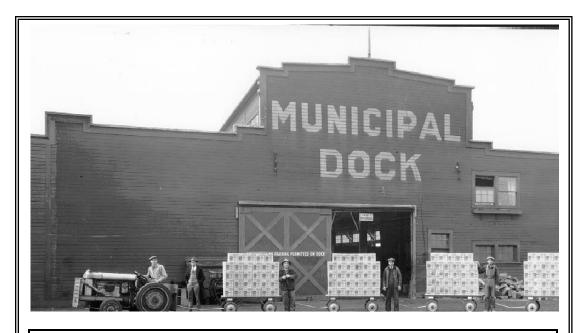# The Port of Bellingham:
A Brief Timeline

- **1889 –** Passage of the Washington State Constitution, whose 15th Article prohibits the state from giving "any private person, corporation or association" sole proprietary rights to navigable waters, effectively insuring that the State's harbors belong to the people of Washington

- **1911 –** State enacts law allowing citizens to designate port districts and elect commissioners to oversee district development and operation, thus granting the public a way to effectively manage and control the State's harbor waters.

- **1913 –** Local citizens create the "Citizens Dock Company" to run passenger steamships from the Whatcom Creek waterway.

- **1920 –** On September 14 1920, local voters approve the formation of the Port of Bellingham by a 77 percent margin. The issue is massively publicized by the Bellingham Chamber of Commerce and bolstered by local businessmen's claims that a port authority would energize a city economy which—like so many other municipal economies around the country—was sagging in the wake of the First World War.

- **1923 –** The Port of Bellingham builds its first ferry dock, a landing for the Canadian Pacific Railway ferry on Whatcom Creek Waterway, and also begins its ambitious campaign to purchase waterfront property.
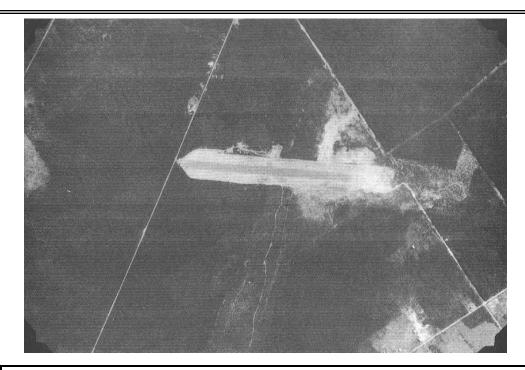

The citizens of Bellingham celebrate the arrival of the first ferry at the Port Ferry Dock: May 21 1923. The top of the old City Hall can be seen in the background.

- **1924 –** The Port of Bellingham makes its first significant acquisition, purchasing the City's Municipal Dock, built in 1918. It was the Port's first ocean-shipping facility, and would grow into the Whatcom International Shipping Terminal.

Longshoremen in front of the Port of Bellingham's recently-acquired
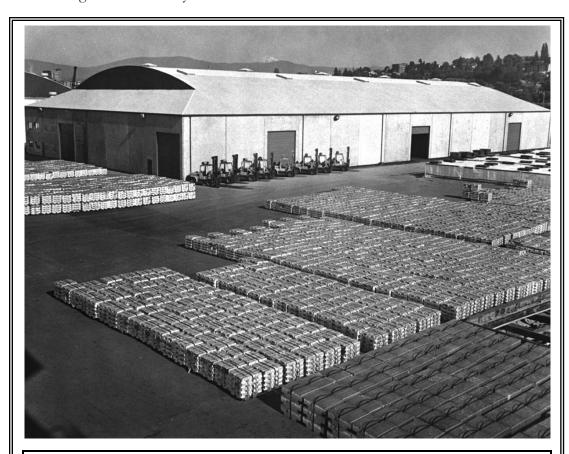Municipal Dock- 1927

