

Orca Rescues Boy at Sea

An article by art historian Linda Schildkraut in the current issue of The Dolphin and Whale Society's online magazine, documents a number of Northwest coastal legends about orcas saving people. Last summer, Eaton's Orca Project, a volunteer research program, uncovered a more recent case of an orca rescuing a member of the Samish tribe in Puget Sound.

The basecamp for Orca Project 2010 was in Cayou Valley on Orcas Island in the San Juan Islands of Puget Sound. The valley was so named for the first European who colonized Orcas Island above the estuary that drains into Deer Harbor. There He married a Samish Indian woman and built a homestead that still stands amidst dozens of plum trees that bear delicious fruit.

Today the property is owned by Bob Connor who is working with People for Puget Sound to recover the estuary and salmon run. Bob told us about Rosie Cayou whose great-grandmother had lived in the homestead next to our camp.

Denise Wilk of Orcas Island, who, with her husband Dan operates Eclipse Charters, a whale-watching service, attended a story-telling workshop she attended on Whidbey Island where she met Rosie Cayou, an elder of the Samish tribe and an instructor at the workshop. Denise brought Rosie for her first visit to the homestead of her great-grandmother on Orcas Island.

Denise introduced me to Rosie who invited the Orca Project staff to Samish Island where the tribal members were convening to teach members tribal

traditions including language, ritual and arts and crafts. The camp where they assembled on Samish Island was close to where I had established years earlier a field research station for the Orca Society which conducted studies of orca whales and taught student interns from several campuses including Evergreen State College, Western Washington University and Skagit Valley College.

During our stay with the Samish people we interviewed several elders including Rosie and her husband, Bill, a well known totem pole carver. Rosie told us the story about her great uncle who, at 11 years old, went out in a canoe with another boy who was nine. The canoe capsized. The older boy gave the other boy something that helped him to stay afloat and reach shore.

The people of the village came to the shore to look for Rosie's uncle but saw no sign of him. While they were there, an orca's fin appeared on the horizon headed toward shore. When the orca was closer the people saw something on its back. As it approached shore the orca threw the boy off its back toward shore then turned a tight, full circle and came back to grab the boy in his mouth, came closer to shore and spit the boy out.

Rosie said that all his life her uncle's nickname was "Fish Puke" because he had

been puked onto shore by the orca.

The event is heralded in Bill's totem pole near the Samish Tribe's office on the edge of Anacortes which depicts a boy riding on the back of an orca.

Rosie also recounted stories from her childhood of orcas driving salmon into

Samish nets.

Rosie's interview and interviews of elders of other coastal tribes will appear in the forthcoming TV production, "Orca Spell."

- Randall L. Eaton, Ph.D., Director, Orca Project