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THE ALASKAN FISHING COMMUNITY AND THE
SOCIOECONOMIC HISTORY OF THE ALASKA SALMON FISHERY

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Our concepts of "community" generally stand for many things. In ecological terms, "community" is simply a gathering of plants or animals—rabbits, businessmen, etc.—in a given territory or place. We also speak of a "community of interest" or an "occupational community." In some religious denominations, a congregation is thought of as a "community of saints," and there was a time (alas, no more) when units of our educational system were described as "communities of scholars." The concept of community implied by the agenda of this conference and the characteristics of its local sponsor, the Prince William Sound Aquaculture Corporation, however, is what MacIver defined fifty years ago as a "true community, a concept which goes beyond these partial concepts," which he labels "associations."

A community is a focus of social life, the common living of social beings; an association is an organization of social life, definitely established for the pursuit of one or more common interests. An association is partial, a community is integral... Within a community there may exist not only numerous associations but also antagonistic associations.
The topic assigned to me under the general panel title of "The History and Description of the Alaskan Fishing Community" specified a kind of community as a social organization around the interdependent economic activities of managing, harvesting, and processing Alaska salmon. To specify the type and purpose of a community is not to say that the result is static. The community must change over time with changes in the physical environment and the larger social, political, and economic systems of which it is a local unit, and change in technology within the limited range of economic activities which are its foundation. Communities must adapt (adjust is not strong enough) to change if they are to survive.

In my presentation, I will consider economic history of the salmon fishery as the force of change, and social history record the attempts of the communities to adjust. Only generalized treatment is possible, and this will be done in terms of four stages of evolution--the aboriginal period, the initial period of highly exploitive colonial commercial harvest, the transition period between World War II and Alaska statehood, and the fifteen years of Alaska statehood. Within each period, a brief analysis will be made of the changes in the organization of the economic activities, their purpose, and the human values to be served.

The Total Fishing Community--The Aboriginal Period

Estimates of Alaska's population at the time of the first European contacts (circa 1740-1780) put 11,800 Tlingit and Haida in
southeast Alaska, 10,800 Pacific Athapascan and Eskimo in south-central Alaska, 12,000 Aleuts along the Peninsula and Chain, and another 18,000 Eskimo scattered along the Bering Sea coast and on into the coast of the Arctic Ocean (only 4,800 Athapascan were estimated as living in interior Alaska). For most of the communities within these population groups, availability of salmon determined their size and location. In fact, original population estimates by Kroeber were in turn based upon estimates by fisheries biologists of the distribution and probable size of the precommercial period salmon runs.

There was some variation in the degree to which salmon provided the community base. The Tlingit and Haida and their "cousins" further south in the Pacific Northwest were characterized by one anthropologist as "the richest people in North America... They did not need to plant. They had more berries and roots than they could use, simply by going to the places where Nature had spread them. Most of them did not even hunt, unless they felt like a change in diet. Every year, they had only to wait until the salmon came swarming up the streams... In three or four months, a family could get enough food to last a year. The rest of the time they could give to art or war, to ceremonies and feasting. And so they did."² The Eskimo and Aleut lived in a less salubrious climate, but salmon were available as well as a variety of sea mammals: the seal, sea lion, and whale. Rather than attempt an inadequate summary of the rich cultural life of the Tlingit and
Haida or a discussion of varieties of communities among the other
Native groups, I will turn further south to a simpler but related
society, that of the Yurok Indians on the Klamath River as described
by Erik H. Erikson. 3

The Yurok lived in a narrow, mountainous, densely forested
river valley and along the coast of its inlet into the
Pacific. Moreover, they limited themselves within the
arbitrary borders of a circumscribed universe. They
considered a disc of about 150 miles in diameter, cut in
half by the course of their Klamath River, to include all
there was to this world... They prayed to their
horizons, which they thought contained the supernatural
'homes' from which generous spirits sent the staff of life
to them: the (actually non-existent) lake upriver whence
the Klamath flows; the land across the ocean which is the
salmon's home, the region of the sky which sends the deer,
and the place up the coast where the shell money comes
from. There was no centrifugal east and west, south and
north. There was an 'upstream' and a 'downstream,' a
'toward the river' and an 'away from the river,' and then,
at the borders of the world (i.e., where the next tribes
lived), an elliptical 'in back and around' as centripetal a
world as can be designed. 4

