Chapter One
The Tender Man

My first job in Alaska was as a tender man. The company needed guys to go out on tender boats and factory ships to buy salmon from the smaller catcher boats. I flew into Kodiak for a brief training course on the salmon fishery, how to buy fish, fill out fish tickets and handle cash. The company, being new, operated as a cash buyer to keep the factory in Kodiak working. Cash buyers could always buy fish on the spot because a lot of fishermen, in order to hide money from wives, ex-wives and their own fish company where they might owe a lot of money, were happy to sell some of their catch for cold hard cash. I was equipped with a fish ticket book, a hooded jacket with pockets sewed inside and $300,000 in 100 dollar bills. I also bought a Smith and Wesson .357 magnum and a shoulder holster on credit from a local sporting goods store. Feeling like a gunslinger from the old west, I was ready to go to work.

My first assignment was to meet the M/V Northern Lights, a Vietnam era missile ship that had been converted into a floating processor. The Northern Lights, with a skipper, first mate, engineer, cook and a factory crew of about 20 people, was at anchor in Olga Bay at the south end of Kodiak Island. Feeling like a riverboat gambler in the old west I boarded a floatplane for the two-hour flight to Olga Bay. The ship was 210 feet long with a factory for heading, gutting and freezing fish. It also had Spartan accommodations as well as a galley, engineering spaces and a wheelhouse with the captain's stateroom. The floatplane landed in the bay close to the vessel and taxied on pontoons up to a skiff and I threw my gear onto the skiff, jumped aboard and was pulled up to the boarding ladder.

The salmon fishery is tightly controlled by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. Since they open and close the fishing to meet escapement goals, there are periods of intense work as well as

downtime. During the downtime, there was plenty of sleeping and reading from the extensive library of discarded paperbacks. It was the skipper's tradition to conduct a happy hour every afternoon at 4 o'clock. It was by invitation only but as the company rep, I was there every day. We sat around the galley drinking beer, wine, whiskey, gin or whatever could be wrangled from private stashes. There was also usually Tillamook cheese and Pilot Bread crackers to munch on. These sessions were my introduction to the rich and varied folklore unique to Alaska and the fishing industry. We shot the shit, told outrageous lies, bragged, and ribbed each other. I guess it was to relieve stress and boredom. A lot of people working in Alaska were from the small towns of the Oregon and Washington State rivers and coast. They brought with them the flavor of the hard working, hard drinking lumberjacks and fishermen of the North West. Being from the suburbs of the East Coast and Midwest I recognized these folks as characters out of a Jack London story. Very exotic; hell, they chewed tobacco, drank whiskey out of the bottle, and grew beards. They tolerated little pretense. Everybody wore Carhartts, rubber boots and tractor caps. Straight talk, resourcefulness, and competence in the outdoors were admired virtues. Except for chewing tobacco, which I tried once and did inhale, I loved it.

Alaskan Natives were a different story. One time, during closure, a purse seiner came alongside to take on fuel. The captain was Joseph Kabakavitch. (Only a facsimile of his real name) During fueling, he came aboard in a friendly mood and struck up an acquaintance with the new guy, me. Joseph was an Aleut from the nearby village of Akiak. The Aleuts are a native people distinct in language and culture from the Yupik and Inuit people commonly called Eskimos. The Aleuts' original home was the Aleutian Islands that bear their name. They were enslaved and transported to Kodiak by the Russians to hunt sea otter after the demise of the Koniag people. They are a sea-going people with a long tradition of navigating the waterways of their home islands in small vessels. Of course, to me he looked like an Eskimo, short, compact with the dark hair, eyes and complexion of his Asian forbearers. He invited me onboard his 52'

fiberglass vessel for a tour of the neighborhood. With nothing but adventure on my mind, I was more than game. Olga Bay is a long narrow waterway that opens into a wide lake at the northern end. It is almost landlocked except for a very narrow passage to the south, only navigable by larger vessels on the incoming and falling tides that connects to Fraser Bay and the North Pacific. As we motored around the bay, Joseph pointed out various landmarks used by locals for navigation. These included the remains of an old cannery from when they canned salmon, several abandoned villages and seasonal fish camps. After about 40 minutes the VHF radio crackled into life. A woman's shrill voice, obviously Joseph's domestic partner, became increasingly agitated calling for him to come up on various channels. Joseph ignored the pleas, chain smoked camels and kept up a running commentary on the passing scenery. She continued

"Joseph I know you're drinking. You better not be drinking. If you're drinking, I'm gonna smash you one."

Finally, Joseph turned to me with a twinkle in his eye and what can only be called a shit-eating grin, turned off the radio and reached into a bulkhead locker coming out with a quart of Old Granddad. He unscrewed the cap and tossed it out a window into the bay, thus making it clear how this was going to end. He then took a long swallow of whiskey and with a satisfied look turned to me and said,

"Hey Mr. Moon, how about a drink."

I was Mr. Moon because I was a Moonie and representing ISA, the company started by Rev. Moon's Unification Church. Since Moonies don't drink alcohol, I hesitated for about a half a second before taking the bottle.

When drinking whiskey straight, it is best to inhale, swallow the whiskey and then immediately exhale. This seems to short circuit the gag reflex and allows the whiskey to slide down smoothly and fill the belly with a warm sensation. Employing this technique I took a large gulp that seemed to impress Joseph. We spent the next hour and a half passing the bottle back and forth. Not being as acclimated to strong drink as my partner, I tried to go a little easy. But Joseph, citing my status as a Moonie and my duty to uphold the pride and

bragging rights of Moonies everywhere, insisted that I imbibe my fair share. Honestly, today I don't know what passed between us, if anything, as conversation.

Towards the bottom of the bottle I was feeling so unsteady that I thought it best to go out to the back deck for the fresh air and to be close to the rail in case, I had to give up lunch. As I stood gripping the rail and gazing into the middle distance, I saw three black heads with eyes and snouts pop up about 40 yards off the stern.

"Jaysus what are those?' I pointed and shouted.

From behind me, Joseph informed me "Fuckin seals! Wanna have some fun?"

All drunkenness forgotten, I replied in the affirmative. For several hours, we had been slowly motoring up and down the bay towing a 14' aluminum skiff with a 40 horse kicker. Captain Joseph quickly put the boat on anchor, hauled the skiff alongside and produced from the house a Ruger Mini-14 with three magazines of .223 rounds. With Joseph at the tiller and me in the bow with the semi-automatic rifle, we cast off in pursuit of seals.

Seals are the sworn enemy of most salmon fishermen since they compete nose to nose for the same resource. Firecrackers, M-80s and firearms are the standard weapons used to keep seals of the nets in this daily struggle. As an ex-marine, I was rightly confident in my marksmanship. A fly in the ass at 300 yards as the saying goes.

Animal lovers the world over can rest assured that this wasn't like shooting fish in a barrel. The bow of a flat-bottom skiff bouncing over two-foot swells is not an ideal sniper's nest. Then factor in the seemingly uncanny ability of these mammals to duck their heads beneath the waves only milliseconds in front of an impacting round and you can understand why the final score was: seals 60(wasted rounds) and skiff commandos 0(seals bagged). It wasn't from want of trying.

The rest of the afternoon we scanned the water for the telltale black heads, sped towards them and unleashed bursts of semi-automatic fire. When we lost the light after about 7pm, it was late August, and we gave up. Joseph took me back to the floater and went home to

face the music. In spite of having a world class hangover the next day and having been rattled to the bone by the skiff, I considered it a pleasant excursion into the great Alaskan outdoors.

When the fishing was ‘open’ we did go to work. There are five different species of salmon in Alaska, kings, sockeyes or reds, chum or dogs, silvers or coho and pinks or humpies. They run up various river systems and are caught using various gear types. In Olga Bay, we were primarily targeting sockeyes (highly prized in Japan for their dark red meat.) but different species ran together and we were obliged to buy everything the fishermen delivered. The fishery is a limited entry permit system. Permits were originally issued by the state in the 1960s and were specific to regions and gear type. The Fraser River system is worked both by boats and set netters. A set net is 100 yards of polyurethane netting with a cork line at the top, so it floats and a lead line at the bottom causing it to sink. One end is anchored to the beach and the other attached to a buoy anchored out in the water. On an incoming tide, the salmon run up the river and are ensnared by the gills in the net. The fisherman (or woman) then, in a raft, skiff or by wading, pick the fish out of the net. The banks of the Fraser River are lined with set net sites. The M/V Northern Lights was there to buy process and freeze as many reds as possible.

It all started with delivery. A typical delivery went about like this. `At some point in the ebb tide, the fishermen would load up all the fish in a skiff and motor out to the floater.

After tying up alongside I’d greet them with something like “How’s it lookin Cap?”

The reply was often “Not worth a shit. Seals all over the net; nuthin but heads” Fishermen have more complaints than farmers.

Next, it was down to business. “What’s the fish price today?” the guy would open.

“Same as yesterday,” I’d let ‘em know with a certain amount of false confidence.

“You know the cannery is payin a nickel more” he’d counter.

“Well, then you oughta motor down to the cannery”, everyone knew it was a two hour round trip to the cannery, “and get paid at ‘settle up’, in September. We’re payin cash now.”

Of course, there was no doubt he was gonna deliver once the bellyaching was over.

Now a little hopeful he’d propose, “They say the cannery’s payin a dime bonus. What’re you guys payin?”

Now on firm footing I’d say “Don’t know for sure, could be a nickel, could be a dime. Hell, it might be a nickel and a dime.”

“You don’t know much, do you, Mr. Moon? Drop that hook down here I ain't got all fuckin night” he’d say to seal the bargain.

Then the hard part began. The fish were weighed and transferred aboard in a net bag called a brailer. A crewman on a deck crane swung a hook with a digital scale and the brailer over the side and lowered it into the skiff. The fisherman and his helper would begin pitching salmon one or two at a time into the bag. The problem was that sockeyes, worth up to $2.25 a pound, ran together with chums that got only .30 a pound. What’s more, the two species looked almost identical. The only effective way to tell them apart was to examine the eyes. The pupils of the dogs were perfectly round. The red’s pupils were narrow vertical slits. More experienced guys could see the difference right away. With all the time in the world in good light, I could do it too. On a dark night, it became a battle. The fisherman would pitch a seeming chum into the bag and I would pitch it out.

“What the fuck’s your problem Mr. Moon,” he’d complain as he threw two more dogs into the bag.

“I got no problem, but them two’s dogs.” I’d assert with more confidence than I felt.

“You sure? I think that one’s a red,” he’d mumble condescendingly.

“Ok that might be a red but the other one’s a dog,” I’d concede.

In the meantime, behind us, the helper was tossing a red and three more dogs into the bag. I couldn’t win but I tried not to get beat up too bad.

The process was repeated throughout the night until all the fishermen had delivered. Sometimes as many as six skiffs were in line waiting to unload. Most captains came aboard and sat around the galley exchanging intelligence and lies over cups of coffee. Helpers were left behind to jockey skiffs as the unloading progressed. The fish were stored onboard in RSW (refrigerated seawater) tanks. Once enough fish had accumulated to keep the line running, the factory started up. They ran until all the fish were in the plate freezers. Later, they would be broken out and cased up.

By slack tide, we were finished for the night. I tallied up and prepared a report. I had to report the number of fish, weight and species bought in the 24 hour period. I reported to Fish and Game by 10 a.m. every day via single side band radio. Then it was breakfast and hit the rack. Usually, as soon as I feel asleep, a straggler would show up and want to unload. We turned nobody away. I got up, weighed and bought the fish, not without appropriate amounts of bitching and moaning. This schedule continued day after day regulated only by openings and closures.

By the second week of September, the fishing had fallen off dramatically. The season was coming to an end. It was time to think about heading back to Dodge. After consultations between the captain and the bosses at the company back in Kodiak, the decision was made. As quick as possible the factory was shut down and the Northern Lights was made ready for sea. It had a scheduled rendezvous with a tramp steamer to unload its frozen and boxed salmon. I got ready to fly back to Kodiak.

The final cocktail party was turned into an epic blowout. Hoarded supplies of liquor and food were broken out. No point in taking it back to Seattle. Things kicked off at 4pm as usual and continued in some fashion until the early hours of the morning. By dawn, it was over. Most people, as far as I knew, were passed out by then. We started with cocktails, oysters, reindeer sausage and cheese on crackers. Dinner was T-bone steaks and baked potatoes. Then the hard liquor was produced. Whiskey, vodka and a rare bottle of tequila were consumed through the evening and into the night.

The season was recapped, old scores were brought up and settled, there were two fist fights and the futures of the fishery, Alaska, America, the world and various individuals were speculated on. Promises were made and goodbyes said. The proceedings eventually fell into drunken slurs. At some point, the liquor ran out and all left standing fell back to beer and wine.

Somebody woke me up, I was in my own rack, at 6 a.m. I was scheduled to catch the mail plane at 7 am for the return flight to Kodiak. Feeling like I had been run over by a bus, I dragged my gear out on deck. There was, surprisingly, sausage and eggs in the galley. I attempted nothing more ambitious than hot coffee and condensed milk. I had a hard time holding that down. Wages of sin I figured.

The mail plane was a floatplane that made a daily circuit of the five rural villages on Kodiak Island hauling the U.S. Mail, fresh produce, and other necessities. Mustering all of my fortitude, I threw my gear into the skiff and crawled over the side. As I was ferried out to the mail plane, I looked back at the Northern Lights expecting at least some sentimental feelings, but all I felt was “I wanna die and get it over with.”

It was a five-hour trip in the small plane and the weather required low flying through mountain passes, soaring and swooping in updrafts and downdrafts. Of course, my stomach was turned upside down by every sudden lurch. I fought the whole way not to embarrass myself by puking in the plane's interior. On landing at Old Harbor, I did crawl out on the pontoon and empty my belly. When we landed at Kodiak and once I put my feet on solid ground, I recovered some. Some is a relative term. It took me a week to fully get over it. I turned in my fish tickets and left over cash and the job was done.

The summer was over and it was decision time. I didn’t know for sure what was next. What I did know was that I had no intention of going back to the lower forty-eight. I had tasted life in Alaska and I was hooked.

CHAPTER TWO
GREEN HOPE DAYS

The salmon season was over and so was my job as a tender man. To stay on, I needed another gig. It seemed like I had two choices, go to work in a cannery or go out on a boat. For me, it was a no-brainer. Commercial fishing was not only the life blood of Kodiak. It was probably the most macho job in Alaska. The popular reality show 'The Most Dangerous Catch' has made the Alaskan fisheries familiar to a wide audience. Of course, the king crab fishery is top shelf. King crab fetches the highest ex-boat price, so that's where the big money is made. Notoriously bad weather, long working hours and working with machinery and heavy loads on a constantly moving platform combine to make it the most dangerous job in America. Other fisheries are just as dangerous but for less money.

It is almost impossible to get on a crab boat unless you are born into it or are lucky enough to be in the right place at the time when a boat needs somebody. As a Moonie, I had an inside track to a job on an affiliated church boat. That fall I signed onto the Green Hope an 82-foot steel hulled stern trawler built in Bayou La Batre, Alabama. The skipper was Bill Dalton. Joe Spicciani was first mate and engineer and Melvin Primos was deckhand and cook. They had been together for several years and had brought the boat to Alaska through the Panama Canal from the Gulf of Mexico. The vessel was rigged as a bottom trawler. It dragged a net with a bag along the bottom scooping up whatever fish was in its path. Me and another Joe joined the crew as greenhorn deck hands. Work on a fishing boat was completely different than any work I'd done before. That I lacked skills was a huge understatement.

This wasn't fly fishing on a river. This was an industrial environment and appropriate industrial skills were required. On a steel fishing boat arc-welding, diesel mechanics, hydraulic and refrigeration know-how were essential. If you break down at sea who you gonna call? Also, net repair, knot tying, and splicing were needed to keep the boat fishing. Of course, the captain needed to navigate, use the various electronic devices on board as well as handle the vessel in all kinds of weather including putting it alongside docks and other vessels. Most of these skills were only to be aspired to after mastering the basics; shoveling ice, pitching fish and washing down everything in sight.

