

19005 - 92nd West
Edmonds, Washington
February 3, 1970

Mr. Jack Calvin
Box 97
Sitka, Alaska

Dear Jack:

It is of great interest to me that you are conducting a campaign to have the west Coast of Chichagof Island declared a wilderness area. Your query as to what life was like around the old Chichagof Mine can, perhaps, be fulfilled by my recollections of the events and stories of the people of Chichagof Mine.

My father was operating the Hollis Mine on Kasaan Bay in 1908. In 1913 we moved to Chichagof Mine and our first stop was Sitka, a sleepy and charming village. The recent presence of the hard working Russians was very evident. Their warehouses and buildings were predominant and the bullet holes in the heavy door of the block house behind the "Ranche" signified that all was not peaceful in an earlier day. Now, the sun shown on "Arrowhead" and "Verstovia" and the ground swells rose and fell as the sea fondled the small rocky islands as it had when the Russians first landed in the year 1804.

Charlie McGrath's general store was in a log building and his competition, W. P. Mills, was established across the street from St. Michael's Cathedral. Mills' father also had a store at Yakutat which they visited periodically by paddling a dugout canoe up the 270 miles of exposed coast as casually as it is flown today. The long war canoe lay between the beach and the parade grounds in front of the Marine barracks which were situated on the present site of the Pioneer Home. The barracks were dedicated as the Pioneers' Home that year by Governor Strong, Alaska's only Canadian Governor.

Sitka's water supply came to town in casks from Indian River on Tom Tilson, Sr.'s iron wheeled wagon drawn by his team. This was the start of the Tilson Transfer of later days.

Lover's Lane, carpeted with spruce and hemlock needles and with the original totems standing as sentries of the past, was a lovely place to stroll. While there, we met Merrill, the photographer and naturalist who loved the country and depicted it on his glass plates. A true and unheralded artist.

Before heading for Chichagof we visited Goddard Hot Springs. After mineral baths in the wooden tubs, a huge dinner was put out by Mrs. Goddard and Mrs. Klunes, her sister. Wynn and Dorothy Goddard were young teenagers and were the official "guides."

We were staying at the Millmore Hotel in Sitka, operated by the Millmore Mining Company and managed by Sam Sing, the genial host. At the float was the "Elk", a pretty, slim gas boat, skippered by Pate Rasmussen, a salty Dane. As we slid up Olga and Neva Straits (named after the Russian rivers) little did I know that I would spend many years in this country operating in the salmon canning business. Crossing the open water from Klokachif Island to the "Cate" we twisted through "Elbow Passage" and the mine lay ahead of us in Klag Bay.

My early recollections of life around Chichagof are of Joe Bauers at Radioville, Sing Lee the Chinese that had a store and garden near camp (you can still see where his terraced gardens were), skating on the ice

from camp into Sister Lakes, John and Henry Sarvela and their families, hunting, fishing, the arrival of the new boat "Chichagof", which replaced the "Elk", riding "Dolly", the mine horses, the mules Jim and Bill, who were too mean to ride and named after my uncle and dad, climbing Doolth Mountain for the hell of it and running back down to see how fast it could be done. An outstanding moment was when I was big enough to ride the skip in #1 shaft with my elbow hooked around the cable instead of being subjected to the bottom of the bucket, and in learning self-restraint when at three thousand feet below daylight a blast went off on the next level above me.

1913 -
Population

The "camp" eventually consisted of fourteen families and one hundred and twenty-five employees. The mine and mill operated three shifts, twenty-four hours a day. The only time they closed were the 4th of July and at Christmas. Living with the constant rumble of the mill, the silence was oppressive when it closed down. As in all camps, the 4th of July was a big day. Usually some of the miners let loose at an early hour with a few sticks of powder, bringing all sleepers to complete consciousness, if not shock. The day was spent in competition on the finish horse, foot races, handdrilling contest (usually won by an Indian) and a ball game. In the evening a fireworks display concluded a carefree day for all.

