On the Edge of America

Dan Dierdorff (facing) and Al Fure gauging the moving pathway along the shoreline.

By Neil Thomas Proto

The tide was coming in. It was late February. The beach eroded around and beneath you. A simple misstep off the slimy rocks or embedded jumble of jagged-edged timber or getting caught in the sinewy, bulbous sea grass and you 'd be sucked easily into the fearsome undercurrent. The rough pounding and spreading burst of cold surf along the Straits of Juan de Fuca were relentless.

The sharp sting of the wind and erratic rain and the gray sheen of the fog made the journey only more perilous. The National Park Service's admonition not to hike on the inward side of the New

Al Fure and Neil Proto talking through the strategy for the predicted rain and high tide schedule.

Dungeness Spit – where bald eagles flew and nested and caught my attention with their jutting claws and chiseled beaks – added to the risk of misadventure and the essential importance of good equipment and experienced friends. It was five and a half miles to the lighthouse at the Spit's end.

High and firm boots and a layer of undergarments from my REI stock were keeping me dry and warm. The insistence on safety came from Steve Marzocco, a solidly built, Seattle-based entrepreneur who had trekked the Scottish Highlands where Sir Edmund Hillary prepared for his assault on Mt. Everest; Al Fure, a distinguished civil engineer and naturalist with an uncanny knowledge of geology, botany, and mapping who could have ably accompanied his fellow Norwegian Roald Amundsen to the South Pole; and Dan Dierdorff, a Seattle banker and weekend duck hunter who I once watched rappel down a thirty-story building for charity. Dan also is a member of the subtly historic San Juan Farms Duck Club where, the trek completed we planned to spend the night in comfort and with assurance of a warm meal. That comfort seemed far off. The Spit is considered among the longest in the world.

The Dungeness Spit derived its name from the ubiquitous Captain George Vancouver who was reminded of the rough outcropping in England – Dungeness – where a lighthouse stood constant vigil.

The Spit was declared a wild bird refuge in 1915. A declaration by President Woodrow Wilson that specifies the refuge's boundaries hangs in the rustic, fireplace-laden one floor San Juan Farms clubhouse.

The clubhouse sits precariously on the end of a slender peninsula within the Spit's only modest protection. It was cloaked in windswept, layered mist from where we stood. The rage of Juan De

Fuca's slashing sea aided by the Olympic Mountain's violently flowing winds have – more than once – eroded and overflowed the rock walls that generations of Farm members have refortified regularly to ensure the clubhouse's integrity. It would be tested today.

Steve Marzocco and Neil Proto breaking inland to check gear.

We gathered around Al when he lifted his walking pole, standing closer to the Spit's center. We huddled closely amidst uprooted waist-high tree trucks and fractured logs, and slimy sea grass with slashed bulbs the size of cracked bowling balls with stems that slithered lively across our feet. Al had identified the timbers' various species and likely origin on Vancouver Island and the proximate geologic age and source of the gray-green and brown-stripped rocks he held in his hand. Until now they were merely our cumbersome bridge across the Spit's lower crescent. It had taken us forty-five minutes to hike the first mile. Because the Spit moves irregularly into the Straits, the

One member drowned in these same waters. It was Dan's duty to ensure that would not happen again.

lighthouse seemed to get more distant and illusive. The wind gusts rippled against my parka. The sky darkened into a hurling gray weapon. " More rain heading our way," Steve said. We moved on.

Steve Marzocco scouting an impenetrable inland passage and encouraging another cautious dash along the shoreline.

The peninsula where San Juan Farms sits is privately owned; donated almost eighty years ago for the formation of a club of Seattle's most powerful industrialists and civic leaders and carved out from President Wilson's public designation through means no one has recorded in the club's otherwise meticulously kept archives. These men of Seattle gathered for recreational diversion and the

planning of Seattle's future in their own vision. Philip Johnson, president of Boeing Aircraft, Lawrence Arnold, president of Seattle First National Bank, Thomas Balmer, president of the University of Washington's Board of Regents and Regional Counsel to the Great Northern Railroad, Joe Gottstein, who came to Seattle from Brown University as an All-American football player and formed Washington's thoroughbred horse track racing with the help of the state legislature, Dietrich Schmitz, who formed Washington Mutual Bank, and Dr. Donald Palmer, a famed UW track star who "often competed successfully in six events in one afternoon."

Dr. Rex Palmer (left), a prominent Seattle doctor (UW Class of 1899), whose father, Dr. Donald Palmer, was among San Juan's founders. Both were pioneers in "sports" medicine.

My tightly fitted boots held steady against the unavoidable oozing pools of water and cracked rocks that emerged unevenly but it was the call of Dan Dierdorff, whose father, Jack, had managed UW's valuable real estate in downtown Seattle and entered the club in the 1960s, that monitored the waves with a sixth sense that kept me out of their grip. When an unsuspected upsurge burst from the Straits and slammed an unseen chasm in the beach and flipped high and then down hard, Dan yelled with certitude. I leaped and clung to a log, lifted and held my legs straight out like a gymnast on the high bar to wait for the surf to dissipate into the sand beneath me.

In January 1965 Dr. Henry Schmitz, president emeritus of UW had drowned in these same waters while his brother Dietrich tried unsuccessfully to save him. It was Dan's duty to ensure that wouldn't happen again. Steve sought to take a photograph of me in my odd and necessary juxtaposition, my water bottle leaking onto the Gore-Tex but in his laughter he couldn't get the camera out quickly enough. In good spirits we moved on.