- **1926** – First pulp-mill operations begin on the Bellingham waterfront.
- **1927** – With voter approval, the Port of Bellingham takes over the Squalicum Creek dredging project, originally begun by Bellingham businessman Edward W. Purdy in 1926. The Bellingham Waterfront had for many years been known for its characteristic swaths of shallow ocean tide-lands: as such, dredging projects had been running almost continuously since the late-nineteenth century. By 1931, the Squalicum-Creek dredging project had created 22 acres of fill-land for industrial development, a breakwater, a web house, and moorage for fishing boats.
- **1934** – Taking advantage of New-Deal funds, the Port begins another round of improvements at Squalicum Harbor, deepening the harbor waters and constructing a protective rock breakwater. The breakwater would be 1,400 feet long, extending east from the outer edges of the Squalicum Creek waterway.
- **1935-1937** – As in 1934, taking advantage of Works Progress Administration labor funds, the Port builds a harbor for Blaine's growing fishing fleet: the dredge spoils are placed under what is today Marine Drive.
- **1936** – Voters approve $75,000 for construction of a harbor in Fairhaven while the Works Progress Administration provides the necessary labor. In that same year, the Port of Bellingham would also construct a pile breakwater to serve as a moorage for about 180 boats at Squalicum Harbor.
- **1936** – Whatcom County buys the site for a future airport at the price of fifty dollars to the acre. According to Susan Wolff, author of *Aviation History of Whatcom County*, in order to build the first runway, the county originally approached the WPA, but was turned down, citing the fact that WPA highway funds were reserved for highway use only. Thus, the county re-approached the WPA, asking them for aid in building a "highway" between two "roads": the WPA accepted the job, and thus began construction of the infamous "highway to nowhere"—the future first runway of the Airport!

Aerial shot of Bellingham Airport's first runway taken on September 6, 1940. The top of the picture faces southeast: this indicates that the main road on the left is Pacific Highway 99, and that the main road on the right is Bakerview Road. Interestingly—although Susan Wolff, in her 1976 work *Aviation History of Whatcom County*, argues that "June Road" and "Barns Road" were only "proposed lines on a map" intended to deceive the county—Barnes Road appears on this map exactly where later-produced airport maps drafted by the military indicate it should be: it is the visible line which extends right from the point where the cleared land to the right of the runway ends.

- **1938** – Puget Sound Pulp builds the pulp mill on the Bellingham waterfront which would evolve into the Georgia-Pacific Mill.
- **1940**- The first runway of the Whatcom County Airport is officially dedicated on June 1, 1940. According to *The Herald*, traffic that day "was out of control" with an estimated 5,000 people attending the opening of the 3,600-feet long, 150-feet wide gravel runway.
- **1941** – With National Defense funds administered under the supervision of the Army Corps of Engineers, Bellingham Airport grows from one to three runways.
- **1941-1946** – On December 7 1941, the airport opens to the public, and members of the community are invited to drive their cars upon its three newly-paved runways. Coincidentally, as cars toured the new runways, news came over the radio of the unfolding attack at Pearl Harbor—as it turned out, the first day the airport was open to the public would also be the last for five years! By December 10 1941, the military had taken control of the airport, now "Bellingham Army Air Field," and had turned it into a pursuit and bomber base. Under the military's stewardship, the airport would grow to about 910 acres, complete with 38 buildings, and no less than 13 bomb-storage structures. The airport was given back to the county in October of 1946.

- **1946** – Following voter approval of a bond to expand Squalicum boat harbor and create a cold storage plant, The Port of Bellingham, in cooperation with A.W. (Arch) Talbot, completes construction of the two warehouses which would come to form the basis of Bellingham Cold Storage. Early customers included Stokely Van Camp (carrots, peas and berries) and Wakefield Seafoods (crab and fish); the business soon expands, however, to meet the increasing demands of local fisheries and Whatcom-County farmers.
- **1947** – A massive January 30 storm destroys Bellingham's harbor at Fairhaven; thereafter, Squalicum Harbor becomes the main harbor for Bellingham.
- **1950-1959** – Time span for the $1.2 million project to move the 1934 Squalicum Harbor breakwater south, and construct a new, larger breakwater. Not only did the project result in the deepening of the Harbor's waters, but would also increase the number of available slips at Squalicum Harbor to around 600. By the end of the 1950s, Squalicum Harbor offers year-round protection from all types of weather.
- **1957** – County deeds airport to the Port of Bellingham for the sum of one dollar.
- **1963** – Georgia Pacific acquires the Puget Sound Pulp and Timber Company located on the Bellingham waterfront.
- **1964** – The Port of Bellingham negotiates with the Amax corporation (now Intalco) in the successful effort to convince them locate their new 200-acre aluminum smelter in Whatcom County. In the same year, the Port would expand their shipping terminal with the addition of a salt storage pad, conveyor, chemical storage unit and rail-barge transfer facility.

