



Sitka Maritime Heritage Society

Sitka's Fish Trade: A History

By Rebecca Poulson, for the 2019 Annual Meeting March 6, 2019

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Photograph by E. W. Merrill. The location is the beach along what is now Katlian Street, before 1904, when the coal sheds on Japonski Island were completed. Collection Sitka National Historical Park, Merrill Collection.

The history of the fishing industry in Sitka – as probably everywhere in the world - is a dynamic, and dramatic, interplay of technology, the resource, and markets. The following is a brief and selective journey, much of it drawn from the work of the late Bob DeArmond:

Indigenous

Trade was the economy in southeastern Alaska well before Europeans first visited, and it included marine products. The trade got a dramatic influx of wealth in the 1780s, when European and American sea otter fur traders began to participate.

It's easy to overlook the scope of the technology and organization developed by Indigenous people to efficiently harvest, preserve, and to store and transport salmon and other marine foods. Salmon, for example, arrive all at once, and spoil rapidly, without intervention.

Another aspect of technology developed by Indigenous peoples is conservation and enhancement of maritime resources, including practices like rules for salmon harvest,

planting herring eggs into new areas, and creation of clam gardens, which kept the resource at high levels for countless generations.

Russian

Russians came to southeastern Alaska for another maritime resource, sea otter. They began invading Alaska from the 1740s, by boat, from Siberia, but they did not come to Sitka until the 1790s, looking to expand beyond where they had hunted out sea otter populations farther west.

By this time the sea otter trade between Tlingit clans and American and European vessels in Sitka Sound was at its peak, so the Russians bringing Unangan, Alutiiq and other hunters from Western Alaska to hunt the sea otter from their baidarkas (skin kayaks) in Sitka waters was not well received. However, the Russians were able to establish a colony at Sitka, called New Archangel, in 1804. Tlingit and Haida people sold furs to the Russians, and also huge quantities of food, including halibut and other fish. The Russians caught and salted salmon from Redoubt for their

own use, and sold some in Hawaii and California.

Cod

Cod fishing, by Americans, began in 1863 off Siberia, and in Alaska the following year. This was before Alaska was part of the United States. In 1915 there were six Alaskan, eight Washington, and seven California vessels fishing the Shumagins, the Bering Sea coast, and Unmak Islands, with both summer and winter fisheries until "mysteriously" the cod stopped showing up in the harbors. Fishing was done from dories and the fish were salted.

One early American vessel, the *Sitka*, was built in Sitka in 1871 and wrecked at Wrangell with a load of cod in September, 1875, when she was blown off anchor.

From the moment the American flag was raised in Sitka, Tlingit clans protested the taking of their property without compensation. American traders pushed Tlingit people out of trade, then in the late 1880s, canneries began taking over salmon streams. American policy is that fisheries are common property; Indigenous ownership was not recognized, and fisheries were often overexploited. Organized effort over generations resulted eventually in the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971.

Salmon Canning

In southeastern Alaska the primary methods for getting fish for canning were fish traps and purse seining. The first cannery in Alaska was built at Klawock in 1878, and Sitka's first cannery, at Starrigavan, started up later the same season, though it only lasted two years. (A building was dismantled and used to build the first building at the future Sheldon Jackson School, in 1882.)

Canneries on Baranof and Chichagof Islands

The next fish was not canned at Sitka until 1917. Other canneries were built outside Sitka, on Baranof and Chichagof Islands. Salmon salteries were earlier, and took less technology and less investment. Port Althorp and Sandy Bay had salteries. Early canneries were at Pavlof Harbor and at Redoubt Bay, in 1889. The one at Redoubt only operated a few years, then moved down to Redfish Bay in 1891.

A cannery at Ford Arm on Chichagof Island ran from 1912 until 1923. The Chatham Cannery in Sitkoh Bay was built

in 1900, and was finally closed in 1974, and burned in 1978. Other canneries included Todd in Peril Strait, and canneries at Hoonah, Tenakee Inlet, Red Bluff Bay, Little Port Walter and Big Port Walter.

By 1889 there were already 13 canneries in southeastern Alaska, including the one at Redoubt. Early seining (catching fish with a net, towed around a school of fish) was done with large rowboats, which apparently were supplied by the canneries, and the fish were carried on steamers to the cannery. These early seine boats were large flat-bottomed open boats, propelled by oars, and nets were pulled by hand.

Engines were introduced on seiners on Puget Sound soon after the turn of the century. According to Herman Kitka, in 1914 Tom Sanders Jr. fished a motorized seiner, the *Comet*, that had been brought up from Puget Sound, for Deep Sea Salmon Company (which built the cannery at Ford Arm in 1912). He outfished everybody, and soon all the seiners had engines. Many of the gas-powered seiners used out of Sitka were built here.

