

THE STORE THAT FLOATS

By David Willock, *Vancouver Province, Weekend Magazine*, Vol. 4, No.42, October 16th, 1954.

“Here come the groceries!” shout Burrard Inlet cottagers, as skipper Madge sails into view.

When housewives in communities along the fjord-like North Arm of Burrard Inlet, only a few miles from Vancouver, hear two loud blasts on an automobile horn, they pick-up their shopping bags and troop down to the wharf in time to meet the store edging in.

The store is a converted 28-foot gas boat, operated for the past six years by Madge Winfield, a former piano teacher from Griffin, Saskatchewan, who deserted the keys for the quays.

The previous owner called this floating grocery store *The Seabisquit* which was apt enough, but now it is nameless for it is Madge who is the personality and not the boat. “Here comes Madge!” say her customers, and the way they say it is a measure of their regard for the cheerful quiet spoken girl who has rarely failed to deliver supplies on promised days.

Throughout the calm, soporific West Coast summer, Madge sets off to visit her 25 ports of call five days of the week. Then, the retired people, loggers and powerhouse workers (the permanent residents of the little communities, unconnected by road or rail) are augmented by summer campers and visitors.

In winter, when fog often blankets the North Arm, ice patches form and winds whistle down from the high mountains to churn-up the waters and rock the top-heavy craft perilously. Madge goes out three times a week. With Madge it is a point of honour to call on the day she is expected, unless weather conditions are completely impassable. Not that her customers would starve if she missed a week, but for pensioners on meager pittances, lone caretakers and workers who might as well be 200 miles from Canada’s third largest city, as the mere 20 or so they actually are. Madge’s visit is a morale booster, a chance for a chat and to buy little extras such as snuff, candy bars and cigarettes.

The war took Madge away from Saskatchewan to New Brunswick where, as a WAC officer, she got her first good look at the sea but remained on dry land. After the war she and two old friends from Griffin, Mr. and Mrs. Jim Masson, were scouting around for a likely looking business. They answered an advertisement, and before long found themselves the proprietors of the *Woodlands Water Grocery* where the road from Vancouver ends.

Jim Masson, a former grain buyer, had no experience of the sea and no particular desire to learn, so Madge found herself elected skipper of the floating store. For two years she had a youth along to operate the boat. Then she took over by herself. “Despite my inexperience,” she says. “I was quite glad when he left. I found myself worrying all the time what would happen to him if the boat capsized. I’m a fairly good swimmer and could reach shore, but I don’t think he would have made it.”

Madge had had reason to worry. Once when the engine conked-out, another boat took her in tow. Then a fierce wind sprang-up and the boats were torn apart. The floating store was lying broadside on to the waves and Madge was so sure it was going to capsize that she carefully buttoned the day’s takings in the front of her coat, and was ready to swim for it when the youth got the engine going just enough to make headway.

Once after she was alone, she lost her rudder and was drifting helplessly in the choppy water when she was spotted from the powerhouse at Lake Buntzen and a boat was sent to her rescue. Back at the plant the workers fashioned a makeshift rudder for her.

“I was so green,” Madge recalls, “that I didn’t know I could have rigged-up an oar to get home on. In those days too, I was so inexperienced that my method of getting the boat alongside a wharf was to put it roughly in position and let the wind blow me in.”



Courtesy Deep Cove & Area Heritage Association

***The Seabisquit* — Outside Bedwell Bay**

Now Madge takes pride in the deftness of her landings. Art George, who runs a marine service station at Deep Cove and handles Madge's mechanical repairs, says, "She knows enough now to be able to demonstrate with gestures what she thinks is wrong, or at least tell me at which end of the engine the trouble lies!"

Madge likes wind the least of all weather conditions. It takes all her strength to handle the top-heavy boat in rough water, and several times she has had to clear the shelves of groceries and place them on the deck for ballast.