In the Yurok world, the Klamath River may be likened to a
nutritional canal, and its estuary to a mouth and throat
forever opened toward the horizon from whence the salmon
came... All through the year the prayers of the Yurok
world go out in that direction, protesting humility and
denying any wish to hurt. Once a year, however, the Yurok
tearfully lure their god back into this world just long
enough to assure his good will—and to snare his
salmon... The Yurok world dramatizes all it stands for
during those exalted days when, with utmost communal effort
and organization, it builds the fish dam; gradually
closing, as if they were gigantic jaws, the two parts
extended from the opposite shores of the river. The jaws
close and the prey is trapped. The creator once more
rejuvenates the world by grudgingly bequeathing its parts
of himself, only to be banished for another year... During the
rejuvenation festivals—that is when their prayer was reinforced by technological teeth—the Yurok
were not permitted to cry, for anyone who cried would not
be alive in a year. Instead, 'the end of the dam building
is a period of freedom. Jokes, ridicule, and abuse run
riot; sentiment forbids offense; and as night comes,
lovers' passions are inflamed' (Kroeber). This one time, then, the Yurok behaved as licentiously as his phallic creator, proud that by an ingenious mixture of engineering and atonement had again accomplished the feat of his world: to catch his salmon—and have it next year, too...

The daily life of the Yurok was influenced and shaped by the salmon and the river in ritual and behavior compounded of magic and economics. The highest value was "clean" living which consisted of "continuous avoidance of impure contacts and contaminations, and of constant purification from possible contaminations." As noted above, only during the salmon run and the communal dam building were these avoidances set aside.

To be properly avoidant and yet properly avid, the individual Yurok must be clean: i.e., he must pray with humility, cry with faith, and hallucinate with conviction as far as the Supernatural Providers are concerned; he must learn to make good nets, to locate them well, and to collaborate in the fish dam, as his technology requires; he must trade and haggle with stamina and persistence when engaged in business with his fellow man; and he must learn to master his body's entrances, exits, and interior tubeways in such a manner that nature's fluid-ways and supply routes (which are not accessible to scientific understanding and technical influence) will find themselves magically coerced. In the Yurok world, then, homogeneity rests on an integration of economic ethics and magic morality with geographic and physiological configurations.

In the aboriginal period "community" was defined by The People (my kin), and territory, in turn, was defined by the salmon run and the salmon stream drainage. The Yurok people and territory were narrowly circumscribed, but the Tlingit, through division of labor and trade, had expanded both the concept of The People and the territory over a much larger geographic area. Among the Aleut and
Eskimo, physical and geographic features again narrowed the concept of community to something close to family units. The objective of the community was survival and something more, if possible. The economic activities of management and harvest of the resource also involved the total ethos of The People and was carried out in a context of belief in the unity of all living things within a defined universe. In terms of integration through common traditions and shared social life, the aboriginal Alaska fishing community was the archetype of the anthropologist's and sociologist's model of a community.

Unbridled Commercial Exploitation--The Colonial Period, 1878-1939

The Russian period in Alaska can be ignored as far as the history of salmon fisheries is concerned. They were interested almost solely in furs, in particular the sea otter, and as regards numbers of "colonists" these probably did not greatly exceed the number of pseudo-Cossaks in Alaska during the "Golden Samovar" period of Alaska Airlines' recent show-biz phase. Annual company and government census for the period 1799-1867 report the average population of Russians and Siberians in all of Russian America (including California) as 536 (with a peak of 823 in 1839 followed immediately to 699 in 1840 and 469 by 1849). Some salmon and other fish were dried and salted as a kind of K-ration for hunting parties, but as an 1862 government critically reported, "Fishing has been done on a scale which barely meets the needs of the colonies
themselves, in spite of the extraordinary abundance of various good stocks of fish in the lakes and rivers of the colonies. 9

