Guemes has always been a matter of first priority; until quite recently, however, few saw this as presenting a major problem. Like editor Gant, most people assumed that normal development of the island would be wholly consistent with the island’s quality. Contemporary attitudes have changed greatly. Today, many people on the island are members of the Guemes Island Environmental Trust, a hard-nosed watchdog group concerned in general with the preservation of the island’s quality of life and in particular with matters such as how increased development may affect the island’s limited water resources.

The Trust distributes a small quarterly newsletter, perhaps the closest contemporary equivalent to the *Tillikum* and the *Beachcomber*. But though the newsletter prints children’s stories, book reviews, and recipes likely to intrigue island readers, the environmental emphasis that is its *raison d’être* is wholly alien to any publication of Gant’s time—for in 1966, an event occurred that transformed island attitudes for good. In that year, the Northwest Aluminum Company, like one of McCracken’s predatory eagles, swooped down upon tranquil Guemes.

Despite its name, Northwest Aluminum was a Japanese-backed consortium seeking a site on which to erect a \$100 million aluminum-

reduction mill. Its plan was to transport bauxite from Australia, convert it to ingots on Guemes using cheap Bonneville power, and then ship the ingots to Japan. The company acquired options to buy property from Guemes landowners and set about attempting to rezone a quiet, untrammelled island valley from residential to industrial use.

The communities of Anacortes and Guemes were instantly galvanized. Like true citizens of their Category I island, many people in Anacortes heartily favored the proposal. At that time, their town was economically depressed, and they saw the mill as a project that would bring the area needed jobs, raise property values, and initiate a domino effect that would benefit the whole region. Both Chamber of Commerce and City Council endorsed the plan.



An artist's conception of the plan, Anacortes American 1966

On Guemes, the reaction was just the opposite. Most people there were convinced that the coming of a huge aluminum plant, with its attendant air pollution, water degradation, and increased noise and traffic, would disrupt forever the historic character of their island haven, marking the first step (as one critic observed) toward converting it into Seattle's industrialized Harbor Island. At a meeting at the Guemes Community

Club, residents voted 102 to 2 to fight any attempt to rezone the island for industry. Feelings ran high. Some feared even to discuss the project on the phone; hostile residents sharing their party lines might overhear. A couple of deaths were partly blamed on stress stemming from the conflict.

At this time, a group called the Save the San Juans Committee coalesced on Guemes. It was headed by Evan Nelson, a retired Boeing official and former president of the Association of Washington Industries. As his attorney, Nelson hired an aggressive young lawyer known for his skill with land-use cases: John Ehrlichman, later famous for his role in the Nixon White House.



Washington State Congressman Lloyd Meeds points to a map of Guemes Island. Senator Henry Jackson and an unidentified man (perhaps the Devil) discuss the proposed aluminum smelter in 1966.

Almost no one gave Ehrlichman a chance to prevail, and at first everything went wrong for him, The Skagit County Planning Commission endorsed Northwest Aluminum's rezone request, and it was approved by the county commissioners. In a lawsuit filed in Superior Court, Ehrlichman challenged the commissioners' decision, lost, and appealed to the state Supreme Court. And then, unexpectedly, Northwest Aluminum backed out. The company attempted to locate its plant elsewhere, beginning with Olympia, where it faced similar popular opposition, and ending up in Warrenton, Oregon, a town near Astoria that at first seemed more welcoming. But protests eventually surfaced there as well, and in the end the Oregon plant was never built.

It was widely reported that the company had abandoned Guemes simply because the legal hassles and the public protests threatened to delay construction of its plant too long. Ehrlichman advances an appealing, if improbable, speculation. "I've always had a romantic theory about the reason they went to Oregon," he says, speaking from his home in Santa Fe. "This was a Japanese outfit. Guemes had tried to persuade them that the plant would interfere with the ecology. We examined similar plants, especially one

in Canada, where fallout from smoke had killed every tree for miles.

“One lady wrote a beautiful letter to the emperor of Japan, describing the local wildlife and the beauties of the island. Knowing he was a biologist, she described the marine life in special detail. She appealed to him to use his good offices to prevent the plant from going in. It was an arrow shot in the air, and we never saw it land. But within 90 days, the announcement came that Northwest was going to leave. I’ve always liked to think that the emperor intervened and caused the right thing to be done?’

