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# Gabriola's wharves—Silva Bay

by Jenni Gehlbach



Silva Bay 2009. Google Earth

## Wharves in Silva Bay

John Silva was Jacque De Almeida, a Portuguese fisherman born in 1845 in Lisbon.<sup>1</sup> He was married to Louisa Marilee

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<sup>1</sup> Not to be confused with Portuguese Joe Silvey, nor with Joe's older brother João (John), who died while still young, nor yet, with a son of Joe Silvey named John. The "John" of Gabriola was not related to "Joe". The story is that John Silva was given his name by the captain of the ship Joe and John were

(Maralee, Marelee), a member of the Cowichan Tribes. In the 1880s, he preempted the land around Silva Bay after having moved from Mayne Island and bought land at the northeast tip of Gabriola from Henry Peterson and his wife Jane, who was another First Nation settler.

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aboard when the captain couldn't master John's Portuguese name. Just to complete the possible confusion, John Silva of Gabriola had a son who was named after his close friend, Joe.

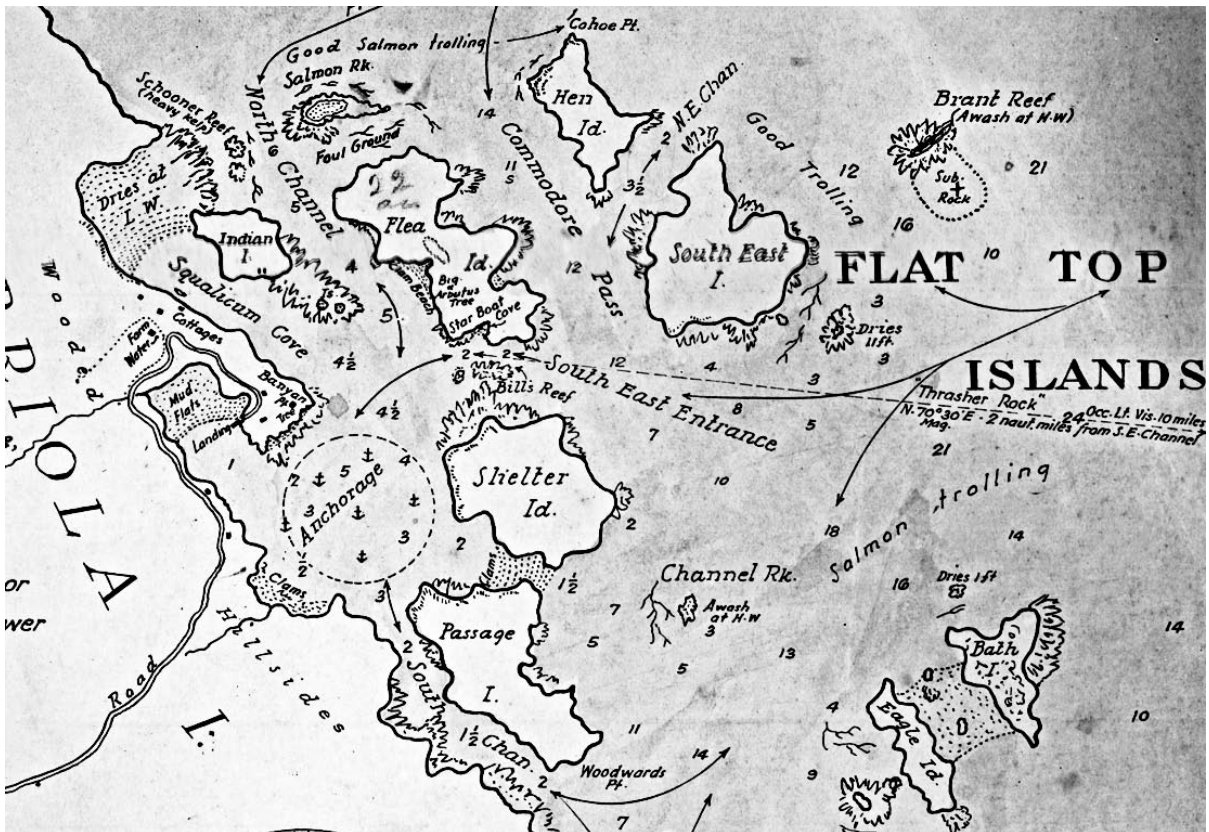


Louisa Silva with grandchildren.