As greenhorns, we started at the bottom and were gradually introduced to the tools of the trade by the other guys. As a boy scout, you may have learned to splice rope. Splicing a loop into the end of a 3/4 inch steel cable is the same concept but in reality a different animal. It involved leather gloves, several steel spikes, a vice, liberal amounts of taking the Lord's name in vain and bloody punctures to one's fingers.

My first effort was conducted under the tutelage of Cap'n Billy himself. With a mixture of instruction, complaint and derision, I was led through the process. It reminded me of my dad teaching me to drive. The end result wasn't pretty but was pronounced functional. The captain walked away shaking his head and I went below to try and stop the bleeding and tape the finger nail back on my index finger.

I did learn to sew web. Since we dragged the net along the bottom, we were constantly repairing rips. The bottom is studded with rock outcroppings that wrecked havoc on the gear. We often hauled the net and bag up on the deck, located and repaired tears. This involved sewing with an eight-inch plastic needle wrapped with plastic twine. Although the net looked like a tangled pile of webbing lying on the deck, it was, in fact, a skillfully designed and constructed device that should 'fly' through the water, opening to its full width to most effectively catch fish. Nets of any size were worth tens of thousands of dollars and came with detailed blueprints mapping-out their

construction. In order to repair anything with more than minor damage, it was important to be familiar with the design. I figured Cap'in Billy knew all about his nets. It was a mystery to me.

Under his direction, we grabbed the cold, wet web in our numbing hands and sewed it back together. Sometimes the task could be completed in a short time. On other occasions, it was so torn up that it took many hours or even days to put it back together again.

The Green Hope was new to the Alaskan waters and we spent that fall and winter learning the grounds. The Company, ISA, was looking for cod and Pollock to keep the plant working through the winter. The stocks were plentiful around Kodiak Island and in particular in the straits of water that separated Kodiak Island and the mainland, known as the Shelikof Strait, and it became our stomping grounds in the pursuit of codfish. While salmon got as much as $2.25, a pound cod was only worth .25 to .30 a pound. Pollock was more like .03 a pound. Therefore only huge volumes of fish could make the effort worthwhile.

The Green Hope was an iceboat, that is, the fish had to be packed in ice down in the hold to preserve the quality during the trip. This limited us to short trips. Three days from the first fish on board to delivery was our window. It was 12 to 18 hours from town to the grounds in the Shelikof. Weather also played a big role. The straits were notorious for bad weather. Storms that blew 50 to 60 knots with swells pushing 30 feet high were common. In such conditions fishing was not only ineffective but dangerous. Three-day trips often turned into 7 to 10 days. In bad weather, we were forced to hide in a protected bay as the storm blew itself out.

Sometimes three or four boats waiting in the same bay would raft up sharing one anchor. Books, food and other creature comforts were freely passed back and forth. Of course, needed spare parts were never denied to even a bitter competitor. Once we were tied up to a factory ship with a Japanese crew. The most important foodstuff for the crew was rice. One of the other boats attempted to make a delivery of a pallet of bags of the critical commodity but somehow managed to drop the pallet into the bay. The bags broke and the bay

slowly turned a spooky, milky white under the arc-lights of the boats. I bet the Japanese crew's faces turned a similar shade of white.

The most critical job on any fishing boat was to put the boat on the fish. This was the exclusive job of the captain. A lot of methods are used by skippers to find fish. Electronics, fish surveys, tips from other guys and experience play a big part. More important is luck, persistence, superstition and even magic. What he lacked in experience in the local waters, Cap'in Billy tried to make up in dogged Irish persistence. I never met a successful fishing captain that wasn't stubborn as the proverbial mule. Our skipper did not lack in the donkey department. It made for a hit or miss experience that season. Sometimes we returned to the dock plugged with fish but often we came up short.

The Green Hope was known as a whaleback design with the house forward. The back deck was the work space equipped with two huge hydraulic winches wrapped with ¾ inch steel cable. There were also two net reels one forward and one on the gantry located on the stern. There was also a ramp from the stern to the water line. When the skipper figured we were 'on' the fish, we deckhands swung into action. The cables were played out and attached to two huge 'doors' that, as it had been explained to me, functioned as wings allowing the net to 'fly' as it was towed through the water. The ends of the net were attached to the doors and were spread wide open by the movement of the doors through the water. At the head or top of the net were floats causing it to spread up. At the foot or the bottom was the roller gear and weights. The weights caused the foot to sink to the floor of the sea and the roller gear should allow the foot to roll over rocks and other obstructions. This operation was drawn out on a chalkboard enough times for us to know what was going on. As for me, I still wondered what was really going on down there. At the end of the net was the bag. It was constructed of webbing and was designed to hold everything that was scooped up.

After the gear was 'set,' the captain towed it until he figured the bag was full. Some tows were relatively short, 30-40 minutes. Others lasted for hours. I think Cap'n Billy could tell if the bag was filling

up by the increased drag on the boat. Any time the tow lasted more than 20 minutes, we bone tired deck hands would be in our racks sleeping. We slept in our clothes and our rain gear with rubber boots already in the pants legs like firemen's turnout-gear, stood ready to jump into. When the skip was ready to haul back, he had no patience for slow, sleepy reaction time.

As the winches labored to haul the bag up, we stood on deck and peered out off the stern anticipating the appearance of the sea's bounty but dreading the backbreaking work. The bag, if full of fish would, buoyed by numerous fish bladders, pop up about 30 yards off the stern. The more sudden the bag popped up, the more fish were in the bag. As the bag was hauled up the stern ramp, the doors were secured to the gantry and the net was wrapped onto the reel. Next, a hook attached to an overhead winch was secured to the bag; it was hauled up and dumped on the deck.

The steel deck was covered with wooden slats that allowed the sea water to run out the scuppers overboard. The deck was also divided into grid by wooden bin boards to keep a deck load from shifting in the constantly moving seas and sending us all to meet Davy Jones. We sorted the catch by species and size while discarding illegal and under sized fish.

On the deck were several hatches leading to the fish hold below. Before leaving town, the hold was filled with ice. Once the fish were pitched into the hold the ice-man, usually Melvin, would chuck them into a bin and shovel in a layer of ice. It was laborious back breaking work. Often it would take three hours to clear the deck. In the meantime, Cap'n Billy was making another tow. If we were 'on' the fish the work continued till the hold was full or we came to the end of the three-day limit. I always had mixed feelings when a full bag popped up.

Of course, there were plenty of times when the bag came up empty. Our target was cod but when you drag the bottom all kinds of stuff would come up in the bag. The best was crab. One time we pulled up a whole bag of tanner crab (opillio). When we dumped it on deck, we were knee deep in the pricey, delicious crustaceans. It hurt to toss it

all overboard but it was highly illegal for us to have it. We did fill up a chest freezer as a reward for our hard work. We did keep any pollack, rockfish, lingcod and various kinds of flat fish that we dragged up. Due to its indiscriminate nature of harvesting, bottom dragging nowadays is considered an ecological no-no.

CHAPTER THREE
MEANWHILE BACK IN DODGE

We seldom plugged the boat in the three-day limit but at the end of the time period, we headed back to Dodge to unload. The city of Kodiak was a town of about 6,000 permanent residents in the 1980s. It is a historic location that dates back to the Russian era and beyond. The primary industry was and is commercial fishing. There is a small boat harbor, a cannery row and all the establishments catering to the fishing industry. Kodiak also, like many towns and villages in Alaska, had an onion-domed Russian Orthodox Church. Connected to the church was a seminary that trained candidates for the priesthood from throughout Alaska. In addition to the commercial fishing, there was also a lot of sport fishing and hunting outfits.

The Green hope always tied up at ISA's dock to unload. We started the unloading process by unscrewing the hatch covers and dropping a stainless steel bucket with a scale into the hold. Most of the time the plant provided a dock crew to pitch off the fish. Bucket by bucket the fish were weighed, tallied and dumped into bins on the dock that feed the processing line inside the plant. When they were through we shoveled out the dirty ice, washed down the hold and deck and picked the garbage out of the net. The skipper took the fish ticket up to the office to settle up the trip. Often a quick turnaround was important. If we were on the fish and the weather was good it was only good business for everyone to get back out there. If the trip had

been a disappointment, it was even a bigger incentive to try harder. The only thing that would keep us in town was bad weather. We usually started to prep the boat to go back out right away.

The various small fish, heads and other debris was garbage and we pitched it overboard without a second thought. But to the bald eagle, it was free pickings and targets of opportunity. These semi-mythical birds being the symbol of fierce independence since Roman times are a rare site in the lower 48. I'd never seen one in the wild. But on Kodiak Island, there were as many as 24 nesting pairs. On any given day they could be found perched in the pine tree tops on Near Island, I guess because it was 60 yards across the channel from the plant. We casually tossed the scraps into the channel and these birds of prey with their, you guessed it, eagle eyes, swooped down with talons wide and scooped up the scraps. Sometimes they would snatch them in mid-air. At other times, a fish head would hit the surface of the water before being snagged by the hunter's talons. It's a magnificent sight to watch these birds, wings back, talons open swooping down from on high to grab a 4-6 inch piece of fish. On a nice day, it was a pleasant diversion to toss pieces up, down and over to watch the action.

Life on a small fishing boat was no bed of roses. First of all, it was no democracy. It was a dictatorship and the dictator was the captain. He was the grand puba, lord and master and he called all the shots. Of course, all success and failure rested on his shoulders. For this, he got the largest crew share.

Almost all fishing boats work on a crew share. All profits are divided strictly according to an agreed-on crew share system. Typically after expenses such as fuel, food and routine maintenance were deducted, the boat owner took the first 60%. The crew divided the remainder. The Captain often got two shares, the mate and or engineer got one share. Seasoned deck hands would normally get a half a share and green horns a quarter. Sometimes this didn't mean much, 40% of zero is still zero. In addition, we the crew, were responsible for our expenses; so it was possible to lose money on a

trip. When that happened, the debt was carried on the books and was deducted from future shares.

Everything depended on catching the right fish in the right window of time. It all came down to the skill, experience and luck of the captain. A skipper with a track record for catching fish was like gold. On the other hand, a guy that was new and learning the grounds was a gamble for the company and every man on board. I've also known captains that were accident prone. Whether it was due to carelessness, poor judgment or bad luck, they would constantly lose or tear up expensive gear, blow up $300,000 engines or even run the boat up on submerged rocks punching a hole in the hull.

The skipper's skill and boat handling were critical to the safety of the boat and the very lives of the crew. For this reason, no one ever begrudged the captain his two full shares. Most guys on deck aspired to one day becoming first, a full share guy and someday a 'slipper skipper' spending every trip, not in rain gear and rubber boots, but in the wheelhouse with one hand on the wheel and the other wrapped around a hot mug of joe calling orders over the PA system.

It was a man's world on deck. A woman working on boats was not unheard of and there were even some women captains but it was rare. Physical strength and endurance were important on deck. The working environment was most often cold and wet. Our most important tool was our apparel. Layering for warmth and keeping dry was essential. We started with long johns and wool boot socks. Next were sweat pants and a hooded sweatshirt. Thick cotton was standard and pile lined sweats were becoming more popular around that time. Jeans, Carhartts and wool lumberjack shirts also worked. The outer layer had to be waterproof. Wet clothing was not only uncomfortable but sapped your strength and induced hypothermia. Rain gear consisted of bib-overalls and a hooded jacket. Cheap cannery issued rain gear worked but wore out quickly and ripped easily. More expensive brand name gear like Helly Hansen, were expensive but worth it. On the Green Hope Captain Bill called rain gear 'skins' and there were even the traditional rain hat called a "south-wester" on board.

In order to work, hand protection was vital. We wore cotton or pile glove liners and some kind of rubber glove on the outside. Thick rubber gloves were heavy and cumbersome for work. Thinner gloves tore easily and so it was a constant battle to keep hands warm and dry.

I hate cold, wet feet. It is the worst and so footwear was critical. When I was a kid, I hated to wear rubber boots. With ten kids, my mother placed a premium on preserving shoes as long as possible. Her method was to get everyone a pair of rubber boots that fit over the shoe and buckled up the front. At the slightest hint of rain or snow, we were required to wear the protective footwear to school. No amount of pleading, reasoning or pointing out the fact that I would be a target for hazing and ridicule for sporting such un-cool kicks moved my mom even one inch in her thrift. The only solution was to wear them out of the house, walk down three blocks to a large evergreen bush, take them off and hide them under the low hanging branches. It was also a convenient place to stash hats, scarves and other unfashionable attire. Once I kept an unauthorized BB gun there for almost six months.

That having been said it takes only thirty minutes working in tennis shoes on deck in the Shelikof Strait to overthrow a lifetime of fashion prejudice. Knee-high rubber boots are the only way to go. Again, cheap cannery boots were an option but most preferred to invest in their feet with a pair of brown deck boots, sometimes called Kodiak tennis shoes. Wool socks and felt soles made them ideal for sub-freezing temperatures.

One of the main pleasures of working on a boat is eating. Food is fuel and so we ate a lot and well. Preparation for any trip included grocery shopping. Although we all cooked a little, Melvin was the main chef. He was also in charge of the menu and getting the groceries on board. Before shopping, he always took suggestions and did his best to make everybody happy. There were several grocery stores in town that catered to the fleet. You could phone or fax in an order and it would be delivered in a couple of hours. Time permitting

it was a pleasant diversion to get off the boat and go into town with Melvin and help with the shopping.

Spaghetti, ham, steak and french fries dominated the menu. Nuked chicken was always a favorite. In addition, a wide variety of cold cereal and milk was needed. Cold cuts, crackers, cookies and lots of bread were always purchased. Vegetables? Sure, mainly onion rings and spuds for baking. Of course mayonnaise, mustard and ketchup supplies had to be kept topped off. Since we were paying for it out of our shares, no expense was spared. We worked hard, ate well and some of us put on weight.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE HUNT

Alaska is a sportsman's paradise. Opportunities for world class fishing for salmon, halibut and other species abound. Once you fish in the rivers, streams and surrounding waters of Alaska, any other place is a letdown. I suppose the same can be said for hunting. People come from around the world to hunt in the 'Last Frontier'. Trophy species such as the legendary brown bear, moose and mountain goat attract hunters from the lower forty-eight as well as Europe, Asia and South America. Caribou, whitetail and blacktail Sitka deer are prized for meat by the locals and smaller game like ducks and rabbits are taken in season. For residents of Alaska, hunting is not only a sport but a way of life. Hunting to put meat in the freezer and a familiarity with firearms is just a normal part of life for most men and a lot of the ladies too.

Living in Alaska was a dream come true for me. I loved working on the ocean. Fishing was just an excuse to be on a boat at sea. Likewise, hunting was all about guns for me. I really like guns,

holding guns, owning guns and shooting guns. Getting out in the vast Alaskan wilderness was an added bonus.

On one of the company's annual hunting contests, me and another guy, Phillip Owen, were dropped off by skiff in a cove on the west side of Kodiak Island. We waded through the surf, crossed the narrow beach, chose a likely slope and started up the mountain. It was late August and the plan was to high-tail it up to the summit and hopefully surprises a black tail buck when he broke cover to graze in the warm sunshine. The thick alder cover slowed us down, but we worked our way up through it knowing that it would yield to alpine meadow somewhere around the 800 foot elevation. My partner was somewhat of a fireplug with two pistons for legs. Before long he was well ahead of me and showed no sign of slowing down for me to catch up. I just let him go. By the time I got out of the alder, he was long gone.