President Wilson's declaration hangs in the clubhouse amidst stuffed geese and flying ducks. Engaging stories in verse line the walls, each member poking fun at another, their mishaps captured in rhythmic parody with small sketches for all to see. "For those of us who've watched you shoot, Have come to this conclusion, That birds you aim at need not fear, Or go into seclusion."

Photographs are faded and some cracked. Yet here was an insistence on chronicling enjoyment, a recognition that in the financial and political power of its members in the state they called home was the duty to register their success and accomplishment here as well.

Members stand poised in these sepias and black and whites, broad smiles in place with their daily catch in hand or spread

neatly on the ground, their shotguns in tow. Rain and boating gear were more primitive then, slickers, hats, and boots made of rubber, leather, and wool. In the long journey from Seattle by ferry and train and automobile, members sought the weeklong respite to nourish the values central to wilderness and wildlife and the risk of harm. But even duck hutting took place with gentlemanly attire, organized entertainment of music and games, and a pervasive ethic about wildlife preservation that the club still maintains with care.

Dietrich Schmitz, President of Washington Mutual Bank, enjoying his retriever. Circa late 19330s. His brother, Henry, was still alive.

The same men can be seen sitting in broad leather chairs, dressed in weathered corduroys and flannel shirts, the fire place casting shadows around the oak paneled walls as they engage in feisty, animated arguments reflective of their stature elsewhere, debating club rules and dues that were all catalogued by hand in records still preserved. In other photos there also is something more subdued at play, quiet asides, affirmative nods, the glimmered smirk, perhaps the fate of the stadium or loan for the office building or the location of the proposed highway being resolved with only memory to preserve it. “Your reputation isn’t good, At hitting geese or ducks, But goshalmighty how you score, At half a million bucks.”

We made it to the weathered, pale white clapboard and concrete lighthouse, classic in its look and once ubiquitous along America’s coastline, after almost three and a half hours with sore ankles but no injuries. It seemed the refuge it was intended to be but the landscape was more desolate and the sound of seagulls more shrill and commanding than I expected. It was the Northwest on its edge: big and hard and unforgiving in a whim. I was grateful for my daily running and the machines that strengthened my gluts and core in Washington, DC’s Cleveland Park neighborhood where I live.

The New Dungeness Lighthouse was built in 1850 and then relocated and refurbished in 1895 and 1927. Exhilarated by our still only partial success, which I posited was comparable to Ernest Shackelton’s quest for the South Pole, we were welcomed by the couple from Anacortes who managed the grounds. When, in 1994, the Coast Guard sought to abandon the lighthouse, the New Dungeness Chapter of the United States Lighthouse Society received approval to manage it. Our gracious volunteer hosts stay at their own expense,

get to the lighthouse only by crossing the Spit and must ensure that the buildings and grounds are neatly preserved. It was their second such “adventure” and they relished it.

Welcome awaits; Old Glory at attention.

Dan led the way up the narrow, winding steps to the lighthouse’s highest reach. Its beacon – a six-sided bull’s-eye prism light – was serving its purpose. Massive tankers, nuclear submarines, and tourist-filled cruise ships heading in and out of Puget Sound look to it. Even with the lighthouse’s lights and foghorns, at least four shipwrecks have occurred nearby.

Al unpacked our lunch, a pound of fresh turkey breast, eight slices of multigrain bread and four apples. We ate slowly, drinking from our water bottles, looking at the display of memorabilia, listening to our hosts describe their daily chores and signing the welcome register.

With the hard crackling of rain against the windows and the darker shade of gray that accompanied it, Al announced it was time to return. Only a quick visit to the rest room was necessary; and we bid our hosts farewell.

The hike back was easier the wind reaching ferocious whipping force but the tide was moving out and, with care, the beach a more accessible path. Dan and I talked about family and career choices, keeping up a steadied pace, agreeing not to succumb to the ache in our calves and shins. His diligence remained sure; noting wearily the unpredictable surge when we were forced closer to the Straits by the log jams blocking our path. I, too, had learned the lesson.

Finished. The author with Dan Dierdorff (right),and Al Fure.

When we entered the clubhouse at dusk, glasses were clinking in cheer. Another club member and his guests were celebrating their success in capturing

In a different era, these men of San Juan Farms set Seattle's civic course.

first prize in a local salmon contest. A fifteen-pound "Black Mouth salmon" stood poised in the kitchen. Dinner was starting to take on an unexpected dimension. The culinary expectation increased when one of the guests, a construction worker from Port Angeles, announced like the master chef he turned out to be: "We also have razor clams. Gathered this morning. Peanut oil to flash-fry. And our seasoning?" He paused and got our full attention. "Secret."

I went to change in one of the small, sparse bedrooms in the clubhouse's rear – named after Dietrich Schmitz – while Al lit the grill outside and prepared to do respectful wonders to the salmon. Along the wall near the bedrooms were the obituaries of the founding members displayed with reverence for each of us to witness. They spoke to Seattle's serious civic life, a collective duty in this frontier setting where ideas and aspirations were welcomed and hard work nourished. One visitor, in his own ode written in 1982, captured the era this way in his closing stanza: "And though we say they are gone, Nor will they rise to shoot at dawn, Historic spirit here abounds, And will until the trumpet sounds."

I was still on east coast time. I felt the weariness in my body when I tasted the comforting texture of fresh grilled salmon Al had brought, appreciatively, to the end of its journey, and sipped the subtly tasteful local chardonnay – aptly named "Boom Town" – Steve had poured to accompany it. My last memory was the razor clams – moist, crisp, and comparable to any shellfish I had ever eaten.