



What's in a Name?

The ballerina of Ballet Bay

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Hidden behind a cluster of islets on the north coast of Nelson Island lies Ballet Bay. It's a popular anchorage for boaters despite warnings in cruis-

ing guides of underwater cables and sunken boom chains. The guides also briefly mention long-time residents, Harry and Marjory (Midge) Thomas and their dancing daughter, Audree, but little more has been written about the 100-year-old Ballerina of Ballet Bay.

AUDREE RUTH THOMAS was born in Vancouver on October 9, 1925, where her father, who had lost his right arm

in the First World War, owned a tobacconist's. She started dance lessons at age five. As a young teen, she studied with June Roper, a Texas native who started teaching in Vancouver in the mid-1930s. Over the next 10 years, Roper sent more than a dozen students into high-profile ballet companies, posthumously becoming an inaugural inductee into the BC Entertainment Hall of Fame.

One day in January 1940, Harry ▶

drove 14-year-old Audree to Seattle to audition before the famed Léonide Massine, artistic director and choreographer of the *Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo*. He immediately took Audree on as an apprentice. Four months later under the stage name Anna Istomina she became the youngest member of one of the most prestigious ballet companies of the 20th century.

Thus began Audree's remarkable, 18-year career as a ballerina. Based in New York City, she danced for many companies in countless freelance engagements and with the greatest stars of the time. She performed two seasons as guest prima ballerina at Buenos Aires' *Teatro Colón*. She toured North and South America extensively, meeting the Governor General of Canada, the president of Venezuela and Eva Perón, the First Lady of Argentina. Numerous articles about her appeared in Canadian press, some acclaiming her as "Canada's first Prima Ballerina."

A YEAR AFTER their daughter's entrance into the professional dance world, Harry and Midge sold the tobacco shop and their Vancouver home and moved with their 13-year-old son, Chuck, to a 10-hectare (25-acre) waterfront plot on Nelson Island. Harry bought a 40-foot cabin cruiser that he named *Istomina*, for his daughter. On the morning after their arrival, Midge looked out of *Istomina's* pilothouse door and declared their new home would be called Ballet Bay. The BC Geographical Names Office made it official in 1950.

Harry had a second boat built by Dary Carter of Pender Harbour: a 17-foot, carvel-planked launch powered by a 2.4-horsepower Easthope engine. To aid one-armed operation, the boat was steered with a lever attached to the port gunwale. Harry

named it *Small Fry*, after the role Audree danced in her hometown debut as a professional ballerina. When Harry left the coast, *Small Fry* went up on blocks at Chuck's service station in Sidney. In 1980, Ira Rote of

Victoria discovered and purchased it. He had *Small Fry* restored and lovingly cared for it for over 40 years, taking it to classic boat festivals in Victoria and Port Townsend. In 2023, Ira donated *Small Fry* to



Audree Thomas aboard *Istomina* in Ballet Bay, c. 1945.



Small Fry is one of a handful of vessels on the West Coast with their original Easthope engines intact and operational.

the Britannia Shipyards National Historic Site in Richmond where it remains.

THROUGHOUT HER CAREER Audree and her husband Sergei were frequent visitors to Ballet Bay where the glamorous ballerina would tramp through the woods, scramble along the rocky waterfront and build log rafts to ride the tidal currents with her sons. She also indulged another passion, fishing. During the 1940s several photos of her appeared in Vancouver newspapers on her father's dock, fishing rod in hand, proudly displaying princely catches of salmon. She even submitted a trout fly called

"Chorus Girl" to a competition.

Midge died of cancer in 1958. Harry and his second wife stayed on the island until 1972 when they retired to West Vancouver. Harry died in 1995 at 98 and his ashes were scattered in Ballet Bay. Chuck had a bronze plaque placed in memory of his parents on a low bluff on the south shore of the bay.

After retiring from performance in 1958, Audree and her husband opened ballet schools around New York City. After Sergei's death in 1969, Audree continued teaching in New York for several more years before she retired to West Vancouver in 1985. She died on January

10, 2014, at the age of 88; her ashes were scattered in Ballet Bay. Several years later, a plaque in her memory was mounted beside her parents'.

The Thomas cabin still stands behind untended foliage on the western point of the bay.

Accounts of Audree's career appear in dance encyclopedias published in the late 20th century, but these make no mention of her connection to the BC Coast. Her complete story is yet to be told, but for now folks anchoring in this tranquil corner of the coast can seek out her memorial plaque and pay homage to the Ballerina of Ballet Bay. ▀