

By Walter Guppy

ON THE HIGHWAY through Pacific Rim National Park, west of the Port Alberni-Ucluelet-Tofino junction, a sign points out a paved road on the seaward side as leading to a gold mine.

This road ends a short distance from the highway at a parking lot where another sign explains there was placer mining early in the century at Wreck Bay. The site is two kilometres farther on, along a path which ends at a pool at the mouth of a stream known as Lost Shoe Creek.

The official name of the bay is Florencia Bay. Wreck Bay is the popular local name. Both, no doubt, derived from the same tragic incident; the wreck of the sailing vessel "Florencia" on the island off the beach in 1865.

The name "Lost Shoe" for the creek is obscure. It would have been more appropriate to have named it "Found Gold Creek" or "Binns Creek" to commemorate the finding of gold by a pioneer settler of Ucluelet, Charles C. "Cap" Binns, in 1898.

The gold is evidently derived from the erosion of the high bank extending the length of the beach except where broken by the course of Lost Shoe Creek. The action of the surf during winter storms would have concentrated it at the base of the cliffs. Access to this beach in the early days was over a rough 10 kilometre-long trail from Ucluelet or, alternatively, from a boat landed on the beach in the surf.

Officers of the coastal steamer Willapa were among the first to learn of the discovery of gold here and to stake claims. The *Daily Colonist* gave extensive coverage to these events. The first item, which was published in the issue of July, 18, 1900, read:

*"The black sand placers at Wreck Bay were discovered in May last year, but nothing was known of them until about a month later, when news of the find leaked out. The officers of the Willapa were among the first to stake properties and they formed the Willapa group. The find was made by C.C. Binns. He and many of the other locators, after working independently for some time, pooled their interests and arrangements were made with Messrs. Graham and Sutton to work the properties, they to receive 65 per cent interest for working the mines. Until recently they worked only with rockers and with a small gold-saving machine, but being confident that big returns will be given by the area of black sand, arrangements were made for the construction of a long flume to carry water to the property and machines to more extensively work the mines are to be put in. The nine hundred dollars brought down yesterday is not the first shipment from the mine, for several*



WALTER GUPPY PHOTO

The mouth of Lost Shoe Creek as it looks today, flowing across the beach at Wreck Bay, once the site of gold fever.

# Gold of Wreck Bay

*others have previously been sent down. This is the largest, though, yet received."*

Subsequent *Daily Colonist* reports provide more details about the operations at Wreck Bay, such as the following excerpt from the issue of July 29, 1900, which states that Sutton's small gold saving machine recovered \$120 in one day:

*"The output of the black sand shovelled on to his gold-saving plates during the morning of Thursday last amounted to \$20, and in the afternoon the yield went as high as \$100. So rich is the bedrock on the beach in places that the miners have taken out within the past few days as much as from one dollar to three dollars to the pan."*

In the issue of Sept. 7, 1900, it was reported that a parcel of gold valued at \$1,500 had been sent down on the Willapa by J.E. Sutton from the Wreck Bay

mines. It was stated that this was "the product of two week's work with the small gold-saving machine and a scanty supply of water." The item also mentions that the flume had been completed and it was expected that when the larger machines were put into operation, recoveries of a least \$200 per day were anticipated. Details of the operation with the larger machines is provided in the October 9th issue of the *Daily Colonist*:

*"At Wreck Bay great activity prevailed. The new large gold-saving machine was placed in operation on Friday last, and the*

*first day of operation the amalgam plates in the sluices caught no less than \$300. The second day's proceeds amounted to some \$500. When the Willapa left, there was \$4,000 at the mines awaiting shipment ... The larger machine has four amalgam plates thickly coated with quick-silver, and these catch all the gold from the black sand thrown into the sluices and washed over them.*

*The miners intend to work as long as weather will permit. It is feared that the heavy winter tides, though, will compel them to stop work for a period, for the wintry seas sweep right up onto the beach where they are now working. They expect to take at least \$300,000 from the property."*

Later reports confirm that fears that the operation would have to close for winter conditions were justified. The section of the flume along the beach was carried away in a storm. This flume is reported to



have extended for almost two kilometres up Lost Shoe Creek and to have included two bridges, one 25 metres long and the other 45 metres in length, with some 400 metres of trestles, as much as six

metres high in some places. It is reported that \$10,000 was spent on construction of the flume and other facilities.

The operation resumed in the spring and continued over the next few years with a smelting device being added in 1901 so that the gold could be cast into ingots and sold at a higher price. It has been reported that the total gold production from Wreck Bay placers amounted to about \$40,000, so evidently it did not quite come up to the most optimistic expectations.

