

Tofino Clayoquot Heritage Museum research document for Cedar Coast Field Station 2019

**Vargas Island History Document for**

Cedar Coast Field Research Station

Spring 2019

Research and writing conducted by Ava Hansen on behalf of the  
Tofino Clayoquot Heritage Museum except where noted otherwise

*This document comprises an incomplete history of Vargas Island in Clayoquot Sound. For more in-depth information on Vargas Island's history, visit the Tofino Clayoquot Heritage Museum at 331 Main Street, Tofino, BC.*

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Vargas Island is located in Clayoquot Sound. The word "Clayoquot" comes from the name "Tla-o-qui-aht" (pronounced as it is spelt). Many newcomers to the area in the late 1700s had a difficult time spelling or pronouncing Tla-o-qui-aht (ʔaʔuukʷiʔaθ̣). This is the name of one of three major First Nations within the Sound. The name means, loosely, "many different people" as various small groups joined to form this nation.

The other major nations in the Sound are the Ahousaht (ʔaʔuʔaθ̣) Nation and Hesquiaht Nation. Ahousaht means "people of Ahous" (referring to Ahous Bay on the west side of Vargas Island) and the name Hesquiaht is related to the sound made when one is eating herring roe, a local springtime delicacy. The current-day main village site for the Ahousaht Nation is at Maaqtusiis (also spelt Marktosis) on Flores Island.

All three nations are part of the Nuu-chah-nulth (Nuučaan̓uɫ̓) Nations. Historically these nations were referred to as the "Nootka Tribes" or the "-Aht Tribes." Nuu-chah-nulth, a name that means "all along the mountains and the sea" links 18 separate Nations that speak or spoke dialects of the Nuu-chah-nulth language. This name was chosen by Nation representatives in 1978.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Arima, E. Y., "Nuu-chah-nulth (Nootka)", *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/nootka-nuu-chah-nulth>, pub. February 7, 2006, ed. November 12, 2018.

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All the Nuu-chah-nulth Nations were and are connected to coastal life. Pre-1900 they were well known as whaling communities, a very respected and dangerous job.

In the forest there is also a deeply integrated connection to the western red cedar tree (huumiis) sometimes referred to as “the tree of life.” From this people made houses, boxes, clothing, buckets, blankets, mats, hats, and many other necessities of life. Careful diligence in harvesting allowed community members to ensure they were not over-harvesting, ensuring resources would be available to future generations.

The Nuu-chah-nulth peoples (kuu’us) are not people of the past, though some lifeways have changed as they will in any culture over time. Nearly 4500 people self-identified as Nuu-chah-nulth in a 2016 Canada census. Many people live in the communities that their ancestors founded, while others live elsewhere in Canada and abroad.

The Ahousaht Nation is the nation most linked to Vargas Island. Another nation, the Kilsama?ath (also spelt Keltsemaht or Kelsemat) also has important links to the area. Yarksis was the main village site for the Keltsemaht Nation on the west side of Father Charles Channel and between the location of the Cedar Coast Field Station and Mud Bay. The Keltsemaht and Ahousaht Nations have since been amalgamated.

## **The Name Vargas**

The name Vargas is one of many Spanish names given to the various smaller islands off the west coast of Vancouver Island. In 1791 Lieutenant Commander Eliza named the island Isla de Feran. Only a year later Commander Galiano and Commander Valdes changed the name to Isla de Vargas on their charts. It’s assumed that the namesake was the governor of New Mexico in the 1690s.<sup>2</sup>

## **Sealing Industry**

By the late 1800s, the Pelagic fur seal hunting had begun. Hunters from Clayoquot Sound were renowned for their skill and local store keepers such as Walter Dawley or

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<sup>2</sup>Walbran, Captain John T. *British Columbia Coast Names: 1592-1906*. Vancouver: J.J. Douglas Ltd., 1971.

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Fred Thornberg would communicate with sealing schooner captains in Victoria to organize the commissioning of local crew.

Around 1887 the sealing schooner *Active* sunk, taking with it all 29 men, including 24 Kilsama?ath (Kelsemaht) sealers. Margaret Horsfield writes “nineteen widows and forty-two orphans were left behind, and the comparatively small Kelsemat tribe was devastated.”<sup>3</sup> Fred Thornberg, the general store manager at Clayoquot was blamed as responsible for their deaths as he had convinced them to take the hunting contract despite their concerns about the weather.