Gabriola Museum Archives

A hand-drawn 1930 chart of the Flat Top Islands (shown on the cover of *SHALE 22*) marks the whole bay as “Anchorage”. The only “landing” marked is south of what we now called Law Point (Banyan Point on the old chart). The part of Silva Bay’s shore that later was home to Withey’s Shipyard and Silva Bay Marina is still simply marked as a clam bed in 1930. Sear Island is called Passage Island, and Tugboat Island is called Shelter Island, the local names familiar to the Royal Vancouver Yacht Club (RVYC) at the time.

A 1932 aerial photograph of Silva Bay shows the large clearing around the Silva family’s farmhouse but no fixed major structures apart from the Silvas’ float in the cove on the south side of Law Point.



Part of *Chart of the Flat Top Islands & Vicinity* enlarged from Admiralty Chart 3618 (now CHS 3475) with RVYC local names and notes. Drawn by R.W. Purves & dated April 1930.

Gabriola Museum Archives



*Above:* The Silva farm in an undated postcard 1920s? There's a float; a ramp or derelict wharf on the *left*, and a boatshed on the *right*. A boat being rowed is on the far right. Nick Doe

*Below left:* The cove on the south side of Law Point in 1932. There are no obvious structures in Silva Bay outside the cove, but the image resolution is poor. Adapted from UBC Geog. Dept. A4530-33

*Below right:* J.E.Silva (Ed Silva)'s float with the Laws' boatshed. Woman rowing is not known.

Gabriola Museum Archives P2003.004.006



picture (*shown below*) with caption "my father's boat *Silva Bay II* at Laws' wharf." This small wharf was near Law Point. A later picture shows the Law family's boat *Westgyle* tied up at their wharf.



### *Private wharves in the 1930s*

In a reminiscence of the Law family published in *Gabriola Island*,<sup>2</sup> Annie Silva Koehler [Joe Silva's daughter] includes a

<sup>2</sup> Peggy Lewis Imredy ed., *Gabriola Island—Gabriola Three Schools Reunion*, pp.105–8, 1984.



Law family photograph of their wharf in Silva Bay. Date unknown but probably before WWII.

Gabriola Museum Archives 2003.004.007

evacuated in 1942, Kanshiro Koyama and his family operated a store and fish-buying wharf in Silva Bay. Phyllis Reeve, whose family now owns *Page's Resort and Marina*, wrote:<sup>3</sup>

"The Koyamas, like the Pages, were fishermen, and their store, listed in the Gabriola directory as a general store ... was also a fishing-buying wharf, trading at least as much with boaters as with landlubbers. ...

### *Fish-buying wharves*

From 1934 until they were forcibly

Two buildings sat on floats close to the shore."