While in other parts of Alaska boats and labor – including the fishermen – were brought in from outside, in the Sitka area the seine boat crews, and part of the cannery crews, were Alaska Native people.

Most of the seine boat builders in Sitka were Alaska Native. Many of the seiners built in Sitka over the years were financed by the canneries, obligating the fisherman to fish for that cannery to repay the debt. The old seiners were smaller than now – most were used for trolling in later years.

Very few boats were built in Sitka before 1915, but between 1915 and 1930, at least 43 documented vessels (over 5 net tons) were built here, almost all fishing boats. A total of 20 of these larger boats were documented in the three years between 1917 and 1919, probably having to do with the introduction of gasoline engines to southeastern Alaska, revolutionizing the process of seining. Gas-powered trollers were also built locally.

Through the teens, 1920s, 30s and 40s there were at least eight boat shops, and at least 104 boats large enough to document built here.



E. W. Merrill photo of the Pyramid cannery, now LFS Marine Supply and Fisherman's Quay. Hardcastle Collection, Sitka Public Library.

Sitka's Canneries

WWI was very good for the canned salmon industry because the government bought large quantities of canned salmon; 14 canneries started in southeastern Alaska in 1918. Two were in Sitka.

Part of getting a cannery in Sitka was installing a better water system. Sitka's water came from a small pump on Indian River, and from a spring on Gavan Hill until 1916 when the Sitka Water and Power Company built a dam on Cascade Creek. Frozen fish was not taxed, but canned fish was, and incorporated towns got some of that revenue back.

The Pyramid Packing Company built a cannery in 1918; fish were packed under a variety of combinations of owners and with several sets of equipment, on and off through the 1966 season. That building is still there, now housing LFS Marine and the Fishermen's Quay.

The Sitka Packing Company was also formed in 1918, and put up a pack in 1919. It built a plant located about midway along the Village waterfront, used by various businesses through 1923.

The U. S. government bought a lot of canned salmon in 1918, war time, but a few years later dumped its inventory and Pyramid and many other canneries did not pack fish in 1921, and many canneries failed.

In 1946 a hand-pack cannery for clams started at the Conway Dock (where Sitka Sound Seafoods

is now). Various businesses, including Vita Foods, packed salmon there through 1955 and possibly later. Canned salmon production peaked in 1936.

Salmon Trolling and Herring Plants

Commercial trolling got going in southeast Alaska around 1905, with rowboats in southern southeast. Trolling is catching fish with a hook and line, pulled slowly through the water. The early gas powered trollers were much smaller than the boats today, from 20 to 25 feet long.

Over the next twenty years hundreds of boats joined the fleet. Around 1913, rich king salmon grounds were found at the southern end of Baranof Island, and fish buyers gathered at Port Alexander. As many as a thousand fishing boats filled the harbor. In its heyday Port Alexander had five stores, two

bakeries, four restaurants, and five saloons.

Troll fish in the early years were mostly "mild-cured" – brined and chilled in large barrels called tierces, which weighed over 1,000 pounds loaded, and shipped south under refrigeration for smoking as lox. The fishery would not have existed without refrigeration. In the early years, it was exclusively for large, red king salmon.

The south Baranof canneries were often combined with or alternated with use as herring plants and mild-cure stations for processing troll-caught fish. The first herring plant in the area was at Little Port Walter, in 1907. In the teens the plants processed herring mainly for food, but in the 20s and 30s were for "reduction" of herring into oil and fertilizer; overfishing caused enormous harm.

The first mild-cure buyer in Sitka may have been the Vandysell Packing Company, on what is now the Petro Marine dock, in 1912.



The trolling fleet, in the 1920s. Photograph collection Sitka Historical Society.

Trolling peaked in the 1920s or 1930s. Until the Second World War there were also the hand trollers, who fished by hand from rowboats or even carved canoes. A typical hand troller rowboat, at least in the 20s and '30s, was around fourteen or sixteen feet long.

The fishing grounds moved up the coast, so that Sitka was popular in the 1920s, and the

outer coast of Chichagof and Yacobi were hot in the 1940s. Meanwhile, Port Alexander's winter population was down to 22 in 1949. The huge runs of giant king salmon were being depleted by development on the Columbia river, mainly dams, and probably overfishing as well.

By the 1930s an estimated 1500 boats were fishing for king salmon in Southeast. The boats were usually powered with 12 to 30-horsepower gas engines, with mechanical gurdies to haul the fish. Fishermen usually worked single-handed, and lived aboard.

In Sitka, Native people trolled, but many trollers were European immigrants or from the Lower 48.