Winded from the climb, I sat down to rest and took in the view. It was spectacular. The mountains and valleys seemed to go on forever in three directions with the waters of the Shelikof Strait forming a backdrop. There was no sign of human habitation visible anywhere; no buildings, vehicles or roads. It was the very definition of pristine. The higher peaks in the distance were white capped even in August. The lower mountaintops were almost treeless, covered with low grasses and lichens. The valley floors were covered with vegetation, mostly thick alder but also interspersed with pine forest. Thick moss hung from the lower branches creating a subtropical feeling. High overhead clouds drifted across the blue sky casting their shadows, changing the color of the mountains, forests and the sea.

Once my heavy breathing abated the silence became deafening. Slowly I began to notice the sound of running water. It was a small brook about ten yards to my left. The water was so cold it hurt my teeth when I took a drink. I thought once again that this is why people climb mountains.

For a long time, I had no inclination to move. Slowly I became aware of a sound. At first, it was far off, a low grumble and a roar. I sat up, listened more closely and looked around. What was it? I

scanned the skies for aircraft. The sound got louder and my eyes were drawn by it to the long narrow valley directly in front of me. As I listened, the grumbling roar took on a direction. It was coming from the valley floor and moving down the valley towards my observation post. Now it sounded like it was a diesel truck roaring down the valley at full throttle. I guess the Valley was about three or so miles long and by the time the roar had gotten to the halfway point I began to hear crashing sounds of breaking branches. Next, I could hear actual grunts.

My god, was it a bear? What else could it be? I had my binoculars out by this time and focused on what I perceived as the path of this monster. And then there it was. I could clearly see the crashing movement of something big moving down the valley through the heavy underbrush and pine trees. Now it was more like a freight train tearing down the valley in a straight line not moving right or left to avoid brush or trees but running over them. Finally, I began to catch glimpses of the beast. It was huge. A mixture of honey brown and a darker brown with a huge head and shoulders, it galloped on all fours with its head down. Although I was high above on the hillside and there was little danger that he would charge me, I felt the thrill of fear grip my belly. At the end of the valley where the small stream emptied into the cove, the cover became sparse and the bear was clearly visible.

It turned on a dime, splashed across the shallow water, charged into the alder and up the opposite hillside from my spot. Without slowing down, he climbed a third of the way up and rounded the mountain and was gone. The Kodiak Brown Bear, largest in the world with no known predators, why was he running? I have no idea; maybe he was late for lunch.

On another day, I was hunting off the road system with another partner, Joachim Becker. It was a warm October afternoon and we were out for a walk and meat. We parked off the dirt road and started up the mountain through the alder and pine forest. As always it was rough going and by the time, we cleared the alder I was soaked through with sweat.

As often happens we separated and each followed our noses in different directions with the promise to meet back at the truck an hour before sunset. I could have climbed higher but I decided to move around the mountain and through a large flat area. I followed a small stream through the thinning pines and after a short time came upon a football field sized clearing with a lake in the middle of it. It was down-right pretty to look at and so as was my habit; I found a small rise in the sunshine and sat down for a rest.

The stream that I had followed in meandered through the grass of the flatland and fed into the lake about 70 yards away. I took out my binoculars and glassed the lake shore looking for a deer drinking. The edges of the lake looked very marsh like with knee high grass most of the way around. The far end of the lake appeared at first to be a brown mud bank devoid of grass. On closer examination I realized it was a dam. This was a beaver dam and I started looking for the engineer.

A short time later I spotted two Vs in the water moving from the far side of the pond towards the dam. When they got to the dam, one after the other, they climbed out dragging pine boughs a good four inches thick and five feet long. They moved the branches into place, trimmed them and packed them down. Then they, in turn, slid off the dam and dove down under the right side and a few minutes later reappeared under the left side of the fortress-like structure. Next, the Vs glided back across the water to the far side and then lumbered out of the water and into the pine forest.

Not too long later they re-emerged with more building material and headed back to the construction site. I watched them for almost three hours. Back and forth, back and forth they went. It was fascinating. At one point, I lay back on nature's mattress, closed my eyes and napped in the warm sunshine. When I woke up, they were still at it. I know well where the expression 'eager beaver' comes from. Finally, I had to rouse myself, saddle up and head back to the rendezvous. On the way, I stumbled across a yearling, dropped it and butchered it out; meat for the freezer.

Hunting on the Alaskan Peninsula is quite different than hunting the mountains of Kodiak Island. The main reason is the terrain. The peninsula is mostly tundra. From the air, it looks flat with a few rolling hills and is dotted with what seems like a million lakes. From the ground, the tundra is not flat at all. Due to the thawing and freezing of the ground above the permafrost, or permanently frozen soil, the earth is shoved up into moguls like small mountains anywhere from two to six feet high. Some valleys are small enough to step into and break a leg and some are big enough to swallow an ATV. It is a very treacherous landscape.

Several species draw hunters to the area including moose, brown bear and the caribou. Caribou, the large species of arctic deer, still roam the tundra; I imagine, the way the buffalo once roamed the plains. They are big animals with magnificent velvet covered antlers. They migrate in huge herds, as many as 10,000 animals, to and from winter and summer grazing grounds.

If you are there at the right time of year, you can watch the Alaska Peninsula herd approach and swim the Egegik River several miles upriver from the village. Once I sat on a hill and watched the herd cross for four hours. A trophy hunter can glass the herd and chose the bull that he wants, track it and bring it down.

I was a meat hunter, so I was more interested in shooting an animal that was in a convenient place to get the meat out. I've shot animals a hundred yards from camp. I guess I would have been happy if a good-sized bull would have wandered right into camp. The area of the peninsula just north of the Egegik River and up to Big Creek was a known calving area. Cows would drop out of the herd, give birth and spend six months raising the calves before rejoining the herd on its way back south and so the cows and the calves were plentiful and were good eating.

The tundra was truly vast and we usually used ATVs (Honda 3 and 4 wheelers) to hunt it. One day I was on a 3-wheeler about three or four miles behind Bartlett's Lodge enjoying the afternoon sun and looking for some meat. I was on a small hill and glassing the surrounding area. Seventy yards to my right I spotted a good-sized

buck with a nice rack standing knee deep in a medium sized lake. I was packing my Springfield Armory M1-A1 chambered for .308 caliber. I had it loaded with full metal-jacketed rounds; packs a punch but does minimal damage to the meat.

At 70 yards, even with open iron sights, I wasn't going to miss. I got down in a sitting position with the sling around my arm for support, got a good sight picture, put the top of the front sight blade on the buck's left shoulder and squeezed off a round. I know I hit it but it didn't go down. I took a quick look with the binoculars and saw blood on the flank. I fired another round and BAM, this time the animal staggered and began meandering into deeper water. BAM, BAM two more rounds and he went down.

The problem was he was now half submerged in the center of the lake. It is illegal to kill game in Alaska and fail to recover the meat. It is known as 'wanton waste' and so I had to get the beast out of the water. I packed up my gear and motored over to the lake. The lake was surrounded by alder shrub and stunted pine trees. With a little difficulty, I was able to find my way through to a narrow sand beach. It was early October. The air was brisk and I knew the water was going to be colder.

I figured I was gonna need some dry clothes to bike back to camp, so I took off my boots, all my clothes, put my belt between my teeth and waded, then swam out to the middle of the lake. Luckily the caribou was only half underwater. I had done this before with a moose that sank to the bottom and I had to dive on it. But that's another story.

It was not a problem to wrap the belt around the beast's neck and slowly tow it back to the beach. Once I had dragged it three feet up onto the gravel and sand, I began the process of field dressing it. The first step was to position the animal so that I could make a cut from the throat, down the sternum to the genitals. Next, I had to cut through the sternum to remove the heart, lungs, stomach and other organs. It was a big animal and I put it on its back with my knees spreading the rear legs and using my elbows to hold the front legs apart. I was using a K-BAR (7 inch long Marine Corps issue fighting

and utility knife) to break the thick bone. I struck it once, twice and on the third strike the pointed blade glanced off the hard bone and was driven an inch and a half into my thigh six inches down from the crotch. Of course, I pulled it out and the blood pulsed out in a three-inch geyser.

First, there was shock then the realization that this is going to take some fast action. Still naked I looked around to find something to stop the bleeding. The belt was still around the buck's neck and was in reach. I used it to fashion a tourniquet and cinched it tight above the wound. The bleeding slowed to an ooze, but I knew I needed to get back to Dodge for some stitches.

Before I could do that, I had to finish the field dressing, get the caribou on the three-wheeler and get it off the tundra. I got into my dry clothes and began to wrestle the 200 pound plus carcass onto the rear of the ATV. It was no easy task. After three attempts I managed to get it balanced on the Honda and tied down with cord. It was a good four miles back to the nearest civilization which was Bartlet's lodge. Under ideal conditions, I could make it in twenty minutes but losing blood and trying to keep the caribou on the bike it took a bit longer.

A shifting 200-pound weight added to my weight on the back of a three-wheeler was a big problem. The weight over the rear wheels made it impossible to keep the front wheel on the ground. Like any tricycle, contact of the front wheel with the ground was the only way to steer the bike. Although I leaned as far forward as I could, the front wheel could only be coaxed to kiss the earth on the rare occasion. All I could do was go straight ahead until I came to an obstacle, dismount and wrestle the bike onto a new course. Often I had to stop and re-secure the animal to the machine.

I had a hand-held VHF radio and used it to contact the lodge. Helen (the lodge owner) came up on the radio and I told her I was on my way in with a knife wound. She said there was a spotter pilot in the bar drinking coffee and she offered to send him up in his Piper Cub to have a look for me. Twenty minutes later I heard and saw the

plane circling three miles to the southwest. I couldn't get him on the hand-held, so I plowed on.

An hour and a half later I pulled up behind the lodge exhausted and relieved. I went directly to the social center (the bar) and was greeted by a small crowd who were drinking whiskey and discussing sending out a search party. The first order of business was to get the tourniquet off, wash, and dress the wound. There were three middle-aged guys sitting at a table with a bottle of Old Grand Dad and three glasses between them. They were intently interested in what had happened and the condition of the wound. One guy told me it was important to get the wound stitched up right away and he could do it with a sewing kit he had in his pack.

I asked him if they were doctors and he replied with assurance "No. We're lawyers."

I said no thanks and waited for the medevac out of King Salmon, the nearest town that had a clinic with an actual medical staff.

When the plane rolled to a stop at the gate in King Salmon, it was met by paramedics in an ambulance and the Alaska State Troopers. The troopers had heard that a stabbing victim was coming in from Egegik and they were there to collect evidence and to fly back to the village to pick up the perpetrator and bring him or her in. It would not have been the first time. With a red face, I had to tell them that I had stabbed myself.

We once had a famous guitar man come to Kodiak for a guided hunt. I'll call him the client. The Roosevelt Elk, the largest of the North American elk, is not native to Alaska but were introduced to Afognak and Raspberry Islands in 1928. Bulls can weigh in at almost 1300 pounds and stand as tall as six feet at the shoulder. We figured this would be a great challenge for the client. Captain Allan Hokanson was an experienced Alaskan hunter and was tapped to head up the expedition.

The plan was to book the 'U-Rascal', a local charter boat owned and run by Captain Chris Fiala, load it up with supplies and use it as our headquarters and bunk house during the hunt. Groceries, cooking gear, ammunition and hunting licenses were all bought in advance

and loaded on the boat. When the client arrived, we were ready to go but he wasn't. He went immediately to his room, locked the door and remained incommunicado for 16 hours. We just stood by.

The next day late in the morning, the client sent word down that he was ready to go and he wanted to leave after lunch. We hit the dock by 2 pm and cast off. It was the client, Capt Hokanson and Captain Fiala and I on board. It was about two and a half hours to Afognak. The weather was overcast with some light showers. The sea was flat calm and we arrived at Afognak Bay without incident around four thirty. The captain motored down the bay looking for a good anchorage with easy access to the beach. We dropped the hook thirty feet off the beach and I assumed would soon have a nice dinner and a long nap. It was not to be. The client was well rested and anxious to get started.

Of course, it made no sense. It was late August, after five o'clock and the sun would be going down in a couple of hours. The client insisted we get on the beach and head up the mountain right away. He said it would be a good condition. He said we would be back before dark. So we grabbed rifles, ammo and day packs and took the skiff to the beach. Allan distributed to each of us one bar of chocolate, one hunk of cheese and a hunk of bread. These, along with the tube tent in his pack, were our survival gear.

The client in the lead, we started up the mountain. Afognak is a relatively low-slung island and for that reason is home to a fairly large logging operation. Where we were, there was no sign of human habitation or activity. The slope was steep and the thick alder made for tough going. Also, Alaska is a wet, very wet place. The sweat from the exertion and the moisture from the vegetation combined to soak the climber to the skin. By the time we broke out of the treeline at around 600 feet of elevation, I was soaked through and through.

Above 600 feet or so the vegetation thinned out and we climbed through the grass of the alpine meadow. Another 400 feet above us was a peak and beyond that a series of peaks that together formed a ridgeline. In the fading light, we walked the ridgeline and scouted for elk sign. Two blacktail does appeared but we held off, we were elk

hunting. In the last light, we looked back behind us and knew there was no way we were going to get down the mountain that night.

Once the sunset the wind picked up and as wet as we were, we got real cold real fast. We needed shelter and fire. Allan got a hold of Chris on the hand-held and told him we were spending the night. At 1200 feet there were no trees or other vegetation, so we moved down lower to find a wind break and something to make a fire with. After ten minutes it became so dark that the hand was hardly visible in front of your face. We found a slight depression that might block the wind a little. We dropped our packs and started looking for firewood. There wasn't much and what there was almost waterlogged. We gathered up what we could and tried to start a fire. It took an hour or longer before we coaxed a small flame out of the damp pile of kindling. For the longest time, we continued to feed wet sticks into the flame. All the heat from the fire was being absorbed by drying out the wood and precious little heat was given off to warm our frozen fingers.

In particular, the client was worried about his hands. At the time, he was a musician and his fingers were important for playing the guitar. The three of us hunched over that pitiful fire and tried to get warm for hour after hour. It was the longest night of my life. We walked around and stamped our numb feet and flapped our arms in a futile effort to warm up. We took turns dangling our wet socks over the flame but all they did was drip water on the flame and threaten to extinguish it.

Finally, the client gave up on the fire and said let's get some sleep. Allan broke out his survival tent, which was like two garbage can liners with a string running through it. We set it up as best we could and crawled in. We laid in close skin touch with each other because that was all the room we had. In a short while, the three of us began to shiver and our teeth began to chatter. It was the first stages of hypothermia. We tried for what may have been an hour but there was no way anyone of us was going to fall asleep. The client made an executive decision. Get up and start the fire. Another hour later and we had the same insufficient fire going again.

We spent the rest of the night huddled over the fire just hoping for heat. With time on my hands and nothing else to be done, it was a good time to pray and so I prayed for daylight. I don't know how the other two occupied their minds but there was no conversation. First light brought new hope and with a cold breakfast of the remains of yesterday's survival rations, we broke camp and started out along the ridge line with our eyes peeled for the elk.

We hunted for several hours but having no sleep and little food we soon decided it was time to find our way back to the U-Rascal. By this time we were well away from the point where we had ascended, so Allan called Chris and asked him to bring the boat around to Marker Bay with the idea we could walk down from where we were.

The way down looked pretty straight forward. It was a steep slope going all the way down to a stream. The slope was no problem. I slid down most of the way on my butt using my rifle butt to slow down. When I got to the bottom, the client and Allan were nowhere to be seen. I was on my own. I quickly found the stream and an animal trail that ran along the bank. At first, the trail seemed to be my highway out. Before long, as it descended, it became difficult to follow. It went uphill six or eight feet and then down six feet again and again up and then again down.

I realized I was running on empty. I thought then that walking in the streambed would be easier. The bed was strewn with boulders large and small. They were wet and slippery and I was wet to the waist. I abandoned the streambed and went back to the trail. I began stumbling and I realized I was in danger of falling and injuring myself. I just kept going and wondering if the others were in front of me or behind me.

