⟫ Gunkholing

By **Jennifer and James Hamilton**

Through the Looking Glass

THE WATER DWELLERS OF SULLIVAN BAY

The concept of a floating, mobile community is so unusual that the National Film Board of Canada featured one in a 1960's documentary. *The Water Dwellers* depicted a village not far removed from the through-the-looking-glass wonderland of Lewis Carroll's Alice, unique to the B.C. coast, if not much of the modern world. Skiff and motorboat functioned as bicycle and car. With the stroke of a tugboat engine, the whole affair could vanish and reappear somewhere entirely of its own choosing. Once common upcoast, most floating settlements—including the documentary's setting—have now disappeared. But some are still left. Sullivan Bay is one of them.

We first came here on our 40' Bayliner *Dirona* seeking fuel, an apt quest as

Sullivan Bay was born of fuel. In 1944, a logging camp on Kinnaird Island became an aviation-fuel depot here on North Broughton Island. Floatplanes were like time machines to the upcoast resident; trips that once took days by boat, the only mode of travel, could suddenly be made in hours. As the restrictions of World War II lifted, business boomed, and the just-add-water community of Sullivan Bay become a regular stop for planes and boats alike.

A boat beneath a sunny sky lingering onward dreamily in an evening of July—

As we approach from a distance, the village seems perfectly normal: a fair-sized community strung out along North Broughton Island's northern shore. Near-

ing, we feel like Alice peering through the looking glass. None of the houses are on shore, where buildings are supposed to be. All are afloat. Tying off, we step through the mirror. Signs direct us down Market Street to its intersection with Main Street. A man takes a daily "walk" by jumping off the dock and swimming across the bay. A woman escorts her dogs to the "Poop Deck", a floating puppy commode. The Sullivan Bay one-hole golf course lets those yearning for the green drive a ball into the aquamarine. Like Alice, we exclaim, "Curiouser and curiouser."

In a Wonderland they lie, dreaming as the days go by, dreaming as the summers die…

Floatplanes still arrive often but the community's focus has shifted to boaters drawn by the slow pace and grand scenery on the far side of the Broughton Archipelago. They are also drawn by the Sullivan Bay Resort's fuel station, restaurant, store and moorage. But it is the warmth and quirkiness of the village that brings people back. Some have trouble leaving this wonderland and stay through the summer, if not longer. The current owner, Lynn Whitehead, arrived in the 1970s and was hooked.

Lynn and her husband Pat Finnerty live in Sullivan Bay's growing float-home community. The buildings range in style from upcoast traditional to Seattle-inspired modern. One even has a helicopter tucked against its eaves. But no matter what the design, none seem out of place. Actually, unusual takes on a whole new meaning after a few minutes at Sullivan Bay.

Ever drifting down the stream—lingering in the golden gleam—life, what is it but a dream?

Whitehead's late father, Ed Price, gave the village much of its current fairy-tale aura and local color, literally. An artist, Price painted on almost anything, including propane tanks, walls, doors and fence posts. The town's famous feline, Alley,

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probably knew to keep his distance.

Price's drawings are a looking glass within the one that is Sullivan Bay. Many reflect the settlement's past and present, sometimes from a rather unusual perspective. A large oil reservoir mirrors the view out a curtain-framed float-home window: An eagle lands in Sullivan Bay, with Alley perched on a couch and binoculars on the windowsill. Others are even more fanciful, with English garden paths leading to distant fields. And all draw us into Price's dreamlike world.

We find firmer footing in the Town Hall, which houses many photographs

and mementos from Sullivan Bay's past. Several feature the work of coastal legend Jim Spilsbury, whose pioneering efforts in two fields reduced upcoast isolation and earned him the Order of British Columbia, the province's highest honor. Starting in the 1920s, Spilsbury built, installed and fixed radios throughout the coast. In a land without wires, coastal settlements until then could communicate only by boat; radio was revolutionary. We are delighted to find an original "Spilsbury and Tindall" radio telephone that once linked Sullivan Bay with the outside world.

Spilsbury also founded Queen Charlotte Airlines, which became the third largest in Canada and a major Sullivan Bay fuel client. The odd assortment of planes flown in by QCA, a.k.a. "Queer Collection of Aircraft," are featured in several Town Hall photographs.

Back at our boat we find Alley, Sullivan Bay's own Cheshire Cat, perched comfortably on our back deck.

"Cheshire-Puss …Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

"I don't much care where—" said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.

Following the Cheshire Cat's guidance, we slowly cruise away from Sullivan Bay. Although we have no particular destination in mind, we are certain that we will arrive.

Poetry excerpted from "A Boat beneath a Sunny Sky" in Through the Looking Glass. *Final quote from* Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. *Both are by Lewis Carroll.*

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