

The Vashon Holiday Season

By Bruce Haulman and Terry Donnelly

As the weather changes, the days grow shorter, and the rains begin, Vashon Islanders have always celebrated the change in seasons. The s̓x̓wəbabs Native People of Vashon gathered in their permanent village winter houses and told stories that defined who they were, and linked them to the larger Coast Salish culture of which they were a part.

With American settlement of the island, Thanksgiving and Christmas became the seasonal celebrations that defined the changing season and the coming of winter. Islanders organized holiday celebrations, shared meals, and exchanged gift from their very first arrival on Vashon.

Outdoor community Christmas Trees at Burton, Dockton, and Vashon; holiday window displays in island stores, church services, power poles festooned with lights and fir swags (later with candy canes), and the obligatory school Christmas Pageant (no longer politically acceptable) all defined the way Vashon celebrated the holidays in the early 20th Century. In more recent times, The Gallant Lady Christmas Ship cruise round the island in the 1960s and 1970s, Berkeley Breathed's Bicycle-in-the-Tree saga "Red Rider Comes Calling" in 1997, the Annual Blue Heron Dance "Nutcracker" beginning in 1999, and the Vashon Elves (resulting in the 2011 Vashon Elves Incident when the well-meaning Elves were forced to stop collecting donations at the 4-way stop in Vashon), added to these other traditions.

The holiday season on Vashon has also always been full of memorable storms and amazing gifts. The "worst storm in memory" swept though in 1923 closing both ferry docks and isolating the island for several days. High winds and a heavy downpour in 1936 "played havoc with the street decorations in Vashon." The attack at Pearl Harbor darkened the holidays in 1941 with air raid drills and defense preparations. In 1950 over 14 inches of snow blanketed the island and brought everything to a standstill. The Jesus Barn collapsed in December 1982, the Bethel Church burned on Boxing Day 1999, and Fisher Pond froze solid for 6 days in 2009.

The Holidays have also brought some amazing gifts to the island. During the Great Depression the Island Welfare Committee, led by W.D. Garvin, delivered Christmas baskets to those "feeling the pinch of hard times." During World War II, and during the Vietnam War, islanders organized to send Christmas packages to young men serving overseas. The "Christmas Miracle" of 1995 saved Island Manor Nursing Home from closing and ultimately created what is now Vashon Community Care when 30 islanders led by "the Two Ted's" – Ted Kutscher and Ted Clabaugh – pledged \$10,000 each to keep the nursing home from closing. More recently, Glacier, because of the perseverance of Sharon Nelson and Preserve Our islands (PIO), gave up the fight to mine the gravel of Maury Island, and in December 2010 the site became King County Park.

There are two long standing lighted traditions that islanders look forward to every year: William and Harold Mann's 1,200 feet of lights outlining the Deer Pond on Cemetery Road (with one red light for Rudolph's nose), and Lou and Paul Engles' lighted Tow Truck towing Santa and his sleigh.



Deer Pond, Cemetery Road, Ray Pfortner



Engles Tow Truck, Terry Donnelly

One of the most memorable recent Holiday traditions was the annual Holiday Parade with Doc Eastly and his team of Shires (originally Russ and Al) pulling the wagon with Santa Claus and Mrs. Claus (aka George and Sandy Eustice), packed with children. Doc began driving the wagon in the parade in 1980 and continued to his last parade in 2006. Bettie Edwards, owner of The Little House, was instrumental in convincing Doc to drive his wagon for the parade. Each year she and her staff decorated the wagon for its trip through downtown Vashon. One of Doc's fondest memories captures the excitement of the parade. A young Mother, with her two-year old daughter, boarded the wagon and the Mother told her daughter, "I rode in this wagon with Doc Eastly when I was two-years old."



Doc Eastly Driving Santa and Mrs. Claus, Rik Forschmiedt, 2003

Doc prepared for the parade by exercising the horses, shodding them with new shoes, checking the wagon, and delivering it to Bettie Edwards to decorate. Then, after a big family chili feed prepared by his wife Pat, they would head up to the parade, Doc would don his winter driving gloves, load up the wagon with Santa, Mrs. Claus, and a load of children, and snapping the reins lead another Holiday Parade through the streets of Vashon.