

THE NORTHWEST MEMOIRS OF FLOYD SCHMOE

By Peter Donahue



RETROSPECTIVE REVIEWS

Mount Rainier and the San Juan Islands are probably western Washington's two most iconic features. Accordingly, a sizable literature has grown around both. So it only makes sense that another Washington icon, Floyd Schmoie, should have contributed to this body of work.

Long before he became renowned as a peace advocate, Floyd Schmoie (1895-2001) worked as a caretaker at Paradise Inn on Mount Rainier and later as a mountain guide and park naturalist. After serving with the Red Cross as a conscientious objector in World War I, he returned home and moved with his wife, Ruth, to the Northwest, where, as a farm boy from Kansas, he was instantly struck by the dramatic landscape. He enrolled in the College of Forestry at the University of Washington and soon after received the opportunity that would result in *A Year in Paradise* (1959), which put Floyd Schmoie in the company of Edmond S. Meany, Martha Hardy, Aubrey Haines, and Bob and Ira Spring in writing notable books about Mount Rainier.

A Year in Paradise opens with Floyd and Ruth trudging on snowshoes up the Longmire-Paradise Trail, desperate to reach the inn by nightfall. The inn is cold and vacant when they arrive, and they quickly set about lighting Coleman lanterns, starting a fire in the dining room hearth, raiding the kitchen stores, and exploring the inn's many rooms. They soon

find contentment in their snowbound isolation, and as Ruth plays piano and adjusts to high-altitude cooking, Floyd does chores about the inn and begins a study of the birds, mammals, and trees on the mountain as well as its geology, glaciers, and weather. In the tradition of Thoreau, his observations often lead to more general musings. "There is still a vast amount that we do not know," he remarks in regard to nature's complex web of life. "Search for the knowable unknown may well be one of the reasons for our existence."

Schmoie also reviews the mountain's human history: the tribal people who viewed the mountain as sacred and harvested blueberries on its slopes; the first European-Americans who attempted to scale the peak, including Army Lieutenant A. V. Kautz (in 1857), after whom Kautz Glacier is named; John Muir; and the mountain's national park designation in 1899, under President William McKinley. Schmoie also introduces readers to the denizens of the mountain, among them: Ben and Len Longmire, sons of homesteader James Longmire; Gus and Olga Anderson, the inn keepers at Longmire Springs; and Hans and Heinie Fuhrer, the Swiss mountain guides who "each made more than 150 summit trips and guided some three thousand climbers to the top and back."

After recounting many of his own excursions on Mount Rainier, Schmoie narrates a trip he, Ruth, and their young son make by packhorse around its base on the

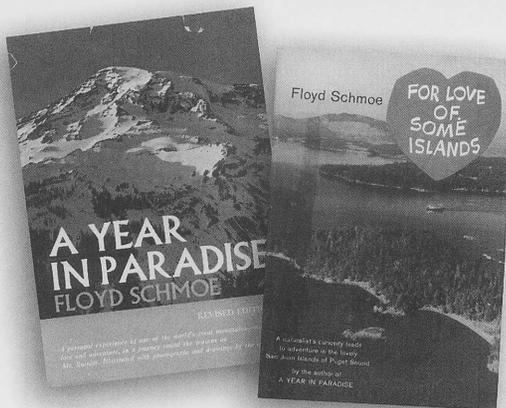
Wonderland Trail, concluding, after their time on the mountain, that "for the three of us life would never be the same again."

Schmoie returned to Seattle, earned his degree, and began teaching as an instructor at the University of Washington. In 1930, working toward an advanced degree, he began his study of marine biology under Professor Trevor Kincaid, founder of the oceanographic laboratories at Friday Harbor. *For Love of Some Islands* (1964), which won the Washington State Governor's Award, is partly Schmoie's account of his early acquaintance with the San Juan Islands, including his construction of an underwater observation post and his effort to homestead Flower Island via squatters' rights. Primarily, though, the book recounts his return to the islands some 30 years later to build a cabin on an old scow, which he anchors in a cove near Friday Harbor and uses as his base for further study of the islands' natural history. The work, however, is also a family memoir in that their many children and grandchildren visit him and Ruth throughout their sojourn to accompany them on their personal discovery of the islands.

While Schmoie says this is not a "scientific book," his scientific knowledge is abundant, and like the best nature writers, he is acutely attentive to and appreciative of the natural world he sets about observing. And when science cannot account for a particular phenomenon, he freely speculates. In respect to the hermaphroditic barnacle, for example, which has no clear need for others and yet forms vast colonies, he suggests that it "may simply be the lack of Lebensraum that brings them together in such numbers." He reserves a special awe, however, for the octopus, that



Floyd Schmoie



chromatic cephalopod that “grows larger in [Puget Sound] waters than any other place in the world” and has an eye comparable in complexity to the human eye.

Schmoë becomes even more philosophical in *For Love of Some Islands* than he had been in *A Year in Paradise*, perhaps reflecting an older man’s experience of the world. Like E. O. Wilson, he uses scientific knowledge to further our understanding of humanity’s place in nature and what nature can teach us. “Man’s laws are not always wise,” he says, “but nature’s laws are good—as good, as right, and as much the ‘laws of God’ as are the written biblical Commandments.”

Schmoë’s search for broader meaning stemmed from his strong Quaker faith, which led in turn to his commitment to aid victims of the atomic bomb in Japan, creating the Peace Park in Seattle’s University District, and doing innumerable good deeds on behalf of peace throughout the world. Though Floyd Schmoë published several books over the course of his long life, it is these two companion memoirs, *A Year in Paradise* and *For Love of Some Islands*, illustrated with his own drawings and photographs, that bring his passion for western Washington most alive—and make an experience of Mount Rainier and the San Juan Islands, in person or through the pages of a book, that much more meaningful.

Peter Donahue is author of the novel Madison House (2005) and coeditor of Reading Portland: The City in Prose (2006) and Reading Seattle: The City in Prose (2004).



Additional Reading

Interested in learning more about the topics covered in this issue? The sources listed here will get you started.

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