

Sampson Johns was the beach's first modern hero

In a secluded patch of ground between Ocean City and Hogan's Corner lies the grave of the first modern hero of the North Beach area—Sampson Johns.

Johns was a Quinault Indian living almost due west of Hogan's Corner during the latter half of the Nineteenth Century and into the first third of the Twentieth Century.

Johns, and his wife Mary, fished and hunted seal skins for their living. They used wooden dugout canoes to go out in the ocean for their trading goods. But Johns also used the canoes to save lives.

Johns helped save crews from two ships in two years, 1886 and 1888. For this he received the Congressional Medal of Honor and a medal from Queen Victoria of England.

The first ship in distress was the *Lillie Grace*, a Chilean Bark. The wood-and-metal 545-ton ship was on a voyage from Port Discovery to Valparaiso when it sprung a leak Dec. 14, 1886 off Cape Flattery.

The captain of the vessel, Charles Wall, had the crew build rafts and put them in tow behind the *Grace*.

On Dec. 19, the rafts broke free, the ship had 12 feet of water in the hold, and a storm roared in upon them. To save the crew, the captain grounded the *Grace* on the beach in front of John's house, just short of the mouth of Grays Harbor.

The morning of Dec. 20, Johns took his

dugout through the breakers to rescue the stranded crew of the *Grace*. All crew members were saved in this episode.

The sailors of the English bark *Abercorn* were not as lucky, however. They were going from Maryport, England to Portland, Ore. with a cargo of rails.

The *Abercorn* reached the entrance of the Columbia River on Jan. 10, 1888. There, Captain William Irvine turned control of his ship over to an experienced bar pilot, Charles Johnson, to get the ship from the ocean to the river.

Pilot Johnson lost his bearings, however, when a dense fog rolled in. The vessel began drifting north, past Willapa and Grays Harbor, finally coming to rest approximately 10 miles north of the Grays Harbor entrance early in the morning Jan. 12.

Only three seamen made it to shore from the stranded wreckage, with 14 crew members, Captain Irvine, and Pilot Johnson all dying as the boat was battered by wind and waves.

Johns took the sailors into his home, and then gathered the bodies strewn along the beach. These bodies are now buried in the same Indian graveyard as Johns himself.

With the notoriety Johns accumulated through these heroic deeds, it was discovered that Johns did not own the land he lived on, according to Ann Cotton, historian for the Aberdeen Public Library.

She says that Johns filed for the property under homestead laws, but was informed he was not responsible for property taxes, since he was an Indian.

It seems as though the county didn't agree with that interpretation, however, as reported by the *Aberdeen Herald* Jan. 15, 1881:

"Sampson Johns... who wears many medals as rewards for his courageous conduct in saving from drowning members of two shipwrecked crews, is now trying to save his land from his white brother.

"Johns filed on a strip of land near Damon's Point (Point Brown), but through neglecting to follow up the filing his entry was canceled, and now the land has been filed over by J. France of Hoquiam. Johns expects to contest."

Eventually Johns did get his land back, and the property is presently Indian Trust Property, with the BIA holding the deed and the property tax-free.

The property owned by Johns originally extended from the high water line on the west to the edge of an area presently called Sampson, a camp between the Ocean Shores Camping Club and Ocean West on the north, through Ocean West to a line marked by a row of telephone poles going from the road to Ocean Shores down to the beach on the south, over past the intersection of State Highway 109 and the road to Ocean Shores on the east.



Sampson Johns

In all, the county has that block of land and accreted land in the form of built-up beach listed as 160 acres of Indian Trust land.

In actuality, some of that land has been sold or leased to other parties who must pay tax on the section they use.

Johns was always a simple man at heart, but did acquire quite an interest in automobiles. In fact, he hired a young Black driver named Walt Allen.

Allen to this day lives in Sampson, but is presently building a house on Chenois Creek property he owns.

Johns died around the era of the depression, but his relatives still live on, both in and out of the area.



bravery medal for saving ship crew



gravestone of a son and a daughter on banks of Conner Creek