Joe Bauers

Joe Bauers was a retired Army Signal Corps radioman who built a large log cabin at Radioville, an island on the west side of Ogden Passage. He carried all traffic for the mine on his spark transmitter. Had tame geese, ducks and deer. Raised goats, had a good garden and cleared land. He consumed barrels of beer and claimed it took eight bottles of beer and one and one-half gallons of gas to deliver a message to the mine in his single cylinder boat. Joe drilled a well and one time W. R. Rust, principal owner of the mine, visited him. Asked by Rust how the water was, Joe replied that he did not know but that it made damn good beer. Joe had a partner later on by the name of John Sord and it was always a great pleasure to visit them. The opening of Joe's large cabin was an event that drew everyone from camp for a picnic. On arrival, the "Elk" was tied to the high-water dock. The goats, being curious, boarded the boat for an inspection. One bewhiskered billy got in the wheelhouse and was quite a sight as he jumped up and looked out an open window, looking very much like an old down-east bluenose skipper with his whiskers flying.

Sing Lee

Sing Lee was a great person. I think he had mined on the Stikine and in the Cassiar. Sing had a large store building and quarters. He terraced the hillside with cedar logs and sold vegetables to the mine store. He was very industrious, carrying the slop from the cookhouse in his dory to feed his hogs and chickens. Nothing was unused and I had many a feed of boiled chickenfeet and chow mein with him. The bluejays were raising hell with Sing's gardens so he made a deal with me to shoot them. He provided a 410 gauge shotgun and shells. I was to get 10¢ a bird, quite an inflated price for those days. Assuming that any jay was an enemy of Sing's, I did not limit my shooting to the confines of the garden. Sing was swamped with birds but maintained his cool. However, he asked me to join him for chop suey which was very good. He asked me how I liked it, and with my saying it was great, he almost fell off his stool laughing and saying, Bluejay--Bluejay--Bluejay! So I am probably the only person that has ever wolfed down bluejay chop suey. Sing's imports of filigreed ivory balls, one inside the other, jars of ginger and licit nuts to eat were a meager but lasting indoctrination into the spell of the Orient. Later, after his store burned, Sing was killed in Wrangell for his money, heading for the Cassiar.

Population

The camp had workers from many, many nations. The underground work was dominated by Southern Europeans, Montenegrans, Russians, Serbians, Slavs and Finns. I recall that the Finns were the experts in the timber shed. They were artists and could frame anything with an adze and a spud. The finished cedar timbers, with many angles and cuts, were great to see. Dances were held with miners playing a fiddle and an accordian in the clubhouse where pool, cards and soft drinks were enjoyed.

The miners were a stable and capable group. Hard and physically tough, many stayed for years, accumulating a stake. Some to return to the old country, others to go on to greener pastures. Seldom was there trouble between them.

A great friend of my father's was John Sarvela. John was a master mechanic from Finland. Dad always said that John had so much common sense and talent that if he had had a higher education he would have been a multi-millionaire. They were loyal and respected buddies and their companionship was not always on the serious side. My first year in school was 1915, conducted by my oldest sister, Louise. There were eleven of us in attendance. I was the only one that did not speak Finnish. The Sarvelas seemed to be in the majority. Lulu was the senior of the group, perhaps in the sixth grade. On cold winter days the school-room would become so cold we would sit around the pot-bellied stove and enjoy cold snappy apples while tolerating our lessons.

Recreation was always at hand. You walked out of the schoolhouse door and had the enjoyment of looking at the mountains and trees or across to the bay and beaches. The mine rock dump was great for snow slides. We needed no fancy equipment. An old enamel hand wash basin was a good fir for small rear ends and a-way we went down the dump slide. When the bay was frozen over a skiff was used to get to the ice. The rise and fall of the tide broke it up around the edges. Once there, skating surfaces were almost boundless.

School House

1916 was the year of the big snow and we neophyte miners had many tunnels and secret havens. At one time, we had an authentic tunnel, timbered and lagged; it went into the red earth a long way. One day we found it caved in, evidently the work of a "safety" conscious miner in the person of my father.

Rudy Sarvela was the naturalist in the camp and the Sarvela backyard always had a group of Canadian honkers and clipped wing mallards.