Fog she regards as a relatively minor hazard in the deep waters of the inlet. However, in the days before she knew the North Arm like the front of a condensed milk can, she once circled a small island several times in a fog in the belief that she was following the coastline, and ended-up at a place she was due two days later.

Madge does more than just sell groceries. She buys meat (which she does not handle because of refrigeration problems) for customers at a five percent service charge, but such little services as getting cheques cashed, having prescriptions refilled, buying books and magazines, taking films to be developed, free.

Only once has she had to play the part of a waterborne Cupid, and that was when a young fellow in the navy sent orchids for her to deliver to his girl in summer camp. "However," says Madge, "they've since broken-up."

Madge's customers clamber into her boat, pick their groceries from the shelves and often weigh their own vegetables. She is an orderly person, yet such goings-on leave her unflustered. She has only one rule: no leaning against the side of the boat. One summer two youngsters were propping it up when the stern rope gave way and they sat down in 20 feet of water. They came to no harm, but Madge won't take any more chances.

She likes to regard her customers as friends and neighbours, and the only complaint she has against any of them is that the occasional summer visitor will put paper money on her counter, forgetting that a playful breeze is waiting to whip it away.

“They seem to forget they are not in the corner grocery store,” says Madge, “but that is a compliment and worth paying for.”



Courtesy Vancouver Public Library

The Seabisquit – Skipper Madge Winfield and Indian Arm’s floating grocery store.

John Grohn recalls a visit to Belcarra in 1925 as a young boy of 11, and the grocery boat that summer residents depended upon:

“I remember the store was only a small one. (*Editor’s Note: The store was located at the picnic grounds, next to the dance hall, about 400 feet south of the Belcarra wharf.*) It only had supplies like for picnickers. You couldn’t buy supplies like groceries. We stayed the week, and we needed groceries, but we couldn’t buy them, and we had to go down to the dock every time the grocery boat came in, and it was a little bit like roughing it. And they would open-up the side of the boat into a counter, and they had all the groceries back there, and so we bought... The store used to handle milk and a few things... We just called it the grocery boat. But he used to go all the way up the inlet, because we went up to *Indian Arm* and we camped as young fellows, and we used to get groceries. He used to stop, he stopped in at Buntzen. We stayed at Cowl Creek camp there.”

Source: Michael Cotton, interview with John Grohn, March 1996.

SAILING SUPERMARKET

Madge's 'Store Boat' brightens up the Lives of North Arm Shoppers

By Kathleen Roth, *Vancouver Province Magazine Supplement*, April 25th, 1953, page 3.

The Skipper's waist measures a trim 24 inches — easily spanned by a couple of long fingered hands. This skipper is of course, a woman. And what a woman!

Marjorie Winfield is a pocket edition gal who is not only skipper, but first mate, engineer, navigator and crew of a 30-foot craft best known along Burrard Inlet as "The Store Boat."

For almost six years now, spring summer, fall and winter, good days and bad days and cold days, calm days and stormy ones, this small friendly woman has carried supplies to the scores of North Arm residents in her "sailing supermarket."

Madge, as she is known affectionately to all, and her store boat are more than a service. They're an institution.

When the boat pulls into any one of the dozen docks along the Arm, women clamber aboard with shopping bags to buy from the well-stocked shelves, to visit and to chat. The boat and its personable skipper carry not only the supplies but the news of the Inlet.

There's nothing of the supermarket in the personalized service.

Madge does everything for her "folks" from buying a new lipstick of "just the right shade" to cashing cheques, getting prescriptions refilled, matching crochet cotton, taking films to be developed or buying a customer's favorite magazine. There's nothing of the supermarket in the personalized service.

What did the ex-music teacher, ex-CWAC officer, know about boats when she took over the job?

"Not a single thing," says Madge with a wry little grin. "I was a typical prairie landlubber, who knew how to swim and that was all."

"The first time I took this boat out alone," says the intrepid navigator "the wind was blowing like billy-o and the waves seemed to be coming at me from all directions, but I just had to make my landings. Folks were kind and helpful and I made it all right."

