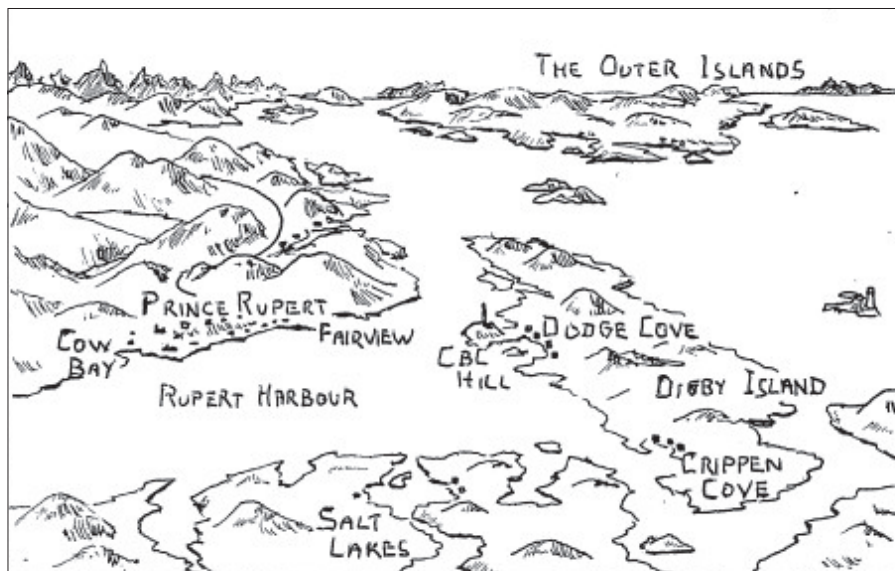


Knats & Stitches

COMMUNITY QUILTS ACROSS THE HARBOUR



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Caitlin Press

For the quilters,
sisters of my heart.





When I came north in the late seventies, I had no idea how soon, and how drastically, my life would change.

Coastal Hopefuls

The coastal community in the seventies and early eighties was fluid and transient. Prairie kids and city kids and unrepentant hippies fetched up on the docks of Prince Rupert in northern British Columbia looking for the romance of the sea, seeking mystical enlightenment or big bucks in the herring fisheries. A wave of restless adventurers drifted up the coast, coming as far north as they could without bumping into Alaska, as far west as possible without falling into the Pacific. Donning rain gear and sou'westers, they quickly transformed themselves into salty sea dogs. I came north for a short visit in 1977, left, came back, and stayed for twenty-two years.

The coastal hopefuls who moved to Salt Lakes, to Crippen Cove or Dodge Cove, or to the islands beyond the harbour honed their nautical skills with fanatical fervour, learning knots and splices, studying the currents and the tides, gaining the seafaring know-how they needed to survive in this harsh, chilly, water-based world. Most were quick learners, and if they were scared stiff, they didn't show it.

I got my first glimpse of north coast nautical life in 1977 at Function Junction, on the Prince Rupert waterfront—a dilapidated tugboat base



Function Junction was a gathering place, and often a refuge in a storm, for folks coming to town from across the harbour and beyond.



Linda listens as Sébastien and Jane G. perform. Work parties, potlucks and impromptu concerts took place on the wooden deck at Function Junction.

taken over by sea-struck hippies. After a potluck supper and an evening of beer and music, a fierce storm swept up the harbour and everyone rushed outside in the dark of night to make sure their boats were safe. I watched through the rain-streaked window, aghast and admiring as they balanced precariously on the heaving wave-slapped dock and retied their lines. They seemed so stalwart and brave. So foolhardy.



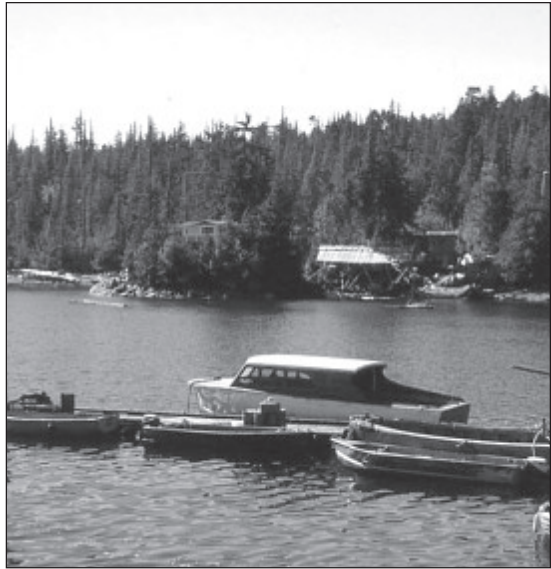
The tiny settlement of Salt Lakes was not on a lake at all. It was a huddle of wind-bleached shanties on the shore of an inlet across the harbour from the town of Prince Rupert. The brackish lake was farther inland, connected to the outer cove by a slough that fed it salt water at the very highest tides. You needed a boat to reach the raggle-taggle community of free spirits living in the cabins and shacks that tilted and swayed on a rocky, windy shore.

