

# Welcome...

to  
**Emmanuel Episcopal Parish**  
of  
**Orcas Island**

By Marjorie Bevlin

**Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14**

Emmanuel is the Greek form of the Hebrew Immanuel, which means “God with us”.

## Historical Background

Emmanuel Church began with a romance and a dream. The romance began across the sea when love blossomed between Sidney Robert Spenser Gray, a red-haired Englishman, product of Eton and Oxford and a student of painter James Abbott McNeill Whistler, and Alma Mecklenberg, daughter of the reigning duke of Mecklenberg-Schwerin, which had recently become a part of the German State. Both families were aghast at the love affair, the Mecklenbergs at the thought of an alliance below their level of nobility, the Grays at the idea of their son marrying a foreigner, particularly a German. Consequently, when the marriage took place without parental consent, both bride and groom were disinherited and they crossed the Atlantic to begin their life together on a new continent, sustained only by funds the bridegroom had previously managed to deposit in the bank under his own name. In the course of searching for a place to settle, Sidney Gray at the age of thirty, sporting red whiskers and filled with energy and vision, arrived on Orcas Island where he was authorized by the Diocesan hierarchy in Seattle to serve as lay missionary for the Episcopal Church. The landscape of the island with its forests and pastures, its hills and valleys carpeted with familiar wildflowers, struck a poignant note in Gray’s English heart, and it was not long before he was envisioning a picturesque village modeled on those of his native countryside, with separate schools for girls and boys, thriving businesses and nearby farms and, as the hub of the community, a charming English church. From this dream, Emmanuel Church came into being.

## The Church and the Island

Emmanuel Church was built on property deeded to the Episcopal congregation by Charles Shattuck, a mule-skinner from Michigan who had gone to California as a “forty-

niner". He also had mined along the Fraser River, and in the course of his trips back and forth by ox-cart, had rowed over to Orcas Island to investigate the hunting. He found deer and elk, pitched a tent on the beach, and sold deer hides and meat to traders from Victoria. Later he brought in a boat load of logs and built a cabin, married an Indian woman, built a store, and ultimately became Eastsound's first postmaster and Justice of the Peace. He is assumed to have been the first white settler in Eastsound. With Shattuck's gift of land, the congregation organized by Sidney Gray set about building the church to Gray's design. Michael Donahue constructed the church building, aided by Ed King and other local workmen.

Sidney Gray's vision extended far beyond his two Sunday sermons and his parish responsibilities. Discovering that the soil of Orcas Island was admirably suited to the growing of fruit, he conferred with a man who had been experimenting scientifically and learned that the island soil and climate were particularly favorable for the production of certain varieties of apples, and a type of plum known as Italian prunes, as well as pears and strawberries. Pursuing his vision of a thriving community, he persuaded several Puget Sound financiers to form a concern designated the Orcas Island Fruit Company, and residents all over the island rushed to clear land and plant fruit trees. As island businesses thrived, Sidney Gray developed his plans for his ideal "Village de Haro" to be located on Madrona Point, raising money to fund two private schools to be known as the De Haro School for boys and the St. Agnes School for girls. As a backup for his plans, he dispatched innumerable letters to England singing the praises of Orcas Island, and English and Scottish immigrants began to arrive to buy land and take their places in the new community.

The fortunes of Orcas Island, however, were subject to influences far beyond the island shores. By 1891 the president of Argentina had squandered government funds until the country defaulted on the British banks holding over a million dollars worth of bonds in its behalf, causing the closing of Baring Brothers and Company, one of the primary financial institutions in London. A panic ensued among those American banks controlled by Baring, and ultimately every bank in the Puget Sound area was affected, calling in notes and refusing to extend credit. Sidney Gray's dream of an English village was among the casualties. Finding themselves heavily in debt and with no resources to buy their land, the people of Orcas Island survived like the residents of the rest of the Pacific Northwest, by returning to primitive barter, growing their own food, and trading with their neighbors. In 1893, his dream shattered, the Reverend Mr. Gray resigned as vicar and accepted a call to be Rector of St. Stephen's Church in Waterloo, Wisconsin.

The vitality of Emmanuel Church reflected the fortunes of Orcas Island. During the six years in which the island enjoyed a thriving fruit industry, Emmanuel Church was the center of community activity. It continued its role until 1904 with the Rev. John William Dickson as vicar. A church had been built in Westsound, and another was started on Shaw Island, where the Rev. Dickson made his home. He came to Orcas by placing his horse on a scow behind a rowboat, rowing to Orcas Landing and riding the horse to Eastsound and Westsound for services. After the panic of 1907, the island and Eastsound declined. Irrigation was introduced to eastern Washington, making possible the

establishment of large-scale orchards, and the development of the railroad and improved highways made it cheaper to transport fruit by land than by sea. When Father Dickson left, the church stood empty, being without a vicar for twelve years. At the end of the time, the Diocese of Spokane was reorganized and the newly retired Archdeacon Henry J. Purdue came to Orcas Island, where he was persuaded to serve as vicar. After twelve years he retired once more, after which the church again stood empty.