## Residential Schools

In 1895 the Ahousaht Indian Day school, Presbyterian run, was opened. It was located south of the Maaqtusiis Reserve on Flores Island. It ran as a day school until 1904 and then as an informal boarding school from 1904-1916 and again from 1918-1940.<sup>4</sup> After 1925 it was United Church run. When the school opened five chiefs sent in a petition to Clifford Sifton, Secretary General of Indian Affairs, to state their concerns that the children were being sent to the school against their will and against the will of their parents.<sup>5</sup> A portion of the response states: “the detention at school (against the wishes of their father) of two children from your reserve” and states that “the Department has secured their discharge and taken steps to prevent a repetition of this occurrence”<sup>6</sup> though it is unknown what actions were taken on the ground.

Begun in 1900, a Catholic Residential School was also opened on Meares Island at Kakawis. It was called Christie Indian Residential School. This is directly across the channel from Rassier Point. This school was run until 1971. After the Ahousaht Residential School closed some children went to the Chrisite School instead. Over the years, especially initially, the schools competitively tried to enrol more children than the other.

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<sup>3</sup> Horsfield, Margaret, *Voices of the Sound: Chronicles of Clayoquot Sound and Tofino 1899 - 1929*, pg. 30.

<sup>4</sup>The United Church of Canada Archives, “Ahousaht Indian Residential School,” *Residential School Archive Project: The Children Remembered*.

<sup>5</sup> <https://thechildrenremembered.ca/school-locations/ahousaht/>

<sup>6</sup>See S. Stewart, Assistant Secretary, Department of Indian Affairs (DIA), to Chief Billy, Oct. 14, 1904, RG10, vol. 6430, file 876-1, pt. 1, LAC.

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## Ranching on Vargas Island

In 1908 the Lennard Island lighthouse keeper and his family were struck with tragedy. The youngest member of the family, 1-year-old Edward, had eaten a piece of lye and died. While grieving for Edward the Garrards decided to make a new start and moved from Lennard Island. They spent some time on Vargas and also had a home in Tofino. Frank Garrard established a partnership with Pierre A. Hovelque in pre-empting 1280 acres of land on Vargas Island. They parceled up the land and advertised it to old friends and past neighbours from around British Columbia and England. Their venture was called the Clayoquot Development League 1912.<sup>7</sup>

### Pre-emption:



Pierre Alexis Hovelaque went to England and Vargas Island gained a good reputation among those in his social circle and a few decided to 'give it a go' on the Island. Some of them were Arthur and Ted Abraham, Donald Forsythe, Frederick Sydney Price, Freeman and Frank Hopkins, and Harold Monks sr.

Most of these men intended to make a living farming. Walking around Vargas, I'm sure you can imagine the difficulties they encountered such as dense forest and bog where the forest thinned. Luckily, the Clayoquot cannery was hiring. Around 1913 families began to arrive and congregated at the north end of Vargas, called Port Gillam.

In 1914 the pioneers attempted to build a wharf at Port Gillam. It didn't last one full year due to winter storms. Nonetheless coastal steamships did make regular stops at Port

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<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>[https://royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/assets/Pre-emptions\\_homesteads\\_quick\\_guide.pdf](https://royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/assets/Pre-emptions_homesteads_quick_guide.pdf)

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Gillam until 1918. Port Gillam - named in honour of Captain Edward Gillam of the *Tees* and *Princess Maquinna*.<sup>9</sup> The wharf would have been quite near to Eby Rock where the navigational aid is at the northeast tip of Vargas, in Calmus Passage.

### **McKenna-McBride Commission**

In 1914 the McKenna-McBride Commission, which was touring the province, visited Clayoquot Sound. They heard complaints from Ahousaht and Keltsemaht Band members about which land was or was not yet set aside as reserve land. This resulted in some reserve land changes in 1916.<sup>10</sup>

### **1914-1950s**

Jacob Eby was a pioneer known for his free-range oxen who helped clear a trail from Suffolk Bay to Open Bay (also known as Ahous Bay, ?aahuus, or aa?aps)<sup>11</sup> for a corduroy road. It seems that this route was already one of a few trails across the Island. Ahousaht Indian Reservation #16 is located on the north side of Ahous Point.<sup>12</sup>

Farming was not turning out to be an easy or profitable venture for the new pioneers on Vargas Island. After the United Kingdom joined fighting in the Great War many of the Vargas men rowed over to Tofino to enlist. In total, 17 men from Vargas Island enlisted between August 1914 and October 1917. After the war only two of the returning men decided to stay on Vargas Island. Eight of the men sent money home to their families on Vargas, five men were wounded, and three died including Arthur Abraham, Sydney Price, and Don Forsythe.