Finally, the terrain began to flatten out and I found myself walking through an area of pine trees and low brush. Here, I heard two rifle shots and knew that they were in front of me and somebody had killed an animal probably a deer. Who would carry it out? I would be lucky to get myself out.

Next, I began to hear noises, voices and animal sounds that I knew were not there. I was hallucinating. For the first time, I began to

think I might not be able to make it out. I sat down and looked up at the treetops. I had a radio but even if I could reach somebody I was pretty sure they couldn't get a helicopter in here. I thought I have only two choices now. I could lay here and die or I could get up on my feet and walk out. In a second, I decided. I wasn't going to die here. I got up and started putting one foot in front of the other.

Down and down I walked. Several times I stumbled and once I fell but the crisis was over. I kept going. Eventually, I came to the mouth of the stream and found the U-rascal on anchor. I hailed the boat and they sent the skiff over to get me. Of course, the client and Allan were back with the deer that the client had bagged and Allan had carried out.

All they said was "Where the hell you been?"

Back in town, everyone wanted to how the hunt had gone. I kept my mouth shut.

CHAPTER FIVE
BETWEEN THE ROCK AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA

Alaska is the Great Land consisting of a huge continental landmass with mountains, islands, peninsulas and vast stretches of tundra. Much of its wealth lies in and under the seas that surround it. In the north is the Beaufort Sea. Frozen over most of the year it contains significant oil and natural gas deposits. To the west are the Chukchi and Bering Seas. Both also contain large as yet to be exploited oil deposits. The North Pacific Ocean lies to the south. All of these waters contain a huge wealth of fish and marine mammals.

What we call Kodiak Island is actually an archipelago made up of one very large island, several large islands and a host of small islands

in the North Pacific and south of the Alaskan mainland. Human occupation goes back more than 10,000 years with remnants of the Russian, Aleutian and Koniag people still living there. The city of Kodiak in 1984 had a year-round population of about 6,000 folks. Scattered around the archipelago, are other settlements, with five being large enough and of sufficient duration to be designated as villages. Big enough means between a hundred and three hundred souls.

In Kodiak, commercial fishing is king and hunting, sports fishing and subsistence fishing are the princes and princesses. There is a cannery row with a dozen or more fish processing plants and the small boat harbor is packed with commercial as well as sports fishing and pleasure craft. For a guy like me who likes boats, walking the docks was always a fascinating way to pass time. Located just outside of town is the largest United States Coast Guard base in the world with more than 6,000 residents. From there, they patrol large tracts of the North Pacific in C-130s, various helicopters, other aircraft and vessels conducting search and rescue operations and saving lives every year. The summer season usually saw the island's population swell to three times its normal size with the influx of fishermen, cannery workers and outdoor enthusiasts.

The islands are mostly a mountainous wilderness with an extremely limited road system. The rugged mountains seem to rise directly out of the sea and reach heights that sometimes remain snow-capped into late summer. The steep slopes are for the most part covered with dense alder. At higher elevations, the next to impenetrable vegetation gives way to alpine meadows. All manner of North Pacific marine life inhabit the waters surrounding the archipelago. Finfish, shellfish and marine mammals abound. The bays, rivers and streams teem with salmon from June through October and into November. Without even venturing out from town a nature lover can watch huge Stellar Sea Lions feeding from the scraps at one of the canneries or Bald Eagles diving for a trawler's cast offs in the channel. Sea otters once prized and hunted for their water repellent pelts are a delight to

watch diving for clams; lazily floating on their backs and cracking the shellfish open with a rock perched on the belly.

The most majestic and dangerous critter was the beast that bears the island's name, the Kodiak Brown Bear. A million or so years of isolation from the brown bear populations of the mainland allowed these monsters to become the largest brown bears in the world. The biologists say there are more bears than people on Kodiak. The Sitka Black Tail deer, introduced in 1901, mountain goats, fox and other wildlife make up the natural menagerie.

The earliest known human inhabitants, known as the Koniag from which the name Kodiak derives, were wiped out by disease and war when the white man arrived. The Russians later enslaved the Aleutian people of the Alaskan peninsula and brought them to the island to hunt the sea otter. The descendants of these three people have mixed and still inhabit the islands today. The legacy of the Russian occupation can be seen in both the Russian last names of most Alaskan natives and the blue onion domes of the Orthodox Church and Seminary.

Kodiak can be a paradise to visit but also be a tough place to live year round. Summers are warm and bright for the most part without much humidity, but short. Winters are long and while not known for the deep cold of the arctic regions they are cold, wet and dark. Thirty degrees and freezing rain is pretty much the standard forecast from November to May. Wet and muddy conditions make rubber boots, known as the Alaskan tennis shoe, standard footwear. Muddy roads with potholes deep enough to lose a Toyota in and constant rain make for what is called the Kodiak Car. If mud splashes up through the rusted out floorboards, you may be driving a Kodiak Car. Nobody carries an umbrella. What’s the point? Wintering over in Kodiak definitely takes some getting used to.

My wife Helen, being from the Clearwater Florida, was used to floating in the bathtub-warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico. When she arrived in Kodiak, she went into culture shock. It was dark wet and cold. Everyone is always warned that the waters around Kodiak are treacherous. If you have the bad luck to fall in the shock to the body

is immediate and hypothermia is followed shortly by death. It was all too hard for her to accept.

In order to save the marriage, I got an idea. I took her down to the Green Hope and showed her how to don a survival suit. These full immersion suits are carried on most vessels in frigid waters and give at least a chance of surviving an accident at sea. The suit is made from neoprene, is put on over clothes, zips up to the throat and covers the head with a hood. It is almost waterproof and gives enough floatation to allow the wearer to wait for rescue for many hours. On that bright cold day, we both put on a suit and jumped off the stern and floated around the dock. Although there was a trickle of cold water dripping in, we were for the most part comfortable and she overcame a big obstacle to living in Alaska.

My dad wasn't a fisherman and so I wasn't either as I grew up. When I was about nine years old my Uncle Wayne gave me a rod and reel and showed me how to cast a lead weight. It was the damndest thing; a steel rod. I've never seen anything like it since. I cast that lead weight several hundred times without ever getting near any water.

A couple of years later, one of my friend's dad took us fishing on a stream in Maryland. The night before we soaked a patch of ground outside the back door and harvested a coffee can full of earthworms for bait. The next day on the stream bank I got the full course on how to attach the hook, sinkers and bobber to the line. The most important part apparently was how to bait the hook. After many hours of watching that red and white plastic ball bob up and down. I finally got the tug on the line that I was warned about. With little trouble, I cranked in a little sunfish. Later we built a fire and pan-fried it. It was full of tiny bones that in my opinion made it inedible. I still wasn't a fisherman.

Some years later I found myself in Gloucester, Massachusetts participating in an outdoor training program called Ocean Challenge. Modeled on the Outward Bound program, it brought together young people from around the world and sought to give them a character building experience through practical and moral challenges on the

ocean. The core of the program was hunting the giant bluefin tuna in small boats. After two days of basic seamanship and hands-on training in building tackle to catch the huge marine animals we were assigned in two-man teams to twenty-eight foot, open fiberglass boats and sent out.

By the luck of the draw, my boat mate was an old friend, Dr. Tyler Hendricks. Dr. Hendricks, an up and coming academic with a PhD. from Baylor Theological Seminary, and me an ex-Marine with an affinity for small boats made a pretty good team. We left the dock every morning before dawn for the forty minute run out to the fishing grounds and spent all day in every kind of weather in the open boat.

From the early morning chill through the blazing sun of mid-day we were exposed to the elements. At night, we tied up at the dock, put up the canvas and slept onboard. Every morning was a little different. Usually cool enough to wear a sweatshirt; sometimes clear and sometimes overcast or raining. We always left the harbor at dawn. Once in awhile, it was more dramatic with dense fog and we would have to navigate out to the grounds by chart and compass. Other days the wind blew and the heavy seas were like moving walls of water that we had to rise above or slam through. Being aboard a boat heading out to sea in the early morning was always exuberating. The powerful movement of the boat through the water, the smell of the salt air and even the spray coming over the bow made a guy feel alive.

On the grounds, we were not alone. Everywhere there were other vessels like ours, cabin cruisers, sports fishermen and even yachts all angling for the chance to hook up a giant blufin. The morning ritual was the same; we found a spot, dropped the anchor and set out the baited hooks on longlines. Then the wait began. We waited for many days before we actually got one on line. We spent the long hours talking, chopping chum and dropping it in the water and daydreaming.

Often when I stood at the rail chopping up trash fish and chumming it into the water I would, twelve-inch butcher knife in hand, have day dreams about men at sea, pirates and boarding parties. What was

going on deep below remained a mystery. We novices had to take it on faith that there were real live tuna swimming below and that they would, when the spirit moved them, take one of our baits. It would be an understatement that after many long days coming up empty we came close to losing our faith.

Then one day out of the clear blue, it happened and it happened so fast it was hard to get control of events. First, there was a distinct snap as the clothes pin holding one of the longlines released and the line began to play out of the basket and into the water at a steep angle. We had hooked up. We had a tuna on and had to land it. I quickly pulled on gloves and took hold of the line. The next order of business was to get the other three lines into the boat so the tuna couldn't free itself by circling around and tangling all the lines. These were not dumb beasts.

As the Doc hastily retrieved the lines, I tightened my grip and felt the heat of friction through the gloves. Not knowing for sure when was the right time, I figured it was now or never, braced myself and yanked as hard as I could three times to set the hook. Then the fight began. The line started to run out even faster now and the line entered the water at a shallower angle as the fish ran away from the boat. All the time I kept some drag on the line with my gloved hands; but there was no way I could hope to stop the giant at this point. Before long it was clear that the fish was circling towards the bow and I moved with it.

The next problem was the anchor line running off the bow. If the fish could make contact with the line, the tension would cut the line and he would be home free. Tyler took over the fishing line and I moved to the bow and stood by to pull the anchor as fast as I could if needed. Lucky for me the fish opted to head straight off the bow and not circle back.

As the tuna made his dash away from the boat the line continued to play out. With no guarantee of stopping it anytime soon, we had to prepare to run out of line in the basket. It was tempting to tie the line off to a cleat but this was a fool's mistake. The muscular fish would have no problem bending the hook or simply ripping it out of his

mouth if we tied the line off. This was a life or death struggle for him. Instead, I got an orange ball buoy and tied it to the loop at the end of the line in the basket that was quickly emptying. As I watched the tuna take the last of the line, I tossed the buoy overboard and the tuna dragged it off. As I attached another buoy to our own anchor line, Tyler fired up the engine and got ready to follow the fish buoy.

Following the buoy through the seas may seem to be pretty straight forward, but it was far from that. There were as many as a hundred other boats riding at anchor in the vicinity and the anchor lines and the vessels themselves were all potential obstacles. Ethics demanded that other vessels take whatever action is necessary to get out of the way of a boat fighting a fish. This required them to get off their anchor and motor out of the path. Most guys complied but not always. Once I had to cut the anchor line of a cabin cruiser that refused to move and there were a lot of nasty words and threats exchanged.

On this day, we had no problems and after following the ball for more than twenty minutes the ball slowed down, we picked it up and began to recover line. Although tiring the tuna was not finished and ran two more times. In the end, the line went straight down and we took turns hauling the dead weight to the surface. When the huge silver blue beauty appeared I put a harpoon dart in behind the gills to make sure. The fish was over six feet in length and there was no possibility of getting it into to the boat. With one line through the gills and another looped tightly around the tail we began the long slow trip back to the dock for the weigh in and photos.

The beauty weighed in at over nine hundred pounds and we caught eight more of similar size that summer. After photos, the guys on the dock cut the tuna's head off, packed it in a coffin shaped wooden box with ice and drove it to the airport on the first leg of its trip to the Tokyo fish market. I was hooked. From then I was a fisherman and when I arrived in Kodiak, I tried my hand at all the sports fishing available.

CHAPTER SIX
THE HALIBUT DERBY

The Green Hope was rigged to drag the bottom for ground fish and this was our focus, but there were other very lucrative fisheries that couldn't be ignored. One of these was halibut. The halibut is a bottom dwelling flat fish species prized for its firm white meat. Nowadays, the fishery is managed on a quota system. Each vessel involved in the fishery is assigned a quota of the allowable catch based on vessel size and past record.

It wasn't like that in 1984. It was wide open to any boat of any size that wanted to go out. They opened the fishery for four days and then tallied the catch and compared it to the allowable catch. Then, they opened it again for one day at a time to get as close as possible to the

harvest goal. This created a system that was chaotic as well as dangerous.

When the fishery opened, as many boats as possible went out, from 200 foot long liners, 100-foot trawlers and 52 foot to 15-foot skiffs to get in on the bonanza. Vessels worked, 24 hours a day if necessary, until the boat was plugged to the max. Safety was for the most part cast to the wind and many boats came back to town seriously overloaded. I've seen ratty old wooden boats tie up with the gunwales underwater. Bad enough in fair seas, in foul weather it killed a lot of folks. This was the Halibut Derby.

The company decided that the Green Hope could make some serious money if we geared up and went out for the 1984 Derby. The talk was that serious money for the company meant serious crew shares. Plugging the Green Hope meant several hundred thousand dollars for four days work. We were enthusiastic.

It was decided that Captain Billy didn't have enough experience and the learning curve was to steep to make the most of this fishery in four days. They hired an experienced skipper, sort of a top gun. Don Mathews was a balls-to-the-walls skipper whose reputation preceded him. The first story we heard about him was that one time he dove off the top of the mast of a long liner into the harbor on a bet. They also said he pushed hard and always made money.

When we had our first face to face, we were already sort of in awe of this guy. Standing about six feet tall, lean and hard, he was dressed in the standard Carhartt uniform with a crumpled Icicle Fisheries ball cap. Hard to tell his age with the sunburned face covered with a full beard, but my best guess was early forties. He was a straight talker and let us know what he expected from us and what his plan was. Straight talk and a macho rep boosted our confidence and we set to work changing the Green Hope over to a longliner.

Top shelf technology in longlining at the time was called snap-on gear. It required a hydraulic driven reel loaded with shots or lengths of longline. As the line was fed out, hooks on ganglions were attached to the line with metal snaps. As the gear was recovered the

hooks and any fish were un-snapped and the line re-wound on the reel.

Foregoing this style, that would have meant a substantial investment for the reel and other equipment such as an automatic hook baiter, the old way of tub gear was opted for. Tubs referred to plastic basket shaped tubs that were used to store the long lines. One hundred foot long shots or lengths of Brownell line with a loop on both ends made up a skate. Ganglions with a hook on one end were attached at four-foot intervals and this skate was coiled into the basket with hooks and loops protruding. The hooks, two-inch Mustang circle hooks, were ready to be baited and the loops were ready to be attached to other skates or ground tackle. The tubs had to be stored and secured on deck and so we first began constructing wooden shelves to hold them.

This style of fishing was labor intensive and so Captain Don hired more deckhands to bring the crew up to twelve. Of course, these guys were guys who Don knew and had worked with before. Most of them were experienced long line fishermen and we fell in with them to get the vessel shaped up. Many hands make for lighter work and smaller crew shares.

During the five days of dockside work, Captains Billy and Don were gone most of the time, I suppose, doing what captains do. They were buying stuff and supplies like lumber, tubs, coils of Brownell, hooks, poles, anchors and bait all periodically arriving dockside. A hydraulic block for retrieving the longlines from the deep arrived and was installed on the starboard side of the work deck and was plumbed into the Green Hope's hydraulic system. Five long days of work in the warm May sunshine transformed the Green Hope and we shoved off on the evening before the opening to make our fortunes.

