

## Q&A WITH JOAN RUTHERFORD

*BY SHARON BABCOCK—writer, project manager, coach, former executive director of the Tacoma Pierce County American Leadership Forum.*

Perhaps Tacoma's most secluded neighborhood, Salmon Beach consists of about 80 homes on stilts arranged in single file along the western shoreline of the Tacoma Narrows just south of Point Defiance. There are only two ways to get there: by boat or by walking down several hundred wooden steps from the parking lot at the top of the cliff to the homes located at water level.

Salmon Beach resident Joan Rutherford knows what it is like to live 8-16 feet above the water in one of Tacoma's most unique neighborhoods.



Residents must leave their cars in parking lots at the top of the cliff and hand-carry their groceries and supplies down to their homes. Visitors pack out their own garbage. The community at Salmon Beach represents a rare glimpse of a waterfront lifestyle and a history dating from the early 20th Century when this area consisted of camping sites and summer cottages.

The original Salmon Beach community was a collection of about 100 cabins built on stilts at the base of a steep bluff bordering the Tacoma Narrows. Several cabins are close to their original condition and represent the small, intimate and independent character of the historic Salmon Beach community. Foss Maritime, operating the Salmon Beach Boathouse and Store, was once located here. I descended the terraced stairway to Salmon Beach, and walked the single, narrow, sometimes tunnel-like walkway of wooden planks that comprises the neighborhood's one "street." The way down is dizzying, and the return trip is a real workout. I imagine that if I lived here, I'd learn quickly not to forget my keys in the car. At the bottom of the 200-plus steps is what feels like a time warp, or some sort of alternate dimension. The residents of Salmon Beach live in their own world, secluded but also open and extremely welcoming. The view (of the Olympics, the Narrows Bridge, Gig Harbor) is spectacular. They call Point Defiance their "side yard." Residents can fish, swim and boat from their front porches and decks.

Not that living at Salmon Beach is without its inconveniences. There have been storms, landslides and even forced removal of all residents in the community's history at times while the debate raged in local government about whether the location was a tide flat or a flood plain. In 1973 the Tacoma Planning Commission decided that Salmon Beach should be allowed to remain as one of Tacoma's three historic shorelines, along with Old Tacoma (Old Town) and City (later Thea Foss) Waterway. The entire community was designated a Washington State Historic District in 1976, and one original cabin (#97) was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1977.

Perhaps the biggest reason people choose to live at Salmon Beach is because of the sense of community they find.

"We have a new baby!" says Joan Rutherford, resident of Salmon Beach's cabin #1 since 1977.

### **Q: What does that mean at Salmon Beach?**

A: Babies (and youth) are resoundingly celebrated. For 30 days following a birth, residents traditionally bring all meals to the family of the newborn so the mother does not have to navigate those stairs. Births are important to us because we have to keep young people living here—because we like them and for the very practical reason of helping us maintain the community with their strong bodies. They are often local university students. Work parties where their strength gets put to use might be beach cleanups

(taking the trash to Owen Beach where a Metro Parks truck meets the workers for the haul-out) or stair maintenance. If there's a heavy job to be done, neighbors always pitch in here. We help each other put in pilings. Several residences are known for having well-appointed workshops, and the longer-term residents remember where the necessary tools reside.

**Q: How did you come to choose Salmon Beach as home?**

A: My husband and I had raised our children at Patterson Lake near Olympia, and as an adult I had always lived on the water. I found that everything is new and different each day when living on the water. There are more natural elements—the movement of the water, the creatures in it and on top of it. I came to view water as something that joins one thing with another, like a road. When I first saw Salmon Beach, coming down the cliff above this cabin, it was one of those special moments when the quality of the wind and the light was just right. I would not rest until my husband agreed to move here. Navigating the cliff has been healthy for me.

**Q: Who are your neighbors in the other cabins?**

A: People who like some solitude, enjoy themselves, and are physically active. We have several serious skiers, builders, mountain climbers, former Peace Corps volunteers, a kayak instructor who has circumnavigated Nova Scotia, one who leads explorations of Denali National Park in Alaska. We have residents with an artistic flair—without being artsy-craftsy. These are mostly people who prefer to not concentrate on life's risks. I don't think we worry about a lot. These are people content to have small boats, since the tide is too swift for craft to be moored here that are too heavy to be regularly hoisted up to a deck. Sometimes we lash them together to create fleets for work parties or for celebrations.

**Q: What changes have you seen?**

A: We have discussed hiring workmen to do the community's ongoing maintenance tasks but decided to retain our traditional work parties. We have annual Fourth of July "Rowboat Race" (loosely defined). The man who won the prize for the last person to cross the finish line last year floated along in his wetsuit. Anything that floats is legal. Sails, motors, and any kind of assistance are not. Halloween continues to be a very big celebration here, with many visitors navigating the cliff because they don't want their children on the streets. I notice that the cabins are getting larger as they are remodeled, making it more difficult for young people to afford them. While Tacoma has had wonderful developments and improvements, I value that Salmon Beach has changed much less than the rest of the world. That's because there is no artificial way up the cliff.