

Sam and Anna Jerisich: From Far Away to a Home on the Bay

Themes:

- Immigration
- Relations between Native peoples and newcomers
- Westward expansion/colonization¹
- Trade in Puget Sound
- Industrial and technological development
- Women's roles
- Early Gig Harbor

Born in Kotor, Montenegro in 1833, Sam Jerisich went to sea at an early age and sailed the world before he relocated to San Francisco.² Later, he came to British Columbia, Canada, looking for gold, where he met Anna, born 1844, who had a daughter, Caroline. Anna was a member of the Penelakut tribe on Kuper Island,³ now Penelakut Island.

In 1869, looking for a good fishing area, Samuel, along with two other fishermen, Peter Goldsmith (original last name: Zlatarich, meaning "son of a goldsmith" in Croatian) of Slovenia, and John Farrugue⁴ of Spain, came down from Canada and arrived at Gig Harbor. A band of the Puyallup Tribe, the *sx̣ẉ'əbabš*, the "swift-water people" lived at the head of the bay in a place they called *tx̣ẉ'aalqət*, "the place where game exists." Until recently, it was believed that no Euro-American migrants had yet settled in the area around the harbor, but now we have evidence that a Captain Norton lived in the area in 1854.

Deciding he had found a place to settle, Sam retrieved Anna and Caroline from B.C. and built a one-room cabin made of split cedar boards on the east side of the bay near the sandpit, on land he later learned was a military reservation. Goldsmith and Farrugue also settled in the

¹ Colonization: taking control of a people or area, especially as an extension of state power. (Merriam-Webster)

² We do not know why Sam chose not to return to Montenegro. It may have been due to Montenegro's conflict with the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It may have been due to following opportunity in North America.

³ Again, we do not know why Anna left her tribe. We do know it was a time of conflict between Native people and the British Crown on the west coast of Canada.

⁴ Also spelled Farrago or Farragut. Different historical sources have different spellings, based on phonetic spelling of spoken names.

harbor. The Jerisichs later built a home on a large piece of land across from the sandspit on the west side of the bay, then a third home farther up the property. In time, Sam and Anna had seven more children, three boys and four girls. They officially married in 1881.

Using the skills he already had, Sam worked as a fisherman with nets he and Anna made by hand using a method brought from the old country called purse seining. There were no trails or roads connecting Gig Harbor to the outside world, so to sell the fish he had to row to Steilacoom, a distance of seven miles, or Olympia. Later settlers established Tacoma in the 1870s. He eventually built a smokehouse to preserve the fish to sell and a warehouse for storage. On the first dock in Gig Harbor, he built a rendering plant for the extraction of dogfish oil. Sam's trade established the commercial fishing industry in Gig Harbor, which would become a major part of the regional economy.

The Jerisich home was surrounded by dense forest, which, in the settlers' minds, needed to be "tamed." Sam cut down trees to clear enough land for a garden, which Anna tended. There were plenty of fish in the harbor to eat, including salmon, herring, smelt, and trout. Anna also shot bear and deer in the forest and dressed the meat, cooking it over an open fire in a Dutch oven. She also picked and dried wild berries, split wood, and carried water from the springs. If necessary, she frightened wildcats and bears away from their house by beating on tin pan. She had to be independent, since following the fish often took Sam far away.

If the family wanted supplies besides what they could shoot, grow, or catch, they had to row to Steilacoom, Olympia, or Huggins' trade store at the former Fort Nisqually. They traded for beef or mutton tallow for candles as well as wool for knitting. Anna learned to spin, weave, knit, crochet, and sew and also acted as midwife and nurse for the neighbors as the community grew. Both Sam and Anna established themselves as important figures in the new settlement, though they never learned to read or write English.

Only three of Sam and Anna's eight children survived past age 30. Two of the girls married other immigrants from the eastern coast of the Adriatic⁵ whose names have become known in Gig Harbor – Dorotich and Skansie. Sam died in 1905 and Anna died in 1926.

⁵ Immigrants to the Gig Harbor area from this region are also referred to as Slavonian, Austrian, Croatian, and Yugoslavian, due to how countries and borders changed over time.

In 1978 the city of Gig Harbor built and named Jerisich Dock in the family's honor. If you visit Soundview Forest Park, you will stand on a part of their homestead. If you visit the Harbor History Museum, you will see Anna's sewing machine, a basket and blouse she made, Sam's pocket watch and tool chest, and other Jerisich objects on display. These artifacts help tell the story of a couple who made a new life together as a cross-cultural connection that is the heart of the Gig Harbor story.

This information compiled from HHM publications, the HHM blog, [An Excellent Little Bay](#) by J.A. Eckrom, and the research of Stephanie Lile, HHM Executive Director.

Discussion Questions: (Questions based on the [C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards](#))

- What was happening in other parts of Washington, the US, and the world during Sam and Anna's lives (1823-1926)?
- What are some of the sacrifices and benefits to the choices Sam and Anna made? How did economic factors affect their decisions?
- How did environmental factors affect Sam and Anna's lives? How did their cultures and backgrounds affect how they adapted to their environment?
- What are some connections between the physical environment and the economic activities of the people living in the area? How did the Native and Euro-American settler activities affect the cultural and environmental characteristics of the area over time?
- How did changes in transportation and communication technology over time affect the distribution of people, goods, and ideas?
- What are some examples of change or continuity in the historical events and developments of Sam and Anna's life?
- Compare and contrast Sam and Anna's life to life today.
- What are some of the factors and context that may have influenced Sam and Anna's perspectives on life? Why might other people from the same time period have different perspectives? How do our perspectives today compare?