Economic development during the American period commenced with the appearance of the first salmon canneries at Klawock and Sitka in 1878 and spread northward and westward into central and western Alaska coming to a halt in Bristol Bay in 1884. From an initial pack of 8,159 cases of 48 one-pound cans, the output of the industry rose to about 2-1/2 million cases per year by the turn of the century and averaged 4.8 million cases during the 1920s. The total annual average catch of salmon rose from 31.7 million fish for the period 1904-1914 to an annual average of 98.8 million fish for the period 1935-1959. Although the Gold Stampedes and a brief but intense period of copper production stole the limelight for part of the period, salmon fishing and canning dominated the Alaska economy until the advent of World War II. Average annual value of Alaska exports for 1931-1940, for example, were accounted for by 55.1 percent canned salmon and 6.4 percent other fish products, with the remaining 38.5 percent consisting of the value of gold, copper, furs, junk (i.e., damaged cannery machine being shipped out for repairs), and miscellaneous. 10

This industrial invasion originated from California's Sacramento River migrating northward after exhausting the runs there, and still had its headquarters in San Francisco, although this was later shifted to Seattle. It was based upon the factory system and a
processing technology in advance of its time. The initial harvest in southeast Alaska was an adaptation of the Indian's dam or barricade but without ethnical or religious controls. The canneries were, after all, highly portable and could be dismantled and erected elsewhere when a stream had been mined out completely. When the initial "prospecting" period ended about 1894 with the stabilization of the number of firms in the industry and the emergence of the "giants," the worst of these harvesting abuses had been abandoned and the task accomplished by several varieties of mobile gear and, where the natural conditions permitted, highly efficient fixed traps. For the period 1904-1914, fish traps accounted for 37.8 percent of the total salmon catch. The take of this form of gear rose to 54.1 percent of the salmon catch in 1925-1934, declining slightly to 48.3 percent for 1935-1939 due to the loss of runs at some sites and more stringent conservation regulations eliminating other traps deemed located too close to stream mouths.

Although Native labor was used both in fishing and processing, particularly in the southeastern region, seasonally imported nonresident workers made up the bulk of the labor force. Initially, the canneries found an abundant and cheap labor force in the California Chinese "coolies" now redundant to the needs of the railroads who had originally imported them. These sources were supplemented and later replaced by other Oriental immigrants,
notably Filipinos from California and Italian and Scandinavian fishermen from San Francisco and Puget Sound.

The course of the industry and fishery development can be traced in the annual reports of the government agencies charged with resource management and economic regulation. The most complete social and economic picture was provided at the very end of this period by a special investigation of labor conditions and characteristics in 1939. Table 1 summarizes the salmon catch in thousands of fish and by the three major management regions, resident and nonresident ownership of traps, fisherman, and the disposal of the catch to processors. Canning took all but an insignificant amount of the catch in all regions. Approximately two-thirds to three-quarters of the catch were taken by traps and nonresident fishermen. Table 2 summarizes the number of persons engaged in all phases of the salmon canning industry by residence, race, and region for 1939. Residents accounted for 59.2 percent and 47.5 percent of the labor force employed in the southeast and central regions respectively, but only 22.9 percent of the western (Bristol Bay-Alaska Peninsula) region.

One or more salmon canneries were located at almost every coastal Native village from Ketchikan to the Nushagak River, at one time or another, during the first three decades of the twentieth century. The seasonal rhythm and tempo of life echoed that of the aboriginal period, but the new technology and commercial motivation
of the nonresident-oriented activity destroyed the former whole fabric of village community life. With the exception of the first decade of the century when Nome was the largest city in Alaska (12,488 at the 1900 census and 2,600 at the 1909 census), the center of gravity of non-Native population was in southeastern Alaska and its urban centers at Juneau, Ketchikan, and Sitka. Each of these new cities had taken over the site and population of former Native communities and became the trade and service centers for the surrounding areas and smaller communities and places. Juneau was the location of the largest hard-rock gold mining operation in Alaska and the territorial capital, but like the other two centers, the landing and processing of salmon was an important element of the basic economy. Ketchikan was truly the "salmon-canning capital of the world." Intermediate non-Native population centers appeared at Wrangell (a former Native village site), Petersburg, Haines, Cordova, Seward, Seldovia, Kenai, and Dillingham, with salmon harvesting and processing as their economic base. (Although a small Eyak village and cannery was located near the site of Cordova before the non-Native town was established as the rail head and port for the Kennicott copper developments, it was not until after the shut-down of the mine at McCarthy that the present diversified fishing community fully emerged.)

