

Whatcom County Ferry History

- 1916 - 1962 Multiple ferries and operators (see following pages of history with photos published in the 2011 Citizen's Task Force Report on the Lummi island Ferry, author Jim Dickinson)
- 1924 Lummi Island Ferry Company sold the Hales Pass route to Whatcom County including both docking sites and the 6 car ferry Central**
- 1962 Current ferry, the Whatcom Chief, built for Whatcom County at a cost of \$444,000
- 2006** Whatcom County creates Ferry System Fund and adopts language defining how fares are calculated and used
- 2011 The Citizen's Task Force for the Lummi Island Ferry formed** and makes recommendations to the County on cost-effective ferry operation and fares
- County and Lummi Nation sign new Gooseberry Point terminal lease through 2046
- 2012 County Council establishes a permanent advisory group, a 7 member Lummi Island Ferry Advisory Committee (LIFAC)**
- LIFAC** recommends County build a new ferry
- 2017 **LIFAC** recommends and Council adopts ferry Level of Service (LOS) goals in Resolution 2017-012
- 2018 **LIFAC** recommends and Council approves a new 34 car "hybrid diesel electric" ferry vessel in Resolution 2018-026
- Consultant Kpff submits *Level of Service Alternatives Analysis* for new ferry and terminal updates
- 2020 Consultant Elliot Bay Design Group submits design and specifications for a new ferry with "diesel battery hybrid" propulsion
- 2021 Council approves *Whatcom County Climate Action Plan*
- LIFAC** recommends "Shore Power Study" to ensure new ferry can operate as an electric vessel (EV)
- 2022 USDOT awards \$25 million RAISE grant for 34 car ferry with "electric battery hybrid" propulsion
- 2023** Ferry users raise questions about ferry revenues and expenses and proposed revisions to the Whatcom County Code on Ferry Rates
- Council reconstitutes LIFAC as 9 member Whatcom County Ferry Advisory Committee (WCFAC)**

This material can be found on-line at: <https://c6.lica.us/>

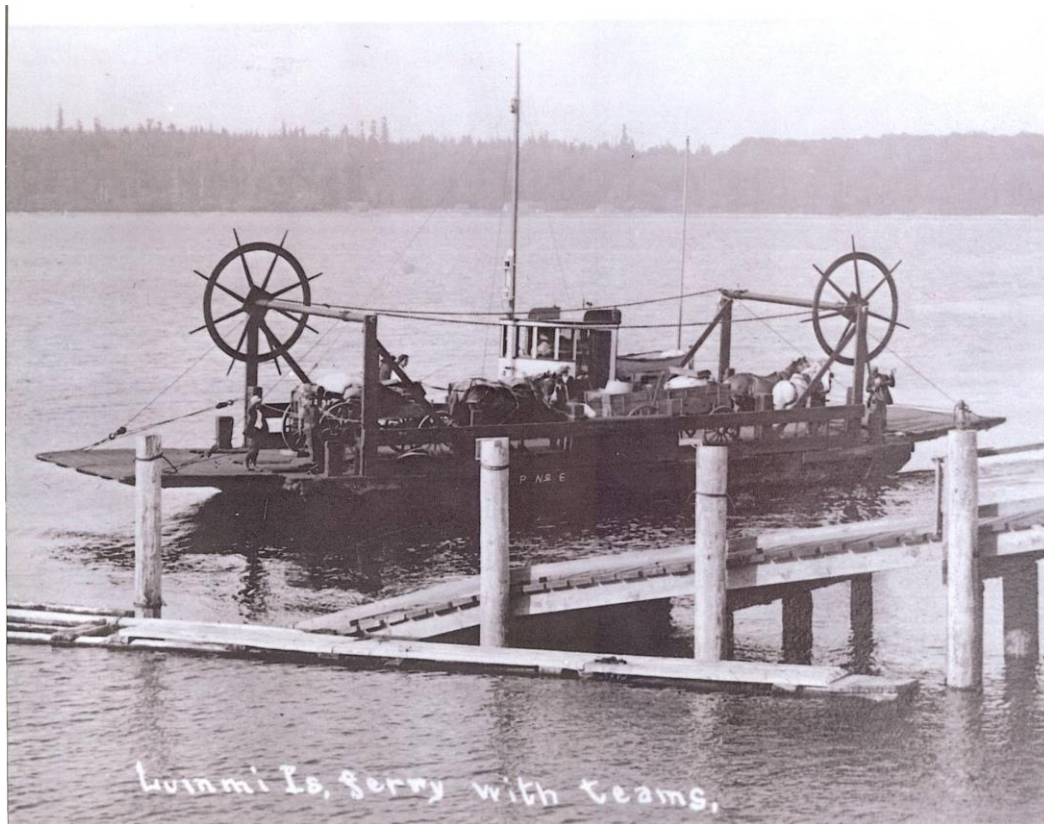
History of Ferries Serving Lummi Island

Automobile and passenger ferries have operated from Gooseberry Point for over 90 years. These ferries have been an integral part of the community of Whatcom County, serving multiple generations of families who have kept homes and businesses on Lummi and Orcas Islands. As the Whatcom County economy shifted from a fisheries and forestry base, the use of the ferry to reach jobs, schools, and extended families has grown.

