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BACK TO SCHOOL



PHOTOS BY BRIANA ALZOLA / ANACORTES AMERICAN

It was a cheerful morning outside of Mount Erie Elementary School on Monday, as staff, including Principal Kevin Schwartz, above with second-grader George Armas, and teacher Kim Hoofnagle, right, welcomed students back into classrooms for the first time since March. Students in kindergarten to third grade went back to their classrooms this week, with students in fourth and fifth grades to join them Nov. 9. Schwartz said he was excited to see students back at school.

Balloons adorned several trees outside the building, placed by the PTA as a way to celebrate students' return to school. Masked parents, students and staff members walked students to their classrooms but weren't allowed inside. Anacortes School District Superintendent Justin Irish also stopped by to greet students.



Final days for old Anacortes fish plant

BY RICHARD WALKER
rwalker@goanacortes.com

The nearly 130-year-old waterfront building at Fifth Street and K Avenue is sagging, its sides collapsing as it enters its final death throes.

It will be demolished soon, its story relegated to newspaper archives, museum files and old-timers with long memories.

But what a story it has to tell.

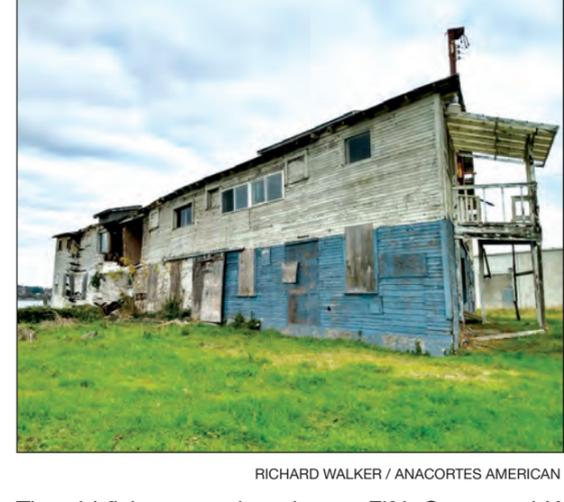
The building is all that remains of what was, at its founding, the first codfish processing plant north of San Francisco. Many of the untreated pilings — eroded by time, tide and critters — were driven by Capt. J.A. Matheson when he built the processing plant in

September 1891.

By October, the former Provincetown, Massachusetts, sea captain's schooner, Lizzie Colby, arrived from the Bering Sea with its holds full of cod, ushering in an era of fish curing and fish canning that would provide jobs for hundreds and fuel the economy of an infant city, according to news stories at the time in the Anacortes American.

"Every ton of fish added to his present capacity means more money for labor, more business for the city, more business for steamboat and railways and a help to the town," the Anacortes American reported on Jan. 12, 1905, when

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RICHARD WALKER / ANACORTES AMERICAN

The old fish processing plant at Fifth Street and K Avenue is set to be demolished soon.

City gets new line for water treatment

BY QUESTEN INGHAM
ingham@goanacortes.com

As a line that carries water to serve tens of thousands of people in the region turned 50 years old this year, the City of Anacortes made an investment.

Rather than replace the aging raw water line, which carries water pumped from the Skagit River to the Anacortes Water Treatment Plant on River Bend Road near Mount Vernon, the city added a second line and a new clear well.

The second line will ensure that water can continue to be treated and distributed when the first one, built in 1970, needs maintenance or repairs.

"It provides redundancy," Fred Buckenmeyer, Anacortes Public Works Director said as he and several other city officials watched the new line being installed last week.

Multiple cranes held up the 1,950-foot-long water line as it was being assembled and slowly pulled underneath the Skagit River. The project began this summer and is expected to be finished within a few months.

The new clear well will temporarily store two million gallons of the chlorine-treated water to ensure proper disinfection. The water will then be distributed to cities including Anacortes, Oak Harbor and La Conner, as well as the Swinomish Indian Reservation, the Shell and Marathon oil refineries and Naval Air Station Whidbey Island. Serving over 60,000 people in all, the city treatment plant is a major provider of water in the region.

The new water line will also provide water through intertie connections to the Skagit Public Utility District when needed, such as



QUESTEN INGHAM / ANACORTES AMERICAN

The new raw water line was held up by multiple cranes as it was being pulled through a tunnel dug beneath the Skagit River on Tuesday, Oct. 27.

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Plant

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Matheson expanded his processing plant and added another schooner to his fleet.

Profits from Matheson's codfish processing plant enabled him to buy a block of commercial buildings on P Avenue (now Commercial Avenue); start a local mining company and, with Anacortes American founder Douglas Allmond, found the city's first water company. He also bought and improved a hotel at the foot of Commercial Avenue, according to stories in the American archives.

Matheson wasn't the only one who would find prosperity in fish processing. By 1922, other companies would be operating 11 canneries and curing plants along Guemes Channel, according to a 2011 essay on HistoryLink.org. But Matheson's processing plant was the first. And while Matheson's old plant will soon be demolished, his fingerprint is still evident in Anacortes.

Matheson, his wife Josephine and daughters Flora and Catherine lived in the two-story Victorian home at 1201 Fifth St. Matheson lived there from 1899 until his death in 1938, and the house is on the Anacortes Historic Walking Tour.

The Matheson Building still stands at the northwest corner of Eighth Street and Commercial Avenue, two lots from the Wilson Hotel.

Matheson's descendants still own 316 Pine St. in Mount Vernon, which Matheson purchased in 1922 and was home to Skagit County's first courthouse.

Future unclear for site

Retired mariner Bruce Baglien was at his boat slip at Anchor Cove Marina the weekend of Oct. 24 when he heard a portion of the west wall of the Matheson building collapse. He said he's watched the building slowly deteriorate and was concerned enough about the building's condition a year ago that he contacted the city.