Our destination was the Shelikof Strait. After a hearty dinner and a couple more hours of baiting the more than 5,000 hooks, we deckhands turned in; dawn and the start of the Derby would come early. As I lay in a top rack still buzzing from the day's labors, looking out the porthole I had a nearly mystical experience. In the luminous moonlight, a pod of killer whales frolicked off the

starboard side keeping pace with the vessel's movement through the rolling seas. As I watched them, I wondered how long they would follow. I fell asleep watching them effortlessly jump and glide along.

Up early to a quick breakfast of coffee, scrambled eggs, sausage and then more coffee, we went back to work baiting hooks. The bait consisted of frozen pollack chopped into two-inch sections put onto the circle hooks in a way that it stayed on. Some technique was involved. The continuous baiting of hooks was an activity that continued non-stop for the next four days. This is one reason why we needed a lot of guys on deck. Squatting on the rolling deck, bent over cutting and handling frozen fish caused the hands to numb up and gave new meaning to the words back-breaking work to the greenhorn. By 8 A.M. we were where we needed to be according to Captain Don. The weather was clear. Seas were at a modest three-foot swell and the Green Hope crew was standing by.

At 9 a.m. the 1984 North Pacific Halibut Derby opened on schedule and we began deploying the gear. First over the side was a twelve-foot aluminum pole with a float and weight on one end and a bright orange floating ball. The buoy would act like a bobber and the flag and a radar reflector on the top of the pole should make it easy to find when we came back. Next, the anchor and float line went over, extending 1200 feet to the bottom. This heavy weight, as it plunged to the bottom, dragged the skates with baited hooks out of tubs and down to the sea floor to begin their work. One skate is 100 fathoms or 600 feet with hundreds of hooks. One set could be made up of several skates.

There was a real danger in this set-out operation due to the heaving deck and the sharp hooks flying out of the tubs, over the rail and into the deep blue. If you happen to be in the wrong place, a flying hook could tear off a finger or some other pound of flesh. Hooks that snare rain gear or other clothing could drag a fisherman down to meet Davy Jones. The most experienced guys worked the rail as we set out the gear.

After more than six hours setting the gear, we broke for lunch as the skipper steamed back to the first set. With the help of radar, GPS and

plotting, the skip knew exactly where the gear was. The real question was; was it in the right spot? That would become clear once we started hauling the gear. Don was getting the captains full share to put us on the fish. During the hour run back to the starting point, there was an air of optimism and excitement for the task and anticipated rewards ahead. For the greenhorns, we didn't know yet what was in store for us. Ignorance was bliss.

Working the rail while hauling the gear was not only dangerous due to high-speed sharp things, but it was critical to the success of the whole effort. As the captain pulled up on a set, the bobbing pole and buoy should become clearly visible. At around twenty yards distance, the rail man makes his throw with a three-pronged stainless steel grappling hook attached to a quarter inch line. When I watched a guy make a throw, it reminded me of the days of old when sailing ships closed on each other and threw grappling hooks to start the boarding. A guy was expected to snag the line on the first throw. Too many misses endangered both bragging rights and one's claim to the prestigious position itself.

Once the line was hooked, it was hauled to the rail, the pole and buoy were disconnected, the down line was wrapped around a hanging block and put in the wheel of the hydraulic hauler and the set was hauled up from the bottom. Next comes the heavy lifting, the ground tackle and the set with several hundred hooks and whatever halibut were on.

Halibut are the largest flat fish in the Pacific Ocean ranging from the 'chickens,' less than a hundred pounds, to the 'barn doors' weighing from two hundred up to three hundred plus pounds. Guys couldn't haul them all up without the miracle of hydraulics. The rail man and his helper stood with long gaffs to gaff the fish and haul them aboard. These guys had strong backs but sometimes it took a winch to get a barn door over the rail.

As the fish came aboard, they were thrown on the butcher table. In order to keep the quality as high as possible over the duration of the trip, the fish had to be butchered as they came onboard. With a sharp knife, the gills are removed and the belly was slit from anus to nape.

All the guts and internal organs were pulled out by hand and my favorite; you had to reach way back inside, locate, grab and pull out the gonads. The final step was to scrape and wash the belly cavity. Once butchered the fish were thrown down the hatch into the hold where they were iced and stacked by the 'Ice Man', Melvin and sometimes a helper. Standing at the butcher table was my job through most of the trip. After mastering a couple of knife and hand techniques it, at first, seemed to be a manageable task. It wasn't long before the fish began to stack up on the table and no matter how fast we worked the fish kept coming faster.

Once the fish started coming over the rail things became a blur of non-stop activity. Coiling lines, stowing poles and tackle, butchering and icing, and baiting of hooks continued around the clock. Clearly Captain Don was worth the money. We were on the fish. After retrieving one set, it was immediately set out again. The first several hours standing at the butcher table burned off most of the excitement and adrenalin of the derby. After that, the hard work began. By the sixth hour of continuous butchering, my back began to ache. Then it was the knees. By the twelfth hour, I was in agony and the fish just kept on coming.

The worst was when the hands cramped up. Cold, wet hands hour after hour reaching deep inside to yank out the gonads became like claws and had to be massaged to be any use at all. We continued for twenty four hours without a break except for stand up meals and quick head calls. Under the setting sun, through the short night and into the following dawn there was no rest for the wicked. It was Don's working theory that without any sleep at all we couldn't go on. If we slept for too long, it would be impossible to get up and go back to work as he had explained to us several times. The solution was that we would each go down in rotation for two hours in every twenty-four hour period. Beginning at dawn on the second day, two guys at a time peeled off gloves, rain gear, and boots to crash, mostly face down, in the nearest rack for their allotted two hours. It was noon before my turn came up and my lights went out the instant my face hit the rack. What seemed like two seconds later, I was groggily

sliding into skins and pulling on boots for my next twenty-four hour shift. There was no thinking, only pushing an exhausted body forward. It took only a short while to re-establish yesterday's rhythm and the pace never slacked. The fish kept coming onboard and we kept butchering them and putting them down in the hold.

On the evening of the second day, I was rotated to baiting hooks which started out as a relief but was soon just as hand and body numbing. I guess it was around mid-night when I started dreaming about my next rack time. It didn't help. I continually fought my body that just wanted to collapse and my mind that wanted to give up and quit. My treacherous mind told me again and again; just quit it doesn't matter. But it did matter. Pride and not wanting to let the other guys down kept me going through the worst of it. It was not a fight I could win once and be done with it. I had to fight and win again and again and then again. Time stood still and the work continued. The two-hour sleep time was dreamed about, longed for and used up in an instant.

It may have been on the third or fourth day that the hallucinations began. It was like being in another alternate world where reality shifted. The only constant was the fish coming aboard; everything else shifted and I struggled to keep control of my mind and sort out illusion from reality. My body screamed with pain and was my enemy. My mind was my friend but threatened mutiny. With only pride left I continued.

In the end, all the days blended together into one and when the derby came to the end, I was still standing, just barely. The other guys were also exhausted but nobody complained. All the gear was on board, stowed and we moved the butcher table and fastened down the hatch. I saw Melvin for the first time in four days. He just grinned. Before the hatch was secured, Captain Don was headed for Dodge.

Numbers were bandied about; something like 100,000 or 120,000 pounds was an estimate. We wouldn't know for sure until we offloaded and tallied the haul. The Green Hope was riding low in the water with the sea washing through the scuppers. She was plugged

and we were happy longliners. The trip back was uneventful. We ate and slept, ate and slept again the sleep of righteous victors.

Back in town we tied up at the ISA dock and sat around bullshiting and grinning. There were about three boats in front of us to offload, but we hung around to watch our fortune get hoisted out of the hold and dumped into the plant. We watched every halibut come out and marveled at the size of the barn doors we had snatched out of the depths.

The final tally and crew share wasn't announced until the next day. There was some disappointment. Although the boat made serious money, the split didn't amount to what we had expected. As a greenhorn deckhand, I got a 1/16 share that only amounted to around $6,000. But I didn't really care. It was more than I had made all winter. What's more the feeling of confronting myself and winning was worth more to me than a full share. It was by far the most physically and mentally challenging thing I had ever done. Even Marine Corps boot camp wasn't this intense in the short run. At the recruit depot, we were, by law, given eight hours of sleep a night. The feeling of victory made me feel ten feet tall and gave me a similar confidence in myself that I felt the day I marched across the parade deck on graduation day at Parris Island.

As we dismantled and offloaded the long line gear, I thought about what was next. I was sure now that I could make it as a commercial fisherman and I was leaning in that direction. Alas, my destiny took a major turn only a week later and I heard the name Egegik for the first time.

CHAPTER SEVEN
THE SPORTING LIFE

One thing about sports fishing, whether it is big game fish or little ole' sunfish in a pond is the mystery of what goes on under the water. One time while fishing for halibut off of Kodiak the veil was pierced for me. We were in a twenty-eight-foot open boat in early September. It was a beautiful fall day and we had left the dock around 8:30 A.M. with four Korean university professors on board. Our destination was Whale Island and the trip would take us past

Spruce Island and the Village of Ouzinkie. It was about a forty minute run in good weather.

We were planning to drift through the narrow passages between the various islands during the flood tide and score some world class halibut fishing. We spent the flood first, drifting past Raspberry Island and then along Whale Island. We caught a few fish but not what we expected. By mid-afternoon we were in Marmot Bay sixty yards off Whale Island, having a little lunch and slowly drifting past the Island. The bottom was sandy with frequent rock outcrops. Close in, we drifted along the three-fathom curve and tried to keep our gear from getting hung up on the rocks. Nearby was a community of sea otters going about their business, floating on their backs in the sunshine and diving for clams. It was easy to watch them forever.

You may think that tropical waters are clear, but the clearest waters I've ever seen were right there in Alaska. We could look down eighteen feet and see, clear as day, the bottom passing under the boat and our halibut rigs with a lead ball and two baited hooks slowly bouncing over the bottom.

Now a halibut's coloring of green and brown irregular markings are designed by nature to look like the bottom, but they could be spotted by watching the movement. As I stared at the bottom, I could see my lead ball and was able to gently bounce it. Low-and-behold, there it was, a halibut moving towards my baits. The fish nudged and bumped the bait and I felt the corresponding bumps and jerks on my rod, reel and line. Next, the shadowy form moved over and covered the bait. Seeing clearly, I let out more line and waited. Then the fish backed off and suddenly took the bait in its mouth. I waited, waited, waited and with no guess work yanked the line and set the hook. The fish arched its spine, jerked its head and tried to dislodge the hook. The fight was on. In the next twenty minutes as I cranked the slab up, I was able to see everything in the clear water. The fish weighed in at 163 pounds and the experience was nothing short of enlightening.

On my first halibut trip, I had a premier experience that I always remembered and tried to recreate for as long as I fished the Kodiak waters. A group of eight adventurers flew out of Kodiak on two

floatplanes headed for the wilderness island of Shuyak. A fisherman, homesteading couple and local legends Red and Debbie Lataski were our hosts and guides. After landing in the small bay out in front of Red's place we spent about an hour over coffee and a tour of the homestead, then we boarded Red's fifty-two-foot homemade gill net boat with Debbie at the helm to catch some halibut. Red was in an eighteen foot Boston Whaler leading the way.

The plan was to get into the channel between Shuyak and the Kodiak mainland as the tide turned. According to Red as the tide rushed through the narrow channel it would bring not only a huge volume of water but also hordes of the flat fish we were hunting. The plan worked like a charm. Both vessels arrived about two hours into the flood and the seawater was rushing through with visible force. We were in the right place at the right time. Debbie guided the boat to a spot near the channel opening and threw it into neutral and the bonanza began.

As fast as we could drop baited hooks into the swirling waters, the telltale jerk on the line would announce another fish on. We were all using a rig with two and a half inch circle hooks and often when cranked up had not one but two fish on. There were plenty of 'chickens' in the fifty to hundred pound range but also, many bigger fish were hauled aboard. Six of us worked at it, and it was work, for more than two hours till the boat's hold was nearly full. Finally, it was decided that we had enough and we were done. The boat dropped us off to meet the floatplane and began the eight-hour run back to Kodiak with the day's catch. In time, I was to learn that, although often recalled and talked about, the bonanza was a once in a lifetime thing.

Sports fishing for salmon is not only a big tourist draw every summer but also a favorite of residents. Hooking a salmon and then successfully landing it is a thrill. One way is to stand on the banks of one of several local rivers and cast flies, bait or lures. Like anything else, skill and know-how always improves the experience. My own experience was that standing on a riverbank in late August or early

September involved a lot off swatting mosquitoes and casting into trees. A competent guide always helps.

I spent one winter working on the dock crew with just about the best sports fishing guide in Kodiak, Chris Fiala. Ah well, everybody has to make a living. Angling was Chris's life. Don't know if he was a naturally born fisherman but he lived and breathed it when I knew him and so, of course, he was good at it. Not only was his skill, knowledge and technique good, he was enthusiastic and so was a great guide. His love for fishing predated his arriving in Kodiak but he found himself in his natural environment and has thrived there.

After more than a couple years fishing and surviving on the rock, he was able to put together a deal and buy the U-Rascal, a forty-three foot charter boat. The vessel could carry the captain a mate and eight clients and Chris could pretty much always put them on the fish. Of course, there was lots of different fish to go after but Chris's specialty was trolling for ocean kings. I went out with him twice and was not disappointed.

All salmon are things of beauty; sleek, muscular and when in salt water, silver bright. The largest of the five Pacific salmon species, the King or Chinook salmon is by far the most magnificent and they put up a hell of a fight for the angler. The trick was to hook up with one on the open ocean. Chris knew how to do it and was consistently able to give the folks that went out with him the experience of a lifetime.

Trolling for kings requires specific equipment and tackle. The U-Rascal had it all. The basics were a medium weight rod and an open real. There were also six downriggers onboard. These allowed the bait to be set at specific depths to attract any kings swimming by. The reels were set up with forty-pound test monofilament line for the sporting experience. The business end was rigged with a four-inch shiny lure and tandem hooks for bait. The hooks were usually baited with herring. There were variations but this outfit fit the bill under most conditions.

The day Chris took me and two other guys out it was late September; the weather was overcast and blustery. We left the dock around ten thirty. Chris was no early riser. He didn't need to be. It was only a twenty minute run out to the spot off Chiniak rock where Chris had been slaying them over the past week. On the run out we sat in the galley, drank coffee and shot the shit. The mate was at the wheel and Chris leaned casually against the port rail gazing at the sky and sea; occasionally shouting instructions up to the wheelhouse.

When the wheel guy backed down the engines, we knew that we had arrived and we lost no time in piling out to the back deck to hook us a king. The mate kept the wheel and the captain gave him a heading and a landmark to steer for. Chris then helped us setup the downriggers and bait the hooks. Once we were all in the water at the recommended depth, the troll commenced. After turning into the breeze, the sea conditions changed and the boat began a stomach churning roll. Some of the guys quieted down and started to look a little green around the gills. At the end of the first forty minute troll without a strike, we cranked up the baits and ran back to the starting point. On the second troll, we caught a nice halibut and a starfish. Not what we were looking for. Troll number three didn't pan out either and Chris glassed the sea further out for birds and or jumpers. It was time to make a move.

I don't know what he saw but we moved another half mile off shore and set out the baits again. Further offshore the roll became worse and worse and the always-ready skipper asked if anybody wanted a patch to put behind the ear. I took two. Seasick is no fun.

Back and forth we worked the ocean and finally Ted hooked up. His line snapped off the downrigger and by the angel of his line and the bend of his pole, it was clear he had a king on. With a little coaching, he cranked it in. It was gaffed and landed. Looked to be forty pounds plus. An air of optimism that only a fish on board can induce returned. Within ten minutes me and Neil also had fish on. My fish didn't come up without a fight and I put my back into it. At one point my line went slack and I figured the fish had thrown the hook. I kept cranking and the weight on the line came back and the

darn thing even ran one more time. When the head popped up, Chris was watching and shouted that it was a big one. I couldn't really tell. With a little assistance with the gaff, I got it into the boat. It was biggish, maybe over sixty pounds and flopping like a big fish out of water. It took three whacks with the ball bat to settle it down. It was a beauty. Back at the dock, it weighed out at sixty-seven pounds.

