

Islander

An Island In History

Pat Burkette, Saltspring Island

They created a love story with their life on Wallace
Island,
but the path of true love never did run smoothly

Take a newlywed couple named David and Jeanne. Give them big dreams and few dollars. Make their address an uninhabited island. You've got the bare bones of a utopian deserted island myth, a.k.a. mysterious island syndrome. Myth or syndrome, isolation leads to creation of an alternate world.

Literature's Captain Nemo, Robinson Crusoe and Swiss Family Robinson all knew such solitude. Hollywood has capitalized on the concept with such TV shows like Gilligan's Island, Fantasy Island and Survivor or such movies as The Blue Lagoon or CastAway. But truth can be stranger than fiction.

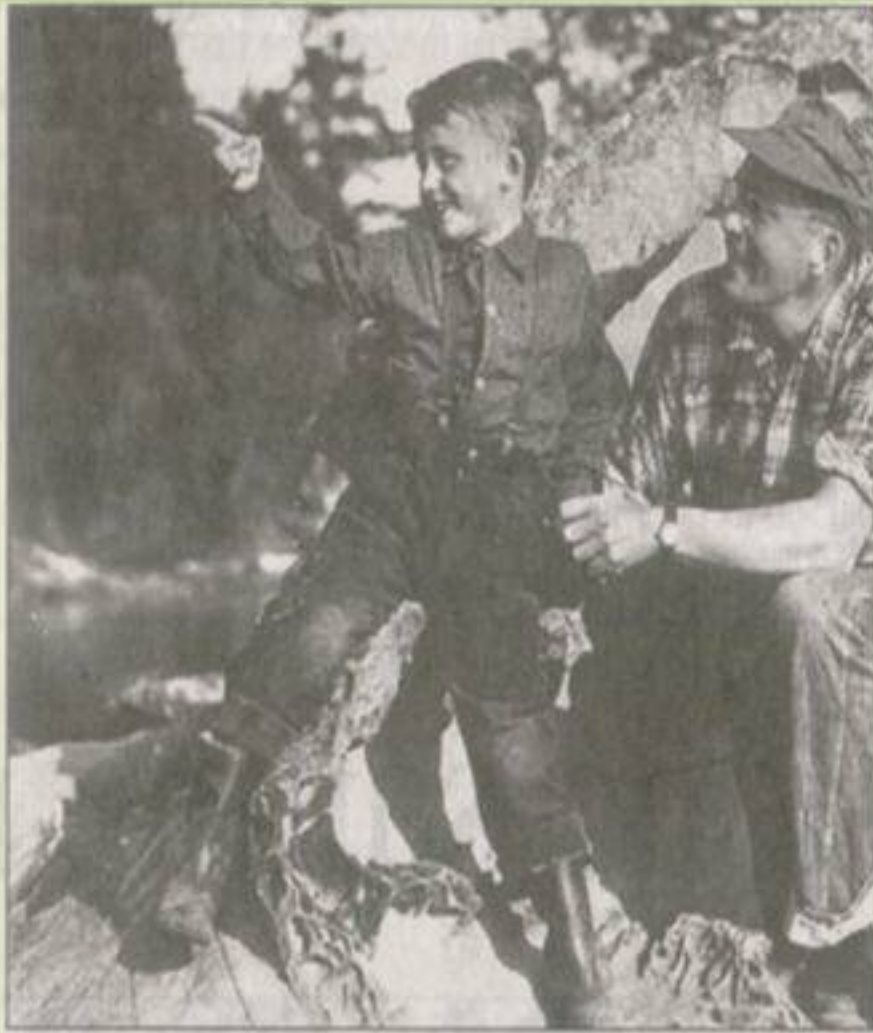
There really was a David and Jeanne. They called themselves Mr. and Mrs. Crusoe, but their last name was Conover. They lived on B.C.'s own Wallace Island, arriving in 1946. Tinseltown's most famous blond, Marilyn Monroe, actually plays a cameo role in their tale.

Seventy-two-hectare Wallace Island, a provincial marine park since 1999, is located in Trincomali Channel, between Galiano Island and the northern tip of Saltspring Island. Originally called Narrow Island, it was renamed for Captain Wallace Houston, who first surveyed the area in the 1850s and who was the captain of the Royal Navy's H.M.S. Trincomalee, a sailing frigate.

