

Up North: Chapter Fourteen - The Alaskans

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Fishing boats in Bristol Bay

The land and waters of Alaska are immense and tend to overshadow the people of Alaska as the dominant force in life. The fact is that no matter how awe inspiring the natural world of land, water and wildlife is; nature will kill you. Yet for thousands of years, people have come to Alaska, carved a place out of the wilderness, survived and thrived.

Everyone from the earliest Siberians that crossed over the land bridge twenty thousand years ago to the college kid that came up to work the summer in a cannery, of course, is from somewhere else. Folks came for economic reasons, for the adventure and just to say they have done it. The common denominator seemed to be that they left another life behind and just came. The rugged individualism of its people made Alaska the closest thing to a frontier left in America. Over the years, I met and worked with all kinds of people some, more memorable than others. More than a few were real characters.

Red Lataski was born and grew up in the Chicago area. In the U.S. Navy, he was trained as a diver and a welder; skills that he put to good use when he arrived in Alaska. Rumor had it that while in the Navy he was involved in a diving accident that had crushed his skull and made him a little unpredictable or crazy. He brought that with him also when he came north. He worked doing repairs on boats, fished and dove into frigid waters to remove obstructions from boat propellers. He worked hard and never worked for anybody else for long. Over a period of a couple of years, he built his own aluminum combination salmon, halibut and crab boat. He also salvaged a sunken crab boat and used it to fish crab in the winter and tender salmon in the summer.

After locating a small isolated island wading distance from Afognak, he built a cabin and began homesteading with his life partner Debbie. Deb was as independent-minded and capable as Red and they made their life together in the remote wilderness. They never thought they needed a piece of paper to cement their partnership and so they never got one. The other side of Red's self-sufficient lifestyle was an aversion to any authority and anybody telling him what to do. He was the closest thing I ever met to a real pirate.

Over the years, he fought a running battle with the Alaskan Department of Fish and Game. Fish and Game for some reason thought it was their role to tell Red when, where and how he could fish just like everyone else. Red would have none of it. It was his contention that only his skill and daring should limit his catch. One of his well-known skills was creek robbing. This involved going up into a salmon stream beyond the limit where fishing was legal and corking the creek. That is running a net from one side of the

stream to the other and catch all the fish. Fish and game did their best to rein him in using every weapon at their disposal including snitches, summonses, fixed wing aircraft and even helicopters. For his part, Red did his best to outfox them at every turn using the remoteness of the waters, the cover of darkness and on one occasion gunfire.

Unfortunately as is wont to happen, one winter Red's crab boat iced up in the Shelikof Strait, rolled over and disappeared with all hands lost. His memorial service was held at a bar in Kodiak and the whole town including the local Fish and Game guys turned out to say goodbye. The radio station announced that proper dress for men was a jacket and tie, which made us laugh because not only did Red not own such duds but nobody in Kodiak did either.

When I showed up in Kodiak in the summer of 1983, I was pleasantly surprised to find an old friend from back in Ohio already there. Neil Shuckerow and I went to high school together and played on the same conference championship football team. At the time, Neil was the ISA plant manager and within a year, he was promoted to general manager and so was my direct boss. In a lot of ways we were friends, often hunting and fishing together, but we were also rivals and more than once knocked heads over how to run the business. Neil was a natural businessman and knew how to make money and so was a big asset to the company. Back on the block when we were coming up Neil was already into making money. In high school, while the other guys were hanging out and playing the fool, Neil always had a job. Neil had an older brother who was active in the Vietnam anti-war movement and after graduation Neil followed him to march on Washington. I was stationed at the Marine Barracks in D.C. at the time and our assignment in a civil disturbance was to don riot gear and clear the district's many bridges at bayonet point. I don't think I ever ran into Neil there but it was possible.

Neil prided himself in being a tenacious negotiator and he practiced a lot. Once he had me meet him in Anchorage to help with some purchasing for the company. He wanted to buy some rifles, shotguns knives and other sporting gear to be used as prizes in the annual company hunting and fishing tournament. He had a shopping list and we rented a car and hit several specialty gun shops and discount outlets. We spent the morning and half the afternoon going back and forth, back and forth between the stores as Neil relentlessly beat the salesmen down. Late in the day, we had a plane to catch, so we walked out on the salesman's best offer and headed for the airport.

After arriving at the Anchorage Airport, Neil found out there was another flight to Kodiak in two hours, so he changed our reservation and we headed back into town to keep trying. I was exhausted and a bit disgusted. What was the point to spend the day arguing over what amounted to ten or twenty dollars per item? With forty minutes till the next flight, we went back to the airport. With the traffic, we missed that one and went back to town for round three.

The last flight was at nine P.M. and we rolled up to the departure area with ten minutes to spare. Problem was we still had the rental car. Neil's solution was to toss me the keys and say take the car back and get the first flight out in the morning. Whatever we saved on getting rock bottom prices, I spent on a hotel room and a lavish dinner. What was the point? I can only conclude that negotiating was his hobby and he enjoyed it.

For a smart guy like Neil, the Exxon Valdez was a bonanza. Exxon had a huge PR problem and they had to spend huge sums almost indiscriminately on the cleanup effort. Housing the cleanup crews was a logistical problem that Neil helped to solve. He leased a huge ocean-going barge, put a dozen pre-fabricated homes on it and anchored it near the main clean up area. He leased it to Exxon to house the cleanup crew for about \$5,000 a day. Over the three or four month period, he did his own 'clean up'.

