

Q & A WITH JIM HARNISH

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's feature: Jim Harnish, TWA member and charter member of the Points Northeast Historical Society in Browns Point.

As you wander through the grounds of the historic Browns Point Lighthouse Park, one of the hardest things to decide is whether it is a contemporary community or an historical one.



TWA member Jim Harnish is very familiar with this community. A Browns Point resident of 42 years, he is a charter member of the Points Northeast Historical Society and a former board member and president. A retired Tacoma Community College history professor, he helps bring the site and its stories to life.

Much of the history of the park is found in its buildings: the lighthouse (1903), the keeper's cottage (1903), the boathouse (1905), the oil house (1906), the crew's quarters (1950s), the pump house (1917), and the original real estate office (1907).

The original wooden lighthouse was replaced by a modern concrete structure in 1933. The restoration of the keeper's cottage as well as the other outbuildings vividly illustrates the life and times of early 20th Century light-keepers. The contemporary site has amenities for the public—swimming, boating, picnicking, fishing, a rental unit, a history museum, a boathouse, maritime exhibits, a research center, an historic trail, and the Puget Sound Viewpoint Waterfront.

Q: What is Points Northeast and its Historical Society?

A: Points Northeast is the area of Tacoma and Pierce County that is located across Commencement Bay from downtown Tacoma. The three distinct communities within the area are: Dash Point, on the north side; Browns Point, on the west side; and Northeast Tacoma, on the south and east sides extending from Crescent Heights to near Fife (an area that stretches along the bluffs which overlook the tide flats of the Puyallup River which separates it from downtown Tacoma). The historical society, founded in 1986, has as its mission to preserve, promote, and celebrate local history.

Q: What is the work of the historical society?

A: This non-profit has attracted grants and matching funds to restore (many of the buildings); expand exhibits in the museum; increase annual visitors to more than 2,500; increase membership to more than 400; and establish an endowment fund. It also rents the cottage at Browns Point to individuals and families willing to be guest lightkeepers by taking on the Lightkeepers Tour of Duty (raising and lowering the flag, keeping a log of maritime activities, watering flower boxes, laundering linens, and opening the cottage for visitors on Saturdays). We are lucky as a non-profit that if we need more funds, we know we must simply rent out the cottage for more days.

Q: What brought you to this?

A: The sense of community in this Browns Point area. There are second and third generation families in the same house bringing an immediate sense of history. This led me to want to know more and to help preserve it. I'm not sure it was totally an academic interest. I enjoy exposing people to new insights, to things that surprise them and give them new ways of looking at things. The lighthouse (electronic and still working) and the curriculum we have developed for school visitors is a magnet for exposing young people to their neighborhood and to a broader concept of history and critical thinking.

Q: What is unique here?

A: We have an original founder of the historical society who instilled in us the rigor of curators in cataloguing materials and interpreting them, and another who worked to get the property listed on the National Register of Historical Places and on the Washington State Heritage Register. We have a man who knows antiques; that helps us to authenticate the experience for visitors through original artifacts. We like to say to those who rent the cottage that, "you stay a week and experience a century." Then there are the partnerships. This is a park that is owned by the Coast Guard, run by Metro Parks, and operated by the Points Northeast Historical Society. We also work in partnership with the Browns Point Improvement Club located right next door to us, especially during the biennial Salmon Bake when their guests come by the hundreds to visit our buildings. Local residents are proud of Browns Point. They use it as their backyard, especially in the mornings and evenings. It is a neighborhood park at an important historical site rather than a destination park. As Metro Parks carries out its plan for increasing access through implementing its bond that was approved in 2005, it understands that any developments need to enhance that special identity and remain minimal.

Q: What are your challenges?

A: The decisions we as a board must make about preservation—for example, whether to repaint the buildings in their original white color or to introduce modern colors. That takes compromise. We've stuck with the former. Before we put new roofs on all the buildings, we researched the historical colors and materials in order to accurately reflect them. We have a vital organization with a *working* board (no paid staff), volunteers logging 4,500 hours in 2014, and 30 docents to open the museum on weekends during the warmer months. In 2014, we had 3,000 visitors. An ongoing challenge, as with many non-profits, is recruiting the next generation to step up to keep this alive.

Q: What changes have you seen in Commencement Bay since 1986?

A: There are more ships and bigger ships passing by along with a much greater environmental awareness with cleanup and preservation of the waterfront.