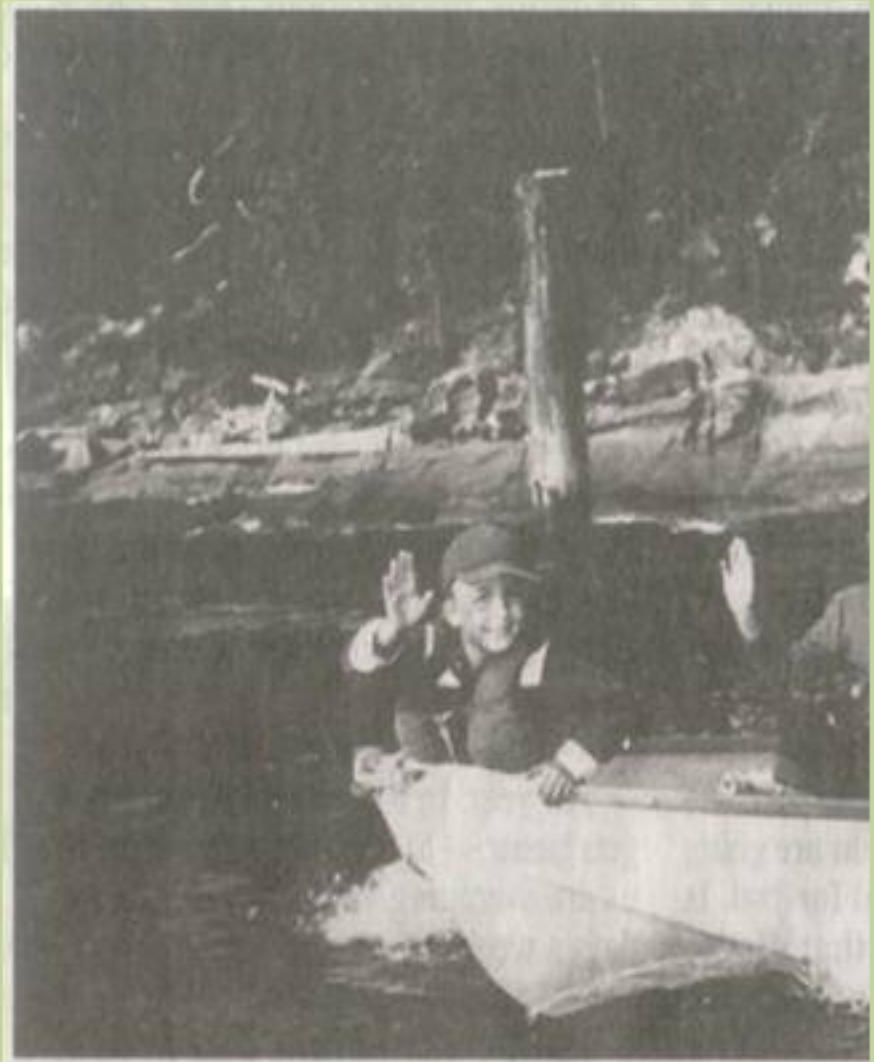
Today, Wallace has no electricity, ferry service, roads or cars. Nautical day-trippers find a natural Eden and ghostly footprints in the sand. Those footprints lead from the dock at Conover Cove to a cottage in a clearing where David and Jeanne lived out David's dream. "It was your dream, remember?" Jeanne told her husband "I just came along for the ride. But I love it."

David Conover was a photographer by profession and a seeker by nature. He wanted challenges that a nine-to-five grind couldn't provide. On a belated honeymoon trip in 1946, he and Jeanne visited Wallace Island, where 10 years earlier, he'd been a summer-camp counsellor.

David Conover's 1967 book about his and Jeanne's authentic alternate world, *Once Upon an Island*, and its sequels, *One Man's Island* and *Sitting on a Salt Spring*, have long been out of print. Now *Once Upon an Island* has been re-issued, as a trade paperback with lots of pictures, by San Juan Publishing in Woodinville, Washington. Publisher Mike McCloskey visited Wallace in his pocket cruiser, *Sea Rat*, and has a goal of bringing back out-of-print island books. *Once Upon an Island's* initial reprint run is 3,000 copies.



David Jr. has said he had three parents as a child: his mother, his father, and the island, which he left as a teenager but returns to regularly.



Going to school meant a daily trip across to Saltspring Island.

The Conovers bought Wallace for \$20,000, and left Los Angeles to homestead on it. Mortgaged to the hilt, they were nothing like the well-heeled owners of today's costly private islands. In pictures, the Conovers are staid, '50s versions of '70s-era hippies or back-to-the-landers. Dressed in jeans, Jeanne was the classic beauty with dark curly hair and David the studious guy in wire-rim glasses who won her heart. Both Conovers were born in 1919, and both were tall, David six-foot-one and Jeanne five-foot-10. Their first home, later added to and improved, was a shack built by retired gold prospector Jeremiah Chivers, who lived alone on Wallace for 38 years.