We trolled for three more hours and everybody caught at least one king, some guys got three and nobody puked, surely a good day fishing. On the run back in the seas laid down and we ate the lunch we had packed and had no stomach for before. At weigh in I had the biggest fish but everyone was satisfied. Thanks Chris. And in case you are wondering this ain't no fish story.

Fishing is a little like playing golf or shooting pool, the more you do it, the better you get. I continued to fish whenever possible until I left the island and did get better at it but never reached the lofty heights of some. The Funny thing is, since I left the island more than twenty years ago, I have yet to get a line wet.

CHAPTER EIGHT
EGEGIK: Who Knew What and When?

The village of Egegik is the ramshackle home of about a hundred souls who reside there year round. It is perched on a bluff on the south bank of the river from which it takes its name. It overlooks the spot where the river empties into Bristol Bay. The name is of Yup'ik Eskimo origin and the site has surely been inhabited as a seasonal fish camp by the Yup'ik and Aleutian people for as long as 6,000

years. There are records of a fish salting and packing operation and year-round habitation from the mid-19th century. Commercial and subsistence fishing continue to be the primary reason to lay your head down in Egegik.

The river is host to one of the largest sockeye salmon runs in Alaska and thus the world. As many as 30 million red, chum and silver salmon mass off shore and then rush up the river between early June and September every year. To intercept their fair share of the harvest, driftnet and setnet fisher folks flock to the village and surrounding settlements as regularly as the returning salmon. Along with them comes the commercial effort of factory workers, tender boats, floating processors and the support staff needed to buy, can, freeze the fish and get it to markets.

In the early eighties ISA, the company, needed to keep the plant on Kodiak Island busy during the lucrative salmon season. Looking for a source of red salmon in 1984 they bought out an operation on the north shore near Big Creek. The seller was an outfit called Homer Seafoods run by a dairy farmer from somewhere near Coos Bay Oregon by the name of Andy Heim. He had been buying salmon from setnetters up and down the beach for about four years. He weighed fish delivered by pickup truck or ATV trailer, bought it, iced it in large plastic totes and flew it off the beach to be frozen in factories elsewhere. The operation was set in the dunes between the tundra and the beach. This location was ideal because of the wide expanse of beach out front that allowed airplanes, as large as the old airliner the DC-6, to land and takeoff at low tide. Since the land was owned by the state of Alaska, the only assets he had to sell were the buildings, a couple of hundred totes and a fleet of rusting trucks and forklifts. Sharp business guys that we were we required him to sign a two year non-compete agreement which he used to stuff in the cracks of his barn down in Oregon apparently. The buildings consisted of a warehouse set on a poured concrete pad, an attached cookhouse, a barn like truck shop and about ten plywood cabins that served as bunkhouses for a crew.

In mid-May, the company in the person of me and another guy named Bill Barnes, took possession of the assets. Not having a clue what the conditions were like out there, we chartered a floatplane and flew out of Kodiak. There was an advance man, that we had never talked to, already in camp. We did get word that he was in desperate need of propane for his cook stove. We threw two one hundred pound bottles of propane, a box of groceries, some sleeping bags and our personal gear on the plane and headed for Bristol Bay. In a Cessna 182, the flight out to the beach was a spectacular hour and a half flight.

We flew over the fir-covered mountains of Kodiak and out across the Shelikof Strait to the Alaska Peninsula. The mountains, forming the backbone of the peninsula, were towering and many were still snow capped. Unable to fly over the peaks, our pilot skillfully threaded his way through the passes. After an unforgettable up close view of the rugged mountains, it seemed as we could reach out and touch the granite faces of the shear walls, mountain passes and valleys, we emerged on the other side over the vast tundra. At first, the tundra appeared flat without perceptible elevation. The most remarkable feature was the uncountable lakes, huge, big and small. They appeared as puddles, reflecting the sunlight on a field after a downpour. It looked like our pontoon configured craft would be able to set down anywhere.

In short order, we found the Egegik River snaking its way out of the Lake Becharof towards the sea. We followed it to the coast. As we lost elevation, the features of the tundra became more distinct. There were low rolling hills and patches of vegetation hugging the ground. Nothing that could be called a tree was visible. Instead, the land was covered with short grass and what looked like moss. The surface, on closer examination, was not flat at all but was covered with irregular formations caused by the upheaval of the freezing and thawing below the surface. I would later learn how treacherous these so called moguls were when trying to walk or drive across the tundra.

Our pilot turned right when we got to the beach and flew along the dunes looking for the cluster of buildings that would mark our

destination. Behind us across the river, we could make out what we took to be the village. On some high ground jutting out into the bay below us, we saw buildings and around sixty boats up on blocks. Surely this was the boat storage at Coffee Point. All along the dunes as we flew north we spotted cabins, outhouses and the occasional seemingly abandoned vehicles. Latter we were to learn that these were the setnet sites. There was not a human to be seen this early in the year. Before long we came to a cluster of mismatched peeling buildings surrounding one larger than the rest. The pilot buzzed a couple of times and a lone figure appeared waving his arms which we took to be Jim Ring, the guy holding down the fort and expecting us, sort of.

After flying back and forth looking for a likely spot to put it down we and the pilot realized the float plane had been a mistake. There were plenty of lakes in the immediate area but none looked to be big enough or, more important, deep enough for the pontoons. The pilot looked at us, grinned and pointed to the bay. Yeah, why not we shrugged. The surface was flat calm and the tide was way out. The pilot set the Cessna down without a problem and taxied into the shallow water until the pontoons were grounded on the sandy bottom. At low tide, the mud flat was more than a thousand yards wide. It was gonna be a long wet hike. We grabbed our gear, tossed the propane bottles into the water and began wading to the beach. By the time we made it up onto the white sand Ring was waiting for us in a rusted out Ford pickup. Thus began my nine years on the beach.

Windswept, sand blown and desolate come to mind when I search for words to describe that stretch of beach, dunes and tundra. I can still hear the sound of the waves crashing relentlessly on the beach and the howl of the wind if I close my eyes. I can still feel the sand in my eyes, nostrils, clothes and shoes. It is a unique environment filled with challenges. Over the years, I came to love and detest it.

As we rattled down the beach in the Ford 150, I noticed that the sand was visible through the holes in the floorboards and that what was left of the body shook and swayed with every bump on the beach. Jim had let us know he had been on the beach for close to a

week and he'd only gotten this one rig, out of the dozen or so hulks littering the yard, up and running. Jim looked to be in his early thirties, had a full red beard and was chewing tobacco. He was attired in Carhartt overalls, a faded red hoodie and a pair of ratty high top Reeboks. An even rattier looking Portland Trail Blazers cap pulled down low completed the outfit. He hailed from Coos Bay and had worked for Heim the last three summers. He had also worked in the woods as a tree scaler and knew how to talk to Asian clients which most likely explains why Mr. Choi, the company president, kept him on after the buyout. He was the transition team. As the point guys for the company, it was Bill and my job to assess the situation, open up the camp and get it ready to buy fish by June first.

There were no landline communications at that time. Instead, there was a SSB (single sideband) radio and a radio schedule at nine every morning. We needed groceries, batteries, fuel, truck parts and a competent shade tree mechanic ASAP. Kodiak came up on schedule the next morning and we gave them our wish list. JR, as Ring came to be known, had recommended a mechanic, John Brown, also out of Oregon, that had experience turning wrench on the beach. I told Kodiak to find him, cut a deal and get him out to the beach now. It was critical but at that point everything was critical.

Over the next two weeks, we struggled mightily with the weather, the harsh environment and each other to get things up and running. I learned to depend on Penn Air, the air taxi outfit based in King Salmon, for logistical support. Anything we needed in the way of supplies, parts, fuel or people generally came out of Kodiak, Anchorage or increasingly Seattle. Shipped first on commercial flights into King Salmon, consolidated by Penn Air and flown down to us on the beach. Chief pilot and owner George Tibbets became an ally and a friend.Georgie came to like our Japanese women employees and even called me 'Mike-san' imitating them.

Once we got some of the necessities flown in we went to work opening things up. The key was to get the vehicles running and when John Brown arrived he started to get them going one by one. Any regular mechanic would most likely quit after only a few days. The

harsh salt water and sandy conditions quickly destroyed all things mechanical leaving behind rusting heaps. The only parts store readily available was the 'boneyard' where hulks were dragged to return to the earth. A good shade tree mechanic had to be able to survey the boneyard, identify a usable part, extract it and jerry-rig it to make it work on one of our antiques. John was a miracle worker and slowly our fleet of REO 4x4s, Allison Chalmers loaders, and various makes and unheard of model forklifts came to life. Of course, like most shade tree mechanics I would work with over the years, John was a strange unsocial character and an alcoholic.

The harsh environment continued to be the biggest obstacle during the start up. The wind blew every day and it often blew a cold rain. Several times in May we woke up to snow on the ground. When the sun came out, it blew sand. Sand was everywhere and covered everything. It was a constant struggle to keep the sand out of moving parts, electronics such as radios and living spaces. All the buildings including bunkhouses were of a rough plywood construction and the fine particles of sand blew through the cracks and piled up on everything. In the end, we gave up trying to keep the sand out of clothes, sleeping bags and body orifices. In those early days there was no indoor plumbing and old fashioned outhouses were the order of the day. The absence of showers and shaving gave us all a gamey, outdoor macho look and smell.

However, the wind and sand were not the biggest natural force we had to learn to live with. Being perched on a sand dune between the tundra and the vast body of water that was Bristol Bay, made the changing cycle of the tide the ultimate natural reality in our daily life. Like everywhere else the tide rose and fell twice each day. The huge mud flats created by the vast amounts of silt washed down by the river and deposited at the mouth created some of the most extreme tides on earth. At extreme low tide, the flats were more than a thousand yards wide. At extreme high tide, the waves crashed up against the dunes. When an on-shore wind was blowing the waves crashed over the dunes and flooded everything. The state of the tide affected every decision and action. I can't count how many vehicles I

saw stuck or broke down at low tide and lost when the tide flooded in. The pocket size tide book became our bible and we studied it every day. At low tide the flat became an airstrip that could accommodate everything from a Piper Cub to a four-engine DC-6.

CHAPTER NINE
EGEGIK: The Flying Circus

By the first week of June we had the camp up and ready, well as ready as possible. The salmon run always began by then. The run starts as a trickle in the early part of the month and builds throughout the month and by the 28th was in full swing. The peak has always been July 4th. The predictability of the return of these fish was always an amazing thing and we watched more and more sockeye show up every day.

By then we had a skeleton crew in place to drive truck, forklifts, other equipment and ice the fish. Our plan was to send trucks down

the beach to buy fish at setnet sites. We also would take deliveries on the back concrete pad at the plant. Support staff included a cook, site engineer to keep the power plant running and the ice machine spitting out chips of ice. We were receiving air resupply of groceries, diesel fuel and other essentials almost daily and we opened a store and began selling stuff to the setnet folks and others. It was part of the strategy to win over folks who were leery of the new guys and the Moonies to boot.

One novel ingredient to the macho mix was the hand full of Japanese women that had arrived. They worked as book keepers, store keepers, kitchen helpers and other support positions in the early days. Susan Puljilowski and Dave Barker were part of the management team and were given the job of running up and down the beach in surplus 6x6 trucks buying fish at the setnet sites.

The first couple hundred pounds of fish that we took delivery of were a dry run for us as we learned the ropes of the operation. JR turned out to be the key man in the outfit. He passed on to us all the things he had learned working on the beach over the past three years. If anything, JR was a likable guy able to shoot the shit with fishermen and reassure them it was ok to sell to the Moonies. On the other hand, the rest of the management team wasn't working out that well. Bill Barnes and I seemed to disagree on just about everything. The real problem was that Kodiak never made it clear exactly who was in charge. Barnes assumed he was the boss and I was sure I was the honcho. It didn't help that we were very different in temperament and outlook. Bill was an early computer guy, very analytical and detail oriented as far as how things should be run. I was a Marine veteran, a people guy and 'get it done at all costs' kind of guy. Right away I had figured out that success depended on winning over the setnet community. Working through JR and building on his experience was my plan. On the other hand, Barnes wanted to shuffle JR aside in favor of his business model. We had several major blow ups and Kodiak stepped in and solved the problem by exiling me to King Salmon.

Northern Peninsula Seafoods, better known as Winky's Flying Circus, was an outfit conceived of and owned by a character named William 'Winky' Crawford. The Flying Circus was as weird and unique an operation as I had ever seen. They operated out of a Quonset hut on the ramp of the King Salmon airport. Winky was nothing short of an entrepreneur, a visionary and an eccentric. His passion was vintage aircraft and his vision was a marriage between these old planes and the fish business. He owned or operated three DC-3s, the WWII tail dragger workhorse. The DC-3 packed 7 to 9 thousand pounds of fish depending on conditions and how brave you were. He also ran a small fleet of small Cessna and Piper Cub airplanes that ran around the various river systems in Bristol Bay and picked up fish from setnetters. Packed in 30 gallon garbage cans his guys unloaded and consolidated the fish in totes with a little ice on the ramp at the King Salmon airport and flew it to Anchorage, Kenai and Kodiak in the DC-3s.

His real vision was to put together a load of 90 thousand pounds, load it on a chartered DC-8 jet and fly it directly into Tokyo and make his fortune. It was overly ambitious, visionary and most people said crazy. As far as I know he never managed to pull it off but it wasn't from lack of trying. I actually saw the DC-8 sitting on the ramp. It left two days later empty. I did hear some years later Winky was flying tuna out of some Pacific island into Tokyo.

I was sent up to King Salmon to buy as much fish as possible from his consolidated loads, make sure it wasn't to hot and fly it on to Kodiak. Armed with an electronic thermometer, a sleeping bag and a duffle bag of personal gear I walked into the hut that served as cookhouse, coffee lounge, flop house and office for the Flying Circus. When I opened the door a cloud of mixed cigarette, diesel fumes from a malfunctioning heat stove and what may have been pot smoke washed over me. Sitting around several long tables smoking, drinking coffee and playing cribbage were about a dozen guys that at first glance looked to be arctic homeless or pirates. I soon learned that these were the pilots and ground crew of the Circus. Most were vets of the conflicts in Southeast Asia; some were ex-Air America.

To a man they loved airplanes and flying and flying fish in Alaska was the way to indulge their passion. Of course they were risk takers and the excitement of bush piloting on steroids was what they seemed to be born to do. Of course chaotic personnel lifestyles went with the territory. Fly hard; put it on the deck and party hardy. Get up and do it again the next day.

On the far wall was a cluttered desk that was the 'office'. The desk was littered with ashtrays, coffee cups, fish tickets and other paperwork as well as a bank of squawking SSB, VHF and aircraft radios. Leaning back in an ancient swivel chair and shouting into a microphone was a dishwater blonde, 16 year old, going on 38, young lady. She was the office manager, Winky's daughter. I soon learned that she was having a great summer with the hard partying and was well on her way to dating her way through the entire crew. With Winky off hustling and flying fish, Carol was my daily contact person at the Circus.

The fish business in Alaska is tightly managed by the Department of Fish and Game and the timely collection of information was essential. The sale of all fish had to be documented by filling out a 'fish ticket' listing weight, species and district where the fish was caught. Furthermore, the purchaser had to report by phone, radio or in person the previous day's tallied fish tickets by 10 A.M. the following day. At the Circus this was Carol's responsibility; only problem is after partying until dawn, waking up around noon and then the matter of coffee and a couple of Marlboros it was hard to tabulate the tickets and make the required report on time. The afternoon that I walked in to take up my new post she was on the VHF radio cursing and shouting at the Fish and Game office; something about a threat to send the Troopers down to either get yesterday's report or shut the operation down. All I could do was find a stained mug, pour a cup of joe and wait to see how things worked out.