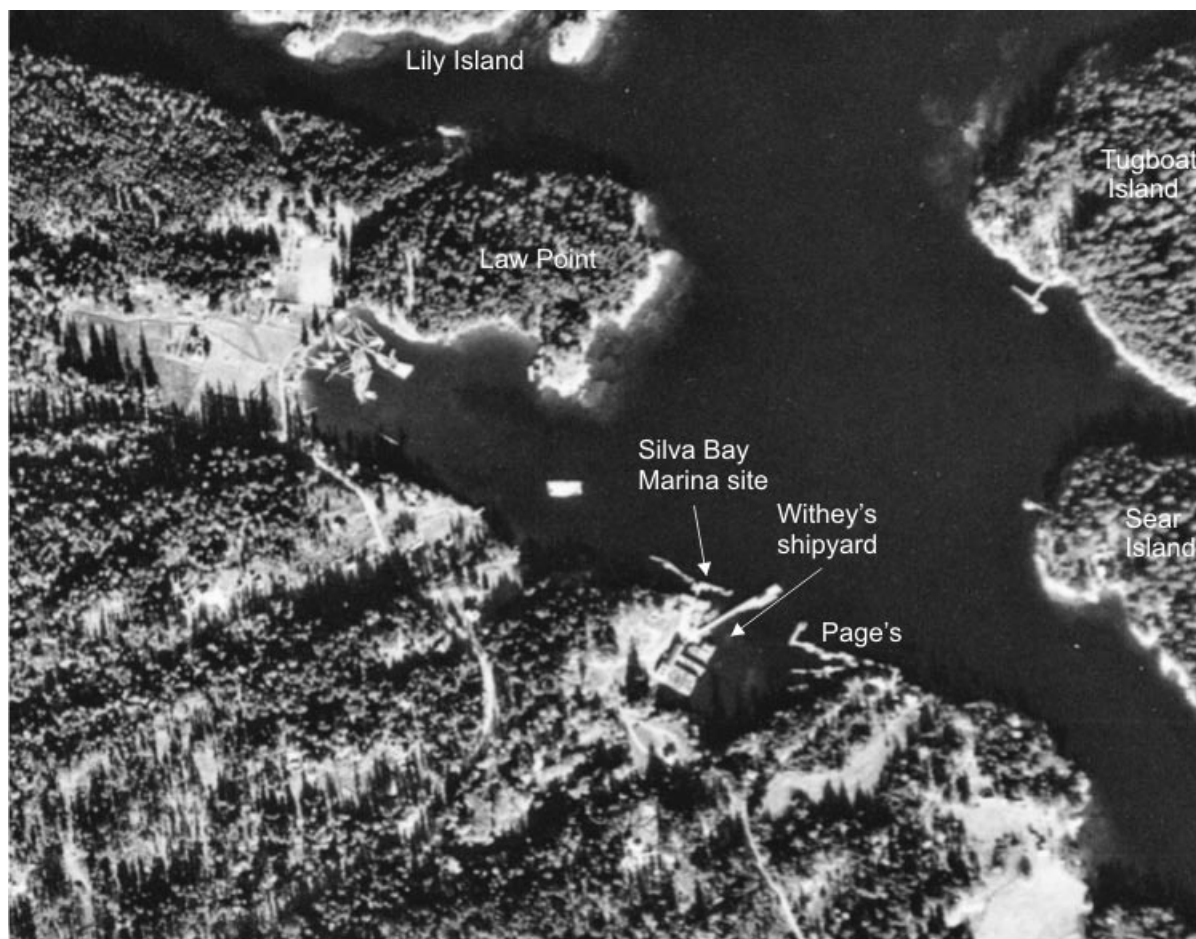


Koyama's store and fish-buying wharf at Silva Bay, 1938. Boats are the *Wanderer*, *Gabriola Pass*, and Louis Silva's boat, not named.

Peggy Lewis Imredy

<sup>3</sup> Phyllis Reeve, *Japanese-Canadians in Silva Bay*, *SHALE* 25, pp.3–8, March 2011; *Page's marina—sixty years ago*, *SHALE* 6, pp.17–21, April 2003.





Silva Bay 1957

BC2244:79

“...two Japanese families, named Haminaka and Koyama, began a fish camp and store in Silva Bay. Most of the business was on floats, with a tiny piece of land leased from Art Millward....The Haminaka family lived on the dock in a building 16 × 24 feet, constructed of dark shiplap...A separate building 20 × 24 feet, also on the dock, was the first store.”

A 1948 letter from BC's Department of Public Works about Gabriola's ferry berthing at the CPR dock in Nanaimo and about the transportation of perishable goods mentions some of the fish-buying wharves at Silva Bay:

“The Sears Store and Fish Buying Wharf is at the far end of the island and supplies are

brought in by fish boats, etc. ...The Page Store and Fish Buying Wharf is in the same category....”