The factors which might contribute to the creation of true fishing communities at these new population centers, however, were diluted by the nonresident element in the labor force and the
nonresident ownership of almost all of the harvesting and processing capital. More importantly, the objectives of this economic development were the exploitation of Alaska resources at the lowest cost to the exploiters and for the benefit of distant markets—a classical colonial objective. The technologically specialized nature of the activities further fragmented the integration of the population and inhibited community development. The usurpation of the resource, coupled with this specialization, was destructive of the Native community. A 1937 look at Alaska generalized that "The labor situation in the Territory is influenced by the fact that the population consists almost entirely of adult males, engaged for the most part in occupations requiring considerable physical activity and mobility, and living, to a very considerable extent, in rather scattered and often more or less temporary communities. This type of employment tends to discourage the building of normal family and communal life."12

There was a sense of industrial "community" among the territory-wide nonresident population centered in Seattle and embracing all elements of the Alaska Canned Salmon Industry (the name of the principal lobbyist organization of Alaska's territorial period). There must have been a sense of occupational community even among the wretched Chinese laborers of the initial period of development and expansion. But local community, in the whole or "true" sense as defined by MacIver, was only beginning to emerge from the wreck of the previous aboriginal communities. One clear exception was the
colony of Tsimshian Indians, who migrated eight hundred strong to Alaska under the leadership of William ("Father") Duncan from British Columbia and established the community of Metlakatla in 1887. In 1891, Congress created the Annette Island Reservation which provided an exclusive salmon resource base which was, and still is, harvested by a rational combination of fixed traps and mobile gear. This was to become a model community for Native and non-Native Alaskans, with integration through adherence to a mid-Victorian ideal of Christian utopianism and advanced technology.

Transition, World War II to Statehood: 1940-1959

The 1939 census reported only 524 members of the Armed Forces in Alaska, but by July 1940, this rose to 1,000 and a year later to 152,000 members. The men in uniform were accompanied by a corresponding increase in construction employment as a defense complex was thrown together and then revamped in accordance with shifts in international politics (i.e., war) and the technology and warfare. For the next two decades, Alaska was primarily the key defense bastion of the North American continent as the "Cold War" followed the "Hot War."

From a total of 72,524 persons in the 1939 census, Alaska's total population rose to 128,643 in 1950 and to 226,167 in 1960. Most of this increase was concentrated in the military-urban centers of Anchorage and Fairbanks, and by the end of the period, Alaska appeared to be well on the way to becoming a one- or two-city
territory. This population was largely a wholesale transplant from outside Alaska tied directly to the defense establishment, but it had important implications for the Alaska fisheries community. For one thing, the age-sex patterns of non-Native populations became more "normal." These new Alaskans joined forces with elements among the old Alaskans to launch the statehood movement, a search for self-determination, which culminated in the passage of the Alaska Statehood Act in 1959.

Resident fishing interests joined with the urban Alaskans in seeking local control of resource management, and in anticipation of this eventuality, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game was established by the 1949 legislature. Funds were limited, but by strategic selection of pilot projects, it prodded the federal managers into programs of expanded research and management. As Crutchfield and Pontecorvo stated in 1969, "there was no significant degree of conservation in the Alaska salmon industry until the 1950s." There was cause for concern. The statehood movement provided a rallying point for resident fishermen seeking the outlawing of the nonresident-controlled fish trap and further localization of management and this, in turn, created an awareness of a community of interest in the centers of population devoted primarily to fishing.