In the midst of wartime, in 1916, Helen Carolan started a school on Vargas. Esther Hopkins and Harry Hilton were involved, but the school didn't seem to last too long.

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<sup>9</sup> Horsfield, Margaret. *Voices from the Sound: Chronicles of Clayoquot Sound and Tofino 1899-1929*, pg. 250.

<sup>10</sup>BC Union of Indian Chiefs. [https://www.ubcic.bc.ca/online\\_resources](https://www.ubcic.bc.ca/online_resources).

<sup>11</sup>Bouchard, Randy and Dorothy Kennedy. *Clayoquot Sound Indian Land Use Report*, Report prepared for 'MacMillan Bloedel Limited Fletcher Challenge Canada and the British Columbia Ministry of Forests', Victoria, BC: 1990, pg. 398. (Note that this sources is sometimes in question of accuracy).

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid*, pg. 401.

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In 1918 Dorothy Abraham journeyed to the west coast of Canada as a war bride. She was to meet her husband Ted Abraham who lived on Vargas Island. Ted and his brother Arthur (who died in WWI October 22, 1917 at Ypres). Ted's home was at the location now known as Abraham Meadows. For Dorothy it was a lot more remote than she had imagined. After giving the location a go the couple relocated to live in Suffolk Bay near Helen Malon (Ted's mother) and Pierre Hovelaque. From here they could visit more easily and see the settlement of Clayoquot which must have made company seem quite a bit closer. She wrote colourfully about her time on Vargas in a book entitled *Lonecone*.

Fletcher Cleland and his wife were quite a remote pair, living at Ahuos Bay (then called "Open Bay"). They were well-known for taking horse and buggy rides up and down the long stretch of beach. Cleland Island is located west of that Bay where the Clelands lived.

### **Neil and Marylin Buckle**

Neil Buckle (aged 12 at the time) moved to the west coast in 1949 with his parents Edgar and Evelyn and brother Dennis. Evelyn's father was Frank Garrard, the Lennard Light lighthouse keeper and business partner of Pierre Hovelaque. Their first home was at Combers Beach. When the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve was designated in 1971 the Buckles moved to Chesterman Beach and Vargas Island simultaneously<sup>13</sup>. In the 1980s the Buckles had a sawmill on Vargas Island. They milled quite a bit of the wood used in building homes along Chesterman Beach. They would mill the wood at Vargas Island and drive it to the Crab Dock, at the end of Olsen Road, by herring skiff and then continue on to Chesterman Beach by land.

### **Vargas Wolves**

In 2000, regional newspaper headlines reported "Wolf Attack has Science Community Mystified" (*Globe and Mail*). Throughout the recent preceding years wolves on the

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<sup>13</sup> Mason, Adrienne, *Long Beach Wild*, Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2012.

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Island had become habituated to human food and began acting differently than healthy adult wolves usually would.

This resulted in an attack on a kayaker who was sleeping under the stars on the beach. The man recovered with dozens of stitches to the head though. This was the only known wolf attack in the Pacific Rim to date and the first recorded wolf attack in BC in 100 years.<sup>14</sup>

Leading up to the attack the wolves on Vargas had been fed by people for years and were getting bold about being around campsites and finding food if they weren't given it directly. After this attack the two wolves that were most aggressive were killed by conservation officers.

This incident cemented the idea locally that humans are a major threat to wolves and in order for humans and wolves measures have to be taken to respect the animals' habitat and way of life. In 2019 a billboard was erected in the Pacific Rim National Park with a striking image of a wolf biting a water bottle saying "Human Food Kills Wildlife". Simple and direct, it reminds us that we're occupying space in wolf country, not the other way around.