Adding to this in 2004, Fred Withey told the Silva Bay Yacht Club about his childhood memories of the late 1940s:

“At that time there was a small store run by Henry Halverson who lived with his wife Anita in the back, a fish buyer who sold to Canadian Fish Company, a small set of floats, and a coffee shop run by Bea and Ben Bodaker. The store sold gas for Imperial Oil and Page's sold Standard Oil. I used to watch the tankers coming in at night as they shone their spotlights in my window. The fish packers used to come in once or twice a week to pick up the fish and drop off ice...”

### ***Post-war developments***

A 1957 aerial photograph of Silva Bay shows an elaborate wharf structure in the cove under Law Point, of which there is almost no trace today. There is also a rectangular float due south of Law Point and a short straight wharf where the Boatel and Store were. Private wharves are on the southwest shore of Tugboat Island and the west shore of Sear Island. What was to become Silva Bay Marina is still just a wing-shaped log float. You can see Page's Resort and Marina's long wharf meandering mostly parallel to the shore (opposite the tip of Sear Island), but the most elaborate structure on Silva Bay in 1957 is the 325-foot long wharf and buildings of Withey's Shipyard.

In recent years, a prominent and controversial new private wharf has appeared on the northwest side of the anchorage.

### ***Pages Resort and Marina***

Phyllis Reeve, whose family has run Page's Resort and Marina since 1987, wrote its history, "Page's marina—sixty years ago" in *SHALE*, 6, April 2003. The Japanese families who ran their pre-war store and fish-buying wharf never returned to Gabriola after their wartime internment inland in 1942. In 1944, their property became the "home and headquarters" of brothers Les and Jack Page and Jack's family. Ironically, after the war other Japanese fishermen became frequent visitors to *Page Bros. Store and Fishcamp*. Reeve wrote:



Thomas (Bill) Cox, great-grandson of Alex Hoggan, selling fish at Page's Wharf in the 1940s with Jim Easthom.

Hazel Windecker

"...the Pages made a deal for 1944–5 with the London Fish Company for the use of a packing boat and the sale of fish."

Hazel Windecker (née Cox) has a photograph of her brother selling fish from the Page's wharf with one of the Easthom boys just after the war.



The shipyard wharf in the 1950s—ways on the right were later moved to the left—with the Withey family home in the background on the *far left*.

By 1957, when Jack Page suddenly died, *Silva Bay Fish Camp* was already being transformed into *Page's Resort and Marina* with extensive berthing facilities and marine gas supplies, as well as a campground and vacation cottages.

Ted and Phyllis Reeve bought the marina and resort from the Page family in 1987, continuing to develop it and adding considerably to its charm and its cultural value to Gabriola by developing a bookstore and art studio in their home, holding book launches, art shows, and classical concerts. The marina and resort are now owned and managed by the next generation of the Reeve family, Gloria and Ken Hatfield.

When asked what recent improvements have been made to Page's Marina, Gloria wrote:

"Since taking over Page's in 2007, along with upgrades to dock and ramps, we added 300 linear feet of dock primarily to expand our capacity to welcome more and larger transient boating visitors to Page's. We now have over 2000 linear feet of moorage, which accommodates up to 80 vessels.

"We also began monitoring the marine radio channel VHF66A year-round, which is of

great assistance and allows many more boaters to find their way here. We also expanded our fuel dock so that we could assist multiple boats simultaneously, which became a necessity.

"In 2010 we were pleased to complement the scheduled flights into the bay by introducing charter floatplane service right to our docks from the Vancouver area though Van City Seaplanes."

### ***The shipyard wharf***

After World War II, Silva Bay became more closely tied to life on the rest of Gabriola, and also an important source of employment other than fishing and logging. June Harrison writes:<sup>4</sup> "In 1945, work was finally authorized to begin the connecting link to join the North and South Roads at Silva Bay and \$3,600 was allotted to complete the task." Silva Bay was now more efficiently connected by land to the rest of the island.

