

Q & A WITH MICHAEL SULLIVAN

TWA members and others are talking to writer Sharon Babcock about enduring inspirations, life lessons, and perspectives from their experiences on the working waterfront.

This month is the 18th installment in the series: Michael Sullivan, principal at Tacoma's Artifacts Consulting.



Michael Sullivan is an historic preservationist, teacher, and storyteller. As the principal at Tacoma's Artifacts Consulting, he deals with historic structures, sites and objects. He moved to Tacoma in the late 1980s following graduate school. Recently, he spoke at TWA's monthly meeting about the Prairie Rail Line railroad spur that has historical significance.

Q: What historical events and developments gave Commencement Bay its character?

A: The bay receives its ethos from Native Americans who had been living here for 12,000 years. The native oral history includes an observation of an eruption of Mt. Rainier and the ensuing lahar. From that, the bay is known as a place of retreat and power with a mystical feel because of the existential idea of living under a volcano. It becomes known as the "Harbor of Phantoms."

The 1873 completion of the transcontinental railroad is critical. Commencement Bay is selected following the Civil War as the place where rail would meet sails. As a result, what is now the Foss Waterway is dredged to become the place to enable this. The first 11th Street Bridge is built and the renowned mile-long warehouse near it.

Henry and Thea Foss arrive in Tacoma in 1892. People, including children, begin living on the shores of the water and there is growth in the social aspect of the waterfront.

With the Klondike Gold Rush in 1898, Tacoma begins to develop international shipping and a diversity of waterfront activities to support it.

In 1909, Tacoma Mayor Angelo Fawcett bargains with the railroad for a piece of downtown real estate that ends up enabling the city to build Union Station and the Murray Morgan Bridge, a public way to carry streetcars to the tide flats.

In 1911, the Port of Tacoma--the first publically owned port on the west coast--opens, ushering in the beginning of a progressive era for the city. Residents had previously bought their electricity privately but wanted a public utility served eventually by electricity generated from the LaGrande and Alder dams on the Nisqually River and the Lake Cushman

Hydroelectric Project. Tacoma pioneered this and is the first municipality in the country to do it.

Most of the buildings that still dominate the city's skyline-- the Washington Building, the Rust Building--are constructed in the 1920s. Construction in Tacoma is distinctively lasting because it is done by engineers and the railroad. The era is known for economic good times, and the area flourished without a large millionaire class, a Nob Hill, or ostentatious neighborhoods.

From the 1930s through the 1960s, the mythology of Commencement Bay grows through a series of Tugboat Annie stories appearing in *The Saturday Evening Post* based on the life of Thea Foss and set in Puget Sound. This birthed the image of a strong-willed, independent, tough-talking woman who became a popular folk heroine as the captain of a tugboat. Offshoots are two feature films and a television series presenting one of the first women fictional characters to triumph repeatedly in a non-traditional job. Tacoma adopts the right for women to vote and run for electoral office prior to the acceptance of the amendment to the Constitution.

Major change comes to Commencement Bay with the U.S. entry into WWII following the attack on Pearl Harbor. The west coast panics. Fort Lewis is built and the shipment of military goods becomes the prime focus for the waterfront. The fleet of ships calling at the Port of Tacoma is rebuilt into minesweepers, flattop aircraft carriers, munitions boats, and PT boats. Aluminum smelters make materials for war. Tacoma begins to ship out Boeing aircraft parts and explosives made in DuPont. African-Americans migrate from the Midwest to the waterfront to work in war industries and live in Salishan. The federal government appropriates a portion of the Puyallup Indian Reservation. The area loses 1,500 Japanese families who disappear in the internment and never return.

Interstate I-5 is built, further damaging the development of Commencement Bay as the center of the city. The coming of the automobile pulls attention away from the waterfront. A new shopping mall and suburbs take off, along with drive-in movies, banks, and tract houses. Unless you work in the port area, the waterfront with the industry the railroad had introduced is irrelevant.

Following WWII, the largest ports in the U.S. shift to the west coast. Industry revives the waterfront, the port modernizes, and waterways are re-dredged for the Pacific ships too large for the Panama Canal.

In the late 1980s the railroad is ready to let go of environmentally degraded areas on the waterfront, discussions begin with the native tribes about mutually agreeable future uses, and the city works on cleaning up the old mills. This paves the way for the Foss Waterway we see today.

Q: What opportunities do you see for the future of the waterfront and its surroundings?

A: We are not going to grow anymore because we are 70 percent physically bounded by the saltwater shoreline and by the municipalities that have surrounded us. So, we can now focus on quality of life. We can do a lot more in a less complicated way with what gives

people happiness. We can make it easier to get to the office. People can create things and generate ideas from homes, workshops, or collectives. We can make it a place people choose to live because of the leisure activities available, the clean air, the temperate climate, and beautiful setting. We have a lot worth keeping. New is not always better. We can avoid tearing all of our solid historical structures down and building new and shiny ones to serve only temporary needs. They can go out of style quickly. The native people who lived on these shores for thousands of years had food, salmon, and abundance. Their concept of “potlatch” recognized that inhabitants have all they need to survive, and the best way to achieve status is to give material away to the old and the weak. The only threats come when inhabitants realize we can have more than we actually need. Then we move into the more dangerous zone of decadence and selfishness. Tacoma still has a “potlatch” ethic. The city doesn’t aspire to extravagance.

As an international seaport with a military base nearby, we are a good place for ideas to be born because there are more languages spoken and therefore a greater tolerance for the flow of those ideas. You see this if you are near Stadium High School at the end of the school day and experience the mix of students exiting the building. They—with their clothes, languages, and skin colors—are the face of the future. Twenty years ago it was not the default for young people to stay in the area following school. Now it’s different; graduates look at their immediate surroundings and want to remain.

We need the continuity that comes from a collective memory; the benefits are economic, social and cultural. My belief is that the area between 11th and 15th streets on the east side of the Foss Waterway, near the former Martinac Shipyard, could be ideal for a green marine craftsman district where the likes of sail makers, foundries, marine architects, and makers of brass hardware could ply their trades—with residences mixed in.

We have a spectacular deep water harbor flushed by a large river, a climate that produces no ice, and a southwest orientation ideal for sailing. My other dream is that in the future, we utilize this natural waterway for practical, day-to-day transportation.