Electricity from a new hydroelectric dam at Sawmill Creek

was instrumental in attracting a cold storage in 1913, when Chlopeek Fisheries of Seattle started one, soon sold to Booth Fisheries, based in Chicago, for buying halibut. Booth also owned three large halibut fishing boats, that used dories for fishing. The plant became Sitka Cold Storage in 1930, when Booth, affected by the Depression, sold the plant to a group of Sitka businessmen. Outside fish buyers used the plant to buy and process troll-caught fish, which fueled the growth of the Sitka troll fleet. Bob DeArmond writes that in 1935 Sitka Cold Storage froze a million and a half pounds of salmon, and mild cured more than 1250 tierces (about 825 pounds net weight each). The plant was used for freezing halibut, black cod, and salmon. It burned in 1973, and today the Totem Square Inn stands on the site.

In 1938 fish buyer Kalle Raatikainen started a cold storage at Pelican, named after his boat, the *Pelican*. The cold storage began operation in 1942. A cannery also operated on and off from 1941. The cold storage went through various owners, and the facility is now owned by the City of Pelican.

Halibut

The halibut schooners built on the west coast were a distinctive type, typically 70 to 80 feet long, with high bow, two masts, auxiliary power, and house aft. There are a couple of classic halibut schooners still in Sitka, including the *Republic*. This fishery was dominated by Scandinavians.

Originally, dories were stacked on the deck of a sailing schooner, which served as the mother boat, and every day the fishermen set out in dories to fish. Often they worked far off shore. It was hard and dangerous work.

With the advent of gas engines into the fisheries around 1905, smaller 70-80 foot halibut schooners could set gear directly from the mother boat. The early teens saw a boom in boat construction, along with the construction of cold storage plants in Alaska, that nearly wiped out the fishery.

The growth of Sitka's fleet brought further economic growth from fuel sales, engine repair, and machine work, boat building and repair, groceries and entertainment.

Since WWII

The canneries in Southeastern Alaska went into a decline after

WWII, with declining salmon stocks and increased costs, and most closed by the 1970s. They stopped financing new boats and sold off their fleets.

The Sitka Cold Storage burned on July 7, 1973. The fire completely destroyed the plant and a grocery and hardware store, and left two firefighters with life-altering injuries. The only remaining facility in Sitka was the small cannery and fish plant owned by Bob Wyman. The Halibut Producers Coop began construction in November 1979, on their plant on Katlian Street, now Seafood Producers Coop. Petersburg Fisheries, in



E. W. Merrill photo from after 1907 (when the radio towers on Japonski Island were constructed) of the halibut schooner *Tom & Al*, built by the (Thomas J.) King and (Albert M.) Winge shipbuilding company in Seattle in 1900, as the *Ragnhild*. In 1914, the yard built the famous halibut schooner *King and Winge*. Photograph collection Sitka Maritime Heritage Society, donated by Lynne Chassin.

a joint venture with Bob Wyman, expanded his Sitka plant to become Sitka Sound Seafoods. In 1997 it was fully merged with North Pacific Seafoods.

Silver Bay Seafoods began at the former pulp mill site at Sawmill Creek in 2007 and now has six plants in Alaska and the Northwest.

Halibut stocks were fished down in the 1950s, but were protected and rebounded by the 1970s. In 1979 the Magnusen-Stevens Act excluded foreign boats from 200 miles from the US coast. Foreign vessels had been fishing black cod; suddenly there was a new fishery with a good market.

At the same time, in the 1980s, trolling was hit by restrictions from Endangered Species Act protection of Snake River salmon

(largely decimated by dams). Many fishermen got into the halibut and black cod fisheries, which had no limits to boats participating, and seasons were squeezed into openings of days or even 24 hours, with resulting waste, loss of gear, injuries and loss lives. Individual Fishing Quotas were instituted in 1995. Fishermen were granted a portion of the quota according to their catches in the late 1980s, with restrictions to size of boat and area.

Also over the past few decades, the charter fishing industry has grown to become an important part of Sitka's economy.

International fish farms grew exponentially in the early 1990s and depressed prices. But, prices have come back, with increased awareness by consumers of the benefits of wild fish.

The next threats on the horizon are climate change, with



Left, Pedro Rieta, right, Mary Durgan, cleaning black cod in the late 1980s. Photograph © Jana Suchy 1980s.

warming oceans and ocean acidification having an impact on the food chain; and pressure from potential investors for offshore fin fish farming.

Sitka people have long adapted to and used North Pacific fisheries for sustenance and income; we also have a long tradition of conservation of the resource. This tradition of activism is ever more important, to ensure a thriving future for ourselves, and our oceans.

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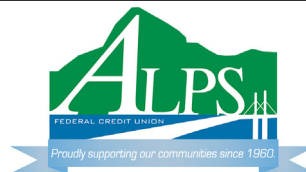
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