

CATCHING ON TO KETCHIKAN

Even tourists are discovering Alaska's fourth-largest city, once infamous for its pirates and bootleggers, but built on its still-thriving fishing industry.

BY JENNIFER KARUZA

As the nickname suggests, the former “canned salmon capital of the world” is a town that was built, and continues to thrive, on its commercial fishing industry. And it's this impressive fishing tradition, combined with a history of fish pirates, an illustrious “red light” district, and successful booze smuggling, that makes Ketchikan, Alaska, much more than just the first port of call for northbound seafarers traveling through the Inside Passage.

Ketchikan occupies three long and narrow square miles of land on Revillagigedo Island, and boasts an annual rainfall of 162 inches (in comparison,

Seattle sees an annual rainfall of 39 inches). There are just three traffic lights in the city, and only the Tongass Highway runs from one end to the other, literally dead-ending in the forest, 18 miles north and 12 miles south of the city.

“The town is so small that you could easily have amongst your friends people in all the different industries. You could be a personal friend of the mayor, and also know people that are doctors, fishermen, loggers, night-girl dancers, and schoolteachers. You can really be involved in the entire town and a whole variety of people,” explains Bill Rotecki, a Ketchikan resident since 1981, who has primarily earned his living in construction and commercial fishing.

The first settlers were coaxed to Ketchikan in the 1880s by the astonishing

amounts of pink salmon that congested Ketchikan Creek, a spot fished for thousands of years by Tlingit Natives, and also to build the first non-native structure in the town: a cannery.

The first cannery was built in 1886 at the mouth of the creek by Mike Martin, described by *Our Town-Discover Ketchikan* magazine as a “personable little Irishman who was free with a dollar and a drink.” Martin came to Ketchikan at the request of Portland, Ore., investors who were looking for a cannery site. Incidentally, he also opened Ketchikan's first saloon, the Sideboard, in 1899.

By the time Ketchikan was incorporated as a town in 1900, the city had a legendary reputation for its saloons,

brothels, gambling, and single men and women in pursuit of adventure and fortune. The town's roads and buildings were built upon piers — some with the smuggling of Canadian booze in mind. Trapdoors built into floors allowed skiffs to come through underneath and deliver shipments of contraband liquor for storage during Prohibition.

The rowdy activities of the men and women of turn-of-the-century Ketchikan didn't amuse everyone. One of the first acts of the newly formed city council was to try and tame a portion of its 454 residents by sending a notice to all saloon owners, which read: “Women are frequenting the bars and disturbing the peace and quiet and order of the community, and unless this is abated, the license will be revoked.”



CRUISE SHIPS like those above are now common sights in Thomas Basin, where not long ago only fishing vessels stood.

Ketchikan, however, was the first port of call for fishermen and miners heading north and the last port of call for the same group heading south, with their pockets full of money. Twenty years after that notice was sent, not much had changed.

An article from the L.A. Examiner dated April 14, 1926, reported that Congress had recently found the U.S. Government was "acting as landlord" and permitting the sale of liquor and drugs, the trade of dissolute women and crime of all varieties on its property of Ketchikan in Alaska. The report ended with a statement that vice was not merely defiant in Ketchikan, it was arrogant.

The mayor of Ketchikan at the time is reported to have responded to the article with a statement that he had always drunk liquor and meant to go on drinking it, and that it was his privilege to visit any house he chose, respectable or otherwise.

Social activities aside, by 1890, Ketchikan was the main supply center for miners, logging camps and canneries. The fishing industry gained a solid foothold in 1907, after a significant rise in canned salmon prices initiated an investment in the industry and the construction of more canneries. In 1920, a total of 231 million pounds of fish product was

shipped from Ketchikan.

The construction of Ketchikan Cold Storage, completed in 1913, boasted a freezing capacity of 70 tons of ice and 90,000 pounds of fish per day, as well as storage space for 7.5 million pounds of product. These numbers attracted halibut fishermen as well as the salmon harvesters, and played a part in the consequent halibut boom of the 1930s.

Halibut schooners, many of which still fish today, began to call Ketchikan their home port in 1920. By 1930, Ketchikan was the center of the North Pacific halibut fleet, and wealthy Norwegian halibut fishermen built homes on upper Water

Street, which became known as Captains' Hill.

