

# A Brief History of CDFU

By Robert H. Blake, 1980

Had I even suspected that I would end up writing the history of the CAMA – CDFU in the eleventh hour when given six week notice, I no doubt would have declined the offer to present it to the chamber. I should also be somewhat apologetic for the length as well as the delivery of what was supposed to be a short speech.

The origin of any original fishermen's group in Cordova is not documented in the records now available at the Labor Hall. However, a sketch of pre-CDFU history was extracted from conversations with Pierre and Jack deVille, Art Nyberg and Norman Swanson.

It appeared that the PWS fishermen formed a union during the 1918-1919 period and were affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. The organization was probably called Copper River and Prince William Sound Fishermen's Union because we find reference to such an organization in early CDFU records. I am told that they went on the A F of L inactive list to hold their charter and this apparently allowed them to act as an independent union. They were involved primarily in price negotiations, which probably were not very effective until 1934 when fishermen called a major strike at Pete Dahl Slough and held their meetings on the grass banks. According to our sources, this strike affected a raise in the price of Red salmon from 13 cents to 19 cents per fish. It is interesting to note that the price of Pinks, Chum, and Silvers on the sound was 1.5 to 2 cents per fish at that time.

The following year, 1935, the Cordova District Fisheries Union was founded. It was chartered under the International Fisherman and Allied Workers of America and had jurisdiction over commercial fishermen, beach gangs, and all floating cannery equipment operators and crews, from Icy Bay to Seward.

As a union, it would and did strike on matters of fish prices, wages, and working conditions. It was closely affiliated with the cannery workers, longshoremen, etc., and at times exercised the power derived from these affiliations to accomplish their primary goals of increasing fish prices.

Our undocumented sources tell us that at its peak of union dominance, the control on the clam beaches was so strong that only Cordova residents could commercially dig razor clams. The major areas of real control were clams and Dungeness crab prices and wages. Control on the salmon industry was considerably less because of the numbers of company boats and fish traps. In 1940, the CDFU purchased the lots and building it now occupies for a total price

of \$8,000 and eventually formed the present Cordova Labor Hall Association to manage and control this property.

The recorded history pre-1945 only documents ex vessel price negotiations, wage and hour negotiations and related union considerations like sick and death benefits; however, much more colorful descriptions of the methods utilized by fishermen to accomplish these goals are described by the "old timers" of the area.

1946 started the era of increased involvement with mention of a United Western Alaska effort against fish traps and the Alaska Salmon Industry, Inc.

In 1947, we see a Dungeness crab price of 9 cents per crab, still fighting traps, and union support of reducing the gear length to 150 fathoms and a midweek closure. At this time, these proposals had to clear the U.S. and Wildlife Service and Congress.

These involvements continued and others were initiated; "Red" Carlson's efforts in the territorial legislature brought power to the Bristol Bay gillnet fleet replacing the sail, and the establishment of the Fishermen's Fund. The Union appropriated a 20% match to funds received in '51 and '53 from the territory and conducted a massive seal control program which accounted for as high as 7,000 documented seal kills per year; they became involved with fish conservation in the Upper Copper; attempted wider areas of prices negotiations with Cook Inlet; supported elimination of anchored gear on the Copper River Flats and established the attended gear principle. From the recorded minutes, it appears that the CDFU continued to develop and slowly increase its involvements from 1948 until 1955, when it received the Federal Trade Commission, Consent Order Document #6261, which was an order from the Department of Commerce to cease and desist from any further involvement with price and wage negotiations because of monopolizing and trade restraints.

Prior to March of 1955, the CDFU held between 2 and 6 meetings per month; during the period from March, 1955 to February, 1971, only 1 to 2 meetings per year were held, basically to keep the organization alive.

During a meeting held in February, 1971, the CDFU general membership voted to oppose an Alaska Pipeline terminal being sited in Prince William Sound or the Copper River Flats area to carry out this action. This meeting reactivated the involvement of the CDFU and initiated the present policy that of the sister organizations, the CDFU would be the entity involved in all matters of the political nature.

The CDFU pursued the membership direction toward keeping the pipeline terminal out of Prince William Sound with extreme vigor, winning the battle in the court system, only to lose it ultimately in the U.S. Congress by one vote majority

decision. However, even with the loss of the battle, great considerations were gained which contributed to establishing that more stringent restrictions and control were placed on the construction and operations of the Valdez terminal than any other terminal in the world. Though many people of the state felt at the time that the actions of CDFU were unwarranted and detrimental to the state as a whole, no one can doubt that our actions were beneficial over the long haul. Had not the CDFU been involved in the matter, we would have seen a situation which would have probably lead to the declining renewable resource production of the area.

Prompted by the shortcomings of a single organizational stand on any heavy issue, and realizing the need for political representation at a stronger level, the CDFU, lead by Knute Johnson, activated the interests of other fishing organizations through the state towards forming the existing United Fisherman of Alaska.

The '70's also saw a trend toward increased local political involvement, which was culminated with the involvement of 5 of its members being elected to positions in Cordova city government in the present decade. The '70's have also seen a dramatically increasing involvement in State and Federal politics with heavy input in OCS development, the 200 mile limit legislation, CZM on the federal and State level, fishing vessel and permit loan programs, Aquaculture legislation and funding, Limited Entry, Marine Mammal Management, D-2, Rare II, the Sea Air Rescue Helicopter base, buoy systems, national weather service, ADF&G regulations, securing an area crab biologist a method of assessing escapement in the Copper River, oil tanker traffic system, tug boat traffic system , CR & PWS Fisheries Regional Planning team, securing a Sea Grant extension agent for the are, and on and on and on.