David Conover described Jeanne's first look at Chivers' shack: 'Gosh,' Jeanne said, 'I can't imagine anyone wanting to live in there' Conover wrote, "She didn't know what her future held in store." That future was classically conflicted. The couple revelled in the freedom of their wild Eden, spending starry nights rowing through the ocean's phosphorescence and days swimming naked in clear, cool water.

But they also tried to tame Eden. With the push on to build resort cabins to pay the bills, Conovers learned driftwood construction, well drilling, fishing, gardening and canning. They dined on fish, clams, oysters and native plants. Human companionship was rare. Bertha, an old lifeboat, was their cellphone. The nearest civilization, Saltspring Island, was reached by boat, not wire.

The real challenges came during the first winter. Paradise was a prison when it snowed. They ran out of firewood, the water system froze and cabin fever hit big-time. Jeanne questioned their exhausting lifestyle and their marriage

But they persisted, logging Wallace to make ends meet. An ad placed in Seattle papers in 1947 heralded the opening of their resort: "Vacation on a private evergreen island. Housekeeping cottage, furnished, \$75 weekly. Fishing, swimming, loafing, Wallace Island Resort." Marilyn Monroe talked about visiting the resort, but according to David and Jeanne's only son, David Conover Jr., never made it.

David Conover met Monroe, otherwise known as Norma Jeane, in 1945 when he was assigned to the 1st Motion Picture Unit in Los Angeles. He was sent by Ronald Reagan to photograph women—in war work and found the 19-year-old on the Radioplane Corp. assembly line. She posed for him on her lunch hour. He has been called "The Man Who Discovered Marilyn Monroe". David Jr. says his father's pictures of the star never sold very well, because they're pictures of Norma Jeane, not Marilyn.

David Jr., who grew up on Wallace, now owns Father's Country Inn Bed and Breakfast, near Kamloops. He was a nurse for 26 years. He says winter was the burr in island life. "The summers were overwhelmed with guests and friends. After Labour Day, it was just dead".



David and Jeanne Conover, with their son, David Jr. This wasn't country living — it was isolated living.
Photos courtesy of David Conover Jr.

Wallace Island Resort was sold in the mid-'60s, along with most of the island. David Jr. says his father never capitalized on the potential of his connections with the rich and famous such as Monroe or John Wayne, who came in his yacht. As well, B.C.'s tourism industry was in its infancy then, with fewer air connections or global promotions. Most of all, David Sr. was ready to pursue another dream— full-time writing.

The Conovers retained 5¼ hectares at Princess Harbour, where a new house was built. But Jeanne moved to Victoria with David Jr. so he could go to high school and, although she initially went back and forth, she never truly returned to Wallace Island. Finally, she and David divorced.

"Later on my mother wanted the conveniences," says David Jr. She was a switchboard operator at Eric Martin Pavilion. Jeanne was living in Arizona when she died in May, 2003.

She'd been happily remarried, to a man who was the boy next door when she was growing up in Los Angeles.