In those days, we had never heard of a drive-in; however, snacks were available and probably of better quality. It was against camp rules for food to be given away at the cookhouse without the approval of the office. However, Bill Sarvela, George and Arne Vesoja, myself and others had good relations with Joe Hermann, the German baker. The back window of the bakery was well concealed by salmonberry bushes and it was here that Joe kept us supplied with liberal cuts of pie. I particularly recall the peach and apple pie plopped onto a dirty palm and wolfed down, whetted by illegality.

One morning at breakfast time, Hazel Sarvela was thumping the piano as my sister gave her lessons, when the shout went up that the new mine boat was in sight. Everyone in camp headed for the dock as she pulled in, spic and span, from Tacoma. It was the "Chichagof" with Capt. Pete Rasmussen at the wheel. A big jump from the "Elk". More power and speed and the under water hull the shape of a rain drop from stem to stern. She was fast and had a side exhaust. However, few people ever made a long trip in her without being extremely sick. This included her crew, at times. In later years, I concluded we were being badly gassed. At one time, I saw two bodies removed from the fo'c'sle. They had opened the drain on the radiator which was heated by the exhaust.

The "Elk", with her forty horse open base Union gas engine, was far more a fun boat. Many picnics and fishing parties were had with her. Some nice evenings, a group would go out to the "Gate" and watch the sunset over the sea with the spruce feathered rocks and islets in silhouette.

While dressing for school one morning, there was an explosion and, above the roof of a large bunkhouse, I saw debris in the air. The "Elk" had blown up and burned to the deck. Glen Fettit and Oscar Johnson were aboard but soon reached the beach in a punt, badly burned even down their throats. The "Elk" was rebuilt and has been fishing out of Sitka to this date. She is now sixty-eight years old, having been built in 1902 at Astoria as a bar boat.

Later, the larger "Ambassador" was to serve the mine. She carried twenty-five passengers and cargo. Her "Nelsco" engine, I believe, was the first diesel in Alaska. She was comparable to a World War II "F.S." and made periodic trips with a barge loaded with sacked "concentrates" to the Tacoma smelter. I have seen many sizeable vessels at the mine dock. These include the original Northland, the Cordova and the Santa Ana.

Robbery

One night Paddy Ryan, the night watchman, woke up my father with the news that the gold brick being shipped to Juneau had been stolen. A brick was shipped out every two weeks on the mine boat to Juneau. From there it was trans-shipped to the mint down below. It was worth \$40,000 and was kept in the bookkeeper's room over the store. Since all travel in and out of camp was by water, anyone arriving or departing was common knowledge. Therefore, it was evident someone in camp had taken the brick. Things were tense and Dad had a .44 Smith & Wesson by his bed. The feat was well planned. A ladder was used from the beach to the store. The bookkeepers, Banbury and Nichols, were gagged and knocked out with gun butts. The brick was heavy and in a rope re-inforced canvas bag with rope handles. It was taken to the snow covered beach on an incoming tide. Walking close to the water on the sand flats, the foot tracks were covered at once. A reward of \$2,000.00 was posted for the recovery of the brick. Being heavy, it would not be carried far and all of us were searching. Macomber, the storekeeper, went at it systematically using a grid and a steel rod. The brick was in a wooden box strapped with steel bands. His rod would indicate hitting a root or a box. Months later he found it close to the beach. The moss had been pulled out from under an over-hanging tree root, the brick shoved in and the moss replaced. At low tide a pillow case with guns and initialed handkerchiefs inside was found. Two men were sent to Juneau for trial but were not convicted.

Indian Ramp

The first Indian camp I recall was within the camp area. The rock dump was expanding and one night there was a meeting at our house. As the elders of the village were worried about rocks rolling against their homes, an agreement was made with my father to build them a new camp. This was done and the members moved from near the old Golden Gate mill to brand new houses just beyond Mae Clark's red scow.

Ed Kah Nah

One of the members of the native group was Ed-Kah-Nah. I always figured that he was at least 100 years old. With his long white hair he was a fine looking man. What always intrigued me was the bullet hole through his hand. He would always let me look through it. One day he sat down on the board walk and took off his Hickory shirt. On his back were many scars. I learned that these were sabre scars and for the first time I realized my friend had fought the Russians in the battle of Sitka. Today, his picture hangs in my family room and two of his totems stand at attention on the fireplace hearth.