The last *Daily Colonist* report of gold production from Wreck Bay appeared in the issue of June 29, 1901. It reported that two gold bricks, with a combined weight of 124.67 ounces, were sent down and sold to the Canadian Bank of Commerce for \$2,020.

Since that time there have been dredging operations at Lost Shoe Creek that appear to have been more promotional than productive and one or two old fossickers were still scrabbling for gold along the beach up to the time the area was made into a national park in 1971.

*Walter Guppy lives in Tofino, retired after a career as electrical contractor and prospector. He has published Clayoquot Soundings and is working on a history of mining on Vancouver Island.*



BCARS D-01359

Graham and Sutton, panning the claim.



**L**AND IS OUT OF SIGHT and the wind is picking up enough to force you out on deck to shorten sail. Back in the cabin, you can turn on the ham radio knowing one of the few comforts aboard the pitching vessel will be hearing the voice of Peter Thomas.

On the West Coast, it is not only goalies who are netminders. Six nights a week, Thomas, also known as VE7PT, signs on at 14.115 Mhz as a service to the local Bluewater Cruising Association. From his home in Saanich, he is the

local net-minder. Just as Lorne Greene was the radio's "voice of doom" for Canadians during the Second World War, Thomas is the voice of home for faraway sailors.



**SUSAN  
DOWN**

"His voice is very distinctive and very comforting," said Greg

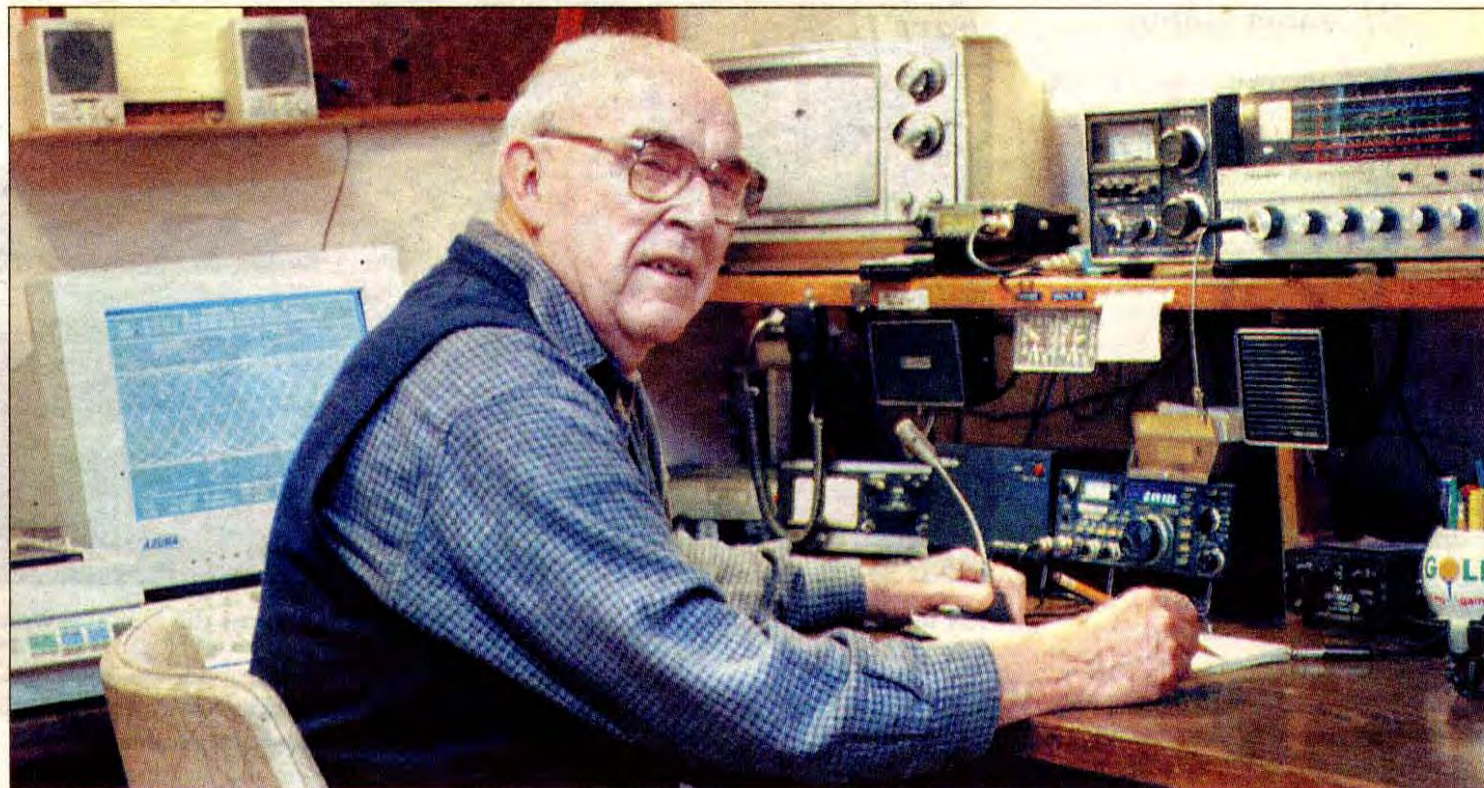
Soroka, who took a year off during 1996-97 to cruise with his wife Patricia in the South Pacific. He said that when something went wrong on the boat, "Peter was very cool, very philosophical. He'll let you rant, but won't feel sorry for you."

