

# A VANCOUVER VIGNETTE

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GEOGRAPHIC ANOMALIES LIKE POINT ROBERTS, WASH., UNDERSCORE THE NEED FOR FLEXIBILITY AND CREATIVE THINKING ON BOTH SIDES OF THE BORDER.

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BY LEWIS LUKENS

For two years now, I have been getting my mail twice a week through a post office box in Point Roberts, Wash. Its 4.8 square miles are completely cut off from the rest of the United States, accessible only through Canada. I finally visited this geographic anomaly recently with our locally hired, cleared American employee who normally makes the trip.

During the 1840s and 1850s, Washington and London negotiated over where to draw the border between what were then “Oregon Country” and the British “Columbia District.” The U.S. proposed drawing the line at the 49th parallel, but Britain wanted to maintain control over all of Vancouver Island, especially its main city, Victoria, which sits near the 48th parallel. Both sides finally agreed to draw the border at the 49th parallel all the way to the water, then drop down below Vancouver Island and head out to sea through the Juan de Fuca Straits. In the process, the southern tip of the Tsawwassen Peninsula was cut off from what became British Columbia, remaining part of the United States.

Point Roberts is 22 miles south of Vancouver, and on

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a good day you can get there from our consulate in 40 minutes. It’s not big — roughly two miles north to south and three miles east to west. Almost 1,500 people live there, and many workers commute in each day from the “Lower 48.” So how does the place survive economically? In a word, Canada.

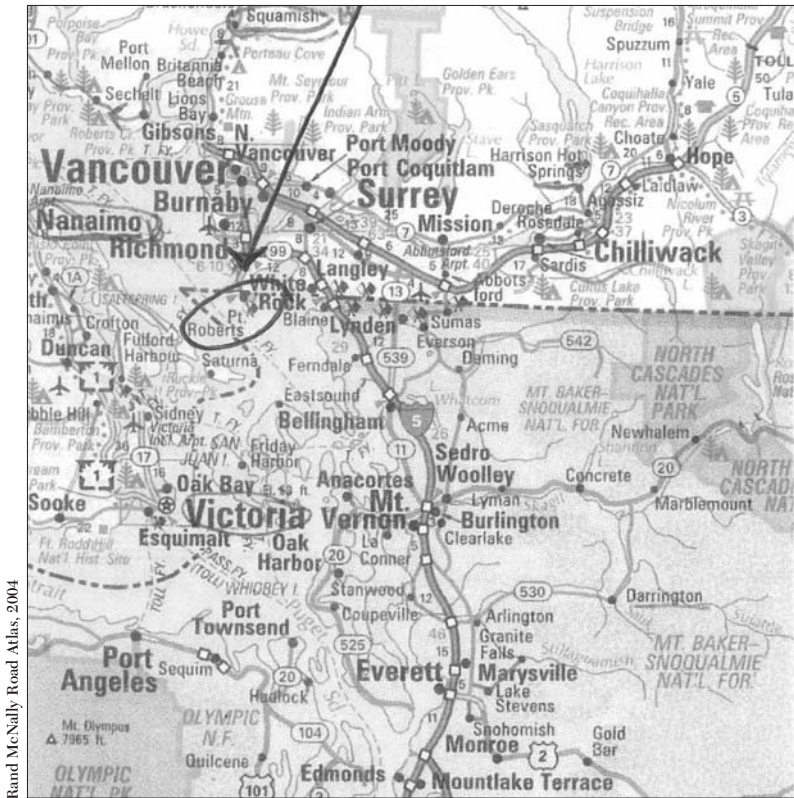
On the day I traveled down from Vancouver, roughly 30 cars waited in line to cross the border. They were all Canadian residents heading south to pick up mail, buy cheap(er) gasoline or pick up groceries.

## **A Booming Business**

Point Roberts is home to a few motels and restaurants, one grocery store, one liquor store and several gas stations. It also boasts a U.S. post office and almost a dozen private mail outlets, all of which do a thriving business renting mailboxes and charging for package mailing and pickup. A steady stream of British Columbia residents flows into Point Roberts daily to take advantage of U.S. domestic mailing rates. (Except for the post office, every commercial enterprise in Point Roberts readily accepts payment in Canadian currency, some at par.)