By late afternoon the smaller planes delivering reds from the opening on the Kwvjack River started to land and taxi over to the ramp were the Circus had set up for business. The crew went to work

and by 9 P.M. we had a DC-3 load put together and the aircraft was loaded and sent on to Kodiak.

The Circus occupied three Quonset huts on the south ramp. The other two were used for storage, mostly folded cardboard boxes for packing salmon, and a maintenance shop filled with tools and greasy parts to keep the forklift running and the planes in the air. I was shown to the former and told to sleep anywhere there was space. I located a likely stack of cardboard and rolled out my sleeping bag. It was no five star hotel but it was free and probably the best short notice accommodation available in the salmon boom town. Ah well, no rest for the wicked. Before I could retire the Circus pickup truck pulled up in a mufflerless roar and I was off with the crew to the Red Dog Saloon.

During June and July King Salmon and its neighbor Naknek were nothing short of boom towns on par with the gold rush towns of the old west. The millions of salmon that were returning to the five river systems of Bristol Bay brought with them tens of thousands of hardworking, hard drinking and hard partying adventurers. King Salmon with its 6,000 foot hard runway was the gateway. Still light out at eleven o'clock the seven of us who had piled into the truck headed west across the tundra on the gravel road designated 'the Peninsula Highway' the 15 miles to Naknek. A village of around 500 folks through the winter it had swelled to three or four thousand cannery workers, boat crew and fishermen. On this evening, the fishing was closed all over the bay and the party was on.

As we crested the rise into downtown Naknek we spotted a huge crowd congregating in the dirt outside the Red Dog. The downtown consisted of about seven pre-fab and older wooden buildings. The Red Dog was a two story wooden building of indeterminate age with a café restaurant on one side and rooms to rent upstairs. The bar itself had a porch on the front and a sign that read "no dogs, knives or firearms" which nobody paid any attention to. The crowd out front was noisy having taken the initiative to provide themselves with liquid refreshments. At first glance, it seemed to be a 25 to 1 ratio of men to women. It didn't look like they were actually expecting to get

inside. Me and another guy worked our way through the crowd, got up on the porch and pushed our way up to the door for a look inside. Wasn't much to see being dark, smoky and wall to wall people standing ass-hole to belly button. Up against the far wall was a sort of stage with a stool and a microphone. A little while later, a less than slim, also of indeterminate age, white chick took the stage, introduced herself as Wendy and began strumming a guitar and singing. For the life of me I can't recall the genre. Probably I didn't hear much over the crowd roar. I did learn that being prominent among the rare female persuasion, she was enormously popular and that several fights that very night, some involving knives, had broken out over her attentions. The drunken revelry continued until well past dawn around two thirty or three. Eventually, joints were openly passed around and there was a steady stream of folks heading around the side of the building for something more than tapping a full kidney. Law enforcement was conspicuously absent. Being of a moderately sober disposition I was still standing when the crowd began to dissipate. I can't say as much for the guys I had arrived with and it took awhile longer to reassemble them for the ride back to King Salmon. I woke up and rolled off my stack of cardboard around 10 A.M to greet the new day.

The next three days were spent in pretty much the same way as the first. The one exception was the late night partying was done at the Circus's own facility. Down time is a fact of life in the Alaskan fisheries. First, waiting for Fish and Game to open the fishing and then waiting for the fish to be caught and delivered. Downtime is spent drinking coffee, playing cards and shootin the shit. Since I was at the disadvantage of not knowing how to play cribbage I had lots of time to talk to the pilots and ground crew that made up the Circus. These guys were veterans of air ops around the world and they had a lot of stories to tell. To a man, they lived to fly. Where and what cargo was immaterial for the most part. Human cargo was the best and livestock less so. Winky's DC-3s often operated in the winter hauling tourists in the Bahamas. Good work if you could get it. Some cargoes were high profit but also high risk. Several guys alluded to

trips from south of the border with less than legal cargoes. Hauling salmon had the potential to make serious bucks but there was a major down side. No self respecting pilot was happy about having fish blood and scales all over their precious aircraft. All of these flyboys held deep in their big hearts the dream of wearing the clean-cut uniform of a major airline someday. But alas flying was flying and they adapted the dress, swagger and lifestyle of air cowboys.

On the fourth day, I got the summons. Apparently things down at the beach had gone south. It seems Barnes couldn't get along with anybody, declared the operation unmanageable and quit. He packed his stuff and hopped the first flight back to Kodiak. The company told me to get back out to the beach as soon as possible and take over. Although I did run into Winky and the Flying Circus several times again over the years, it was time to say goodbye to his band of high-flying, hard-charging misfits.

CHAPTER TEN
Egegik: On the Beach

I hit the beach running and didn't stop until sometime in August. In the Alaskan seafood industry, the superintendent of a cannery was like the captain of a ship. His word was law and he ran things as he saw fit. I was the boss and started to run the outfit with little or no daily input from Kodiak. "God is in His Heaven and the Czar was in Moscow" as it was said in the old days of Russian control. Kodiak was in effect almost as far away from the beach.

Of course I couldn't do it alone. My co-church members, known as the Moonies, came out on a mission and were devoted to the work

laboring harder than many other employees. Key players were the seven Japanese women sent directly by the Rev. Moon, Susan and Davy. I realized early on there was a big cultural gap between the 'church' culture of abstinence and the hard living Alaskan way of life. It was up to me to bridge the two ways. I endeavored to keep one foot planted firmly in both worlds. For example I conducted religious services every Sunday morning for the church members no matter how hungover I was. Susan and David also did a great job in this regard. It wasn't always easy.

In order to make it work winning the trust and loyalty of the setnet permit holders, the fishermen were essential. This included, many, times their families and crew. This was my number one job. Dave and Susan went down the beach to the Bishop Creek area, Coffee point and beyond and built relationships with the fisher folks. JR and I did the same with the setnetters close enough to deliver their catch to the plant.

That first season it wasn't clear if we could overcome the 'Moonie" label. Everyone had heard of the Rev. Moon and the press was not flattering. When a company owned by the Unification Church bought land in Kodiak the original response from locals was vicious with public protests and threats of violence. It took the guys in Kodiak about three years to put the stories of brainwashing, heavenly deception, unfair labor practices and the like to rest. Treating people fairly and paying good money for fish went a long way but it took time. On the beach, my plan was to pay top dollar, provide services folks needed and show some integrity.

We started out as cash buyers. Most fishermen already had a relationship, however stormy, with one of the big fish packers usually known as the cannery, even though the heyday of canning salmon was long past. A new guy that wanted to break in had to pay cash, often at a rate of three to five cents a pound more than the canneries were paying. That first June, I sat in a plywood shack and paid out a couple hundred thousand bucks in crisp C-notes flown in from Kodiak. A little nervous, I kept a Colt 45 Combat Commander with a round in the chamber and the hammer back in plain sight on a

shelf above the cash box. As we built, trust we gradually went to paying by company check and then settling up at the end of the season just like the other canneries.

The decision and posting of the fish price was a daily complication. Of course, I was in daily contact with Kodiak over fish price strategy. The only problem was contact was by SSB radio and everyone in the fleet could listen in. Because the situation on the grounds changed quickly the buck always stopped with me. My mandate was to buy as much fish as possible. I listened to reports of what other canneries were promising, tried to sort out the lies and attempted to stay out front without leaving money on the table. In the heat of an opening I often bumped the price several times in a 12 hour period. The 'Bonus' was also an all important issue. In theory, the end of the season bonus was intended to be a way to reward loyalty and share some of the profits made when the pack was sold at the end of the season. In practice, it was just a way to confuse the price of fish and get more fish. When asked I always let folks know we would be paying a bonus, maybe a nickel maybe a dime. Back in the day all prices were conveyed word of mouth or posted on 4x8 sheets of plywood in two-foot high numbers. I wonder if they do it on Facebook or Twitter now days.

Food, fuel and all manner of parts were commodities always in great demand on the beach. That first year we had to fly everything in. It was expensive but had to be done. Once we started flying fish into Kodiak, the planes came back virtually empty. This was the backhaul and became the source of lots of stuff. Groceries, truck parts, bags of cement, 55-gallon drums of diesel and gas, batteries and a lot more came in on the backhaul. Early on we opened a store where fishermen and their families could buy groceries and other stuff, charge it to their account and have it deducted from money owed to them at the end of the season. For a while, we hauled in cases of beer and several times shipped in a whole pallet of beer. We handed out a six-pack at a time for every delivery of over a thousand pounds. After several years of that wildly popular promotion, the Alaska Liquor Board declared that it constituted selling alcohol

without a license and told us to stop. We sold fuel by the gallon, eggs by the dozen and web by the fathom.

Every year we threw a Thank You Party for all the fishermen and their families. The original idea came from Mr. Joo Chan Choi, the company president in Kodiak. We took the idea and ran with it Egegik style. The ISA party was always held the last week of July before the bulk of the fishermen began to drift back home. There was always plenty to eat and drink; mostly standard barbecue fare like hot dogs and hamburgers, ice cream and watermelon. One year we dug a pit and roasted a small caribou on a spit. Every permit holder's name was put in a hat and names were drawn for prizes like a Honda ATV, color TV and other swag. A couple of times we had a live band and dancing. Although it was billed as a family style event, the beer flowed freely and if you knew which cabin to visit there was whiskey. Once the families left it sometimes got wild.

After the initial year, I always went to Seattle in January, purchased huge quantities of all the essential stuff, loaded it on barges and shipped it to the beach. On or around May 1st each year an ocean going tugboat would haul the barge into the river, drop of two mini- tugs that would push the barge up on the beach. That would begin the 24 plus hour operation of hauling the stuff down the beach and into camp. Myself, usually Davy, JR and a small crew had to be in two weeks earlier to open up and get ready for the barge. Based on how much equipment was up and running we made a plan and waited for the barge. The barge, when it showed up, stood off shore and waited for the right moment in the tide and pushed the barge up on the beach with the incoming tide. The outgoing tide left the barge high and dry and the on-board crane began setting the 20-foot containers on the beach. In most cases we broke out the containers right on the beach and loaded the cargo onto our 6x6 trucks to transport it back to camp. Some containers were hauled by huge 4x4 forklifts to their destination. It was a gigantic operation fraught with potential problems. Equipment breakdowns and simply getting stuck in the sand often left a vehicle to the tide as it rushed in. At least once a year a vehicle was lost and I can't recall how many

we saved a rig just in the nick of time. Once a piece of equipment went through the tide it never operated the same again if at all. One year a truck with a container loaded with 70-pound bags of cement broke an axle in a stream running across the beach and dumped the container off at a 60-degree angle. Me and two other guys climbed up on the container, stuck a ladder down inside and unloaded sixty bags by putting them, one by one, over a shoulder and climbing out. Damn near killed me but we saved the truck, cargo and container from the onrushing tide. Every year no matter how much we planned; this operation always took a toll on men and equipment.

Once the barge was in, we had more than a couple of weeks to put the rolling stock back together and complete the season's improvement projects before the salmon showed up. In the spring of 1984 the camp was primitive to say the least. Every year with time and materials available we tried to improve the plant and living conditions. Electrical power was produced by an old generator and the warehouse, cookhouse and office had intermittent power. Over the years we built a new generator shed, set up two new 300 horsepower generators and an auxiliary. With a reliable source of power, a distribution system was built to deliver electricity to all the bunkhouses and other buildings in the camp. Batteries and oil lamps for power became just a memory. Our source of water for cooking, making ice, washing fish and sanitation was the ground water in a small pond behind the plant. Lack of water during the peak was a major concern. A new pumping and purification system was constructed and operated by the chief engineer Peter, a chain smoking Polish refugee from the USSR's submarine forces. With an adequate water supply, we were able to build a washhouse with flush toilets, laundry machines and hot water showers all connected to a septic tank and drainfield. The era of the two hole outhouse faded away. Icing down hundreds of pounds of salmon during the peak of the season was a major headache. With enough electricity and water, we brought in a couple of huge capacity Northstar ice machines. It helped but warm days in July still threw us into crisis mode over ice. Since we could save money on airfreight charges by removing the

head and guts of the fish before loading them on the planes, we set up a butcher line and became a processor. Then the major problem became how to dispose of the offal in an environmentally acceptable way. Since we were butchering the fish on site we needed to process the roe into the Japanese products sujiko and ekura. These products required technicians licensed in Japan so we brought them in and roe production became a consistent high-profit center. Although the salmon was headed and gutted by hand, we eventually bought and installed machines that could do the job faster with only a small loss in yield. When we upgraded the plant, we brought in more people and had to improve the living conditions by upgrading the bunkhouses. Over the years, we continually improved the operation but air-ops continued to be the critical concern.

CHAPTER ELEVEN
Egegik: Air Ops

Take a look at a map of 'The Last Frontier', a huge landmass with few roads, and it becomes clear why the airplane was made for Alaska. The bush pilot is legendary. On Skis, on floats and on wheels the bush pilots have moved freight, medicine, groceries, dogs, gold, diesel, people and more in ways that make life in the lower forty-eight downright boring. All over the state people hop on planes like people down-below get in taxis, buses or the family car. Private plane ownership in Alaska per capita is more than any other state in the union. Of course, airplanes kill a lot of people. If your car engine quits you coast to the side of the road, put on the emergency blinkers

and call AAA. If you are taking off from a frozen lake on a bitter cold winter day and the condensation in the av-gas freezes into ice crystals and blocks the fuel line and the engine dies at 600 feet, so do you.

Over Bristol Bay, the airplane was ubiquitous. They were a lifeline, the air taxi, used for medevacs, a tool in the salmon wars and the reason I was on the beach. I always watched with fascination the small planes that drifted and circled above the fleet like hawks working the flats out in front of ISA. These were fish spotters. In partnership with a drift boat or a group, they spotted fish from the air and radioed the location to their partners on the water who would then be on said fish like a pack of dogs. Problem was a pilot flying around and back and forth, always looking down for fish, had the increased likelihood of meeting up with another guy doing the same thing. Almost every year there were mid air collisions with disastrous results.

Moving fresh fish from one place to another by airplane was nothing new but the scale of the ISA Egegik beach operation was unique. Outside of Winky's Flying Circus nobody conceived of flying, let alone actually flying, as many pounds of salmon as we did year after year.

The Alaskan salmon fishery was divided into districts centering on runs in the various river systems. It is a limited entry permit system and is specific as to gear type and boat size. In the Egegik district, 32 foot limit gillnet boats plied the waters. Setnetters anchored one end of a gill net to the beach and extended the other end out across the beach. When the tide came in and covered the net, it brought with it the salmon that became ensnared in the web. Traditionally as the tide ebbed the fisher folk picked the fish out of the muddy net. More aggressive types pick fish in a rubber raft all through the tide increasing the catch and fish quality. Fish picked while the net was still submerged wasn't muddy and didn't require the additional step of washing the fish.

Drift boats had a lot of options when it came to delivering. There were plenty of tender boats and floating processors on station where

they could offload and sell the catch. The land bound setnetters had far fewer options and always felt like a stepchild when it came to price and services. When ISA bought out Andy Heim, he was flying a couple of hundred thousand pounds off the beach every year. For us it became how much could we buy and how much could we fly. Come to find out the logistics were a nightmare.

The flat stretch of beach out front of the plant was our airstrip. At low tide, it was wide and long enough to land four engine aircraft and lift off with as much as 30,000 pounds of chilled salmon in totes onboard. From the beach, it was less than an hour to the Kodiak airport. There, the totes of iced fish were trucked to the ISA plant, blast frozen, cased up and held in cold storage for sale in Japan. Pretty straight forward but of course the devil, as we found out, was in the details.