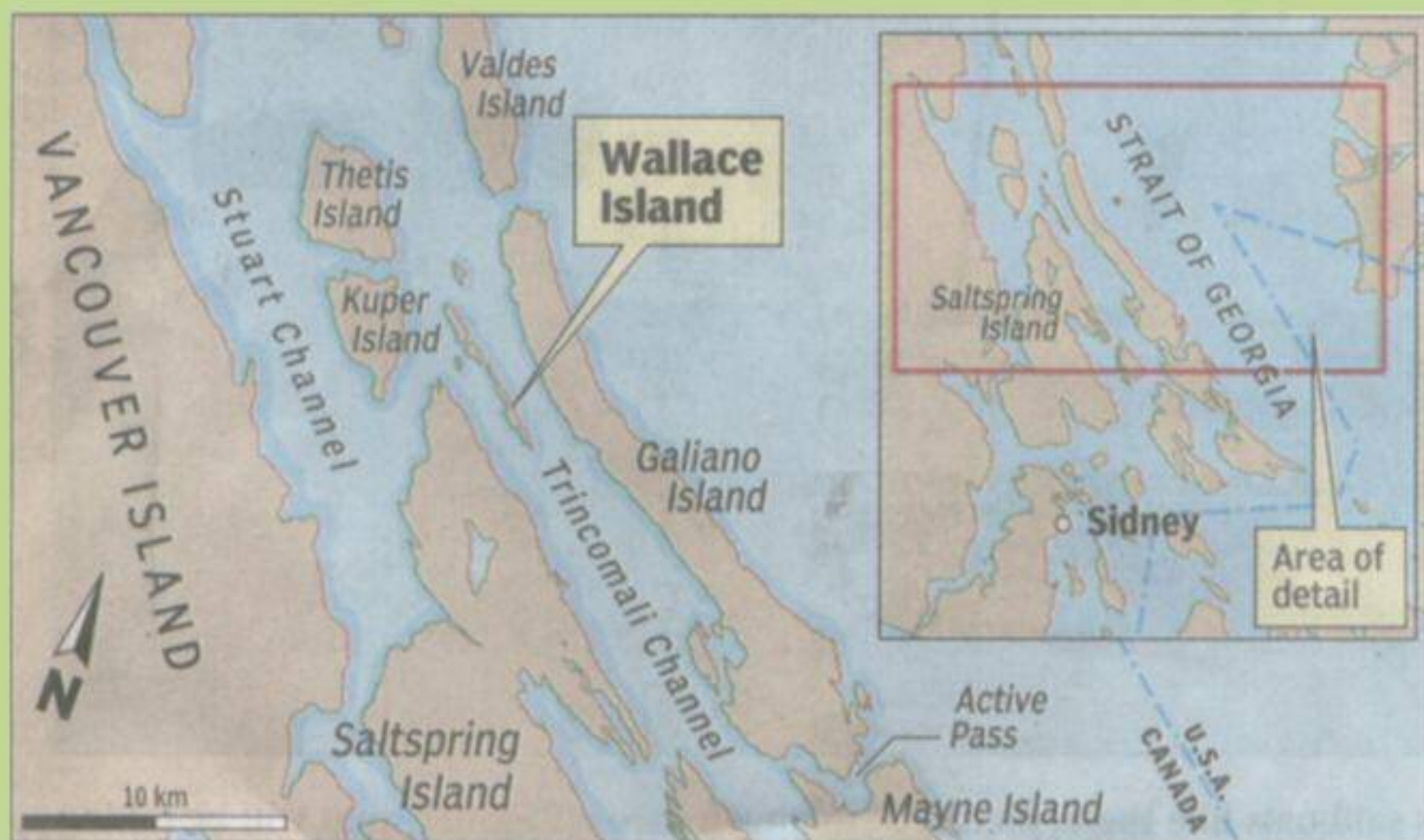
Jeanne wasn't the only woman who left the island. "It was hard to get a lady who'd live on an isolated island. That wasn't really country living. It was isolated living", explains David Jr.

David Sr. remarried three times, first to Kathy, a student who came to Wallace only on weekends, and next to Peggy, who had owned a boutique in Victoria. Peggy left with the caretaker from neighboring Jackscrew Island. Conover then married Barbara, who had been the Jackscrew caretaker's mate. Conover died three years later in 1983 at the age of 64, on Wallace.

An American couple bought his property. In 1990, B.C. Parks bought the rest of Wallace, by then owned by a Seattle group called the Wallace Island Holding Company. David Jr. still visits Wallace regularly. The loss of the island when he was a teenager, too young to take it on as his own challenge, is poignant. "I had three parents — my father, my mother, and the island. I lost the island. It's something I love".

Recently, members of the concerned public who also love Wallace Island, many of them boaters, have raised about \$12,000 to restore the Conovers' heritage cottage. "There are not a lot of funds available to us and we're coming to that moment in time when we have to address critical restoration issues," said Joe Benning, B.C. Parks area supervisor for Saanich/Southern Gulf Islands.

Jonathan Yardley, a Saltspring Island architect and a director of the Heritage Society of B.C., did a preliminary assessment of Conover buildings for B.C. Parks in 2001. He notes heritage status can be determined by a historical, cultural and conceptual evaluation as well as on architectural merit. "The heritage significance is the historical connection to the Conover family."



Most of Wallace Island is now a provincial marine park.

Rob Struthers

Benning, who has his own well-worn copy of *Once Upon an Island*, expresses that significance simply. "There's just huge cachet in that story." So much cachet that if you look at the guestbook on David Jr.'s Web site, www.dconovet.com, you'll find dismay expressed by people who visited Wallace years ago, or read the bestselling Reader's Digest condensed version of *Once Upon an Island*. They're shocked to learn David and Jeanne's love story ended in divorce and the island was sold. Perhaps forever, the utopian deserted-island myth will be alive and well and living on Wallace Island.

Pat Burkette lives on Salt Spring Island.

Contacts:

People wanting to help B.C. Parks preserve the Conover cottage on Wallace Island can send cheques to Wallace Island Donation Account, c/o K2 Park Services, S3, C9, Galiano Island, V0N 1P0.

Once Upon An Island is available for \$23.50 from www.dconover.com and will be in

bookstores. David Conover Jr. will visit Wallace Island this summer and invites those who want to spend the day with him to contact him via his website.