An oddball bunch of folks lived at Salt Lakes—hippies and hermits, cannery workers, longshoremen, barmaids, biologists, and fishermen. The women who fished were called fishermen too. The women at Salt Lakes ran their own skiffs and took pride in their chainsaws and in their home-baked bread.

Anyone who wasn't wearing homespun ponchos or gauzy paisley skirts wore the traditional garb of north coast fishermen: scratchy wool Bamberton trousers over slit-seated long johns, red and black plaid shirts with grey wool

Stanfields on top, plus raincoats, rain pants, and gumboots, of course. Residents brewed beer in plastic buckets stashed behind their wood stoves, cooked salmon on the beach, and went clam-digging once or twice before they learned about paralytic shellfish poisoning and the raw sewage that emptied into the Prince Rupert harbour.

In 1979, my boyfriend Bill and I hitched a ride to Salt Lakes on a fishboat, arriving awkwardly at the dock with two over-excited and wildly barking dogs, their leashes



Our tiny cabin is to the right of the large boatshed on the far shore, across from the dock at Salt Lakes.

tangled in the rigging. We were as excited as the dogs, hiking to the lake along a trail jewelled with red huckleberries. It wound through damp groves of young alder and past a swampy marsh, emerging into sunlight at pink-tinged muskeg meadows where the tops of bonsai'd trees scratched our knees. A broken, sway-backed boardwalk skirted the slough, then continued through salmonberry bushes and deep moss to the lake.

Tangled groups of browning bodies lazed as naked as seal pups on the grass and on the splintery platform in the middle of the lake. I was shocked by all this flesh, but tried not to show it. As we visited Salt Lakes more often, I got used to swimming nude, welcoming the rare rays of sunlight on my skin and the silky feel of the cool water.

We were lucky to buy a sturdy, round-bottomed skiff from Ember at Crippen Cove. He had found the fibreglass shell of a Davidson lifeboat abandoned on the beach and had been able to squeeze the sides together and carry the narrowed boat carcass through the door of his cabin. He completely restored it with oak gunwales and runners, applewood knees, and a mahogany transom. He recreated a broad, beautiful skiff, but of course it no longer fit through the doorway. So he cut away the back wall of his cabin to launch it. We gave him \$800 and a handmade quilt in exchange for a boat that safely handled many a storm.

We bought a run-down cabin on the inlet at Salt Lakes for \$3,500 but we didn't own the land it sat on, though it only cost \$70 a year to lease

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a vaguely defined plot of land. We kept our tiny apartment in Rupert and played house at Salt Lakes, spending romantic candlelit evenings at the cabin, then going back to our real life in town. We imagined settling down in this slipshod paradise, but as it turned out, I ended up living there alone.

I was a nervous boater and felt very grateful for the strength and stability of our fourteen-foot Davidson skiff.

Salt Lakes

“Kriiis-tuuun! Cuuhhm foohrr dinn-neeerr! Briiing suuumm pohhh-ta-aa-tooehs!

Lorrie, Linda and Margo were my three friends at Salt Lakes, and tremendous friends to each other. Their cabins stood three in a row directly opposite mine, on the far side of the cove. They had perfected a deep, slow yell to get in touch with me. I'd grab my salad and the bag of potatoes, fasten my sagging door tight with a nail through the hasp, and head down the wooden boardwalk with my dog Arlo at my heels. I'd pull in the clothesline, an ingenious but often ferociously aggravating way to keep a boat floating in deep water. The clothesline had nothing to do with laundry. It was an endless loop of rope that ran from a pulley on shore to another pulley on a floating platform. Boats were tied to the rope and then hauled out beyond the low tide mark, or pulled in to shore.

Five minutes of rowing took me to the derelict dock in front of Linda's cabin, where I'd step carefully to avoid the holes, then cling tightly



The Salt Lakes dock is on the left. The cabins of Linda, Lorrie and Margo are in the middle of the photo. A fisherman lived in the cabin at far right.

to the handrail as I climbed up the ramp in the twilight rain. Arlo dug in his claws and scrambled after me. I'd skate across Linda's slippery wooden deck and open the door to a kerosene-gilded glow and the smell of boiling crab.

Meals were abundant and leisurely at Salt Lakes, accompanied by home-brewed beer, roll-your-owns, and endless Scrabble games. The smell of woodsmoke and creosote mingled with the acrid singe of wool socks hanging too close to the fire. Helly Hansen rain gear as thick and stiff as milk cartons and damp clothing with the faint sour reek of old dishrags added to the mix. Outside, the sweet savour of clean-washed air, cedar kindling, wild mint crushed underfoot. And rain, constant rain.

