



Frank Varga / Skagit Valley Herald

This story is part of a continuing series about communities in Skagit County.



A city anchored on its waterfront

Story by WHITNEY PIPKIN / Skagit Valley Herald

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The docks are open to curious strollers and boat owners alike, as is the waterfront esplanade that wraps around the marina and was recently extended past the Seafarers' Memorial Park to the south. The memorial, which shows a woman looking out over the sea, bears the names of those who've lost their lives there, many of them Croatians.

Croatian roots

After World War II, it was the sea lured fishermen from war-wrought Croatia. Many joined family members who had first moored their boats in Anacortes before it became a city in 1891. The island town reminded them of their Dalmatian Coast

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Sailboats race in Fidalgo Bay, part of a weekly regatta put on by the Anacortes Yacht Club. In the background is the Tesoro Anacortes Refinery, one of two refineries that provide a good chunk of the city's tax revenue.

Anacortes: Has large Croatian community

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home, although with a much cooler climate.

Nick Petrish's family was already here when Maria, his wife, arrived with her family at the age of 8 in 1949. Her family came with the second "tide" of Croatian immigrants who arrived after World War II.

By that time, a sizeable Croatian community had formed along 15th Street. Women gathered at others' homes for afternoon Turkish coffee. Most of the men fished salmon, and the women worked at canneries during the day.

The women also grew their own food to make their traditional meals. Maria remembers the other school kids branding her as "terribly exotic" for her homemade meals while they ate Wonder-bread sandwiches, which were strictly forbidden by her grandmother.

Today, those recipes are the centerpiece of Saturday meals sold to the public at the city's Croatian Cultural Center. Maria is the cook behind the weekly event that coincides with the Anacortes Farmers Market, which she helped organize in 1989, "long before they were trendy."

She's also the director of the vibrant Vela Luka dancers, whose thousands of handmade costume pieces are stored in Maria's basement. The dancers, who perform across the region, are one of the most tangible ties to her Croatian heritage, with songs and choreography linked to the individual islands from which immigrants first arrived.

Maria's husband Nick is just as well-known in the community, as one of the organizers of the Anacortes Arts Festival, which will celebrate its 50th year this August. He also will retire this year from 14 years on the City Council.

While it was the sea that first brought their families here, the Petrishes said they made the decision years ago to stay and get involved.

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Fishing

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Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald

Workers at Dakota Creek Industries clean and reinstall the anchor chain for the "Alaskan Leader" fishing ship on June 20.

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A couple days later, Ashlyn could be found on board the "Trejo" fishing boat, as the crew moved supplies into storage. Her glittery outfits and long brown hair stood out against the gray backdrop of fishing supplies, as she entertained herself with the family's Chihuahua, Cookie.

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homeport of Anacortes for 30 years, said he's never thought much about the lifestyle that often took him away from his family for most of the year.

"When you grow up in it, you don't really think about it. You just do it," said Andrich, who insists the winter fishing scene in Alaska, though dangerous, is nothing like "that 'Deadliest Catch' show."

Now, at 53, Andrich gets to be home a bit more, fishing prawns locally on his boat "Laura Jean" when he's not at his other job.

He sells the live catches at the Cap Sante docks on Friday and Saturday afternoons under the Puget Sound Prawns label, which is more of a sandwich board sign propped up on R Avenue. The group is a "loose affiliation" of fishermen formed a couple years ago who, despite the hassles of retail, want to give locals firsthand access to fresh-caught produce.

Andrich's day job is also on a boat but tied to a different industry, one that changed Anacortes' commercial landscape when it arrived in the mid-'50s.

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Five-year-old Ashlyn Jones visits her grandfather, Ken Jones, on the deck of the "Trejo" fishing vessel, as crew members load supplies before the boat heads to Alaska for salmon season.



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Nick Moyer of Conway plays accordion at the Anacortes Farmers Market on June 11.

ventative booming services and oil-spill response equipment to one of the local oil refineries. He can't say which one.

The company T-shirt bears its ever-so-accurate slogan, "our business is booming."

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But there are certain things they can't discuss. The business of the refineries has, after all, always been shrouded in a bit of secrecy.

A turnaround

Just ask Wallie Funk, who was part owner of the Anacortes American, the town's 121-year-old weekly newspaper, when the first refinery came to town in the mid-'50s.

Funk, a lively 89 years old, returned after college to

his hometown of Anacortes in 1950. He took up an offer to buy the paper with his journalism colleague, John Webber, and soon launched a campaign to improve Anacortes' economic and social vitality.

The canneries and lumber mills that had bolstered Anacortes for decades were in their final years, and Funk was among those trying to make room for new industries.

"There were just a lot of people concerned about our future, not only our future but our survival," he said of that time.

In 1954, Funk got "the scoop" from a local realtor on a new business tenant for March Point, a thumb-shaped peninsula jutting out of northeast Fidalgo Island. He was invited to meet them, too.

"They looked like they were out of the Chicago mafia," Funk said of the sharply dressed representatives from Shell Oil Co., who told him they were interested in building a \$95 million refinery at

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Anacortes: Funk says '50s were 'beginning of evolution' of what city is today

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March Point.
"I was flabbergasted, because that's more than the whole town was worth," Funk said.

Soon after that, Texaco Inc. built a refinery on the peninsula, which is now Shell's Puget Sound Refinery. The former Shell refinery is now Tesoro Anacortes Refinery.

City tax revenues from the two refineries began to fund the vision that Funk and others had for the city, including new schools, new roads and new jobs.