As general manager of ISA, Neil constantly went head to head with our Japanese partner. Standard Japanese management style is for the bigger company to treat suppliers as subsidiaries and squeeze all the profits upstairs. This went against Neil's instincts and very nature and he fought for ISA's integrity and profitability tooth and nail. In the end, the Japanese company was able to force him out.

Understandably a little bitter, Neil moved his family to Anchorage where he opened a furniture factory and his wife Young-nim opened a popular Chinese restaurant. The furniture company broke even but the restaurant was a hit and with some real estate income they joined the millionaire club within a couple of years. Living well seems to be the best revenge.

Unfortunately, Neil passed away from a sudden heart attack in his early fifties. I flew back for the funeral and was a pallbearer. I felt like I was saying goodbye to two old friends at the same time, Neil and Alaska.

Over the years, I hired and then worked and lived with a lot of characters. Mike Belfus was our Egegik winter man for many years. He lived on the property through the long, harsh winters and discouraged random theft and vandalism. He was a Vietnam vet, a loner for the most part, a hard worker and a fisherman in the summer time. During the time when we were opening up the camp in the spring, he was

my labor foreman. He was a ramrod that always got the job done and became a friend. Unbeknownst to most, he was a heroin addict and died alone of an overdose one cold winter.

My brother John and my sister Mary both worked for me at Egegik for several years. John became a hero the night the salmon fried. Mary was single then and I tried to set her up with some handsome boys from a ranch in eastern Washington who were working for the summer. They were nice, cowboys, gentlemen and competent, hard workers but Mary wasn't interested in them. At the time, I never understood why.

We had several chief engineers over the years. The best and craziest was Peter Swerkowski. Of indeterminate age and cavadorious of physique with bright blue eyes Peter was a refuge from Poland. He was trained as an engineer in the Soviet submarine fleet and as far as I could tell he knew his stuff. He had defected, he told me, because of the discrimination against him in the Soviet Navy because he was Jewish. He loved the good ole USA because he was free to pursue his passion for eccentric engineering projects. His ideas and solutions were often so far out that I suspected he was a genius. His vision for the development of our little piece of windswept dune was futuristic. All I wanted was more and more ice at the critical moments. He wanted to build the infrastructure for a small city with a power plant and distribution grid that would deliver electricity to settlements up and down the beach.

With his heavily accented English and the ever-present cigarette clenched between his teeth I only understood what he was saying half the time at best. As long as he produced copious amounts of ice in the clinch and kept the water and power on the rest of the time, I let him do whatever else he wanted with materials and labor on hand. When it came to purchasing big-ticket items, I put the brakes on by making him justify his ideas.

He built his own little fiefdom over the generator shed and feuded with other departments constantly. His loyal assistant was a Japanese fellow named Nabotani who spoke no English at all. Everyone wondered and even marveled at how they communicated. One year we had a cook who was a fervent Catholic and thought Peter was the anti-Christ. Peter claimed she deliberately put pork and ham on the menu just to vex him. Peter scrounged a cook stove, utensils and foodstuffs and cooked for himself and his crew. It became our very own skunk works and a lot of good ideas and developments came out of it. I am convinced that in the right environment and with the right support he could create miraculous engineering feats.

The one person that I came to like the most in Alaska didn't come from outside but was born there. Although he no longer lives there my son Kevin Downey was born in Kodiak and so qualifies as a genuine Alaskan. On the day, he was born Kevin's mom went into labor and somehow got herself to the small hospital. Our doctor called me to let me know it was time. I was in Seattle at the time but he told me not to worry that I probably had six hours. Of course, I hopped the first flight north and after a layover in Anchorage made it back to be there when Kevin made his entrance.

Although we lived in Kodiak, the job required me to be either in Egegik or Seattle a lot of the time and most of the early years of child rearing fell to Helen. Sentiment today calls for a more hands-on role for dads but back in the day, it wasn't uncommon for fathers to leave much of the parenting to mom. Hindsight is 20/20 and I do feel some regret that I wasn't there for Kevin as much as I could have been but it was what it was.

Sometimes I think that being born and bred up north contributed at least something to his independent streak. When he was about four years old, we were sharing a house with a guy who was a boat captain and suffered from getting sea sick, which I found to be not as rare as you might think. One day Kevin got into his anti-sea sick medication and thinking it was candy or something ate a bunch of it. Helen rushed the drossy lad to the emergency room to have his stomach pumped. The staff explained that they don't pump it out in such cases but instead give the patient something to make them wretch and vomit. But of course the anti-sea sick medication prevents vomiting so they said that they would just keep him overnight for observation and he would be ok the next day.

They put him in a room with a guy who had been mauled by a bear. He was a hunter and he had shot a deer; the rifle shot attracted the bear knowing that the sound meant fresh meat. Unfortunately, the hunter made the mistake of being between the meat and the bear when it showed up. The mauling was serious but the guy recovered. I don't know how much Kevin remembers of that incident but I sure do. Not just anybody can say they spent the night in a room with the victim of an Alaskan bear attack.

He started school in a one-room schoolhouse run by the Seventh Day Adventists. I didn't know such things still existed. If we had stayed in Kodiak, who knows, he might have become a commercial fisherman or a bear hunting guide. Instead, we moved to Seattle and he became a computer programmer, which may be the equivalent nowadays.