"When I first came here, there must have been 75 halibut schooners and people lived here year round," says Norman "Mac" MacDonald, 87, a retired ship carpenter who has lived in Ketchikan for 75 years.

"We had at least two big cold storages here, and at least seven different fish buyers. They all bid on the halibut and they all made money," MacDonald recalls. "Then the times changed and the fishermen got newer engines and faster boats, and they'd run their fish to Seattle and eventually moved to Seattle. It was an entirely different life than it is now, that's for sure."

By mid-century, fish stocks began diminishing and problems arose between canneries and fishermen. The fishermen, who couldn't compete with the volume or freshness of fish caught in the widely used fish traps, blamed the canneries for their loss of income and the decimation of fish stocks.

"When they had fish traps, the seine boats didn't amount to much. I'm sure the quality of fish wasn't anywhere comparable to the fish caught in traps," MacDonald says. "But after they got rid of the traps, and the seiners started making money, they improved their boats."

MacDonald says his wife's uncle used to own some fish traps. "We used to go out there and brail the traps and get a deckload," he says. "Quite a few fish would go over the side, but there were so many fish, it didn't matter."

Before the traps were banned (in 1959, when Alaska achieved statehood), some fishermen retaliated by becoming fish pirates. They'd steam out to the traps, steal the fish, and then sell them back to the canneries as their own catch — sometimes to the very cannery that owned

the trap. This became so common that canneries hired watchmen to live in shacks by the traps, and then hired boats and people to observe the watchmen. Finally, they hired patrol boats to keep an eye on those watching the watchmen.

One tale surrounding the traps involves a pair of college boys from Washington State who ran a seine boat without a seine. They went from trap to trap, pirating fish, and paid their way through college. The canneries were never able to catch the duo, no matter how many boats they chartered to follow the sein-

Demand for construction and packing boxes for the canneries initiated Ketchikan's lumber industry and resulted in the building of the Ketchikan Spruce Mills in 1903, which operated for over 70 years. Ironically, it was this timber industry that later tempered the temporary mid-century decline of the fishing industry.

In 1954, a \$55 million pulp mill was built on the north end of Ketchikan at Ward Cove, which continued the growth of the city. The mill operated until March 1997, when the 50-year contract between the mill and the U.S. Forest Service ended, forcing 500 residents into unemployment.

Since the closure, it is tourism that helps fuel Ketchikan's economy. In 1999, tourism revenues totaled more than \$70 million.

Cruise ships have now become common in Ketchikan. In the 1980s, the ships were



AFTER PRODUCING \$7.5 million worth of salmon in 1936, Ketchikan erected a sign welcoming visitors to the self-proclaimed "salmon capital of the world."

relatively rare; these days, according to the Department of Community and Economic Development, over 600 cruise ships dock in Ketchikan each summer, often up to six at one time. During the 2000 season alone, 572,464 cruise ship passengers visited the city.

During summer, dock space fills quickly and some cruise ships must anchor in the channel, effectively plugging the entrance to Thomas Basin. The Thomas Basin dock was recently expanded to accommodate the ships, but the port size remained unchanged.

Some locals say they feel lost in their own town and believe tourism is thriving at the expense of the community, while others see tourism more as a necessity than a necessary evil.

"Way back when, the locals would gawk

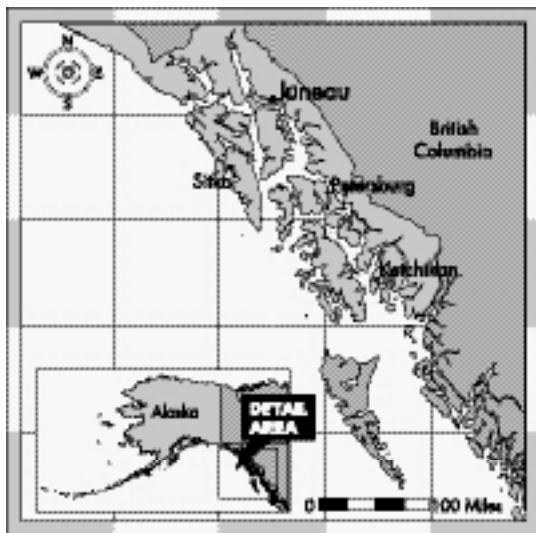
MAC'S MEMORIES

Retired ship carpenter Norman "Mac" MacDonald, 87, moved with his family to Ketchikan in 1926, when his father began work at a shipyard in town. The younger MacDonald purchased Tongass Boatworks in 1955, and he says he believes he has probably serviced every wooden boat in Ketchikan's fleet.