The CDFU is presently involved with practically everything that effects the future viability and security of the area's fishing interests.

Members of the organization are involved with, have held, or presently hold , positions in Cordova City Council, the local planning commission and boards, the State Legislature, Alaska Board of Fisheries, the National Coastal Zone Management Program, Alaska Coastal Policy Council, Alaska Fisheries Development Foundation, Prince William Sound Aquaculture Corp., Chugach, Eyak, Tatitlek, and Chenega Native Associations and the Alaska Federation of Natives, the Alaska Salmon Quality Control Committee, North Pacific Fisheries Management Council, United Fishermen of Alaska, Alaska Fisheries Safety Advisory Council, Alaska Board of Forestry, Alaska Fishermen's Fund Advisory and Appeals Council, and others.

Essentially, you made it, and if it related to fisheries, the CDFU in some ways, through some of its member, is involved with it.

The Cordova Aquatic Marketing Association was formed in 1955 as a result of the cease and desist order to the CDFU from the Secretary of Commerce regarding monopolization and restriction of trade.

Jack deVille was the first elected president, and initially the organization was utilized only to negotiate clam, crab, and salmon prices. The CAMA had its headquarters here in Cordova, but also maintained a branch office in Seattle during the late '50's.

We can also find no recorded reference of dramatic involvements beyond price negotiations prior to 1964 when the CAMA, via a request from Governor Bill Egan, called in Japanese processor ships to buy the PWS seine catch because the land-based processors were unwilling to process Pink salmon that year.

In 1965 we developed - with the processors – a sliding formula, based on the Alaska Wholesale Average price to the present day. Other areas have utilized variations of the system, but none have enjoyed the success or relatively consistent level of prices the CAMA has from this type of formula.

In 1965 minutes also refer to the development of plans for a cold storage facility which had to be abandoned as I recall, because the city of Cordova needed the EDA grant monies for replacing a destroyed dock facility.

An interesting side note from 1969 minutes is that the CAMA signed a contract with the Alaska Frozen Products for sac-roe herring at \$22.00 per ton.

In 1971 the CAMA membership authorized the Board of Directors to act in the matter of the Alyeska Pipeline Terminal, and voted to voluntarily assess themselves 1 cent per fish, to be granted to the CDFU Environmental Defense Fund, with another vote to continue the assessment in 1972.

1971 also found us negotiating a contract value for salmon roe in excess of the canned salmon value for the first time. WE are the only fishermen's organization I know of that has enjoyed this additional benefit.

1973 saw the initial development of our present fleet insurance program and in the fall of 1974, we conducted our somewhat infamous "Silver Salmon Custom Pack" when we were unable to reach a price agreement with the local processors.

The November 1974 general membership meeting produced major goal incentive when Armin Koernig raised the question of why we didn't do something to offset the second closed seining season in two years. That question prompted the investigation into the problem and its pursuits quickly developed the founding of the Prince William Sound Aquaculture Corporation.

1975 salmon negotiations were a turning point as far as the price structure of Red and King salmon are concerned, with the introduction of large "cash buying" interests on the Flats. That season also found the fishermen voluntarily assessing themselves to fund Prince William Sound Aquaculture Corporation and incorporating hand delivery into our salmon contracts.

1976 North Pacific Processors initiated the original processes match of their fishermen's aquaculture assessment with all the other processors following their lead. This assessment, the processors match, EDA grants, community contributions, volunteer involvement and the state loan program as well as hocking the Union Hall several times has allowed PWSAC to survive, produce, and hopefully flourish to the overall benefit of this area. PWSAC is the only really credible, productive, and viable non-profit aquaculture corporation in the state at the present time.

During the period between 1975 and 1977, the CAMA made major contributions to the Cordova Volunteer Fire Department of various pieces of sea-air rescue equipment including life rafts, survival suits, high volume pumps and para-medical jump kits. We did this to provide greater access and reliability of the sea-air rescue equipment for the public at large, as well as fishermen.

Over the past three years, we have coordinated with the Coast Guard in the certifying of commercial fishing vessels, dispensing fuel, and the issuance of tanker men's cards to their crews to further promote safety in the industry.

The CAMA is and has been involved in a considerable number of other projects concerning our area fisheries. These involvements have, however, been reasonably confined by practical policy, to the general areas of marketing, aquaculture, and insurance.

The combination of the CAMA-CDFU sister organization round out a total involvement picture in fisheries related matters. Their reputation and track record is outstanding and without a doubt these two organizations are the most respected, influential, and effective fishing organizations in the state.

As far as goals and directions of the organizations are concerned, it would be extremely hard, if not impossible, to place a detailed listing before you. With the velocity of the area, statewide, national, and even worldwide changes we see occurring on a daily basis, it's difficult to project what tomorrow's projects will be. And although fishermen carry the stigma of being reactionaries, our people at least, are in fact planners and directors through the wide and varied participation.

If we had to choose one basic goal and direction, it would be the continued maintenance of a stable and viable economy for Cordova based on the fishing industry. And with that, whatever we can be involved with to accomplish this goal, which will benefit our members, we will be involved with.