Early Days

Although the starting date of the formal ferry service has been lost, unofficial sources quote 1916 and 1919 dates. Originally the Ferry was operated by Lummi Navigation Company and later by the Lummi Island Ferry Company (LIFC). Both were divisions of the local Carlyle Packing Company who owned the largest salmon cannery and was the largest private property owner and employer on the island.

At different times, ferries varied from barges towed and pushed by powered launches to steam powered ferry boats. Docks were minimal. Lummi Navigation Company also operated both steam and petroleum powered passenger and freight boats from the Island's west side docks on seasonally dependent schedules.



LIFC sold the Hales Pass route to Whatcom County in 1924, including both docking sites and the wooden hull, wood-fired steam powered, 6 car ferry Central. In time, the County replaced the docks, moving the island dock to slightly to the north of where it is now and in 1928 relocating the mainland dock about 100 feet to the east to its current location. In 1929, the

U.S. Coast Guard condemned the steam boiler of the Central which caused the County to put forth an emergency appropriation for \$13,999.13 for a new ferry. The result was the Atlas diesel powered, wooden six car ferry Chief Kwina.

Early operations of the ferry service by the County were considered less than satisfactory by those who lived on Lummi Island. Until the later part of the 1930s, the system operated with a very sketchy schedule and sometimes without any at all. The operating crews were sometimes "contracted out." These operators ran the ferry with their compensation being whatever they could charge those who used it, which of course brought accusations of gouging.



Chief Kwina with School Bus on Ramp, Acorn in WWII drab on side

The islanders successfully petitioned the County to take back control and pay the operators. Often these crews were hired through political patronage by the Third District County Commissioner. In 1931 the Island Grange brought forth a lengthy complaint about the service, partially dealing with the absence of a schedule. A further complaint, elaborated in the letter to the County Commissioners, was the fact that the County was allowing Puget Sound Freight Lines, a subsidiary of Puget Sound Navigation (PSN) who were the progenitors of the Washington State Ferries, to use the newly built Chief Kwina to go to Orcas from Gooseberry Point up to 4 times per day instead of servicing the island, and sometimes substituting their own dilapidated ferry Pioneer for the Kwina while it went to Orcas.

The last reference of the Chief Kwina going to Orcas was a two trip daily schedule during the winter of 1934. PSN operated the 20 car ferry Mt. Vernon from Gooseberry to Orcas in the summers.

In 1941 the Whatcom County Commissioners, in co-operation with San Juan County, leased the 20 car ferry Fox Island for the summer of 1941 to operate between Gooseberry and Orcas. The run was successful, however it was considered non-essential in WWII, and the Fox Island was assigned to service the Bremerton Navy Yard.

In the 1950's the Chief Kwina was joined by the used diesel powered wooden six car ferry Acorn, leased from Bob Granger, as a backup and overload vessel.

Whatcom Chief

By the early 1960s, it became apparent that the aging wooden ferries were no longer adequate. In 1962 the County built the current ferry, the steel, double-ended, dual diesel powered Whatcom Chief, for \$444,000. The Acorn was sold by its owner, and the Chief Kwina was retained as a spare boat until 1970 when it was sold to local resident Frank Granger and extensively rebuilt. It is still in service as a contract commercial fishing tender.

The Whatcom Chief was considered huge by islanders used to a six car ferry, as it had been sized by the County to provide a two trip a day connection to Orcas. This inter-island connection was never realized as San Juan County never provided a landing site. The Whatcom Chief had a projected capacity of 16 cars. Over the years the load has averaged about 20 cars which is very close to the Washington State Ferry System target load of one car per 18 feet of vessel length multiplied by the number of car lanes. The Whatcom Chief can make a maximum three trips per hour across Hales Pass, with up to 97 people on each trip, for a maximum of 60 cars and 291 people per hour traveling in one direction.

In historical perspective, the Whatcom Chief has been one of the most reliable car and passenger ferries ever built. Since 1970 it has operated without backup almost flawlessly, with less than 20 complete breakdowns; almost all repaired within a few hours, at worst a few days.