Indian Camps

There are several old Indian campsites in the Chichagof area. One is to the right and up the channel from Frog Rock in Ogden Passage. Another is the gravel beach to the right as you approach the "Gate" from the ocean. This was known as "Graveyard Point." Having fallen into a grave there once I can assure you that this is well named. Just outside of Graveyard Point fishing for cod and bass was always good alongside the kelp beds.

As you leave "Elbow Passage" and enter "Klag Bay" there is a narrow entrance into "Lake Anna." Locally this was called "First Salt Lake." At the far end of this was "The Rapids" and through this narrow entrance one entered "Second Salt Lake."

Here was the site of the power house supplying electricity to the mine. During the winter the lakes and streams would freeze up and the water supply to the generators would be insufficient. Rust Lake above the power house was the water supply source. In order to increase the water flow during freeze ups, it was decided to drive a tunnel to the bottom of the lake. With a gate valve at the portal of the tunnel the flow could be controlled.

Powder and all supplies had to be taken in with "packers". Johnny Littlefield was one of these, young, healthy and tough. The cookhouse tent at the site was shingled with powder box shooks and good grub was the order of the day.

The tunnel was 900 feet long and the final shot was ready to fire. It was unsuccessful as the lake bottom sloughed down and it plugged up. My father said it was the hardest thing he ever did to himself, but he decided that since it was his project, he took the powder and wire in to clear the blockage. Crawling in a tunnel half filled with mud and rock, he placed the charge. This time the tunnel cleared and soon a rush of water was pouring out the gate valve. Rust Lake is below its normal level today as someone has cracked open the valve. Perhaps it could be closed again and the lake brought back to its original level.

At one time, there was a salmon cannery in Ford Arm owned by August Buschmann, the pioneer salmon packer. This cannery produced 92,000 cases of salmon one year. Bill Piehle the bona-fide rum runner was in and out of Chichagof those days and many stories can be told about him. Many waters carry his name. Piehle's Island, Piehle Hole and Piehle's Pass first navigated by this derby hatted rascal in his sailboat.

*"Moon
Shiners"*
In the early thirties the area was popular with moonshiners. They carried on a running war and, at one time, I know of nine men that died under mysterious circumstances. One person was responsible for many of these useless killings. The most tragic find was the bullet-holed hat of Johnson MacLean, a fine friendly Native. Rudolph and Bill Walton picked it up in their seine and a marker was placed just inside the entrance to First Salt Lake in memory of Johnson. Paul Layton's bones were found in his cabin in Pinta Bay and boats with no one on board were found beached and wrecked. The authorities did little to correct this as no bodies were ever found.

Chichagof mine was the richest gold mine in the world for the money invested. Producing a million dollars a year at the old price of gold, and totaling double that paid to Russia for Alaska. Many prospects were worked in the area and signs of these can be seen today. Hirst Chichagof, on the other side of Doolth Mountain, (the major owners being the Chinese consul, Coon Dip and his family of Seattle) was a successful mine. The old Chichagof mine was sold in 1922 and then closed. It was wild-catted several times and a cyanide plant built in an attempt to recover what the tailings held in value. After the crash of 1929, it was revitalized but all profits went back into development work and the pumps were stopped after the mine flooded.

Many people hold fine memories of this area. It was a great place for a growing boy. A skiff, a gun and a dog along with a sunny day was paradise complete.

These are my memories of Chichagof mine and its people. We kids probably missed a lot living in such a remote place. However, in looking back, we were perhaps a "privileged few" enjoying a life denied to those of today.

Before the bulldozers and chain saws move in and the trees vanish from Chichagof and her sister islands, I hope for one last look. Not to recapture youthful memories but in some way to contribute to the preservation of this beautiful coastal area for others. Where they can climb, fish and play without the whine of the hungry chain saw under-cutting beauty and denying true enjoyment to future fugitives from the city.

The best to you and Sasha.

Sincerely,

Larry Freeburn