4H Kids Build Boats

Our most exciting news is our partnership with Sitka’s 4H program. Twelve youth ages 7 and up are building a small plywood boat, at the boathouse on Sunday afternoons in April and May. Boat building adult leaders are Paul Rioux, Tom Crane, Terry Perensovich, and Joe D’Arenzio. They are also planning a paddle making workshop with Mark Sixby at the Sitka National Historical Park in May.

Pub Talks and Events

Activities since last fall included our Pub Talks series, starting with The Princeton Hall Story, at the Beak restaurant, in October. Owner Kathy Ruddy told the history and stories of this 60-foot wooden yacht, built in Sitka as a mission boat, in part by young men from the Sheldon Jackson High School.

We also held Sea Chanteys and Stories from the Days of Moby Dick, an evening of sea chanteys and stories from the inimitable Don Sineti, at the Beak restaurant, in November.

Also in November, we had an early birthday celebration for the FV Cummins, whose keel was laid a hundred years ago, at The Story of the Cummins, held at the Baranof Brewery. This was a fascinating look at the origin of the Cummins company and the family behind it.

Also during WhaleFest week, the SMHS was beneficiary of a fundraiser Whale Blues, at the Mean Queen by the excellent Sitka Blues Band.

In December, Jerry Dzugan told about the infamous local character Alexander Pihl, in a talk called Alexander Pihl: In the Land of Dreams and Illusions.

Perhaps most memorable, and most historic, was Tales of the Boatshop Through the Eyes of Bob Modrell’s Daughters. This event, held in January at the boat shop, included footage (in color!) of Japonski Island life, Lincoln Street, and of course, boats. Presented by Kathy Snelling, Mary Bowen, and Roberta Modrell, this was well attended and a thrilling connection of the historical use of the building with us today.

In February, we hosted the USCGC Maple’s Historic Transit Through the U.S. and Canadian Arctic, at the Mean Queen. This was another great, well attended program, hearing crew members tell first hand about logistics and the scientific work accomplished, and their impressions of the North West Passage.

2018 Annual Meeting

Our big event in March was our Annual Meeting: Family Fishing Stories, The Challenges and Joys of Working on the Sea with your Relatives. This was held on March 21st at Harrigan Hall.

Scene from Family Fishing Stories, from right, Charlie Skultka, Eric Jordan, Denise Klingler. Photo by James Poulson.
This was a funny and inspiring look at the ins and outs of fishing with kids, parents, and other relatives. We heard stories about firing your mother, and getting fired by your father (three times in one day!), barely-averted tragedies, and the genius strategy of “lookout and decoy”: the kids spot and wave to passing boats, as Mom and Dad hide, pretending fishing is slow.

Accessible Entry Under Way

This spring we are wrapping up work on phase one of our entry addition. Contractors Oceanside Excavation trenched and brought utilities into the building, and Pacific Services is finishing the concrete work on a stemwall foundation, pad for the new winch, entry deck, ramp and stairs.

This work is funded in part by a federal Certified Local Government grant from the State of Alaska Office of History and Archaeology, via the City and Borough of Sitka Historic Preservation Commission.

A series of work parties over the winter did the groundwork for the foundation, repairing walls and documenting and moving the old winch and its shed.

This entry, when complete, will have a year-round restroom, utilities, a new winch, and small lobby/office.

The ultimate goal of the rehabilitation has the functioning woodshop in the southeast wing, boat haul out in the main work bay, and a multi-purpose exhibit and event space in the current store room wing.

Thank You to our Fabulous Anonymous Donor

The end of 2017 brought Pick, Click Give and other end-of-year contributions, and a welcome, generous gift of $25,000 from an anonymous donor.

This will get us closer to our goal of leveraging grants and local funding campaign for opening the boathouse as a functional, heated, plumbed! living, working maritime heritage facility.

Storeroom Lights

In 2017 the SMHS used a grant from Museums Alaska toward putting electricity and lights (by contractor Eagle Wolf Electric) into the storeroom wing as part of new exhibit space.

USCGC Cutter Kukui Crew Work

The crew formerly of the USCGC Maple, now of the USCGC Kukui, contributed three full days of labor cleaning the storeroom wing!

Thank you for this valuable work, you guys rock!

Thank You, Jenya

Our intrepid, energetic and brainy Executive Director, Jenya Anitchtenko, has taken a job as the Sitka Historical Society’s new Curator. We wish her the best in this new position!

Long-time board member and artist Rebecca Poulson is taking on the Executive Director job. We have lots of plans for the coming year, building on Jenya’s great work and creativity.

We also are keeping the door open to hiring a motivated person interested in making this their career, who wants to grow the director job and the organization. If this is you, give us a call!

Coming Up

We have plans for the rest of the year, including more talks featuring local mariners and interesting boats, like the St. Lazaria, built as a trap tender in 1918 and still working. Also, check out the following:

- The annual 4th of July cruise
- Our display case inside City Hall,
- Updated website,
- Work parties on the boathouse to repair the west wall,
- A work party by Outer Coast College youth in August, and
- An open house/family day at the boathouse, with fun and interesting activities for the whole family.

For the fall and winter, we are pursuing funding to complete the building renovation, planning boat repair and building classes, designing a new t-shirt, and conducting an art project. All good stuff!

Thank you for your support!
A Short History of Sitka’s Sea Otter Trade

by Rebecca Poulson

In 1778 Captain Cook was in Nootka Sound (on Vancouver Island), and bought some garments made of sea otter fur, which brought a huge profit at Canton, China. Cook’s journals were published in the mid 1780s, sparking an international rush for sea otter furs.