She's been making it ever since.

A serious toothache and post-extraction difficulties couldn't keep the spunky little character at home, either. "I'd feel as though I were letting my friends down," she said.

That's the way she's been ever since 1947 when she became a partner in the *Woodlands Water Grocery* with friends Margaret and Jim Masson.

Now the small, slender hands that did administrative work in the army and before that taught piano in Saskatchewan, guide the floating grocery store on its regular runs.

It's those same music teacher's hands that so capably hoist a 50-pound bag of potatoes on to a dock for a customer or handle a heavy wooden case of 12 quarts of milk.

It's the same size four feet that used to tap-out dance routines for youthful pupils that now spring numbly to a slippery dock to tie up the store boat.

Pushing off from Woodlands, Madge makes her first stop at Deep Cove, where she "stocks-up" with meat (from Mr. Elliott, himself a legend as a butcher in Deep Cove), fresh vegetables, fruit, milk, and bread, and odd items from the drug store and the hardware store.

The store boat makes Belcarra Park its next port of call where — in holiday season — literally hundreds of children crowd around while grown-ups try to get their shopping done.

From Belcarra Park Madge visits customers from along the coast at north and south Woodlands, including the Joe Scotts, the Dr. W. H. Hatfield's (at their island stronghold), the Angus Patersons, the Gerald Charltons, the Dr. G. A. Dowsleys, the Gilbert Stuarts, the Frank Smiths, the H.C. Burnetts, the Jack Taylors, the Dr. Elliott Harrison family, and many others in the sunny season.

Then to Sunshine Falls, where, during the winter, Miss Edith M. Southcott holds the fort almost entirely alone. (Her family first came to Sunshine Falls in 1910!)

Farther up the Inlet Madge stops first at *Jubilee Summer Camp* for Children, where in the winter only Mr. J. Collinge, the caretaker, comes down to greet her and make his purchases. Next, according to the Skipper's chart, is the poultry farm of Captain T. Thwaite, where cases of wonderful, Grade 'A' large eggs are loaded aboard.

Then across the Inlet to Buntzen Bay, a beautiful settlement populated by folks like the lively Jack Summerfiels and their two sons, who operate a logging business there; the Roy Elgars, who live there because they love it; the Morrissettes, (George senior and Cecil jr.), and their wives, the Nathan Marquis, the dignified bachelors of the colony, G. K. Slaney and Walter Bailey.

The women, and sometimes the men, climb aboard with their shopping bags, serve themselves, chat with Madge and exchange recipes and household hints with each other.

Next call is likely to be at Lake Buntzen power plant, where women come from their homes on the mountain side walking down hundreds of steps to welcome Madge with friendly smiles. Mrs. Leo Belcer, Mrs. Bill Wardale, Mrs. Sam Cathcart, Mrs. Jim Virtue, Mrs. A.V. Sorley, Mrs. Bill Russell, Mrs. B. Henshaw, Mrs. R. Harlow, are among the busy housewives whom Madge considers not only customers but friends.

Sometimes the mothers bring their small fry along (they cannot be left alone in these cliffside homes!) and even the tiniest say: "Hi, Madge."

There are other calls to make, some on alternate days. At Belvedere, Mr. And Mrs. W. Joynes and Colin Campbell make their home. Close by is well known Camp Howdy, YMCA camp where in off seasons Bill Craig is alone in his beautiful surroundings. He is usually waiting for stale bread for his pet raccoons who look to him for their daily treat on his doorstep.

Skipper Madge not only knows what brand of tobacco the men like best and what brand of milk each customer takes, but she also remembers to ask about their children in school in the city, their progress with homes they are building, their new babies, and all the other things which make the difference between strict business and friendliness.

When any of the folks move away Madge says, "I hate to see them go, not because they are my customers, but because I have come to look upon them as my friends."