Baglien said the building poses a risk to public safety. People have long entered the collapsing building, leaving behind evidence of their visit, from graffiti to needles. In addition, debris from the building is getting into the channel, he said.

Matheson's descendants sold the old processing plant, land and tidelands in 2008 to Jerrel C. Barto, a Southern California oil company owner and land developer who that year also bought Rosario Resort on Orcas Island. Planning Director Don Measamer said Thursday that Barto was given notice "about a month ago" to fence the site and demolish the building. Measamer said Barto was out of town until Nov. 2 but expected to get the site fenced after he returns.

Demolition first requires permits from the state Department of Ecology, Department of Fish and Wildlife and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Once obtained, the owner can obtain a demolition permit from the city, Measamer said.

The American left a message Thursday for Barto at his Signal Hill, California, office. His contractor, Nels Strandberg of Strandberg Construction, called back later on Barto's behalf.

Strandberg said the



RICHARD WALKER / ANACORTES AMERICAN

Capt. J.A. Matheson's codfish processing plant (pictured above, now) through the years: In 1901, 10 years after it was built (below); later, in an undated photo (middle photo below), after an expansion. Warren Gilbert, Matheson's grandson, said in 2008 that the building currently at the site was built before 1900 and was remodeled and updated through the years. Bottom: An employee, name unknown, of the Matheson codfish enterprise unloads codfish from the company schooner the Lizzie Colby in this turn-of-the-century photo. The man in the bowler hat at right is believed to be Capt. J.A. Matheson.

Timeline

1891: Capt. James A. Matheson, owner and master of a codfish schooner in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, moves to Anacortes to build a plant to process cod caught in Alaska. He buys block 135, between J and K avenues, from the Oregon Improvement Co. and begins construction on a wharf and processing plant in September. His schooner, Lizzie Colby, arrives Oct. 14 from the Bering Sea full of cod.

The building has packing on the first floor and storage on the second. Matheson's grandson, Warren Gilbert, said in 2008 that the fishermen would filet and salt the fish on board the schooner. When the boat was full, they would sail back to the Anacortes plant where the fish were portioned into one-pound sections and packaged.

1893: J.A. Matheson Codfish Salting, Drying, Curing and Packing House begins shipping packaged cod to Hawaii, the Anacortes American reports on Aug. 17.

1899: The Lizzie Colby returns from the Bering Sea with 185 tons of cod, the Anacortes American reports on Sept. 11.

1897: A Sanborn Fire Insurance map documents the curing and packing house's growth. In an updated map, the wharf has expanded northward and contains pickling vats, fish-cutting vats, storage areas and a warehouse. A small smokehouse, storage building and fish drying yard are shown on the upland portions of the site.

1904: The Lizzie Colby returns from the Bering Sea with "200 tons of fine fish," the Anacortes American reports on Aug. 18.

1905: Matheson enlarges his wharf and plant, the Anacortes American reports on Jan. 12. He adds a 352-ton schooner, the Fannie Dutard, to his fleet. Expansion of his plant doubles the capacity to 500 tons.

1914: Apex Fish Co., a cannery located to the west of Matheson, buys Matheson Fisheries for \$25,000, the Anacortes American reports on July 23. The acquisition makes Apex, according to that company's boast at the time, the second-largest fish processing business in the world. Apex processed 50,000 fish in one day that year.

1915: Matheson reenters the industry, leasing — and ultimately buying — his old property back from Apex. His two schooners return from the Bering Sea with a combined 395,800 fish, more than half the Anacortes codfish fleet's catch for the season, the Anacortes American reports on Sept. 9.

1935-1970: Matheson's processing plant building is unoccupied but remains in Matheson family ownership.

1938: Matheson dies on June 13 at age 89.

1970s-2000s: Matheson's grandson, Warren Gilbert, rents the property to a succession of seafood processors who dry and pack eels and sea cucumbers.

2008: Gilbert Family Properties sells the site and 15,713 square feet of tidelands to Jerrel C. Barto, a Southern California oil company owner and land developer, who that year also buys Rosario Resort on Orcas Island.

Today: Matheson's fingerprint is still evident in Anacortes. His Victorian home at 1201 Fifth St. is on the Anacortes Walking Tour. The Matheson Building still stands at Eighth Street and Commercial Avenue. His descendants still own 316 Pine St. in Mount Vernon, which Matheson purchased in 1922 and was home to Skagit County's first courthouse.

— Sources: Anacortes American archives; 2008 Environmental Site Assessment by GeoEngineers, a firm with offices in Bellingham and Seattle

site will be fenced within two weeks; permits are being sought from the required agencies. Once demolition occurs, the site will be vacant land for the first time since Matheson drove his first piling in September 1891.

What's happens next is more complicated.

Barto would like to build four condominiums there, but development is complicated by the city's zoning and shoreline regulations. The site is zoned light manufacturing; under city zoning, condos would be allowed with a conditional-use permit. But regulations



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are more restrictive near the shoreline, and conditional-use permits — and construction of condominiums — are not allowed.

The city is updating its Shoreline Master Program, and Strandberg hopes the regulations will be made compatible "so we can actually do something nice there someday."

Any use under current shoreline regula-

tions "would have to be light manufacturing with a shoreline component," Strandberg said.

"If you look at that property, unlike the other properties that are zoned properly — which are (Anchor Cove) Marina, Shannon Point Seafoods, the Port of Anacortes — they've all got their docks, piers and they're completely developed. We've got a giant mudflat that goes

out 300 feet and we're also squeezed geographically."

The site comprises about an acre of uplands and 15,600 square feet of tidelands wedged between Anchor Cove Marina and Trident Seafoods.

"We're on the waterfront, but practical, light manufacturing use of the waterfront is next to impossible," Strandberg said.