Despite Northwest Aluminum’s withdrawal, Nelson’s case against the Commission’s rezoning was eventually heard in the state Supreme Court as *Smith v. Skagit County*-and, for the first time, Ehrlichman won. Author of the court’s written opinion was that most literary of jurists, Frank Hale. “Guemes Island is a quiet place,” he began. “It has no industry or commerce, no hustle of traffic, no crime and no police. The air above it is pure and sweet, and the waters around it sparkling and clean. It lies at the eastern end of the San Juan archipelago-one of a group of inordinately beautiful islands?’

From then on, it was downhill all the way for fans of the Northwest Aluminum Company. Following an appropriate reference to Lady Macbeth (her “Out, damned spot!” was quoted in connection with a discussion on spot zoning), the court concluded by holding the rezone invalid. The victory was razor-thin, a 5-4 decision, with two of the majority justices declining to sign Hale’s opinion, concurring only in its result. Guemes residents didn’t care. Joy on the island reigned unconfined. As for Ehrlichman, whatever difficulties he later faced in the larger world, on Guemes he is to this day viewed as a St. George who slaughtered the dragon.

But the island had been given a permanent scare. For many years, there was nothing to remotely equal it, though at one point there was serious talk of siting a supertanker port on March Point, across Guemes Channel, where the Shell and Texaco oil refineries are currently located. Had this project gone through, it most certainly would have had an impact on Guemes. But it was aborted by Senator Warren Magnuson’s famous “little amendment’ which put a stop to supertanker traffic on Puget Sound. It wasn’t until the recent Cypress Island affair that the newly raised environmental consciousness of Guemes was once again made manifest, and to positive effect.

Cypress, a 5,500-acre Category III island lying across the narrow Bellingham Channel from Guemes’ western shore, is one of the loveliest and most mysterious of all the San Juans. A residential treatment center for troubled adolescent boys is located there, crumbling homesteads

still haunt its interior, and a few full-time settlers occupy cabins along its shores. Yet humans have never had much to do with Cypress, partly because it's a very high island with few saltwater beaches and many steep hillsides. Pockets of old-growth Douglas fir still flourish there, surrounded by thick carpets of moss. The island has several small lakes that see relatively few visitors. It supports a population of introduced red foxes; in the past, feral goats and cattle roamed its woodlands, crashing through the brush and scaring campers. Some people are spooked by lonely Cypress, but others love it with a special passion. "There's a lot of energy there, a lot of power," says Ferdi Businger, a young Guemes bachelor whose father owns property on Cypress. "I'd do anything," he adds with fervor, "to save it from development."

Part of Cypress has long been owned by the state, but a few years ago, a 3,176-acre chunk of land still in private hands was bought by a Spokane developer. He announced plans to seek permits that would allow construction of a huge destination resort, to be called the Eagle Harbor Conference and Recreation Center, complete with golf course and marina.

A group called Friends of Cypress immediately sounded an alarm; they saw the largest undeveloped island in Francisco de Eliza's Islas y Archipelago de San Juan going the way of most of its well-settled sisters. Though the Friends of Cypress was headed by a commercial fisherman from Anacortes named Nick Fahey, the group received much backing from Guemes. Supporters such as Businger, publisher Haley, and McCracken's student son, Bob, made many trips to hearings at the county seat in Mount Vernon. The sessions were often acrimonious, one of the problems being that the Inland Empire developer appeared totally unequipped to understand the preservationist mindset of most of the islanders. Many thought that every time he opened his mouth, he did his cause further harm.

Luckily, the state Department of Natural Resources had available a special funding source. In 1987-prodded by state Senator Mike Kreidler, then-state Senator Jim McDermott, and others-the Legislature had temporarily levied a 0.6 percent increase in the real estate excise tax, setting aside the proceeds for the purpose of buying land in four specified "conservation areas:" of which Cypress was one. Using this money, the DNR negotiated a deal with the developer in which his property was transferred to the state. At the next legislative session, pressure from the real estate lobby blocked renewal of this special tax, but by then the state had acquired the Cypress property. It now owns about 75 percent of the island.