Norm Sear, the Silva Bay landowner and fisherman, went into business with newly

<sup>4</sup> June Lewis-Harrison, *The People of Gabriola*, 1982, p.223.



arrived Les Withey in 1945, opening a shipyard on the Sear property.<sup>5</sup> A few years later, Les Withey became the sole owner of the shipyard. He built several large wooden harbour craft for the navy, and lots of fishing boats and private yachts, employing many locals. He built ways and a wharf for the shipyard and extensive floating docks for the marina that he developed over the next two decades.

In *Withey's Shipyard at Silva Bay*, we read that:

"One of Les Withey's enterprises in the 1950s was helping to work out a deal for the 105-foot cargo and passenger vessel *Lady Rose*<sup>6</sup> to have Silva Bay as one of its stops on its weekly voyage out of Steveston. ... Withey wanted to see Gabriola become a famous vacation spot... Part of the *Lady Rose* deal was to haul livestock feed and store it in the empty shed beside the dock. Local farmers would (they hoped) buy the feed and subsidize the service."

Alas, this *Lady Rose* service to Gabriola only ran for a year or two in the 1950s.

Withey sold his shipyard in 1974 and it has had several owners since. The glory days of wooden boats are over and the *Silva Bay Shipyard* is much smaller than it was, but it is still in operation.

<sup>5</sup> The full story of Withey and his Gabriola shipyard is told in *Withey's Shipyard at Silva Bay* in *SHALE* 22, January, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> MV *Lady Rose* is a small, diesel vessel... Originally a Union Steamship Company of British Columbia vessel for day-trippers... built in 1938...[she] is the last survivor of the USS fleet. Today she operates on routes between Port Alberni, Bamfield, and Ucluelet... Owned by Lady Rose Marine Services, she remains a vital cargo link to Bamfield, although her primary cargo has always been passengers. (Wikipedia).

### *Silva Bay Marina*

Les Withey's primary interest had been the shipyard, but in the 1960s he also began developing a marina with extensive pilings and docks, and a pub and restaurant. The Withey story records:

"Into the 1960s, *Withey's Shipyard*. expanded the Marina from a few log floats to something closer to the size it is now. They also changed the location of the marine ways from the other side of the wharf ramp.

"... Float pontoons were built using fibre-glassed wood with decking on top. They had a contract with British American Gas to sell marine and auto fuel, using the first modern gas pump..."

Withey sold the marina in 1968 to *Silva Bay Resorts*, and it has continued to develop its docks and berths under several different owners and managers since then. The owner is now called *Silva Bay Resort and Marina* and about its current capacity, manager Jenny Ireland wrote:

"It is difficult to say exactly how many berths Silva Bay Marina has as some of the docks are linear...footage and some are slips....One way to describe it is as follows (depending on the size of the boats):  
Permanent Moorage - approximately 2000' (approximately 52 boats)  
Temporary Moorage - approximately 1658' (approximately 32 to 38 boats)"

The Marina's current website contains a delightful coloured sketch of the Silva Bay area in 1997 (*front cover*). The sketch shows Silva Bay Marina's docks, including the floatplane dock and fuel station, as well as the docks of adjacent Pages Resort and Marina, the Silva Bay Shipyard, and the private wharf on Tugboat Island maintained by the Royal Vancouver Yacht Club.

***The Royal Vancouver Yacht Club  
wharf***

There are extensive private docks on Tugboat Island just across from Silva Bay Marina, which are reserved for members of the Royal Vancouver Yacht Club. The Communications Officer at RVYC told me that:

“...the Royal Vancouver Yacht Club purchased Tugboat Island in 1960 with a mandate to preserve and protect the natural habitats of indigenous flora and fauna. Our 50th anniversary celebrations were highlighted by a work party together with nature conservancy agencies to replant species of wildflowers as well as tend the Garry Oak meadow.”

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[EDITOR: This is the fourth of six articles on Gabriola's wharves by Jenni Gehlbach. ]