Soroka liked the contact particularly while he was singlehanded on the month-long passages to and from French Polynesia. Since Thomas had a weatherfax, Soroka would consult him to confirm the forecast information he had received from the U.S. coast guard radio broadcasts.

The billiard-like properties of radio-wave propagation mean a radio transmission's range can be extended by bouncing off the ionosphere, allowing hams to contact friends in another hemisphere. But these natural laws have their own quirks. Last summer, during a cruise to the Queen Charlottes, Soroka discovered that to contact Thomas he had to call Edmonton and forward the message to New Zealand before the signal could be heard in Victoria.

Now that his boat is moored in Victoria again, Soroka has finally met his long distance companion and occasionally tunes in to talk to Thomas on a slow night on the net.

Raised on a farm in Alberta, in a region where all the towns were named for British battleships, Thomas, now 77, perfected his navigation and electronics skills after he joined the Royal Canadian Navy. He served aboard HMCS Lanark on the convoy escort run between Newfoundland and Londonderry. In the postwar years, he instructed navigation at Naden and at UBC and later acted as commanding officer of HMCS Malahat.



RAY SMITH PHOTO

## Netminder to the bluewater fleet

With degrees from the University of Alberta and UBC, Thomas settled in Victoria, teaching high school at Mount Newton and later Royal Oak (where he was principal). He was secretary-supervisor of instruction for School District 63 when he retired in 1981.

Now, instead of students or recruits, he has about 90 sailors on his roster. He speaks to the handful who check in every evening in the fatherly tone — punctuated by his gentle chuckle — that he probably used to address errant teenagers. Of necessity, after fielding calls from Vanuatu to Madagascar, his knowledge of geography is sharp.

The questions asked most often usually concern the NHL or the World Series. "When the playoffs are on, I have the sports pages open right beside me when I'm on the radio," he said. Election or referendum results are in demand as well,

although Thomas tries to keep the chat neutral. Birthday greetings and other messages are regular requests, and even consultations with sailing doctors have been arranged.

Thomas was close to retirement when he bought his first amateur radio rig from his son. The Morse code requirements weren't difficult for Thomas after his naval experience, and he earned his ham licence in 1978.

His career as a volunteer netminder began in 1986

when an anxious friend phoned him one night to ask for help in contacting her daughter and husband who were sailing offshore. En route from the Marquesas to Vancouver, the couple hadn't been heard from in weeks. Since the couple didn't have a ham licence and couldn't be contacted directly, Thomas hailed local netminder Gerry Anscorb, who immediately put out a call. A contact in the Marquesas said he'd find the sailors, and within 24 hours came the reassuring message that the boat had just arrived.

When Anscorb retired from his ham duties in 1992, Thomas took over the responsibilities, working with Saltspring ham Jim Spencer as well as other contacts in Calgary and Edmonton.

One of 45,000 amateur radio operators in Canada, Thomas has combined old and

*From Vanuatu to Madagascar, Peter Thomas is the voice of home to bluewater sailors.*

new technologies. By linking his computer with the radio, he can send e-mail messages as well as voice transmissions.

Each morning Thomas talks to naval contemporaries in Western Canada on the White Ensign Amateur Radio Net. He has also offered his services to regional emergency planners. In the event of an earthquake, he already knows where he should go — the Gorge Road Hospital radio room setting up a communications network.

Beyond his radio room, Thomas is a golfer, a photographer and a gardener, a man who can converse knowingly about compost recipes or the best way to capture Hale-Bopp comet on film. He is also a devoted attendant to his wife Kaye, in hospital recovering from a stroke.

Although he takes a month off in the summer and the occasional evening for a meeting, most of the time it's his voice you'll hear, as workaday as traffic, as familiar as Oprah, its reassuring sound soothing sailors far from home.

*Susan Down is a Times Colonist staff writer and a keen sailor.*