Today, though the future of Cypress is far from completely settled, it looks promising. "Our ultimate goal," says Bob Rose, special staff assistant to the commissioner of public lands, "is to make sure that the ecological integrity of the island is maintained?" Most of the owners of the 25 percent of privately owned property—predominantly Category III types—seem ready to help. Many have already indicated a willingness to work with the DNR toward long-term protection of their individual parcels, either by agreeing to convey easements limiting future development or by making outright donations of their land.

Another problem facing contemporary Guemes seems far less likely to be solved easily. This is the issue of aircraft noise. South of Guemes, at Oak Harbor, lies the Whidbey Island Naval Air Station, a long established training facility for pilots of carrier-based aircraft. The planes flown there can be extremely noisy, though until lately the roar of the jets didn't greatly affect the citizens of Guemes. In summer, when prevailing winds are northerlies, planes on training flights did not overfly the Guemes-Fidalgo area; in winter, when southerly winds require a different approach, planes habitually flew over Fidalgo, avoiding Guemes.

Suddenly, in 1988—and, residents contend, without prior warning—Whidbey altered its flight patterns. Planes began to fly over Guemes during periods of southerly winds. They roared above the island up to 50 or 60 times daily, on occasion as late as lam, as they circled toward the base. Sometimes, while still above Guemes, they flew in landing configuration with power up and wing flaps down. This practice, called "flying dirty," doubles or triples the resulting noise. "When they come over," says Joseph Miller, "you just have to stop talking." McCracken agrees. "In my studio, you sometimes can't hear a chain saw over the sound of a plane," he says. "That has to be loud."

Not all Guemes homeowners have been affected equally by this change, but it has significantly touched the lives of many. These residents feel the Navy cannot successfully argue (like other airfield operators faced with noise complaints) that they moved to the neighborhood of the base fully aware of the noise threat and that they therefore have no right to raise the issue now. Though they concede that in the past an occasional plane from the station flew over Guemes, they say these flights were nowhere near as common or as loud as the repetitive training flights that are causing the current trouble. At the time when most of today's residents of Guemes first came there, it was always quiet, save for the natural sounds of the outdoors—truly Prospero's Island from Shakespeare's *Tempest*, "full of noises, Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not." This country stillness was one of the qualities that caused them to seek it out. They had no reason to suppose that aircraft noises from

Whidbey would ever seriously disturb them.

Guemes activists have met several times with air-station officers, so far without much success. The Navy is willing to try to reduce the noise impact of its aircraft by flying over Guemes Channel rather than over the island proper-when this can be done practically-and by delaying as long as possible the necessary transition of its planes to landing configuration. But it has declined to alter its new flight pattern. "It's either go over Guemes or go over Anacortes, and more people live in Anacortes," as one official puts it.

Currently the Navy is preparing an environmental impact statement that will analyze the effects of its operations and address alternative ways of conducting them. Guemes partisans are worried, though, that by the time the EIS is completed next year, the Navy's current procedures will be "set in concrete." The more committed among them strongly believe that the air station is in the wrong place, that such a facility no longer belongs on an overpopulated Sound, and that it should be moved elsewhere, perhaps to Eastern Washington, where there is plenty of empty space. This is not a proposal the Navy is likely to endorse; it would annoy some patriots, who consider noise from naval aircraft "the sound of freedom" and would likely be unpopular in Oak Harbor as well, where many civilians are willing to put up with all manner of racket from the base in exchange for the economic benefits it brings. While the dispute smolders, the planes continue to fly. Winter is once again at hand, with its south winds, and no solution for the beleaguered folk of Guemes is yet in sight.

But if the Navy has not been defeated in the air, another armada on the sea has recently run into stiff opposition by the islanders. This story concerns a plan that would affect some of the most scenic and widely utilized of the adjacent waters. Off North Beach, on either side of Jack Island, a company called American Sea Vegetable has been proposing to pre-empt 33 acres of surface water and 362 acres of sea bottom for the exclusive cultivation of nori.

Nori is an edible seaweed that has long been grown in Japan. The young plants are hung underwater from nets strung between buoys. Ropes anchor these nets to the sea floor. During the growing season, which runs from September to May, the nets must periodically be raised above the surface so that unwanted growths attached to them can be killed. At night, passing boats are warned away by blinking lights. When the seaweed is mature, it is mowed, processed, and used to make sushi rolls and as a flavoring agent for soups.

