

# A special place in history

## County park established on Shaw Island back in 1927

By Sharon Wootton

The great blue heron lifted off the beach and headed down the cove, its flight path following the curve of the sand, its 6-foot wing span casting a long shadow.

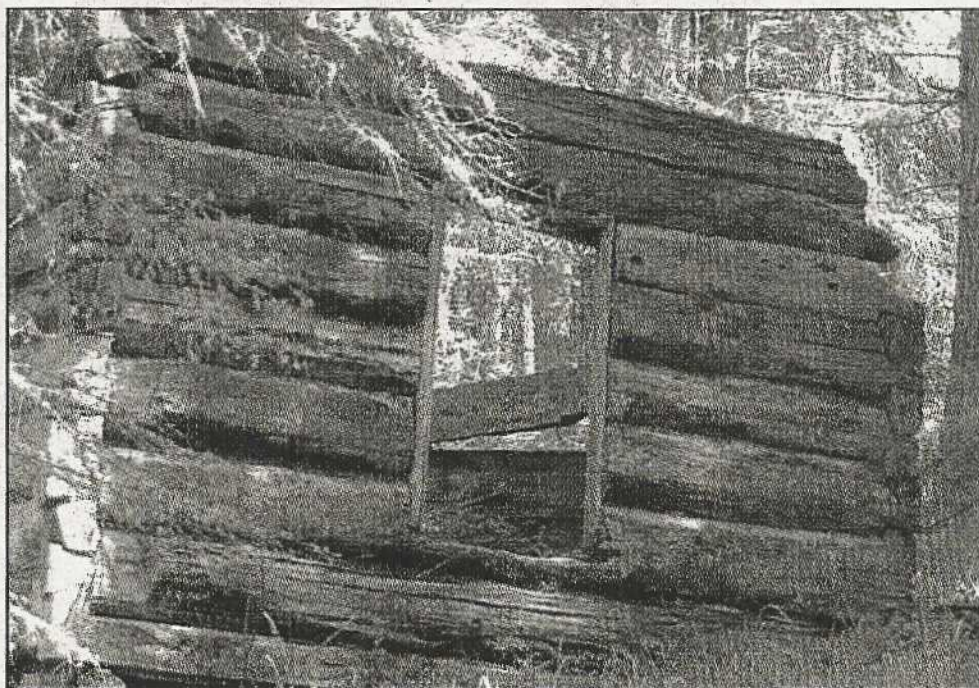
It had had one of the best sandy beaches in the San Juan Islands to itself before two humans walked down the wood launch ramp at South Beach County Park.

The 60-acre park curls around the western part of Indian Cove and takes in most of the peninsula that juts out between the cove and Squaw Bay (the tip is privately owned).

Views from the 3,250-foot-long beach are toward San Juan Island, Canoe Island and Upright Channel.

The park can be fairly quiet even on summer weekends when the campground is often full. Many have visited for a decade or more; some come from other islands, seeking a getaway close to home.

"That little tiny corner has been near and dear to Shaw Islanders, but not too much got recorded about its history," said Cherie Christensen, historian



Sharon Wootton photos

Above, nestled in an isolated corner of South Beach County Park on Shaw Island are the remains of an old log house which was used as Shaw Island's first school. Below, items left behind at the park await the return of their owners.

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## At a Glance

While the San Juan Islands' state parks deserve the praise that they receive, the county parks are quieter gems. This is the first of a series of stories on San Juan County's parks.

**What:** South Beach County Park, Squaw Bay Road (on some maps, called Shaw Island County Park).

**Where:** About 2 miles from the Shaw Island ferry landing.

**Features:** Beach access, boat launch, 60 acres, 11 camp sites, water, vault toilets; picnic area, shelter, swings.

**Reservations:** (360) 378-1842.

— **CHERIE CHRISTENSEN, HISTORIAN, SHAW ISLAND HISTORICAL MUSEUM**

for the Shaw Island Historical Society.

Credit the existence of the park to Shaw Islanders' persistence. A 1930s newspaper clipping at the Shaw Island Historical Society refers to residents "agitating" for a park as early as 1890.

While \$3.75 per supportive resident would have covered the cost of the land, meeting minutes show islanders unanimously charged themselves \$5 each, with any money leftover going toward park improvements.

The article says that they bought 60 acres of federal military land at South Beach and

deeded it to the county.

A June 1927 receipt for \$74.70 from the prosecuting attorney to F.E. Fowler is for the "purchase price of lands for park purchased from the U.S. government." But according to county records, in September 1927, President Calvin Coolidge conveyed Shaw County Park (59.75 acres) directly to San Juan County.

Ownership order aside, islanders always visited the beach.

"Squaw Bay Road was one

of the last roads to be put in," Christensen said.

"To get to the park, you had to come up from the Shaw dock and Blind Bay and go to the school house corner and all the way around to get to the beach. People would ride a horse and buggy with all their picnic makings."

It's easy to see the attraction, especially for families.

At very low tides, hundreds of feet of hard-packed mud are exposed, just right for small children to explore. Shallow waters warm up during the summer to allow for comfortable wading and swimming.

There's driftwood for forts, bird tracks to follow, large barnacles to admire, scattered shells to pick up, and a boulder on the beach that begs a moment to wonder about its origins (possibly left behind when the last glacier retreated).

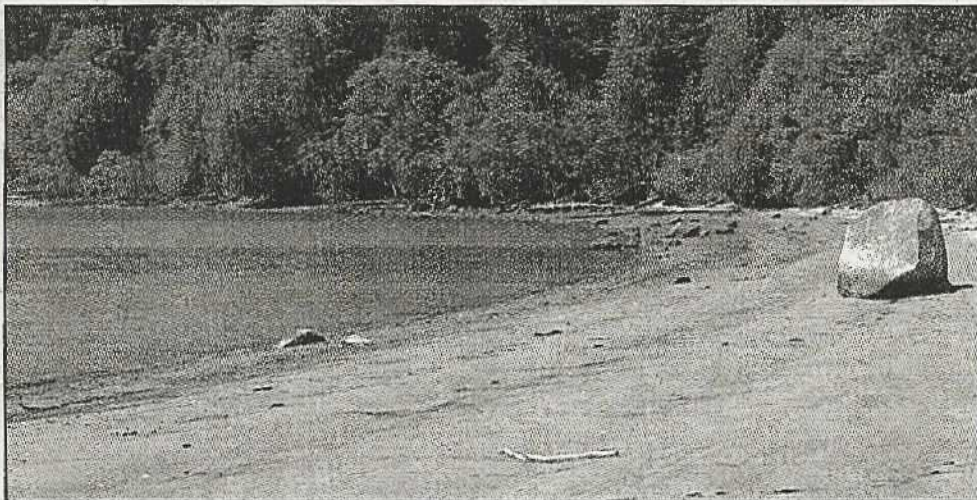
Eleven campsites are along a park road (six on the water side), starting on a low bank that rises to a high bluff, with steps down to the beach at a few places. Most are very private.

A grassy area provides room for day use, a picnic shelter, and swings.

Off in a fairly isolated corner of the park near Squaw Bay is what's left of an old log structure, the island's first school.

Nature and history make this place special, something Shaw Islanders have known since at least 1890.

—*Writer/photographer*



Sharon Wootton photos