"It was a good time," MacDonald recalls. "We did everything by hand. We did all kinds of woodwork. We put in keels and pilohouses, various things. We used to pay five cents per board foot for lumber. Now, it's \$10 per board foot. I'm glad I don't have to bill anyone now. We put the keel in a halibut schooner for \$4,000; now, I don't know what it would cost."

"It was interesting work," he adds. "It wasn't a real lucrative job and we didn't make a lot of money, but I enjoyed my work." — J.K.

at a tour ship; now, the tourists gawk at the locals," Ketchikan resident LoAnn Swanson, who among other jobs, works for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game says, laughing. "I am not opposed to the tourist industry, but I am opposed to how the city is behaving," she explains.



Continued from page 23

as thousands of non-locals who call Ketchikan home during various fishing seasons.

Salmon remains Southeast Alaska's biggest commercial fishery, and stocks are healthy because of cautious, hands-on management. In 1999, Southeast seiners harvested a record 75 million pinks. In 2000, salmon harvests alone generated \$72 million in Southeast Alaska, making up a quarter of the state's total, according to the Ketchikan-Community Guide.

The 2001 Southeast Alaska pink salmon catch prediction was between 36 million and 50 million fish. Official statistics aren't available yet, but during the 2001 season, so many fish were present that many seiners were put on a 60,000-pound limit per opening. Catching the fish wasn't a problem; thanks to the wealth of farmed salmon flooding the market, getting a good price was. The Southeast salmon seining fleet is facing cutbacks in 2002 because of poor market conditions.

In addition to the summer salmon fisheries, Ketchikan supports various crab and shrimp fisheries, commercial dive fisher-

ies, and halibut, blackcod, lingcod, and rockfish longline seasons.

Even with the recent success, it was the years following World War I that were considered Ketchikan's fishing heyday, when more than 1,000 salmon boats supplied 13 canneries and cold storages. The salmon industry found several new markets for salmon during and after the war, and in 1936, the production of 1.5 million cases of salmon, valued at \$5 million, led Ketchikan to proclaim itself the "salmon capital of the world."

Although Ketchikan can be considered a small town by most standards, it is the fourth-largest city in Alaska. Swanson has witnessed a portion of its growth in the 30 years she has lived on the island.

"People used to drive by the post office, and those inside the post office would lean their heads out towards people they knew in the cars outside, and they'd just sit there and talk to each other like that," Swanson says. "And nobody would honk. Dogs would sleep in the middle of the road. The first time somebody honked at the post office, everyone stopped and turned around to see who was doing the honking. When we saw the car had California license plates, everyone turned around and continued talking."

The post office kibitzing may have faded, but residents still enjoy passing time together. Each afternoon, MacDonald hosts a cocktail hour for family and friends, which includes his nephew Larry Kubley, owner of the notorious Sour-

dough Bar.

"Everybody has a couple of drinks to pass the time of day, and get any news that isn't in the newspapers," MacDonald explains with a chuckle.

One rainy afternoon in July, the group is gathered in MacDonald's living room as the seiners, just in from an opening, steam through the channel.

"I don't know of any place I would rather live," MacDonald declared. "I like the water, and I'm very fortunate to sit right here and watch the boats go by. The packers lay across the bay here, and it's hard to judge when a boat has a lot of fish now because they have the tanks. But I look over there and they look like they're loaded. I'm happy here."

Sources for historical information gathered for this article include *Spirit and Our Town-Discover Ketchikan*, both produced by *Historic Ketchikan Inc.*, the *Ketchikan Community Guide*, and the *Tongass Historical Museum*. **NF**

Jennifer Karuza is a freelance writer living in Seattle.

"Way back when, the locals would gawk at a tour ship; now, the tourists gawk at the locals."

—LoAnn Swanson

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