My three friends worked together cutting wood, painting their boats, and canning salmon. On canning day, huge tubs of salmon sat on the old wooden table under the cedar tree between Lorrie's and Linda's cabins. Lorrie was quick and practical, her butcher knife glinting in the sun as she slashed jar-lengths down the side of a silver fish, then sliced deep through orange sockeye flesh. "You want to leave the bones in for calcium," she said. Linda deftly filled jars, giving



Linda (top), Lorrie (middle) and Margo (bottom) lived in the cabins across the cove from me. They welcomed and mentored me as I adapted to my new marine-based life.

each a tap of salt, then wiping the rims, fastening the lids and stacking the jars. A massive pressure-cooker rocked and hissed on Lorrie's stove inside, another jittered on a camping stove outside. Margo, who worked in quality control at the cannery in town, went back and forth, supervising the boil with scientific precision.

Lorrie had left small-town Saskatchewan at nineteen, quitting her job as a Dairy Queen carhop and breaking off her engagement to her high school sweetheart. She joined Prairie friends who were heading west to find work. Looking back, she remarked, "I didn't really feel rebellious, but I guess I was. I liked it around Rupert, met people and befriended them, and they befriended me. I met Paul in a bar and he took me across the harbour on a snowy night. So romantic! We went up the slough on a high tide, up to the lake. It was incredible." Soon Lorrie was living in a little cabin at Salt Lakes, borrowing Paul's boat, the *Bathtub*, to get to her job at the post office in town.

Margo was a city girl, a biologist whose first job after university was in the Queen Charlotte Islands, now renamed Haida Gwaii, a distant archipelago 290 kilometres west of Prince Rupert. She lived with friends in a variety of remote rustic cabins there and became accustomed to boats, wood stoves, and harvesting the bounty of the seashore. When she got a job based in Rupert, she was drawn to life across the harbour, and bought the tiny box-like cabin beside Lorrie's, where she lived alone for over a year.

Linda had fetched up at Salt Lakes when she and her fisherman boyfriend "went for a drift," as she described her first trip across the harbour in a little flat-bottomed sailboat that didn't sail very well. "We ended up rowing into Salt Lakes. We didn't know anyone there, but we stayed the weekend. A year later we bought a cabin there and a boat called the *Sieve*." Linda grinned and said, "Not a bad boat except it leaked a lot, but I commuted back and forth to the cannery in that leaky boat until it self-destructed."

Later, Linda owned a sturdy gillnetter named *Naiad*. She expertly eased her thirty-foot fishboat to the dock, jumping lightly onto the slippery planks to tie the lines. She did the maintenance on the engine herself. A friend described her as "tremendously competent, working on the motor with huge wrenches while clouds of smoke billowed forth." When I asked Linda if she found running the boat intimidating, she laughed and said she didn't know enough to be intimidated.

Linda was seasonally self-employed, mending fishing nets at Salt Lakes. She had a swaybacked wooden net-float with long, waist-high railings that supported the vast swaths of gillnet. Grass grew in the cracks between the planks and around the plywood patches nailed over the biggest holes. The net-float was anchored behind Horsehead Rock in front of Stew's cabin, and in sunny weather, Stew would stand naked between the drapes of netting and play his saxophone.



Linda and Margo are mending gillnets out on Linda's net-float. The huge nets are stretched over the wooden railings, with the cork floats in a pile beside them.

Linda mended nets from morning to night in certain seasons. A gill-netter would tie up stern-first to the net-float, and unreel the net from a huge spool onto the float. Sometimes there were several fishboats out at the float, with fishermen lazily drinking beer and talking about fish. Linda enjoyed the company but was not distracted from her seemingly endless labour as she worked her way through the netting. Her net needle was steady in its rhythm—loop, catch, tighten—in a repeating sequence as she rebuilt the structure of the mesh.

Linda had a blue net-mending hat that her fisherman friend had bought in Vancouver's Chinatown. It came in a flat, saucer-sized case that Linda unzipped, taking out a small circle of nylon. Flourished in the air, it magically transformed into a broad-brimmed hat. The brim was stiffened with wire and could be coiled into concentric circles to diminish it for storage, yet spring forth to a majestic sixty-centimetre diameter.

It was lovely to row out to Linda's net-float on a warm summer evening, to lounge on a pile of nets while Linda worked and her friends enjoyed their leisure. The inlet at Salt Lakes faced southeast, so the sun would set behind us unseen. The windows of Prince Rupert across the harbour reflected the sunset back in an enchanting grid of tiny glowing red and gold squares.

But more often it was raining or blowing, and then Linda would have the net-float to herself. Without her friends, without her jaunty hat, she would stand hunched and enduring in the wind as water sluiced down the hood of her grey raincoat, her needle never ceasing in its loop, catch, tighten.