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## Olga Strawberry Barreling Plant (Orcas Island)

The Olga Strawberry Barreling Plant, constructed in 1938, stands as a reminder of the once-flourishing strawberry industry on the east side of Orcas Island in San Juan County. Built in a cooperative effort by the Orcas Island Berry Growers Association and the National Fruit Canning Company, the plant provided jobs for locals through the end of the Great Depression and into World War II. After operations shut down in late 1943, the building was used for storage and then repurposed first as a restaurant (1978) and later as a cooperative art gallery and cafe (2004). A major fire in July 2013 galvanized the Olga and Orcas community to restore the historic building.

### Strawberry History

In the early 1930s, farmers in the Olga area near the southern tip of Orcas Island's eastern lobe began growing Marshall strawberries, producing both plants and berries. Discovered by F. Ewell Marshall in 1880 and introduced in 1883, the cultivar *Fragaria x ananassa* (Marshall) was a popular variety valued for its taste and firmness. Glen Rodenberger (1888-1973) was the principle grower, being one of three certified growers of Marshall strawberries in Washington and Oregon. Starting in 1934 with one acre of plants, by 1940 Rodenberger had expanded his operation to 27 acres, shipping some 2,242,000 certified plants throughout the Pacific Northwest. In addition to Rodenberger, the main Olga-area producers were Oscar Carlson, Merton Christianson, Henry Leatherwood, and George Loomis, eventually bringing some 450 acres into cultivation. On February 25, 1936, Carlson, Loomis, and Rodenberger, along with Alvin Myers and Ethel Pinneo, filed articles of incorporation for the Orcas Island Berry Growers Association under the Co-operative Marketing Act, for "marketing, buying, selling, barreling, processing, canning, storing, and handling or utilization of berries or other fruits and vegetables ...", among other objects.

Later that year W. P. McCaffray of the National Fruit Canning Company approached the Orcas Island Berry Growers Association, proposing to supply the building materials and machinery for a barreling plant on land provided by the association. Construction of the facility depended on the availability of electricity; as part of the New Deal's Rural Electrification Administration (REA), electricity reached Orcas Island in 1938. (The local cooperative would eventually become Orcas Power and Light Cooperative [OPALCO] which still provides electricity to the San Juan Islands.) Rodenberger purchased a half-acre plot located at the intersection of Olga and Pt. Lawrence roads for the plant site. The materials were shipped to Olga in November of 1937 and the plant was ready for production the next summer.

The facility provided work for scores of Orcas residents, who cultivated, harvested, processed, and hauled the strawberries. Some 300 pickers harvested the crop in the fields and another 14 worked in the barreling plant. At the height of its production in 1941, the pack consisted of 832 barrels, which, together with the 33 tons of berries marketed in crates for immediate consumption, produced 241 tons of strawberries and shipped 2.5 million plants to off-island farmers.

The strawberry operations employed not only locals but also young workers recruited from the surrounding area, especially Bellingham. With military conscription and the migration of young men to war-related jobs, however, labor supply became a major issue. Saanich Indians from Vancouver Island were invited to harvest. Operations lasted until the end of 1943, when a combination of disease in the strawberry plants and shortage of wartime labor led to the plant's closing.

### **The Building and Its Functions**

The Olga Strawberry Barreling Plant was a simple wood-frame building measuring 30 by 80 feet, with a 10-foot loading dock on the east end. The floor structure was hefty, designed to support barrels filled with 400 to 500 pounds of strawberries each. The two long walls under the gable-pitched roof had three-by-three-foot wooden-frame windows with six lites each, arranged in clusters of three to afford the best lighting for the operations inside. The clear-span wooden rafters and cross-ties of the roof structure were left exposed, as were the six-by-nine posts and two-by-four studs of the walls, clearly indicating the utilitarian nature of structure.

Strawberries were picked, hulled, and packed into flat crates of twelve boxes each in the field and then brought to the plant in trucks. After registering and weighing the berries on a floor scale just inside double doors on the west side of the building, workers poured them into a tank of running water and then sprayed them clean on a chain-metal conveyor belt before grading on a rack. Women hand-sorted out green and non-hulled fruit, and then another belt sorted the berries into small, medium, and large. The fruit fell from a trough into continuously jolted barrels (the jolting packed them solidly); each 425-pound barrel had 318 pounds of berries layered alternately with 107 pounds of sugar. The barrels -- about 17 per day -- were loaded from the east dock onto trucks, shipped by ferry to the mainland, and driven to Everett for freezing. In addition, diggers brought year-old certified Marshall strawberry plants to the building where they were cleaned, trimmed, and packaged in bundles of 25 for shipping.

### **Changes**

After strawberry processing ended in 1943, the building was used for storage until it was sold in 1978 and converted into a restaurant, the Chambered Nautilus. At that time the owners re-sided the structure, remodeled the interior, and added a loft with dormer windows on the west end. In 2004, the Olga Strawberry Council was formed to manage the building as an artist's cooperative and the Cafe Olga; the same year, it was listed on the Washington Heritage Register. In 2006 the council established a Historic Preservation and Conservation Easement with the San Juan County Land Bank in order to preserve the unique character of the structure.

On Friday night, July 19, 2013, fire destroyed the east deck and restrooms, as well as causing smoke damage throughout the east half of the building. A successful response by local firefighters saved the entire structure from being destroyed. Relying on the engaged support of the local Olga and overall Orcas Island community, the Olga Strawberry Council worked to restore the historic character of the building while upgrading it to modern building and health codes. Work was completed in less than two years, with the art space and a new cafe scheduled to open in the historic structure on April 25,

2015.

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Cafe Olga (Strawberry Barreling Plant building), Orcas Island, 2006

*Photo by Boyd C. Pratt*



Strawberry Barreling Plant building, Olga, Orcas Island, 2006

*Photo by Boyd C. Pratt*



Strawberry Barreling Plant building damaged by fire, Olga, Orcas Island, July 2013

*Photo by Boyd C. Pratt*



Strawberry Barreling Plant building, restoration work following June 2013 fire, Olga, Orcas Island, March 2015

*Photo by Boyd C. Pratt*



Strawberry Barreling Plant building, Olga, Orcas Island, March 2015

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