The U.S. postmaster commutes daily from “the mainland,” making roughly a one-hour drive from Ferndale, Wash., across the U.S.-Canada border in Blaine, Wash., through several of Vancouver’s suburbs, and back across

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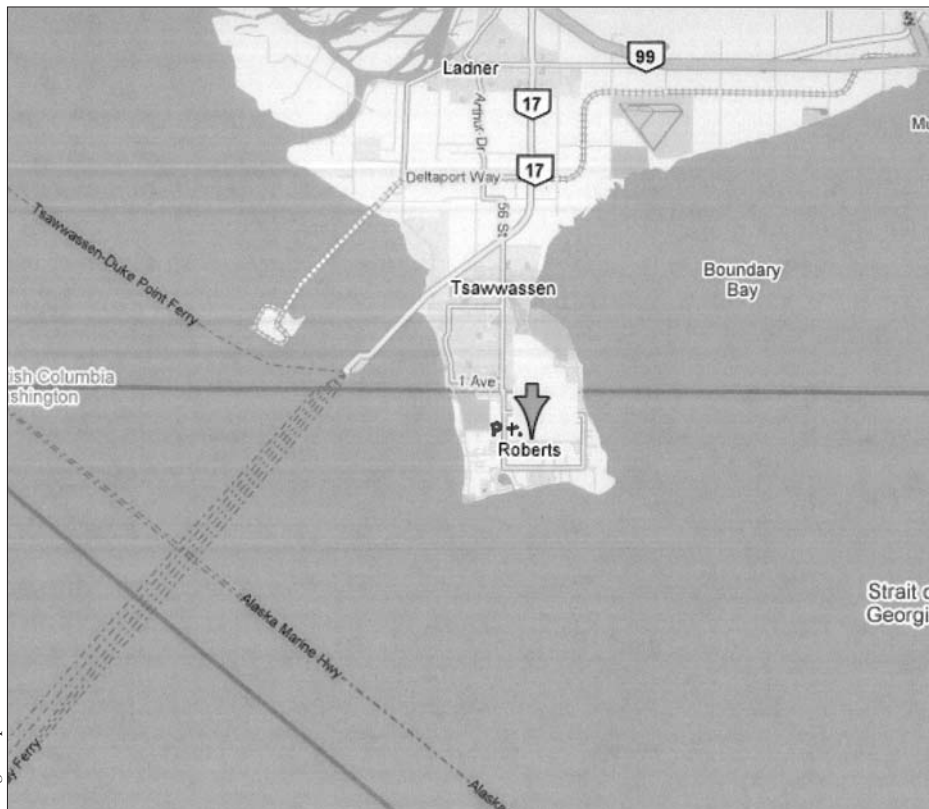


Rand McNally Road Atlas, 2004

the border into Point Roberts. The town has a small primary school serving kindergarten through 2nd grade, while older children ride the bus daily to Blaine, 30 miles away. Like the postmaster, they cross the international boundary four times daily.

Point Roberts is certainly the most visible, but not the only, anomaly along our border with Canada. With the introduction of a new passport requirement for everyone — American and Canadian — entering the U.S., Point Roberts has become a case study for all the points along the border that would be uniquely affected by the new law. Here, where high school children cross into Canada to get to their schools in the U.S., parents of teenage children grasp more quickly than most the impracticality of having their children safeguard a secure document like a passport in their backpacks.

There are similar cases in other parts of the United States' northern border. From



Google Map Data

New Brunswick's Campobello Island, Canadians have to drive through Maine to get to the mainland. The Akwesasne First Nations Reserve straddles the U.S.-Canada border (and, up to now, members of the Mohawk nation there have had their own entry lanes and travel documents). Another case is the Thousand Islands region, along the St. Lawrence Seaway, where boating is the principal means of transportation between the two countries.

All these anomalies underscore the need for flexibility and creative thinking on the part of Canadian and American officials on both sides of the border. ■