

Teen Years

Indian Masks

The summer of 1945 found the Gildersleeve Logging Company camp at the head of Rivers Inlet. The Rivers Inlet Cannery or RIC was founded in 1882 by Shotbolt, Hart & Company of Victoria. It had long since been closed down, but still had a fisherman's store and net loft. During the summer a number of fishermen, mostly Indians, lived in old cannery shacks along the beach.

Our floating camp was anchored to the mud flat near some islands on the north side of the Wannock River estuary. When the tide was out the entire camp was resting on thick river mud. The Wannock River that drained Owikeno Lake was glacially fed and thus the lake and river were heavily laden with silt. During the spring and summer runoff, the entire upper end of Rivers Inlet is a silty, milky color, and seeing more than eighteen inches into the sea water is difficult.

The first summer we were there was again a summer of exploration. My sisters and I were off in rowboats to inspect our new surroundings. One of our first discoveries was on a small island that, due to swampy ground, was heavily overgrown with cottonwood willows. We went ashore to see if there was anything of particular interest on the island, e.g., evidence of human habitation. The very first things that we came across were huge round piles of fresh bear scat. This was somewhat puzzling, at first, because the island was so small, only about two or three acres. What would bears eat here, we wondered, that would produce such piles? We soon found the answer, old orchard fruit trees. There were apple, cherry and plum and maybe other fruit trees that we could not see. The brush was so thick in places that we had to crawl on our hands and knees to move around. Stinging nettles were everywhere, growing as thick as hair on a dog's back. Having never experienced nettles I whacked the back of my

hand against a plant, and for the next few seconds I was on my knees holding my arm in agony. Almost as quickly, the excruciating pain was gone. It was a quick and simple lesson in plant identification. Stay clear of nettles.

Crawling around among the fruit trees, we discovered a row of cabins not far away. They seemed to be well-constructed cabins, but for some reason, none of them had any front stairs. We climbed through the front door of the nearest cabin, finding it clean and dry, but it had the look and feeling that no one had been there for a long, long time. Upstairs in the cabin we found pieces of furniture and an old trunk with clothing. The trunk had parts of an army uniform from the Great War and also newspapers from that era. We left everything as we found it and went to examine the other cabins. In one of them we discovered a large quantity of handcrafted Native ceremonial masks. They were of all sizes, and appeared from the odor to be made of yellow cedar. The smallest was the size of a human face, and some were eighteen inches or better across. All were beautifully hand carved and painted. Some were adorned with colored beadwork and feathers. From an early age we were taught to leave things be that did not belong to us, and although the temptation was great, we took nothing and left everything as it was. To this day, knowing the value of that art work, I can only hope that the rightful Native owners have long since taken possession of it.

On another day I was back at the island alone, and was standing inside one of the cabins when something by the door caught my eye. It was a nail driven high up into the side of the door frame. On closer inspection I could see what had attracted me—a small gold ring. A lonely wedding band hung there. I stared at it for a long time without touching it. I was wondering who the owner had been and what difficult circumstances might have brought the ring to this nail. After some time I carefully grasped the ring between thumb and forefinger and gently lifted it from the nail. Holding it thus close to my face, I could see that it was a wedding band for a small delicate finger. A very, very slight pressure caused the ring to bend. I returned it to its round shape, realizing that it was, probably, twenty-four karat gold. I knew

intuitively that I could not keep the ring, nor did I want to. It belonged to someone once. Now, perhaps, it belonged to posterity. Life can be cruel. Someone's life of love and hopes may be tied up in that ring. It may still be there where I left it, hanging on that nail, in 1946.

Later on that summer we found where the Native Indians had nested coffins in large trees as burial sites. Most of the coffins and contents, however, had long since fallen from the trees. We also observed where personal effects were left atop grave mounds, e.g., a treadle Singer sewing machine, perhaps thinking, as I have read, that they would be useful in another life.

Spring Salmon

In Rivers Inlet, shortly after World War II, the sportfishing industry for spring salmon had not yet begun, and power boating as we know it now was almost nonexistent. Of course the spring salmon have been there for centuries, prior to going up into Owikeno Lake each year to spawn. Like anyone then who wanted to fish for spring salmon, we kids took to a rowboat. I was fifteen; Cherie was fourteen. We trolled a hand line with a #7 Gibs spoon and three pounds of weight. One morning Cherie and I were out trolling with the above equipment. I was rowing and Cherie was sitting in the stern seat holding the line. Actually, I had snubbed the line with a break away loop, I thought, to a ring on the boat transom. Cherie had reached out with her hand and was holding the strain of the line in order to detect a nibble or a strike. We had been out about one-half hour when Cherie reported mildly that she thought she felt something. All of a sudden a fish struck. Instead of the line popping loose from the snub ring as it was supposed to do, it tightened into a knot as the fish sounded. A few seconds later, the line pointing almost straight down came taut again with such force that the transom of our rowboat was pulled under. Instantly it popped up again, but not before shipping many gallons of water. Frantically I loosened the knot where it was tied to the transom ring, while Cherie, who had now gone to the bow of the boat, was whipping in the yards of line that had gone slack. Before long, the line went tight again as the fish was now out in

front of us about ten feet down and going like blazes. The fish was so strong that Cherie was hanging out over the bow of the boat holding onto the fish line with both hands, while I hung onto Cherie. That fish towed us around the bay in great circles at about four miles per hour for several minutes without letting up. Finally the line went slack once more. I hurriedly yarded in limp line exposing the lead weight and twenty feet of leader. Suddenly the fish appeared. A huge spring salmon. It swam up to the rowboat, took one frightened gawk at us and sounded again. The three-pound lead weight caromed off the oarlock as it flew out of the boat, while Cherie and I ducked for cover. Again the line went slack and again I rapidly hauled it in, up to the lead weight. I saw now that the leader line had been slashed on striking the oarlock and only a strand or two was holding the fish. This state of affairs upset us greatly, as we were certain that we had never seen a fish as big as this one.

We had no hand net, no gaff nor even a club to stun the fish in order to help us get it in the boat. It sounded once again and we let it have all the line it wanted. Eventually, the fish played itself out. Luckily for us, the rowboat we were using was round bottomed and tipped on its side easily. Drawing the fish alongside, we slid the huge salmon in, along with many more gallons of water. We had a coffee can for bailing and promptly began to toss the water out. The fish, very much alive, started slapping the bottom of the boat with tremendous force, throwing fish slime into the air. We could do little about it.

Fifteen minutes later we landed at the commercial fisherman's wharf, our clothing, hair and eyebrows coated with slime. Nevertheless, we were extremely pleased with ourselves when one of the fishermen hauled our fish onto his scale and weighed it at fifty-four pounds. We learned later that even larger spring salmon had been caught there. Our mother, years before, had caught a white spring much farther north, weighing seventy-five pounds. It had to be beached, as she could not get it into her rowboat.