Taking the sand out of ‘Sand Point’

How Sandpoint’s namesake substance helped the region’s railroads

By Hannah Combs

“Sandpoint’ suggests and always will suggest to the outsider a dreary waste of blowing sand,” wrote George R. Barker, editor of the Pend d’Oreille Review newspaper, in 1913.

Today we may scoff at this ungenerous description of the natural beach from which Sandpoint takes its name. We might chuckle at the alternate names townspeople proposed to replace Sandpoint, including Corbin City — intended to draw railroad business from D.C. Corbin and the Spokane International — or Lucerne, after a beautiful lake in Switzerland but ultimately deemed too romantic a name to “tickle the fancy of the old timers.”

In the early 1880s, according to Mel Nesbitt, a child at the time, “the bathing beach was a mountain of glistening white sand with a few pine trees on its crest.” The sand was deposited by the currents sweeping around the point and down the river. The Kalispel and other Salish tribes regularly camped on the pristine beach; but, by the turn of the century, the iconic “sand point” was no longer the natural beauty of years past and neither was it yet the idyllic, manicured face and shape of our “sand point” has changed frequently.

Through it all, despite decades of disagreement, the name Sandpoint continues: was hooked up to dozens of bike trailers loaded with brimming baskets; was hooked up to dozens of bike trailers loaded with brimming baskets.

Barker’s biting criticism of exertion. But what if the bicycle were hooked up to dozens of bike trailers loaded with brimming baskets? Then it would be easy to come by a reliable inland supply until the NP tapped the potential of the sandy shores of Lake Pend Oreille. The sand at Sandpoint’s beach was deemed perfectly suited to serve the Northern Pacific’s rail line. Though the fineness of Sandpoint’s sand was desirable, one characteristic was absolutely essential: The sand had to be bone dry to be effective. The Northern Pacific set about building a “sand spur,” or dead-end track, off their main line near the Sandpoint depot, down toward the beach.

Next to it, they built a “sand house.” The damp sand was stored in a fenced area next to a small building. Inside, sand was shoveled into a furnace and dried. The sand was then loaded into gondola cars and transported to a sand tower. An engine at a maintenance facility would sidle into a sanding spur, stop under the sand tower while a hostler or fireman filled its sand dome.

With so much industrial activity happening on the shores of Lake Pend Oreille, it’s no wonder that the citizens of early Sandpoint were eager to draw attention away with a more “distinctive” name. At some point, it seems that the Northern Pacific was at risk of over-extracting from the beach. Mel Nesbitt remembered, “Only congressional action on request of the local citizens’ petition presented in person by W.F. Whitaker [the first state senator from Bonner County] stopped the devastation.”

The “dreary waste of blowing sand” was eventually restored by the healing river currents. Over the years the area has been reimagined many times, becoming the recreational space we all know today. From Indigenous camping grounds to a sand pit to City Beach, the face and shape of our “sand point” has changed frequently.

Through it all, despite decades of disagreement, the name Sandpoint has stuck around.

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