

Context:

Gabriola, short stories

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Cowichan children seen from inside the tent at the camp on Valdes.

William Ebrington Gordon, *Journal...* Mitchell Library MSS 3091

The Gordon party left their camp, which was at a “sufficient” distance from the Indian village at Cayetano Point, on the southern tip of Valdes, on Thursday evening;

## Short stories—and tall tales

### **The day the ferry went duck hunting**—*told by Frank Hackwood*

You know, some people get very upset when the ferry is a few minutes late, even when the weather is bad, but I remember the time when these things didn’t matter so much.

It was just before the war—1937-38, something like that—back in the days of the first ferry, the *Atrevida*, which was owned by Bill and Tom Higgs. The skipper was Bill Millburn. Running back and forth between here and Nanaimo wasn’t a full

bivouacked *en route*; and on Friday, May 6, 1853 directed their course through the “Gab[r]iola Gap”, remarking that they believed it to be “never passed by white men before”.

They reached Nanaimo late that evening, thereby completing their circumnavigation of Gabriola Island. There, they found that the *Virago* had completed coaling that same afternoon. At 5:30 the next morning, they proceeded on their way into the Strait of Georgia and on up the coast toward the Queen Charlotte Islands.

The following year, the *Virago* was involved in the fiasco at Petropavlovsk; but that’s another story....

### **Acknowledgements**

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time occupation then, so in-between times the ferry was used to do some towing for Frank Beban who was logging on the island and had a sawmill over on the other side.

Tom and Frank used to get along fine and one day they decided they would take the afternoon off and go duck hunting on Hoggan Lake. I think they were mainly after mallards. There were lots of them around—brant geese too, they used to be so numerous that you could bring down several with a single blast from a shot gun.

Anyway, while they were waiting over in Nanaimo for the *Atrevida's* scheduled departure, they passed the time in the Elks Club where there was not a lot to do other than yarn and have a beer or two. By the time it was ready to leave, they were both in a very good mood.

The skipper duly set off for Gabriola with Tom and Frank on the bridge, but they had no sooner cleared Protection Island than the impatient hunters spotted flocks of ducks down in the Nanaimo River estuary, near the "reef", a gravel bar that used to be on the west side of Jack Point. It's gone now.

So, what with Tom Higgs being one of the owners and all, the Gabriola ferry forgot all about going to Descanso Bay. It headed instead down toward the river for a little duck hunting.

Whether they got any or not, I don't know. But I'm sure they all had an enjoyable afternoon trying. People talked about it for years afterwards. ◇

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### **The sad tale of Jancowski's horse**—*told by Frank Hackwood*

As you know, I was born in Nanaimo and have been coming over to Gabriola since I was a boy. My mother, whose story this is, starting coming here in the 1920s. My family and I now live at Twin Beaches on the Pilot Bay side—been here since the 50s.

What I notice is how things have changed in recent years. The sand here used to be pure white, but now the eel-grass is growing and it all looks kind-of mucky. There was kelp too, so much kelp it sometimes looked as though you could walk to Nanaimo. There still is kelp further out, but the beds are nothing like they once were. Fishing was good then—bluebacks (coho) and springs.

Before the war, the Japanese fishermen in Nanaimo ran a ling-cod fishery.

Just in the corner here where we live, there used to be a creek—it only ran in the winter but it was always pretty swampy. Where the water seeped out onto the sand, it made a quicksand. We often had to wave to people on the beach to signal to them to go further out when they started to lose sight of their feet in the sand. It has dried out tremendously in the last ten years or so—nowadays, you'd scarcely notice it.

Back in the old days, all the property round Pilot Bay was owned by Fred Jancowski. In the days before the depression, the 1920s, there were lots of ideas of making this a big holiday resort area with hotels and lodges. At one time, Jancowski had a boat, the *Red Devil*, that he used to bring friends over to what is now the park for outings.

Anyway, Jancowski had a horse, which he probably used for hauling logs, and one afternoon it was on its way along the beach—just here in front of the house—when it got stuck in the quicksand.

The horse couldn't get out by itself, and men came from around with ropes to try and help it. They tried for several hours but to no avail, and nobody had a motor or truck or anything like that.

My mother never told me what eventually happened, I was just a boy, but [Jancowski] must have shot it. By late afternoon the tide was coming in and there was nothing more anyone could do to save it from drowning.

It just shows how things change—looking at the beach now, it looks so benign—as if nothing like that ever happened. ◇