

## **Wingehaven**

**By Karen Borell**

### **For the Washington Water Trails Association: Cascadia Marine Trail.**

Wingehaven has been a private estate, failed vacation home development, commercial fish farm, and finally a park. It is located in a steep ravine on the northeast shore of Vashon Island, looking out across the water at Seattle and Mt. Rainier, and those characteristics have played a key role in its history.

The first known Europeans to see Vashon Island were Capt. Vancouver and crew, who explored the area in 1792 and named the island after a British sea captain friend, Capt. James Vashon. Lt. Charles Wilkes appeared in 1841 to survey the islands. Its first known human inhabitants were the S'Homamish Indians, a band of the Puyallup Tribe.

Before settlement by Europeans, Vashon was covered with old growth Cedar Hemlock forest, described by early settlers as dark and nearly impenetrable. Indians had occasionally cleared undergrowth and created open areas with small fires to encourage the growth of berries and bracken, used in traditional technology and for food. European settlers began logging, both to clear the land for farming and to earn cash. Early Vashon settlers' stories tell of stumps 8 feet or more in diameter which would be slowly burned out over days or weeks.

By 1907, the Wingehaven property had been clear cut, a cherry orchard established, and a two-story house built, probably on the site of an old cabin. An early post office, whimsically called Aquarium by a postmaster named Captain Fish, had been sited there but moved a few miles south. The location, with proximity to Seattle and views of Mt. Rainier, caught the attention of a real developer, William T. Cowley. Cowley was owner of a Seattle investment firm and described himself as a retired English sea captain. He had acquired the property by 1914 with a plan to create an early version of condominium development. It was to be called Twickenham Estates, after the developer's purported village of origin in England.

Cowley built a large house, a substantial dock, and gardens. The Cowley family lived in the house and the dock became Cowley's Landing, a regular stop for the Mosquito Fleet. The gardens appealed to the popular enthusiasm at the time for water gardens. There were at least 12 concrete ponds constructed—one touted as "Virginia Waters"—a warm water swimming pool, and another as a "wading pool for the little fellows". Old photos show concrete enclosures filled with water and lily pads. The gardens featured fountains, topiary, and statues of crocodiles, lions, goddesses, gargoyles, dolphins and herons, some with water shooting out of their mouths. There were lily ponds, koi ponds,

large urns on iron feet with flowering plants, and an Italianate balustrade atop the seawall.

The property became a site for fraternity parties. Mrs. Cowley's scrapbook included memorabilia from a UW Delta Chi party in the spring of 1914. The photos show young men in sport coats and boater hats and young women in flapper attire, picnicking, sitting on park benches, and posing on the dock or the balustrade. Local lore is that the ponds were a hiding place for bootleg liquor during Prohibition.

Cowley's development was to be build-to-suit bungalows for vacation or retirement homes. A stylized brochure enthused over the views, access from Seattle, fresh air, suitability for children. Although a model bungalow was constructed, no lots were ever sold and no other homes built. The project was conceived in the boom times of the 'teens and twenties, but succumbed to the economic hard times after the stock market crash of 1929.

The property was acquired by Ernest J. Moy in the thirties, who used the tanks for fish farming, and sold fish for aquariums nationally and internationally. The ponds were expanded and the business flourished. However, the topography of the site, a hillside and ravine, eventually reasserted itself. Spring runoff, unchecked by the established forest vegetation that had been cleared, would course through the ravine, overflow the ponds, and wash away the fish. The business fell victim to changing economics during the war years and the property was sold in the 1940's to William Sanders, the owner of a Seattle restaurant chain, who used it as a private residence.

By 1950 the ponds had fallen into disrepair, and could not be economically restored. The Winge family purchased the site, renamed it Wingehaven, and renovated the old house. Three generations of Winges owned the property until 1969, when the family sold the property to King County Parks. The property was purchased with funds raised through the "Forward Thrust" bond issue, which allowed King County to double its parklands. In 1995 King County transferred the park property to the Vashon Park District. It has been a WWTA site since 1998.

The site is bordered on the north by Dolphin Point and the Bunker Trail neighborhood. A number of the houses in Bunker Trail were relocated from the path of I-5 construction and barged to their present location. One of the neighbors at Dolphin Point was the author, Betty MacDonald, who wrote *The Egg and I*, which was made into a popular movie and translated into more than a dozen languages. Another of her popular books, *Onions in the Stew*, was written about life on Vashon while she was living at Dolphin Point in the 1940's.

Visitors can still see the Italianate balustrade on the seawall, the concrete foundations of some of the ponds and a tennis court, and much of the landscaping and garden

plants. The dock was carried away by a big storm in the early fifties, and the house was demolished by the County when the site became a park. Erosion through the ravine and along the hillside has reclaimed much of the site, and unfortunately, vandalism and neglect have destroyed most of the distinctive garden features.

It is possible to walk about 1.2 miles along the beach from the park to the boat docks north. It is also possible to walk along the beach south for a few miles as well, but mind the tide as the beach directly to the south of the park narrows at high tide.

#### Acknowledgements and sources

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