American Sea Vegetable's John Merrill makes a spirited argument in favor of his aquaculture project. Non farming, he says, puts Puget Sound

to good use. It produces food, and, far from harming the environment, requires clean water and helps absorb nutrients, of which the Sound now has an overload. Responding to conservationists worried about Jack Island, he contends that non harms no wildlife, either above or below the surface, and indeed is attractive to fish. Nor does he believe most people object to non cultivation: "The Japanese have tour boats that go out to look at non farms because they're so picturesque." Merrill sees opposition to his project as something largely whipped up by shoreline property owners fighting a progressive idea—a classic case of "Not in My Backyard." He feels this kind of opposition would surface no matter where he proposed to grow non, and says one reason for choosing the Guemes site was that relatively few shoreline owners would be affected. "These people have had exclusive use of a public resource for a long time," he says, "and I'm challenging that."

But those on Guemes who object to non farming do not do so solely because its culture would mess up their waterfront though they don't like the idea of continually blinking lights or raised seaweed, and argue that the prospective site, one of the most dramatically picturesque on the Sound, ought to be left alone. They point out that waters set aside for non cannot be used for anything else. As they see it, the Guemes project would interfere with commercial and sport crabbing, with commercial and sport fishing, and with general use by the public of waters historically free to all forms of navigation.

"Look out there," says Earl Cahail, gesturing at a fleet of sailboats beating across Samish Bay. His house is on North Beach. "Those boats are in the middle of what would be a seaweed pen. That's one of the reasons we don't want them here."

Originally, American Sea Vegetable applied to set aside a much larger area for its proposed project—70 surface acres and 707 bottom acres. Reaction on both Guemes and Fidalgo was immediate, mostly negative, and by no means confined to waterfront-property owners. As soon as the first application was filed in 1987, approximately 600 letters of protest poured into Skagit County's Office of Planning and Community Development. Nor did reduction in the size of the area applied for appease the project's opponents. Repeating the strategy successfully employed by Evan Nelson many years before, they revived Save the San Juans, hired a Seattle attorney, and introduced a bill, now pending in the Legislature, that would stiffen guidelines for the establishment of aquaculture. A court challenge stands ready, relying in part on the language of Article 15, Section 1, of the state constitution: "The state shall never give, sell or lease to any private person any rights whatever in the waters beyond such harbor lines" The islanders are digging in

for another long battle in the courts and the media. So far the skirmish seems to be a draw. And this time, there seems to be no chance of intervention from the emperor of Japan.

Meanwhile, except perhaps when the roar of a training jet shatters the peace of a quiet winter day, the Guemes of the present remains much like the Guemes of the past—not, it's true, the primeval Guemes of 1791, when the Spanish invader walked its beaches, nor the Guernes of the era of Charley Gant, settled by white men but still wonderfully close to nature. It's never more beautiful than during a magical summer morning, when dawn fires the cool blue sea with tints of rose, and a soaring heron drifts slowly toward Padilla Bay across the snowy face of the Gran Montana de Carmelo. And, later in the day, when one drives about the island, returning neighborly waves of the hand, one is reminded that there still exist a few backwaters where the friendly calm of the Northwest's years of early growth survives into its harried present.

Yet no one can count on the persistence of this idyllic state of affairs. In an ever more crowded Puget Sound basin, where progress is rampant and the frequency and ferocity of turf wars continue to escalate, there seems small reason for the people of Guemes to let down their guard. Given the worldwide glut of venture capital, some successor to the Northwest Aluminum Company could well surface; given the island's unsullied maritime beauty, some new version of the Eagle Harbor Conference and Recreation Center almost certainly will.

But the citizens of Guemes are now prepared. They lost their innocence with Gant. If the last few decades have taught them nothing else, they've learned that out there beyond Samish Bay—maybe in Seattle, maybe in Spokane, more likely in New York or Tokyo—those predatory eagles are waiting, ready to move in. And unlike the less fortunate scoters and buffleheads beneath Philip McCracken's window, today's determined islanders just might succeed in fighting them off.

—John S. Robinson who “lawyered for his paycheck but wrote for his soul”, died March 11, 2003. Originally published in *The Seattle Weekly*, November 8, 1989