But, as Charlie Simpler's review of his life as a Cordova fisherman makes clear, there was little "sense of community" during
this period. The Alaska fisherman emerges from his account as an essentially lonely figure, struggling heroically and with indifferent success against the hazards and niggardliness of Nature, competing for a share of a dwindling salmon resource against other gear and other predators, and being harried and frustrated by a confused and divided federal and territorial attempt at resource management. It is difficult to find any trace of integration or unity in this picture; the centrifugal forces of specialization, competition, and increasing scarcity have driven the whole into fragments and chaos.

The First Fifteen Years of Statehood--1959-1974

Statehood was a basic rearrangement of political and administrative institutions with transfer of administration and management functions and land and resource ownership and control from Washington, D.C. to Alaska with expansion of state and local government—in short, a shift of objectives and control from the nonresident. The basic philosophy of the Alaska Statehood Movement increased local self-determination and sharing in the benefits of economic development. They reappeared in modified form in the Alaska Native Political Movement of the 1960s, culminating in the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971. This program launched further land ownership transfers and introduced new political-economic institutions in the form of the Native regional and village corporations.
More directly affecting salmon, in 1972 the voters approved a constitutional amendment allowing the state to limit entry into Alaska fisheries, and in 1973 the legislature passed an act launching such a program. High seas fishing activities of foreign fishermen, particularly Japanese, appeared to pose a growing threat to survival of the salmon fisheries. On the other hand, Japanese purchases of fish through the A-Y-K Native fishermen cooperative provided financial assistance and, in 1975, foreign investment (mostly Japanese) in Alaska fish processing plants totaled $17 million.

Alaska continued to grow. Between the April 1960 and 1970 census dates, population increased by 33.8 percent, or an average annual rate of growth of 2.9 percent. All principal economic indicators recorded steady growth in the economy—between 1961-1972, state gross product increased at an average of 9.8 percent (or 5.7 percent in constant dollars), per capita personal income received by Alaskans by 6.2 percent (or 3.7 percent in constant dollars), and civilian employment by 3.3 percent. Within the commodity-producing sector of the economy, oil and gas production and forest products were the main sources of growth while fisheries showed little or no change.

The salmon fishery continued to decline from an annual average catch of 34.5 million fish in the five-year period of 1955-1959 to 30 million for 1971-1975. (The annual catches for this five-year
period were 47.5 million, 32 million, 22.3 million, 21.9 million, and 25.5 million [preliminary for 1975].) Prior to the limited entry program of 1973, the number of commercial fishermen licenses issued rose from 11,919 in 1960 to 22,088 in 1970. Use of licenses issued as a proxy for actual employment, however, is somewhat misleading during this period. The elimination of fish traps, which accounted for approximately half of the catch from 1915-1944 and a third of it thereafter, required a shift to more labor-intensive forms of gear just to maintain catch levels (e.g., licenses increased from 11,919 in 1960 to 14,010 in 1961), and this period also witnessed an increase in "sport-commercial" fishermen, particularly in the southeast and Cook Inlet regions.

An estimate of the number of persons actually engaged in fishing (using data on weekly catch landings from fish tickets) for the six years of 1965-1970 places the peak employment for 1970 at 10,826 fishermen as compared with 22,088 licenses issued. Taking into account the effects of trap elimination, this figure does not represent an undue increase over the 1930 employment of 7,736 (Table 2).^15

The spectrum of types of fishermen was extended and embraced greater variety than in the previous historical periods. At one end of the spectrum were the surviving subsistence fishermen, and at the other extreme were the sports fishermen interested only in the recreational aspects of the activity. The range of commercial
fishermen in between subsistence and sport divided into nonresident and the last into subsistence-commercial, full-time commercial (those fishermen dependent primarily upon fishing for their livelihood), part-time commercial (moonlighting teachers and others who supplemented their basic income with summer work), and sports-commercial (pleasure-craft owners who secured commercial licenses to provide cash for operating costs and/or tax write-offs). All were competing for a share of the dwindling resources, and their different motivations presented managers with complications of dealing with these conflicting interest groups and setting priorities of some sort.

