

## **AN HISTORICAL NARRATIVE OF FISHING IN THE PRINCE WILLIAM SOUND/COPPER RIVER AREA**

The Prince William Sound/Copper River region supports a wealth of seafood resources that have sustained Cordovans and the commercial fishing industry for well over a century. The following is an account of how the industry developed, particularly in Cordova.

The land of the Copper River Valley boasts a wealth of natural resources and in turn has supported three groups of Native inhabitants, the Chugach-Aleut, the Eyak and, the Ahtna. Their lifestyles developed over the centuries and in all three cases relied heavily on the life cycle of the salmon. The Native's relationship with the salmon was forever changed when explorers arrived in the area beginning in 1741 and climaxed with the Russian settlement at the village of Nuchek on Hinchinbrook Island in the very late 1700's.

Commercial fishing came to the mouth of the Copper River in 1887 when Captain Sands and the crew of the schooner Jennie erected the region's first cannery. Backed by the Pacific Packing Co. of San Francisco, it was located near the native village of Eyak, in the growing settlement known as Odiak. Two years later, a second cannery was built at Odiak by the Pacific Whaling Co. of San Francisco, and a third constructed in 1889 on Wingham Island.

In these first few years of commercial fishing, 25,000 cases of salmon were processed by the new canneries. By the end of the 19th Century, 42 salmon canneries were operating in Alaska and in the year 1900, 1.5 million cases were packed.

Canneries continued to develop around the Copper River area. In these early years salmon, once caught, spoiled quickly and for that reason, canneries were usually built near river mouths where salmon schooled before ascending the stream to spawn. There, salmon were caught in barricades placed across the mouths of streams. Incredibly efficient, barricades did not allow many salmon to escape upstream to spawn—Congress outlawed their use in 1889.

In 1912, Alaska became a United States Territory. Protective measures for the salmon fisheries in the Copper River region were instituted by federal legislation in 1913, limiting fishing times and gear types to below Eyak Lake. Due to the rapidly increased fishing of all gear types on the Copper River and also to the complaints of Natives over their decreased subsistence catch, commercial fishing was restricted on the Copper River and the waters of the delta by federal order effective January 1, 1918. By the end of that year, all concerned with the health of the fisheries conceded that even stricter regulation were needed to reverse the drain on the supplies of salmon. However, until 1924, the only protection afforded Copper River salmon was the order which prohibited all salmon fishing in the river, its tributaries and lakes and with 500 yards of each mouth.

The 1924 White Act gave the Secretary of Commerce, and eventually the Department of Interior, the power to regulate how salmon and other fish could be taken for commercial purposes in Alaska. The restrictions applied to where fishing could take place, gear types and length of openers. The adjustments in closure times were made to compensate for changes in numbers of fishing boats operating in the area. The fish stocks under this conservative management rose to previous levels. Studies of statistics kept on Copper River reds show a consistent pattern of catches in the next thirty years.

Meanwhile, use of fish traps brought additional debate. Over 40 trap sites were established in the Prince William Sound during its heyday. Traps were operated six days per week, 24 hours a day during the annual fishing season. Throughout the late 1940's and early 50's there began a steady decrease in the numbers of fish taken statewide. In the Cordova region, canneries went from 527,000 cases packed in 1947, to a low of 100,000 cases in 1955. In '54 and '55, there were essentially no pink and chum fisheries in the Sound. Fish traps were seen as directly responsible for this dilemma. When Alaska became a state in 1959, demands were finally met to abolish fish traps.

With statehood, Alaska received the authority to manage its fisheries. A Department of Fish & Game was charged to set annual catch limits, determine types of gear and define where and when fishing could take place. The new state also decided to build and operate hatcheries. Legislation beginning in 1971 established limited entry permits and a new division within AD&G which authorized the operation of non-profit hatcheries to contribute to the industry. By 1983, there were twenty state-operated hatcheries and fifteen private or non-profit.

The necessity for government intervention in the management of salmon was obvious in the early years of commercial fishing. At the turn of the century, the Alaska Packers Association was a powerful entity owning two-thirds of all canneries in Alaska. Operating out of San Francisco along with another large group, the Alaska Syndicate, they fished in Alaska waters with short-sighted aggressiveness. They consolidated to keep prices paid to fishermen low, and lease prices high. They owned all the traps, most of the canneries, and controlled the shipping of salmon to the west coast markets. Outside of a handful of independent fishermen, the "company" fishermen leased boats and equipment from the canneries at often exorbitant prices. In short, the two companies monopolized the fisheries.

