

The More Things Change



by Peggy Carl

I NEVER PLANNED TO move up North. One thing just followed another, step by step.

My brother Alan brought his girlfriend down to Victoria for Christmas in 1977. We couldn't read his handwriting so thought of her as Dolly/Polly/Molly. They talked a lot about life in the north and invited me to come stay with them in Crippen Cove. My family looked after my two daughters and fed their father while I was away. I had a wonderful time, despite the fact that it was January and I didn't have proper warm clothing or rain gear. We spent a lot of time in the skiff, beachcombing, picking abalone and rock scallops off reefs, setting crab traps and digging clams. We also visited in Salt Lakes and even spent the night at the Function Junction. That place made a great impression on me. It was perfect. You could tie up your boat to the dock, and to reserve a place to sleep, you just left your sleeping bag where you wanted to crash. That first time I chose the work bench. There was a small heated living room, a kitchen, a hatch in the floor you could raise so you could sweep the dirt down it, and a semi-public bath which you filled with a hose attached to the kitchen tap, which was poked through a hole in the wall to reach the bath. Wonderful. You never knew who would be already staying there. We also made a trip across Chatham Sound to Humpback Bay to visit Fran and Steve; their homestead and their lifestyle made a great impression on me. I was also impressed by all the young women who travelled in boats and anchored them out: they seemed so skilled and confident.

So by the time I got back to Victoria I had already decided to give my husband notice that I was moving on, and that the kids and I would spend the summer at Crippen Cove. In July and August we had drought conditions but in September it rained every day except for two half-days; but I still wanted to return.

It took until March 1978 to get organized, but we got off the ferry with all our worldly goods, including the family dog. We had borrowed a 1960 three-quarter ton pickup with a tall chickenwire cage built to fill the truck box, which took days to pack. Next came the brass bed tied across the back and two trunks riding on the lowered tailgate. We arrived to snow on the ground, and rain. There was snow on the ground and it was raining. Brother Alan was herring fishing but his friends Malcolm and Tommy brought their boats across the harbour and lots of volunteers helped dump all our stuff on the decks. It was all a big rush because the tide had turned and we had to offload at Toby Point before it was too low to reach the dock. Almost everything got wet, but we survived. The house we were to caretake was quite a distance from the dock, but we got most of our stuff into the house before dark. Neither stove was functional but we got some gear strung up to dry, made ourselves a nest, and got some sleep. Things improved immensely after that!

As soon as possible I retrieved the skiff *Magnolia*, which I had bought from Anneke the previous summer. I learned that it would have been better to get the barnacles off her hull when they were fresh. Someone donated a four horsepower air cooled outboard motor, and I already had oars so we were all set to go. As our house was on the trail between Crippen and Dodge Coves, I kept the skiff on a tidal clothesline.

My younger daughter Sarah had her sixth birthday party at our new place and lots of kids and their mothers came. I kind of felt like I was in a zoo, but it was a good introduction. I sent my girls to school in Prince Rupert so they went by ferry then bus with the other kids. For many reasons that didn't work for us so we tried correspondence school – no joy there either, so I home-schooled them for the next four years and we did fine. When they went to school later in Victoria they managed to fit right in.

That first spring I managed to get a garden in despite setbacks. In the south, I had been able to plant earlier. I had never heard of the little mi-

gratory birds who swooped down in black clouds and ate every seedling in sight. I did better with acquiring livestock. I bartered future eggs and milk for a goat from Sue Staehli. The goat arrived before her shed was ready and I was given a 10 minute lesson on how to milk, the kids falling over laughing at me trying to milk, squirt – long pause – squirt. Of course they learned really easily and always were better at it than I. Next came birds, about 50 of them from a woman who had just moved into town. They were at the other end of the road in Dodge Cove and we spent several evenings making many trips with wheelbarrow loads of birds stuffed into gunny sacks or packed in cardboard boxes. One drake escaped and it



Phillip.

was free for at least a week; I'd get phone calls, but he was always long gone before I got there until Tommy threw himself at the duck as it ran by in the boatshed and caught it. I carried the three geese home one by one, body under one arm, and my other hand holding onto the top of the neck so they couldn't bite. Then I got several more goats from Fran, including a young wether named Phillip who belonged to my older daughter, Marion.

There was a smokehouse on the property so I went into the fish smoking business during the summer. The best fish I had ever tasted was smoked by Linda Gibbs and she gave me her recipe. I also learned a lot from others, including Bill, who brought me loads of pinks. John and Finbar brought me dog salmon and paid me for the smoking by bring me alder wood to burn. I had to get up every four hours to tend the fire, but other than that it was fun.

That fall I took a course on how to mend gillnets and found out how unbelievably cold my feet could get. Over the next few years I earned a fair amount of money hanging and mending nets, but I wasn't brilliant at it.