Whatcom Chief

Its early career was marred by consistent engine problems due to the originally installed large Waukesha diesel engines not being able to handle the stop and go cycling required by this route. Even so, the ferry never missed a trip; it simply operated on one engine, a procedure no longer allowed by the Coast Guard on double ended passenger vessels. When the early engines were in

full tune the acceleration of the vessel was incredible, with emergency stops in less than its length. Installation of later engines remedied the engine problems almost completely, although the ferry never again had the performance it had with the original engines.

The Whatcom Chief is now on its 5th set of engines. As time passes it has become apparent that the ferry again has become dated with increasing age related maintenance problems, metal deterioration, not being in compliance with current auto lane widths and a tenuous ability to handle the increased ferry traffic, especially during the peak seasonal demand.

In the late 1970s the county, tired of the maintenance of the long wooden island dock, moved the island terminus to a fill slightly to the south. The originally installed rotary screw ramp lifting

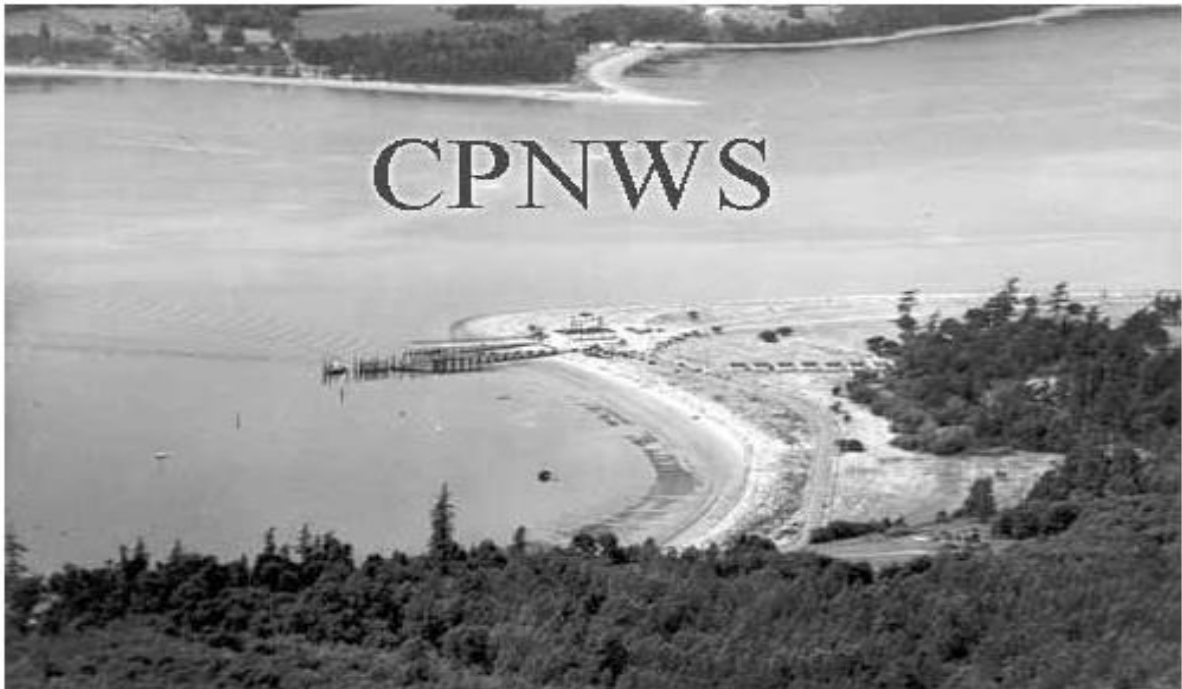
apparatus failed repeatedly over several years and was replaced by a conventional cable/counterbalance setup which has performed well.

The Future

Although the lease for using the Gooseberry Point dock is close to being settled for the next 25 years, future cost increases may lead to investigating other possible terminals. [Lease was signed for 35 years, ending in 2046, with cost increasing by annual inflation.] Several alternate ideas were considered during lease negotiations, including the possibility of changing the mainland terminus to Fairhaven, a distance of 10 nautical miles, versus the current .75 nautical miles. This destination would bring about a completely different mode of operation which would preclude use of the existing ferry. A change in destination, a larger ferry, or a large change in fares would have significant impacts on the composition of the island community. As can be seen by comparing the photograph from 1948 below to what we see today, what the future would hold for the roads of Whatcom County would have been difficult for anyone to imagine 60 years ago.

*Jim Dickinson, Lifelong 60 year Lummi Island Resident,
Commercial Fisherman Vessel Operator since age 11*

Gooseberry Point Ferry Terminal 1



Galen Biery Collection #81
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Ferry terminal between mainland and Lummi Island. The Caption: "The Portage. Fish Cove. Taken from alpine flight in Russell's airplane. 1948." Unknown photographer. No restrictions.