In 1903, Alaska cannery owners began to introduce salmon butchering machines. These replaced 15 to 30 cannery line workers and increased the rate of production. Although the machines changed the industry, thousands of seasonal cannery workers were still needed in the salmon canning industry. Unfortunately, cannery work offered few opportunities for the local labor force as the Packers and Syndicate had a pool of cheap immigrant labor from the ports of Seattle and San Francisco. The Alaska Fishermen's Union, based out of San Francisco, began to represent the canneries and the fishermen in the 1930's, and conditions slowly began to improve. However, even

these unions were primarily controlled by non-residents, creating hostility among the locals. These fishermen staged strikes of their own during the early 30's until a federal mediator was sent in 1934-35. He pronounced the Packers were "robbing the fishermen blind". In Cordova, the Alaska Fish Cannery Workers Union formed in 1935 and included cannery workers, clam diggers and fishermen. This organization evolved into today's Cordova District Fishermen United.

Between 1914 and 1923, fourteen new canneries were established in the Sound, and although the nationwide depression after the 1929 market crash did not leave the area unscathed, the region remained relatively stable overall. The fishing industry now far outweighed any other Alaskan industry. During WWI, the military purchased salmon contracts from the salmon packers to feed troops. Production escalated. After the war, prices crashed due to surplus, but quickly rebounded with increased demand.

By 1940, Cordova's 14 canneries processed not only salmon, but also crab, clams and shrimp. 1915, the peak year for the claming industry, saw 3.5 million pounds of razor clams dug by 135 diggers. By 1932, Cordova was known as the "Razor Clam Capital of the World" and generated over half the clam pack produced for the entire United States. However, overharvesting and the devastating 1964 Alaskan earthquake destroyed the clam industry.

Between 1935 and 1940, a dungeness crab fishery developed in the Cordova area. During this period, 5000,000 pounds of crab were processed at seven area plants. Again, the 1964 earthquake, over-exploitation and the expanding sea otter populations ended this industry as well.

The herring fishery began in 1914. Between 1914 and 1931, herring were caught for bait and curing. After 1931, the herring were used primarily for oil and meal. In the peak year of 1936, the Sound produced over 56,000 tons of herring. After the 1989 Exxon Valdez spill, herring populations declined. Herring fisheries are now closed for the next season. The future of this industry is uncertain.

The Exxon Valdez Oil Spill in 1989 changed the nature of commercial fishing in the Prince William Sound. Salmon fisheries were closed in most of the Sound that year. The economic shock waves continue even to the present day. Not only have the fishermen's incomes declined, the value of their boats, permits and equipment have decreased. Losing market share in 1989, public perception of tainted fish, along with the burgeoning farmed fish market filling the void—all contributed to the sharp decline in commercial fishing in the PWS area.

While salmon fisheries have rebounded following the spill, other fisheries, especially the historically important herring fisheries, have not recovered. Subsequently, salmon, halibut and blackcod represent an increasing portion of earnings from commercial fisheries for residents of Area E.

While only seven of the twenty Area E processors registered with ADF&G are located in Cordova, most permit holders are Cordova residents. The 343 commercial fishing permit holders that reside in Cordova make up 82% of all permit holders living within the Area E region (Valdez/Cordova census area). These 343 permit holders residing in Cordova account for nearly 20% of the *total* potential work force (all individuals age 16+). In addition to the significant percentage of adults owning permits, half of all households in Cordova have at least one person involved in commercial fishing or processing.

Today, there is a growing worldwide food movement where consumers are increasingly demanding food traceability and wild and sustainable foods. Progress continues in ASMI's promotion of Alaska's wild salmon. In 2005, Cordova became the first statewide Regional Seafood Development Association to start up, when PWS permit holders voted to assess themselves 1% to cover regional marketing efforts. The Copper River/Prince William Sound Marketing Association in combination with ASMI's statewide marketing efforts continue to indicate a strong growth in consumer demand for Alaska's wild salmon, that in combination with Prince William Sound's regional marketing efforts is proving economically productive for our region.

In terms of other species, in 2011 fishermen are reporting that halibut are smaller and less prevalent. There is concern over Pollock fishery bycatch issues, and the North Pacific Fishery Management Council just voted to reduce the incidental catch limits at 25,000 Chinook salmon. Locally, halibut and blackcod are fetching high prices in the marketplace and have become increasingly important to Cordova's economy.

There are many threats facing the future of Prince William Sound salmon fisheries. Ocean acidification, off-shore aquaculture, resource extraction, and increasing populations dependent on resource harvests, have led to the sense that the salmon economy is somewhat unstable. Despite this, PWS drift gillnet and purse seine permits, which steadily decreased in value between 1990 and 2008, are finally edging back up to historical highs.

With strong resources, marketing efforts and industry revitalization in place, the reallocation of fishery resources traditionally harvested by Area E's commercial fishing fleet remains a great challenge to Cordova's economic health. Cordova is truly an economy based on the sustainable harvest of fishery resources. With no alternative major opportunities for economic diversification on the horizon, our continued economic well-being is predicated on continued access to our traditional fishery resources.

\*Some material taken from "Fisheries Heritage Week, 1998" and used with permission by Cathy Sherman, Director of the Cordova Museum & Library. Content updated and revised by Rochelle van den Broek post-2005.