Northwest Coast Indigenous people already had a robust trading economy, and integrated this new trade into the system. The maritime side was soon dominated by American ships, nearly all out of Boston. Trade moved from Nootka Sound as sea otter were hunted out: Sitka was the hot spot in the 1790s. Sometimes trade was accompanied by violence, but it was mostly civil as shrewd Yankee traders met their match in shrewd Indigenous traders. Elaborate trading protocol developed.

Americans alone sold an average of 14,000 sea otter pelts/year at Canton 1805-1812. After the Revolutionary War, the sea otter skin trade was a fortunate replacement for lost British markets. Americans traded the furs for Chinese luxury goods, which they then sold for big profits in the United States.

The trade also brought great wealth into the Northwest Coast Indigenous economy. There was an explosion of art. Manufactured items were traded far into the interior for more furs, which were then sold by Coastal traders at a profit.

International trade brought devastating smallpox epidemics in the early 1770s, in 1795, in 1811, and in 1836-37. Smallpox and other diseases killed more than half the people originally here. It is hard to overestimate the impact these losses must have had on society.

The Russians: Russian hunter-traders swept across Siberia in the late 1600s and 1700s. In 1742 the survivors of Vitus Bering’s last voyage returned to Siberia with sea otter furs, and like Cook’s men 30 years later, they discovered how valuable sea otter furs were on the Chinese market, sparking a Russian fur rush. Between 1743 and 1800 a hundred expeditions set out for Alaska and the North Pacific islands.

Russians forced Native labor for hunting and providing food and equipment. Devastating disease epidemics and Russian brutality killed the vast majority of the people of the Aleutians.

Over time, companies became bigger and had to go farther, as sea otter were exterminated closer to the Siberian mainland. The few companies left by the late 1780s consolidated in 1799 as the Russian American Company, with a charter by the Czar to colonize Alaska.

By the 1790s, the Russians were moving into southeastern Alaska, as they ran out of sea otters farther west. They brought fleets of hundreds of Western Alaska Indigenous hunters in baidarkas (kayaks).

In 1794 the Russian ship Phoenix with 170 baidarkas took 2,000 otter just at Yakutat. The first hunting expedition to the Sitka area was in 1796. Over the years 1797-1821 Russians took an average of 3,000 sea otter a year, most from southeastern Alaska.

In 1799 Alexander Baranov negotiated with Kiksadi clan leaders for a base at Old Sitka, about seven miles north of present-day downtown. That year, 115 Native hunters working for the Russians died from paralytic shellfish poisoning from mussels at what is now called Poison Cove. In spite of this tragedy, they took 1,800 furs that season. In 1800 they took 2,000 sea otter, and in 1801, 4,000 sea otter, just in the Sitka area.

The Russian-allied hunters taking thousands of sea otters from Tlingit waters, in addition to insults and abuses, led a multi-clan alliance to destroy the Russian fort in 1802.

Two years later, following the Battle of Sitka at Kaasdaa Héen, or Indian River, Russians established a fort on the site of the Tlingit fort Noow Tlein. The Kiksadi clan and their relations had made a strategic retreat, but, this was the end of Russian hunting in southeastern Alaska - although Baranov reported 500 furs from 1804- early 1805. The Russians never controlled southeastern Alaska, but traded extensively with the Tlingit clans, in a mutual dependence on the fur trade.

Sea otter were largely hunted out by 1820. The Russians had also begun exploiting the fur seal breeding grounds, and by the early 1830s they began conservation in areas they controlled, in western Alaska, and built populations back up.

Declining numbers of sea otter made the trade less profitable for all parties over the years, and trade expanded into less valuable furs and other products. The average number of sea otter pelts sold by the Russian American Company 1842-1860 – hunted by Company employees in Western Alaska, and purchased from Tlingit in southeastern Alaska – was 1,347/year. Tlingit traders provided an average of 150 of those, until 1852, when they took all their sea otter furs to Victoria instead.

The Russian American Company depended on the fur trade, and tried to diversify, but couldn't. Expenses grew. The depressed state of the fur trade was part of why they left Alaska.

In 1867 Russians gave up their claims to the Americans. Fur hunting and trading was wide open, and sea otter and fur seals were very nearly wiped out permanently in the international frenzy for profit.

Sources:


Japonski Island Boathouse Rehabilitation

The Sitka Maritime Heritage Society is working to restore the historic Japonski Island boat shop as a working boat repair facility and museum. Your support also leverages grant funding.

As a member, you will receive the newsletter and a 20% discount on t-shirts and other goods, and you will be a part of preserving Alaska’s maritime heritage.

The SMHS is a 501(c)3 nonprofit so your donation is tax deductible.

If you would like to join or renew, please fill out the form below and return it, along with your check, to:

Sitka Maritime Heritage Society  
P. O. Box 2153  
Sitka, Alaska 99835

or, use your credit card using this form, or online at www.sitkamaritime.org

Credit card information: Name on Card ___________________________  
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☐ $15 Students and Elders  ☐ $100 Navigator  
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☐ $50 Mate  ☐ $1000 Old Salt  
☐ Other ___________________________

In addition to my membership I would like to make a donation of $________________ to the building fund.

Thank You!

Sitka Maritime Heritage Society  
P. O. Box 2153  
Sitka, Alaska 99835