In the broader context of political and economic change and the salmon fisheries context of continued decline in catch accompanied by increased fragmentation of the harvesting labor force, the continuation of the Alaska salmon community appeared threatened. In southeastern Alaska, many resident fishermen faced with ever shortening open sessions found it expedient to become nonresidents wintering in the Puget Sound area and coming up for a brief summer season. At the other end of the geographic line, the resident Bristol Bay fishermen did not have this alternative escape and were increasingly dependent upon special emergency and welfare programs to make ends meet. But the 1970 census reports revealed a survival of all places which might be identified as "salmon communities," and in a number of cases, registered population increases.
My study of fisheries employment for 1965-1970 suggests that this evidence of survival did not rest solely on tenacity or welfare subsidization, but a continuing basis for making a living at fishing. New employment in natural resources production and government dominated the total state employment, but in the fisheries regions of the state fisheries and fish processing employment continued to constitute an important portion of the total employed civilian workforce (Table 3). In Bristol Bay, this constituted virtually the total civilian employment available (military personnel are excluded). In Prince William Sound and the Southwestern region (Kodiak, the Peninsula, and the Aleutians), these employments accounted from 40 percent to more than half of the peak employment and between 18 and 38 percent of the twelve-month average employment. The expansion of oil and gas and petrochemical industries in the Cook Inlet region and logging, timber, and pulp production and government employment in Southeastern region (coupled with absolute declines in fisheries) reduced the relative importance of fishery and related employment, but for the period these sources were still significant. Isolating the center of oil and gas, timber and pulp, and the state capital, the remaining places within these two regions still depended upon salmon and other fisheries for their survival.

The Future of the Alaska Fishing Community

Today we are in the process of further changes in Alaska, the nation, and the world which both threaten the survival of the small
community and increase its value to the future of mankind. A recent collection of studies of community points up this dichotomy in the destruction within a space of 200 years of the agricultural village, an innovation of the Neolithic age which survived more than 10,000 years at the home of mankind, by the superior energy and power of urban technology.

Uncontrolled technological development and economic exploitation were the engines, large-scale and largely urban societies the destination. And now the very liberalism that allowed this world to be created is in a process of decay; the massive interdependence simply cannot persist without a greater degree of order than the classical economists prescribed. In this new crisis, there is promise of community, and there is threat to... our communications... our educational systems... make possible a kind of integration... never before known. They also make possible a kind of coercion, indoctrination, and control over the behavior of others not possible before. While we may learn from the historical instances available to us, we simply cannot extrapolate from them; we shall have to invent new styles of community.16

The Alaska fishing community viewed in the socioeconomic history of the Alaska salmon fishery is a model of this longer and larger story of the course of history and future fate of mankind. The wholly integrated aboriginal village, which probably evolved over a period of hundreds of thousands of years, was likewise destroyed with the swift expansion of the salmon cannery industry between 1878 and 1884. The broader course of Alaska's history has likewise been toward increased urbanization and larger-scale community—at times, the destination almost appears to be the creation of one (or at most, two) city/state as functions and population become
increasingly centralized. The present overwhelming wave of oil and gas exploitation, driven by the international energy crisis, poses real physical and economic threats to the survival of any fishing community.

To paraphrase the quotation with which this section opened, we will have to invent a new style of fishing community, not a copy of the aboriginal community, but one embodying forces of integration and unity. The very threat of Valdez tanker traffic and offshore oil and gas leasing have forced upon the highly individualistic Alaskan fishermen an awareness of community of occupation and interest. Looking at the sponsors of this conference and the members of the Prince William Sound Aquaculture Corporation, there is further evidence that others with interests in salmon are here aware of a broader community of associations, to refer back to MacIver's definition. During the course of this conference, we may be discovering this needed "new style of fishing community," one in which shared fate will take the place of the ancient basis of shared tradition, and a philosophy of giving as well as taking, the recent one of taking only. In this, we may be seeing on a small scale the prescription for the salvation of Alaska as a place to live and make a home as well as a living. Like the rest of you, I am here to learn and listen.
ENDNOTES


4Ibid., pp. 166, 167.

5Ibid., pp. 181, 182.

6Ibid., p. 168.

7Ibid., p. 182.


