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An Unforeseen Journey

Tales of
Pioneering Spirit on
Decatur Island

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WITH GAIL DUPAR

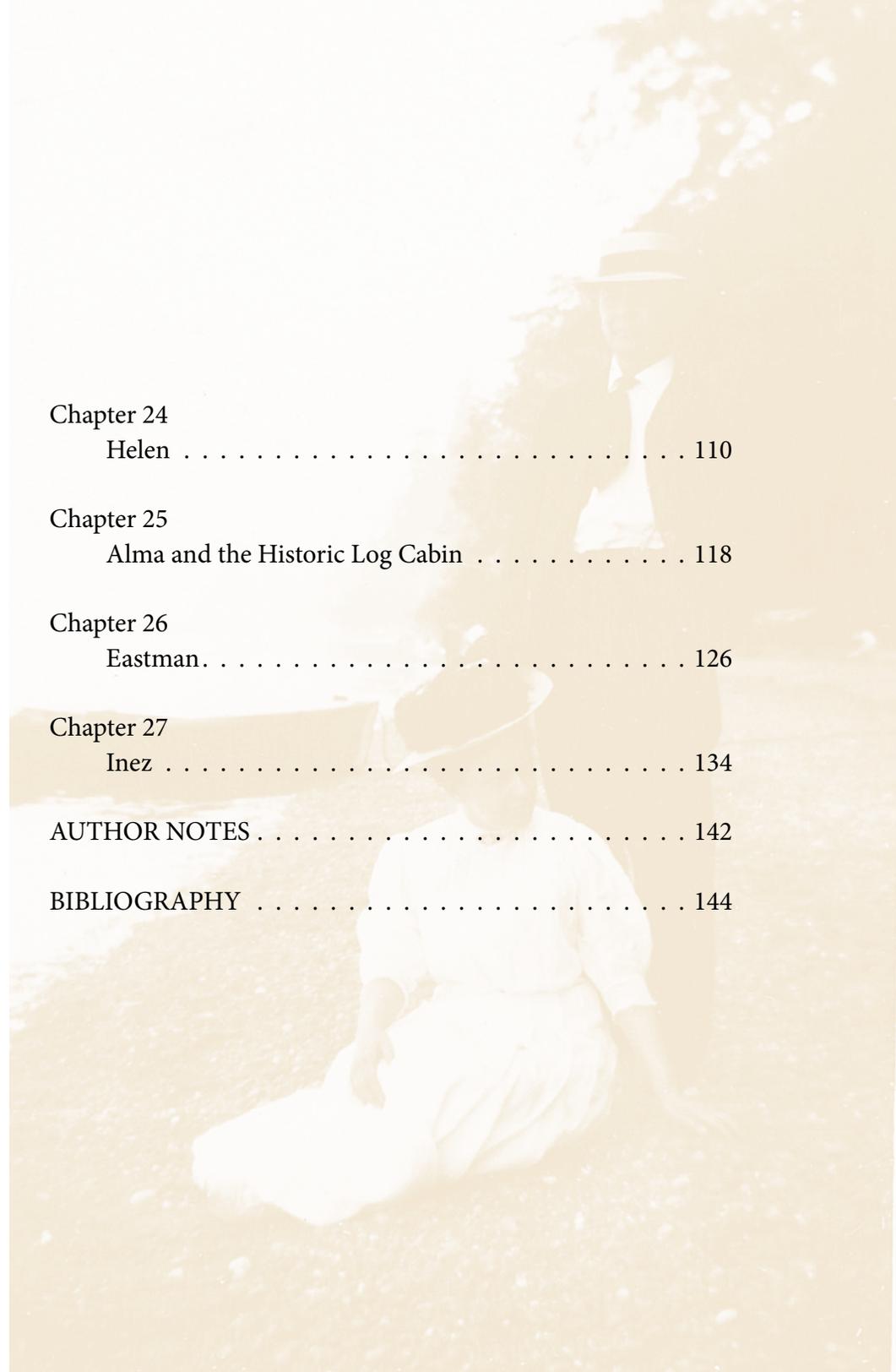
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CHAPTER 1

1895

The white clay cliffs of Decatur Island face south toward the Strait of Juan de Fuca and the entrance to Puget Sound. Below the cliffs, covered by layers of driftwood swept in by the wind and tides, lies what island residents call “the outside beach.”

From there, overlooking Rosario Strait, an islander could see schooners passing on the final leg home after a long trip from Alaska. The tall ships’ holds were filled with brined codfish, a delicacy destined for tables in New York and Chicago. After delivery to the nearby fish canneries in Anacortes, they were packed in one-pound boxes for shipping east.

The cliffs of Decatur, west of Anacortes, were a reference

point for the schooner captains, assessing the distance and time before they could make port. As they waited for the tides to change, the captains might have speculated if anyone lived on Decatur, an austere island. From the decks of their sailing ships they saw only dark forest above the chalky cliffs and beaches open to heavy tides and strong southerly winds. They might have wondered what people would do there for a living and how they would ever get to “town” for supplies if they did. From the captains’ standpoint, travel across Rosario Strait in a small boat was risky. They might have discussed foolhardy sailors they had heard of who tried to better the sea and bad weather and had lost.

They might briefly wonder again why anyone would want to live on Decatur...

1895

Once the schooners were securely tied to cannery docks in Anacortes, the crew probably forgot about Decatur Island while socializing with cannery workers and boasting about their own difficult journey home. Happy to be back at their own fireside, surrounded by the warmth of civilization, they might briefly wonder again why anyone would want to live on Decatur in isolation from society. It seemed the only people who could tolerate the loneliness were Indians, squatters, or recluses.

Primitive conditions and lack of a written history prevented accurate record keeping about Decatur Island prior to the turn of the century. Most information was passed down orally by early island residents and their descendants. Naturally, the outcome of these tales depended on who the storyteller was related to and what information they wanted preserved or censored about their relatives.

RECORD VOYAGE FOR ROBINSON SCHOONER

Codfish Vessel Is Back From Alaskan Waters With Heavy Cargo of Largest Fish in Experience of Pioneer Captain—Many Mishaps, However, Mark the Trip—One Man Is Drowned, Another Dies From Natural Causes, Two Desert, and Dead Derelict Is Found on the Deep—Stormy Weather Rages—Fish Will Be Prepared and Cured at New Robinson Codfish Plant.

Flying its flag at half mast as a mark of respect to two members of its crew who died on the voyage, and carrying a heavy cargo of exceptionally large fish, the schooner Alice, belonging to the Robinson Fisheries Company, sailed into the port of Anacortes last Sunday night, and was towed up to the dock alongside the newly completed and large Robinson codfish plant and fertilizer. The fish will be cured and prepared at this extensive new plant, which is one of the most complete west of Gloucester, Mass.

The schooner was in command of Captain Malcolm McPhie, one of the best known pioneer master mariners of the codfish trade, and who has been with the Robinson Fisheries for many years.

Fish of Record Size.

According to Captain McPhie and other seasoned members of the crew, the fish brought back are of exceptionally large size. Captain McPhie says they are a larger lot than he has ever handled since engaging in the codfish trade in these parts. Several of the fish run to over 43 pounds after being dressed and there are a number of them only slightly smaller than that size, while the general size measures large and weighs heavily.

The cargo is estimated at no less than 385 tons, but is expected to reach more when the batch is weighed in.

This article, taken from an Anacortes newspaper, shows the dangers involved during long voyages made by codfish schooners.