Stacks of aluminum ingots await export at the Whatcom International Shipping Terminal, product of the Amax Smelter, 1981.
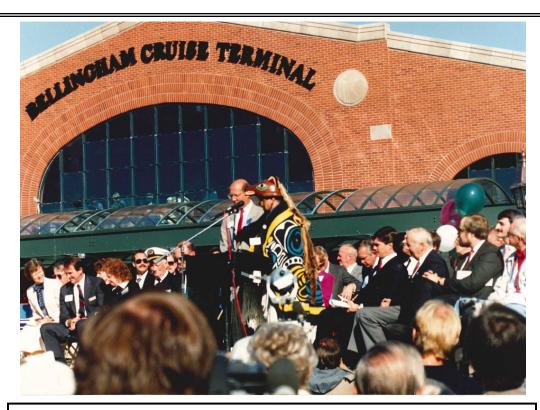
- **1965 –** Georgia-Pacific constructs a chlorine/caustic soda plant to serve internal needs of pulp and tissue bleaching.
- **1966** – Following the closure of Pacific American Fisheries in Fairhaven, the Port of Bellingham buys their former property, buildings, and equipment for $598,000, thus garnering another deep-water shipping dock on Bellingham Bay.

A worker operates a forklift amidst frozen halibut stacked like cordwood at Bellingham Cold Storage; photo taken in the 1960s.

- **1970s-1980s** – The Port continues to develop Squalicum Harbor with a $2.5 million project to dredge what is now known as the Inner Basin. In total, 50 acres are dredged, and the spoils are placed behind dikes, creating 46 acres of uplands. About 800 moorage berths are created, bringing the total number of moorage slips in Squalicum Harbor to 1,417.
- **1980**- The Port of Bellingham approves a $1-million dollar project to replace the dilapidated United-Airlines Terminal from the 1940s with a new Bellingham Airport Terminal building.
- **1983-1988** – With revenue from an Industrial Development Tax Levy, the Port moves forward with a number of industrial projects to promote economic development: improving the Airport, the Whatcom International Shipping Terminal, and rehabilitating the pier at Fairhaven.

- **1985** – The Port of Bellingham creates the Sumas International Cargo Terminal on a 52-acre plot of land in the border town of Sumas. Thereafter, Canadian forest-product corporations begin locating at the site.
- **1985 –** Pacific Southwest Airlines (PSA) begins daily passenger service at Bellingham International Airport, marshalling in tremendous growth for the airport and its services. PSA merged into the larger USAir in 1988, continuing to operate in Bellingham until 1991.
- **1989 –** Culminating a $10.3 million project three years in the making, The Port of Bellingham opens the Bellingham Cruise Terminal on October 3 1989 with weekly sailings to Ketchikan, Alaska. In fact, the Port's efforts to convince the Alaska Marine Highway System (AMHS) to locate its southern terminus in Bellingham might actually be better traced to as early as December of 1963, when a Bellingham delegation consisting of representatives from a variety of city agencies, including the Chamber of Commerce and the Port, travelled north to lobby the AMHS on Bellingham's behalf. Although they were ultimately unsuccessful, efforts in the 1980s would indeed succeed in convincing the AMHS to move its southern terminus from Seattle to Bellingham. On October 3 1989, more than 1,000 members of the community came out to see the 9:30 AM arrival of the 418-foot M/V Columbia at the Terminal's inauguration. The ferry was greeted by a flotilla of boats, a plane with a welcome banner, two Alaskan dance troupes, and the high-school band. The terminal project enjoyed mass community support (nearly 85% of Bellingham residents, according to *The Herald*), and was expected to boost the local economy with a new influx of tourism from Alaska.