## Provincial Park

The west half of Vargas Island was made into a 5,805 hectare provincial park in July, 1995.<sup>15</sup> Other portions of the Island are Indian Reservations or privately owned land. This also incorporates Blunden Island, a historic village site, and the marine environment adjacent.

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<sup>14</sup><https://thetyee.ca/News/2017/10/23/Wolves-Humans--Vancouver-Island/> ; Wild, Paula. *Return of the Wolf*. Madeira Park: Douglas & McIntyre, 2018.

<sup>15</sup>BC Provincial Parks, "Vargas Island Provincial Park Purpose Statement and Zoning Plan", February 2003. [http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/explore/parkpgs/vargas\\_is/](http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/explore/parkpgs/vargas_is/).

# TOFINO CLAYOQUOT

## HERITAGE MUSEUM

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## Stewardship Area

*\*The following content is verbatim from <http://www.mhssahousaht.ca/mhss>.*

In 2012 the The MaaqutusiisHahoulthee Stewardship Society (MHSS) and the Ahous Business Corporation (ABC) were incorporated by the Ahousaht Hawiuh, Chief & Council and advisors.

Vargas Island stewardship areas are divided between private land, community development, Ahousaht Indian Reserves, and Cultural and Natural land management areas.

## Vargas Island in 2019

Today Vargas Island continues to be a popular spot for recreational sea kayakers, a lucky island for sighting whales, home to a coastal wolf population, and the home of a few private citizens and the Cedar Coast Field Station.





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We hope that this synopsis was helpful in providing an overview of the area. For more information on local history please see the Tofino Clayoquot Heritage Museum website, [www.tofinomuseum.com](http://www.tofinomuseum.com). There you'll also find current hours of operation for the museum as well as upcoming events and programming and our blog.

### **Timeline**

1774 Juan Perez sails up the coast from San Blas Mexico to Nootka Sound. Almost 'claims' the land for Spain, but is prevented from landing by inclement weather.

1778 James Cook lands in Nootka Sound. His crew sells sea otter pelts in China and the 'soft gold' rush begins.

1790-1810 Height of trade for sea otter pelts.

1811 Trading hiatus after the *Tonquin* incident.

1855 First trading post on Stubbs Island.

1864 The destruction of the *Kingfisher* near Flores Island. Resulted in shelling of several Ahousaht villages.

1868-1911 Pelagic fur seal hunt industry gets going.

1875 First missionary since departure of Spanish stays at Hesquat.

1885 Fred Thornberg ran the Stubbs Island trading post.

1887 The sealing schooner *Active* sunk, taking with it all 29 men including 24 Kilsama?ath (Kelsemaht) sealers.

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1886-1889 Peter O'Reilly the Indian reserve commissioner allotted reserve land throughout the Sound.

1890s First trickle of homesteaders in Clayoquot Sound.

1904-1940 Ahousaht Presbyterian Residential School in Operation.

1908 Francis Garrard and Pierre Alexis Hovelaque buy property on Vargas Island to parcel off.

1912 F. G. and P.A.H. establish the Clayoquot Development League 1912 and pioneers start arriving the next year.

1913-1952 The *Princess Maquinna* services the west coast.

1914 Port Gillam wharf is built and is quickly destroyed in a winter storm.

1914 (June) Helen Malon starts a post-office out of her house on Vargas Island.

1914 The McKenna-McBride Commissioners interview Ahousaht and Keltsema residents.

1914-1918 The First World War. Many Vargas Island 'ranchers' go to war overseas.

1916 Keltsema is allotted a new reserve land adjacent to a traditional house site.

1916 Helen Carolan starts a short-lived school on Vargas.

1918 Dorothy Abraham comes from England to Vargas Island with her new husband Ted.

1919 Ted Abraham (Helen Malon's son) takes over the post office.

1920 The Vargas Island post office closes.



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1930s-1950s Stanley Sam oversaw his trapline.

1949 The Buckle family moves to the coast.

1980s Buckle family had a sawmill on Vargas Island.

1983 BC Packers closes, last plant that processes wild salmon.

1984 Meares Island Logging Protest and Court Case and Tribal Park declaration.

2000 UNESCO Biosphere Reserve designation.

2000 Wolf attack on Vargas Island after conditioning to human food.

2016 the Maaqutusiis Stewardship society determined a permit area.