"The 1950s, to me, were the beginning of the evolution of Anacortes to what it is today," Funk said.

Funk left Anacortes to run the Whidbey News-Times out of Oak Harbor for 25 years, but he returned in 1989.

Today, he's active as ever when it comes to local politics and planning. At a recent meeting hosted by the Anacortes Futures Project, Funk used his walker as a podium to express what he loves, yet still would change, about Anacortes.

"I love this town because through thick and thin, making some money and not making some money, we stick together... I'm here because I want to be," he said.

"Beyond that, love you, see you," he added with a wave and a reference to his bedtime. The roomful of people responded with applause as he left.

A careful mix

Much of what exists in Anacortes today is the fruit of careful city planning led by an active community. That was clear during the Futures Project this month where dozens of Anacortes residents gathered yet again to chart the city's course.

"Waterfront, waterfront, waterfront. It's there, we recognize it and we're just not doing enough about it," Mark Bunzel, president of the Anacortes Chamber of Commerce and publisher of a marine magazine, said to describe the planning committee's findings.

The waterfront — and the struggle to balance its development — has long been a focus of such meetings.

Just ask Bob Hyde, who recently pioneered the lauded esplanade project around the new Seafarers Memorial Park, as executive director of the 85-year-old Port of Anacortes.

On some days, he might have to explain the curious marriage between the waterfront's commercial and recreational uses over the sound of sandblasting at a shipyard next door to the port office.

That's just how it is in Anacortes.

Along the Tommy Thompson Trail — one of the city's most traveled paths running along Fidalgo Bay — there are as many boat-storage yards and manufacturing buildings to take in as there are breathtaking views of Mount Baker and the San Juan Islands.

It's the careful mix of both recreation and the industry that supports it that makes Anacortes' waterfront unique, giving it a depth and breadth that begs a little exploration.

Even from the idyllic downtown setting, people cannot ignore the industrial-sized ships looming at the end of Commercial Avenue.

Mike Nelson, vice president of the mega-boat manufacturer and repair shop, Dakota Creek Industries, said tourists often wander into the company's office to find out just what those 100-plus-foot-tall ships are about.

Locals stop by, too, check



The Seafarers Memorial and the "Lady of the Sea" sculpture at Seafarers Memorial Park pay tribute to those who perished in pursuit of a living from the sea.

One of the three new boats in Dakota Creek's shipyard, each of which measure almost 150 feet long and 60 feet wide, will ship out from its dock soon to be used as a detachable tug for oil tankers — the first of its kind.

The other two are still at various stages of completion, putting about 280 employees to work welding and piecing together to massive structures and working on other boats that come in for repairs.

Dakota Creek is one of the many boat manufacturers that have formed a chapter of marine-based businesses along the Anacortes waterfront over the past three decades.

It's a piece of industry that's driven the city's workforce and economy in recent years, despite setbacks during the recession. On the recreational side, some yacht manufacturers who had closed their doors in 2008 have reopened and are hiring back workers.

The Northwest Career and Technical Academy marine skills center that opened last year is a firm nod to the industry's promise of jobs and the city's desire to supply a trained workforce. (Funk raised \$70,000 in scholarship funds to support the center.)

The hangout

Outside of its manufacturing niche, Anacortes' retail and restaurant scene provides a growing number of local jobs. For example, the Anthony's Home Port restaurant added 75 jobs when it opened on the waterfront early this year.

Most of the city's watering holes are located a few blocks away along the downtown strip, which boasts a restaurant-to-resident ratio that far exceeds that of similar sized towns.

But at lunchtime, there are a few places the locals seem to gather.

At the corner of Fifth Street and Commercial Avenue is the 30-year-old deli whose breakfast and lunch crowds followed it to



Maria Petrish (from left), Wallie Funk and Bill Mitchell, long-time Anacortes residents who have been active in the community for years, gather for a portrait in front of the visiting tall ship Hawaiian Chieftain.

rightly so. There are even signs dictating which cliques sit where. In the mornings, the Matt Brown photo club sits in one corner, and the "L.D.G.A.B.T.T." (It Doesn't Get Any Better Than This, for those of you who've been wondering) group meets in the other.

A table near the soda machines is set aside for "The Lunch Club," a revolving door of people who've been meeting for lunch as long as the restaurant's been around, said owner Laurie Gere.

Metal signs from the '30s, '40s and '50s, collected by Gere over the years, decorate the walls, tying together the hometown feel the restaurant's retained since those eras.

Like many buildings downtown, Gere-A-Deli has on its street side a few lifelike murals of Anacortes residents who have left a mark on the city. There are more than 150 around town, from the founder of the local newspaper to a



Laurie Gere and her son, Phil Gere, run Gere-A-Deli, a favorite lunchtime hangout in downtown Anacortes that has been in business for 30 years.

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Gere-a-Deli has been called "the high school cafeteria" of Anacortes — and rightly so. There are even signs dictating which cliques sit where. In the mornings, the Matt Brown photo club sits in one corner, and the "I.D.G.A.B.T.T." (It Doesn't Get Any Better Than This, for those of you who've been wondering) group meets in the other.

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The artist, 62-year-old Bill Mitchell, said he's had no shortage of people to paint over the years in this "haven of colorful characters." Mitchell himself is one of them, painted in a self-portrait in his 1954, army-green Autowette, which moved him out of a wheelchair and into the community after a car accident left him paralyzed.

This will be Mitchell's last year of painting new murals, which are usually requested by family members or friends of the subject. With little wall space left in Anacortes, he decided it's time to retire.

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