An Alaskan Native joins Bellingham Mayor Tim Douglas on stage at the opening of the Bellingham Cruise Terminal.

- **1994 –** The Port of Bellingham begins construction of Bellingham's first intermodal transportation facility at Fairhaven, linking the Bellingham Cruise Terminal with a new Amtrak, Greyhound, and Public Transit Station.
- **1996 –** Bellingham International Airport opens a new control tower in the effort to improve airport safety (operators are now perched 60 feet above ground instead of 15 feet, as in the old tower), and to attract new airline services to the airport. After San Juan Airlines (1989), USAir (1991), and Alaskan Airlines (1992) all end their Bellingham services, the only passenger services left at the airport are Horizon Air and United Express. As such, the new control tower, as well as a runway-extension project, are part and parcel of the Port's plan to attract new airline services and add new air-travel destinations for Whatcom County passengers.
- **1998-2000** – The Port of Bellingham undertakes a massive $12 million project to improve Blaine Harbor, dredging the harbor to add room for new moorage, bringing the total number of slips from 325 to 629, and using dredged mud and clay to form an underwater island to create a better habitat for eelgrass, plankton, juvenile salmon and waterfowl.
- **1999-2002** – The Port of Bellingham undertakes an ambitious project to reenergize the informally titled "Tom Glenn Spit"—a man-made peninsula created in the early 1980s from the dredge spoils produced in the creation of the Inner Basin at Squalicum Harbor. By 2002, the Port had built a luxury hotel, restaurants, office space, and a 1.6 acre public-use park christened "Tom Glenn Common." Thereafter, the peninsula is renamed "Bellwether on the Bay."™
- **2001** – The tragic events of September 11 2001 fuel economic turmoil and cause a sharp downswing in the number of airline passengers using Bellingham International Airport. As a result, United Express pulls service from the airport in late 2001, leaving Horizon Air as the only passenger airline service left at the Airport. On the waterfront, 2001 would also see Georgia Pacific close its pulp and paper mill in December, although continue to operate its tissue-manufacturing plant, producing household products such as MD bathroom tissue and Sparkle paper towels.
- **2004** – The Port of Bellingham helps oversee rehabilitation of soft-shore beach at Marine Park near Fairhaven to create a more habitable area for wildlife, as well as a more durable shoreline in an area famous for its near complete lack of beaches.
- **2005** – On January 20, 2005, the Port of Bellingham acquires Georgia Pacific's 137 acres of waterfront property in exchange for the Port's agreement to take on specific aspects of the larger environmental cleanup still necessary. After Georgia Pacific ceases all Bellingham operations in 2007, the Port begins working with other local agencies to craft a complete redevelopment of the waterfront, including the creation of integrated mixed-use facilities, such as retail, commercial, marine, light industrial and residential units.
- **2006** – Delta Airlines announces that it will begin twice-daily flights from Bellingham International Airport to its main hub in Salt Lake City, beginning June 8 2006. Since 2001, the Port had been vigorously marketing the Airport to perspective airline services, resulting in Allegiant Air's 2004 announcement that they too would begin offering Bellingham-Las Vegas flights, and San Juan Airlines' resumption of

Bellingham services in 2002. Just a month before, the Port completed a massive $2 million renovation of the airport's interior spaces and exterior appearance.

- **2007** – The Port begins the removal of derelict creosote structures and pilings from the Squalicum Waterway put in place during the era of rapid World War II shipbuilding to improve fish access to Squalicum Creek and remove the potentially hazardous creosote pilings from the harbor.
That same year would also see two startup airlines come-and-go through Bellingham International Airport. First, Western Airlines began operating in Bellingham with flights to Ontario, San Diego and Phoenix. Commencing operations on January 18 2007, financial problems forced its closure less than a month later. Later in 2007, Skybus Airlines added flights from Bellingham to its Columbus, Ohio hub, but had ceased operations by October of 2007.

- **2009** – Alaska Airlines begins services at Bellingham International Airport after Delta Airlines ends its services in 2008. In 2009, 530,000 travelers would use the Bellingham International Airport.

Alaska-Airlines Jet takes off on its 2009 inaugural flight to Las Vegas, Nevada.