Once, my family wanted us to come down to Victoria for Christmas, but Marion's pet goat Phillip had been attacked and almost killed by a neighbour's dog, so I said we couldn't come. I got talked into bringing the goat down with us. My brother Alan carried him down to the car deck

of the ferry with a ticket lady running after him and shouting, but the crew just ignored her and we made a bed for him on pallets with crew members' jackets as bedding. I set up a manger for him and filled it with cedar boughs and salal, the cook sent down salad leftovers and other food, and the towel lady brought him fresh linen twice a day. I did get an announcement



The Topo makes her maiden voyage across Chatham Sound.

over the P.A. when I was putting the kids to bed: "Would the owner of the goat please report to the car deck." Somewhat embarrassing. Phillip had gotten loose and was wandering around getting the tethered dogs all excited. Getting Phillip back up north was also exciting. I was bringing my car back and had Phillip in the back seat with Marion. Sarah sat in front and I had a bale of hay on the roof and a funky trailer behind. We were in the lineup at Schwartz Bay for hours but didn't get on the first ferry. I went to the office in tears and explained that I needed to be on the ferry for Prince Rupert, which only ran once a week, and that the next one from Vancouver Island would get to the terminal too late. They did some phoning and the Rupert ferry waited for us; we just drove across the terminal and onto the ferry, they shut the doors after us, and we left.

During the summer of 1980 the kids were with their father, so I went fishing with Tommy. We made a little money, but it was mostly a great learning experience. He had had good teachers and taught me a lot about basic seamanship. In November, I bought a 21-foot wooden sailboat named *Topo*. Another huge new learning experience. Luckily Malcolm mentored me through the beginning and I confined my trials and errors to the harbour. In January 1981 I took off on my maiden voyage: I crossed Chatham Sound to pick Sarah up from Humpback Bay, where she had been staying with Dory Spencer and Skid; then we carried on up through Steven's Pass to Skiakle Bay. I was looking for a place to home-

stead and soon decided on Isabellachuck on Porcher Island.

During the spring and early summer of 1981, we spent most of our time at Isabellachuck clearing land and preparing to build a house, but circumstances changed and we moved to Simms Bay in the Creek Islands. It was now too late to build, so I bought a tipi from Sue Staehli, one she had made for herself. I cut down and prepared poles, set up the tipi, and we moved in. I had two stoves, a cookstove and a heater, so I put them back to back just inside the entrance so I could use the cookstove as a kitchen counter and heat with the other. Because of the amount of rain, the smoke flaps didn't work well, so I put in a stovepipe and made a huge raincap from heavy canvas. Uncle Buster, who lived across the way, gave me a tent for the goats and I made a tipi around it creating an inner space for the does and their young and an outer space for the bucks.

My brother Alan towed his floathouse out for us before Christmas. He'd tied a red ribbon into a bow on it, making it look gift-wrapped. It had no windows to speak of and one wall was held on with a scotch windlass. On December 31 my lead doe gave birth to a single male kid we named Satu and the only way I could keep them warm was to put a small stove in and let them have the house.

In 1982 I built a barn with lumber that a neighbour milled and delivered to us. The barn was eight feet by fifteen feet and had a loft and windows but no door at first. We just nailed a piece of plywood across the opening at night and took it off every morning. We spent the next winter in the tipi and were snowed in from about October until April; it even snowed in May. We humans were comfortable but the animals had a hard time of it. Because the vegetation was frozen so long, it had little nutritional value and we only had one kid born who survived that spring. Every day I filled the barn with small trees and lots of salal and we stomped trails so the goats could get exercise, as they couldn't walk in deep snow that was up to their shoulders. In 1983 we finally moved into the floathouse. What a luxury!

Eventually my children moved to Victoria, lived with my relatives, and went to South Park School. They and my sister's kids would come home for the summers and we had a lot of fun but it was hard to part with them in September. After a few years I couldn't do it anymore. So a friend and I loaded the remaining goats into his pickup and drove them to their new

home on Quadra Island. We also had my girls plus my Irish Wolfhound with us so it was quite an adventure, especially as we had to milk the does on the side of the highway.

Eventually, I bought a place in Hunts Inlet on Porcher Island which I still own, and lived there for many years. Then music became my main focus so I moved to Dodge Cove, across the harbour from Prince Rupert, and started teaching violin and played with a series of Celtic bands based in Prince Rupert and Terrace. I no longer had goats; instead, I started rescuing ferrets that had been abandoned, were unwanted by their owners, or surplus at local stores. I had up to 17 at one time. After falling off my deck and shattering my knee, I spent three months in a wheelchair and on crutches. It was time for change, so in 2002, I moved into town. I still had my place in Hunts Inlet and still had my boat *Topo*. I lived in Prince Rupert until 2010, when I moved to the Comox Valley.

It took two summers to bring my boat down the coast. The first leg of the journey took me as far as Rivers Inlet where I had to leave *Topo* over the winter. I flew in the next summer, and after waiting for weather for a week in Smith Inlet, I made it across Queen Charlotte Sound in thick fog all the way. Thank God for compasses and G.P.S. I made it as far as Alert Bay where I found a buyer for *Topo*, as I knew I couldn't afford to keep her in the Comox area. A nice guy living on a boat at the dock helped me pack all my stuff into cardboard boxes and then drove me down island, back to Comox. He is also a boat person and an artist and now we are married.

Although I live in the south now I still live on the water. I have boats, animals, gardens, and music is still huge in my life. I guess some things just never change