During this period the ladies of St. Agnes' Guild moved into action, determined not to let the church fall into total disrepair. With bazaars, teas, recitals, and other money-making activities, they raised enough to have the church reshingled and ultimately, in 1948, were able to build the parish hall. Meanwhile, the church was being served by commuting clergymen, the Rev. Oliver Drew Smith who came from Mount Vernon from 1942 to 1949, and the Rev. George Pratt, who commuted from Abbotsford, British Columbia, from 1951 to 1953. In 1954 the Rev. Pratt was moved to the parish at Everson and Blaine and the Rev. Johnson West, who was then serving there, was sent to Orcas Island, where he served as resident priest for two years.

The building bordering the churchyard on the east (which has since been moved by barge to Lopez Island) was known as Benson Hall, named after the Rev. Glion Benson, who came to Orcas Island when the Rev. West became an Air Force chaplain in 1956. Father Benson loved the sea, was an accomplished sailor, and thoroughly enjoyed his island mission. In 1957 the Daughters of the King in the Seattle-Tacoma area raised money to buy a converted whaleboat, christened the Royal Cross, in which Father Benson and often "Mother Benson", spent many hours going to and from services on San Juan and Lopez Islands and making parish calls on various other islands as well. It was Father Benson who had a ship's mast erected in the churchyard, from which signal flags were flown during services, and Mother Benson who worked tirelessly to make the churchyard into a garden spot worthy of a church designed after those in her native England. Benson Hall, acquired in 1979, housed church offices and accommodated the Sunday School as well as many community meetings. Its churchyard entry was enhanced by a pair of stained glass windows, designed and executed by local artists to symbolize the lives of Father and Mother Benson.

When, sadly, Father Benson was felled by a heart attack, the Rev. Edward Leche took his place as Vicar of San Juan Islands Mission, including congregations on San Juan, Lopez, Shaw and Orcas Islands. When Emmanuel Church became a separate mission, he continued to serve until 1974 when Rev. West retired from the Air Force and returned as Vicar, serving for ten years during which Emmanuel became a parish, thus making him rector. During this time the LARC (Lutheran, Anglican and Roman Catholic) came into being in which the Episcopal congregation shares the church facilities with the two other liturgical congregations on the island (the Roman Catholic congregation has since built their own church building). In 1980 Father West initiated an exchange of pulpits with Rev. Robert Nichols of Lyndoch, South Australia, thus enabling the Orcas Island congregation to share in the worldwide concept of the Anglican Communion. In 1984 the Rev. Robert Howell came from the San Francisco Bay Area to serve as rector until 1987, after which the Rev. Patterson Keller of Cody, Wyoming, became the rector. By now,

fruit-growing had long been supplanted by tourism as the leading island industry, and the congregation continues to be composed not only of permanent year-round residents but of “snow-birds” who go south for the winter and of summer tourists and visitors.

### **Features of Interest**

As with any church, Emmanuel is also a living history of its members and of milestones in their lives. The marble plaques behind the choir memorialize early settlers, including Charles Shattuck, who gave the land for the church, and a little girl who dies at the age of eight. Stained glass windows on either side of the sanctuary commemorate the devotion of the first two clergymen, and the two chancel windows were a gift of Robert Moran, the builder of the mansion that became Rosario Resort. The Eucharistic candlesticks were given by Dr. Karl Moran in memory of his mother.

The altar rail and Bishop’s chair came from a 17<sup>th</sup> century church in England that was bombed during World War II, and the hanging lamps date from the days of Sidney Gray, having come around Cape Horn. Of the seven hanging in the sanctuary, the central one represents the Holy Spirit while the other six are symbols of the gifts of wisdom, understanding, counsel, ghostly (or spiritual) strength, piety, and holy fear. The prie dieux also date from the time of Sidney Gray, being listed in his inventory more than a century ago.

The stained glass windows in the narthex are in memory of two young men who had served as altar boys at Emmanuel Church and who were killed in action during the war in Vietnam. The bell that signals the beginning of services, peals for weddings and tolls for deaths, was cast in Holland. Nearly every item – prayer books, altar linens, vessels, service books, and candlesticks – has its special meaning as a symbol of a cherished relationship, with an individual, with the Church, and with God.

### **An Invitation**

The door to Emmanuel Church is never locked during the day. We welcome you and invite you to enter and feel the presence of God in this unique little church upon the rock, to attend a service if your time allows. Here, where the breezes of the sea caress the windows and the call of gulls punctuate the liturgy, and where people of all walks of life and all parts of the world have expressed their faith, may you, too, find peace.