In order to move a million plus pounds of fish in eight weeks, you gotta have some serious airlift capacity. We employed a bunch of different pieces of equipment, all that could be considered antiques. ISA neither owned nor operated any aircraft but instead signed charter deals with companies that specialized in operating vintage airplanes. They were contracts that specified an aircraft, its weight capacity and a per trip rate in dollars. Winky's boys flew numerous trips in their DC-3s. The DC-3 was rated at 9,000 pounds for flights from the beach into Kodiak. We used these twin-engine taildraggers for flights early and late in the season when we were buying less than 50,000 pounds a day.

At other times we also used the C-46, which was a U.S. Army version of the DC-3 with bigger engines and a beefed up airframe that packed 15,000 pounds. The most interesting plane that hauled for us was the C-119 or Flying Box Car. Another WWII Army workhorse. It had a twin tail construction with clamshell doors and a ramp in the rear to offload over-size freight. One big advantage of using this aircraft was that on back hauls we could get all kinds of oversize stuff, including full sized automobiles, out to the beach. One of the major downsides was that it was seriously underpowered for lifting loads off the beach. To compensate, they were fitted with jet

assists for takeoff. These were essentially rockets, looked like oversized vacuum cleaners and were mounted on top of the fuselage between the wings. On takeoff, the pilot would get the old lady rolling as fast as she would go down the beach, pull the stick back and fire the rocket. I never tired of watching a boxcar blasting off. It packed 15,000 pounds.

For the heavy lift during the peak days, we had four engine planes available. An ex-Air America guy named Norman had two DC-4s that needed legitimate work. Well before the Gulf War everybody called him 'Stormin Norman.' He worked pretty steadily for us over the years until one time when he was needed, he had disappeared. It turns out he was on an undocumented flight somewhere off the coast of Washington State when NORAD scrambled a couple of F-16s to force him down. Apparently having been well trained during his years flying for the CIA, he thought fast, set the plane down in the Pacific Ocean and climbed into a life raft. The DC-4 with whatever cargo it was hauling sank to the bottom before the Coast Guard could arrive on the scene. No evidence, no foul. He did lose the remaining DC-4 in his struggle to stay out of the federal hotel and never flew for us again.

The Ball brothers were by far the most stable and reliable airplane guys we had the pleasure to work with. They were a Seventh Day Adventist family out of Dillingham and had a long track record of flying throughout Alaska. North Pacific Transport leased the C-119s and three or four DC-6s. They turned around and contracted with ISA to fly fish off the beach. Jerry was the chief pilot and he and his brother Newt both captained flights off the beach. The heavy lift capacity, 30,000 pounds, of the DC-6 made it an essential part of our plan on the days when we were buying more than half a million pounds in a twelve-hour opening. The mix of aircraft was crucial but only one part of the equation, which also included tide, weather and emergency openings.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game managed the salmon resource throughout the state using a limited entry permit system and by ensuring that enough fish escaped up the river to spawn and

maintain the run. Fish and Game biologists studied the run and set escapement goals for each river system every year. Then they actually counted the fish as they passed a control point and opened and closed the fishing as the escapement kept pace with projections. They were pretty good at it. From mid-June to mid-July the openings were announced on an emergency basis sometimes only six hours before the opening. Emergency openings were short; twelve or twenty-four hours and coincided roughly with the ebb and flow of the tide. When things were hot and heavy we were buying as much as a half a million pounds in a twelve-hour opener. The challenge was to get it all down the beach, iced and or processed into totes and flown off the beach before the fishing opened again and more fish started pouring in. It wasn't uncommon for the fish to start stacking up. We often fell behind in ice production and ran out of totes to hold the salmon. It was a point of pride and a matter of keeping a promise that we never turned down a single fish no matter how plugged we were. As long as we could keep flying, we could keep buying.

We had enough aircraft under contract and standing by to move the fish as long as the weather co-operated. That was a big if. By July, the weather in Bristol Bay was consistently good. Warm days and cool nights were the norm. The difference between the early morning cool temperatures and the warm surface temperatures from the day before often produced morning fog that burned off by noon. The long days were most often bright and sunny sometimes reaching into the low eighties. Of course, if you're holding a half million pounds of expensive salmon with limited ice supplies sunshine wasn't a good thing. Once they reached a certain temperature, they quickly went from number ones to number threes. I prayed for rain or overcast skies.

A much bigger problem was the weather in Kodiak. The ground fog there often lasted all day and was so thick that they closed the airport. Big problem when you absolutely got to move a lot a fish. The pressure was enormous and went on continuously for fourteen or more days. The stress almost killed me. All I could do was deal with

every impossible problem, keep buying fish, processing it and flying it.

All things on the beach, the fishing, the hauling, the processing and the flying happened according to the relentless rhythm of the rising and falling of the tide. The differences between the high and low tides in western Alaska were huge. At the low tide, the beach was a wide highway and airfield. At high tide, it all disappeared under the waves crashing against the dunes. In many places the beach was impassable. Nothing could be left on the beach exposed to the corrosive salt water and the raw force of the on rushing tide.

The tide rushed in and ebbed out twice a day in twelve-hour cycles. Calculating and planning for the tide change was an essential life skill for anyone operating on the beach. The pocket size tide book that everybody carried became our bible. Even when all the other conditions lined up, if the tide wasn't right we had to wait.

CHAPTER TWELVE
Egegik: The Day the Salmon Fried

That year we were on a roll. The sockeye run prediction was huge and the demand in Japan drove the fish price to a record high. We were buying over 200,000 pounds every 24 hours. On or about July 2nd our nightmare came true. We lost a plane.

The fishing had opened early in the morning and by 9:30, when the morning fog had burned off, the early deliveries were already coming in fast and furious. We still had 50 or 60 thousand pounds from the day before waiting to fly. The sun was shining and my fish were getting warm. I ordered the production foreman to re-ice the totes. A little later, he came back and said there wasn't enough ice to re-ice yesterday's fish and ice the fish we were now buying. I summoned the Chief Engineer and read him the riot act. I was informed in some form of Polish-Russian-English that due to elevated air temperatures the pond water temperatures were elevated and the efficiency of the ice making machine was way down. In addition, due to evaporation, there was some danger of pumping the pond dry in the next few days. "Doin the best we can boss." Shit! We gotta move these fish!

Word out of Kodiak was that they were socked in and it wasn't predicted to lift until late afternoon. Around noon, I got a call on the, recently installed, landline from Georgie Tibbets, the chief pilot at Penn Air in King Salmon. He let me know that there were two FDA agents at the counter wanting to book a flight down to ISA. The FDA's mission was to prevent adulterated foodstuffs from entering the food chain. Every year they showed up at the most in-opportune time with thermometers to check fish temperatures and a vial of orange dye to mark offenders. I told Georgie to stall them a couple of hours. He said no problem. They were cooling their heels on the tarmac now and would be there for awhile. They showed up around three and I already had 100,000 pounds staged on the beach waiting for the planes. I argued, begged and pleaded with assurances that the rapidly warming fish would all be in Kodiak getting less than 32 degrees within two hours. Dodged that bullet and got back on the horn to shout for the planes. At four o'clock I was informed that the fog was slowly lifting and they were sending every plane they could beg, borrow or steal. It was going to be close, but I might be able to get out of this one.

By 5:30 p.m. the sky was full of airplanes circling, buzzing the beach and then landing one by one. Before they had all landed and

taxied up to positions in front of ISA, the forklifts were loading the first of them for the hop into Kodiak. Once they were all lined up with doors, open it was an impressive sight. Three DC-6s, Two DC-4s a DC-3 and a Flying Box Car were lined up and in turn taking on the plastic and aluminum totes of fish. It was a sight for sore eyes. It was just about dead low tide and the beach was dry and wide; making for easy maneuvering and take offs. By 6:15 the 3 and the Box Car had taxied into the take off position far up the beach. First, the 3 started down the beach and as it lifted off and banked right over the bay, all eyes turned to the spectacular blast off of the Box Car. By 7:30 the other five planes were wheels up. We still had a shit load of fish to move and five or six more hours of light to do it in. One more flight out wouldn't clear up everything but it would give us some breathing space to start buying more fish on the next opening that was set for seven a.m. the following morning. Hell, I might even get a couple of hours sleep.

Around nine p.m. the planes started arriving for the last trip of the day. We had gotten the heads up from Kodiak and the totes were staged on the beach for a quick turnaround. The tide had turned and now would be the major player in the night's activities. I figured we had to have the beach cleared by midnight.

One by one we offloaded the backhaul, loaded the planes and sent them. There was a noticeable onshore breeze that could throw the tide estimate off. We had to hurry. By 12:45 the light was fading. It would never get full dark but before too much longer visibility down the beach would be compromised. Shortly before one A.M. the last tote was on the last DC-6, the doors were closed and the captain started the sequence to start the four engines. I was on a Honda ATV and pulled up under the captain's window to consult. The Captain stuck his head out the window and I shouted up at him. He took a long look down the runway, made his decision and gave me the thumbs up.

There was no real option to keep the plane on the beach until morning's light. The tide had already covered the mud flats and was moving across the beach. With the steady onshore wind, the entire

beach would be awash in two hours and the aircraft would be in the surf. I touched my hand to the bill of my ball cap sending him to Kodiak and headed for the office to give Kodiak the wheels up signal. It was all up to the flight crew now.

The captain slowly turned the aircraft and began the long taxi to the flight line. I was already in the radio room when I heard maximum power applied to the four big engines to begin take off. When she passed ISA, I thought damn she's up high. Now you got to know the beach is relatively flat, the operative word being relatively. All the pilots knew there was a high beach and a low beach with a slight gully separating them. The low beach was flatter and so the best choice for the larger aircraft. The fact that the DC-6 passed up high was only a curiosity at the time. Take offs were their business.

I had just enough time to raise Kodiak and let them know the last plane was on the way when I heard the boom. The loudest sound I had ever heard on the beach sent me running out the door to the south facing back pad to see what had happened. A huge fireball lit the sky. It seemed to be at the bluff near Bishop Creek. There is no doubt what had happened. Our worst dream had come true. The DC-6 with a crew of three and 30,000 pounds of salmon worth $75,000 had crashed and was burning.

In an emergency situation, sometimes time stands still and sometimes it telescopes and disappears. That night they both happened at once. The disbelief had no time to register. We had to act, right now! Everybody in camp was up and staring down the beach. We started to organize a rescue effort. There was no real fire fighting capacity but I told the guys to get all the handheld fire extinguishers, shovels, axes, chainsaws they could lay hands on and load up the trucks. We had to get down there fast. There, of course, was no fire department.

I told the guys in the office to get on the horn, wake up everybody in King Salmon and get the medevacs on the way. When I arrived at the crash site, there was already a small crowd standing around at a distance looking on in horror. The crash, explosion and fireball were

seen and heard by everyone up and down the beach and the more than 500 boats out in the bay.

The entire plane was ablaze. Apparently it had corkscrewed into the bluff, tearing the wings off and spreading burning aviation gas all over. The forward section with the cockpit had broken away and was lying on its side. The fire was intense and spreading fast. The mass of cold, wet fish was retarding the flames and the infernal had not yet reached the cockpit. First order of business was to get the crew out.

The first guys that entered the cockpit were able to immediately come back out with the captain and his co-pilot. They reported that the flight engineer was still inside with the control panel crushed across his legs trapping him. Next, my younger brother John Downey and Bruce Hawkins went in with a fire ax and a chainsaw to try and cut him out. This was serious. The flames were coming fast having already consumed the aluminum totes and fuselage. The air was filled with the smell of roasting salmon mixed with avgas. After ten minutes the two heroes came out and said it was a no go.

We could hear the engineer screaming "Somebody help me!"

My brother said he was crying. We had to have an idea. Bruce said we could rip the nose off the plane and free the guy, so I sent him back to camp to get the LARK. The LARK was a twelve-ton amphibious vehicle with a 300 horsepower Cummins diesel engine and huge rubber tires. It was just the ticket. With time clearly running out the LARK appeared on the bluff above the disaster site. With a 40-foot steel cable attached to the tow rig and a two-inch stainless steel chain wrapped around the plane's nose, we did it. The LARK surged forward, took up the slack in the cable and sliced through the aluminum of the nose like a hot knife through butter ripping it clean off. We got the shaken engineer out in what was surely the nick of time.

The crew with the injured engineer were loaded onto the bed of a pickup and driven to a spot on the beach where the tide had not yet arrived where George Tibbits was waiting in a Penn Air Medevac.

The wreckage continued to burn but there was nothing more we could do. We packed up the gear and returned to camp. The tide rose

and the tide ebbed. No one slept the rest of that night. Most everyone sat in the cook house drinking coffee and decompressing. I huddled in the office with JR and Takai, our Japanese partner's representative, and thought about what was next. With the fishing opening up again in a couple of hours we could expect to buy another 200,000 pounds. I was worried that the FAA or somebody would shut down flights off the beach. The question was; can we buy fish or not? If we bought fish and couldn't fly it, big bucks would sit and rot on the beach. If we announced, we can't buy, we would lose all credibility with the fishermen. At the end after a consultation with the boys in Kodiak it was decided we had to buy.

We bought fish that day and on every opening the rest of the season and had a banner year flying close to two million pounds off the beach. The plane's captain and his co-pilot were ok and continued to fly for us. The engineer was busted up with a broken leg but a survivor. The next day I went back to the crash site and was shocked at what I found. It was all gone save for some puddles of melted aluminum and what looked to be part of a landing gear. It all burned up in the intense fire.

Later to preserve the pristine quality of the beach, the State of Alaska took bids on a contract to clean up the site. ISA bid on it and won the contract. I sent the Allis-Chalmers loader down and did the job burying everything in two hours. The Ball brothers let us know that they considered that we had saved the lives of the crew and were grateful. Newt Ball passed away in 2012 in, you guessed it, an airplane crash. Rest in peace.

In my opinion, the real heroes that night guys like my brother John who ran into a burning plane to save lives. He worked for me for several years and was essentially a good steady quiet guy, an artist. On that night, he had big brass balls. Bruce Hawkins was a character, some said a near-do-well and a jack of all trades master of none. That night he manned up not only going into the inferno but also coming up with the idea that would save a man from a fiery death. I can't forget these guys.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
MOON OVER ALASKA

Sun Myung Moon first visited Kodiak in August 1983. He came directly from the tuna fishing grounds off Massachusetts. He came to fish. Apparently he fell in love with the pristine land and waters and continued to come every summer for more than twenty years.

In 1979, International Oceanic Enterprises, a company owned by Unification Church International, was formed in order to buy and convert an oil field supply vessel into a factory trawler. When the deal fell through, the funds for the project were used to buy waterfront property in Kodiak and to build a seafood processing plant under the name International Seafoods of Alaska (ISA). When construction began in 1980, and it became known that the infamous 'Moonies' were moving into the small fishing community, there was an uproar. Most folks in Alaska, just like the rest of the country, knew about Rev. Moon and the 'Moonies' through the media. Surely most of the stories I've read or seen in the mainstream media began with 'Rev. Moon the millionaire industrialist, self-proclaimed messiah, convicted tax cheat and controversial cult leader that brainwashed young Americans' and went downhill from there. Although the opposition was fierce at first ISA stuck it out and once the plant was completed and operational the guys like Johnson Choi, Tony Aparo, Dave Rogers, Joachim Becker and Neil Shuckerow operated in an ethical manner, paid good money for fish and slowly won over most of the community.

The notorious millionaire industrialist and cult leader was not the man I knew and was able to observe first hand. Instead, I found him to be a genuine visionary who led a life of devotion to God and was a tireless worker to realize his dream of a world of peace and prosperity for all. His ocean related activities, dating back to the early sixties, seemed to stem directly from his somewhat mystical connection to the natural world from his rural upbringing and the deep poverty of his native Korea in the fifties and sixties. He went to sea to experience and commune with the Almighty. He caught fish to feed people.

In 1983, I was fishing for the giant bluefin tuna with Ocean Challenge out of Gloucester Massachusetts. I was crewing for Dr. Tyler Hendricks on a twenty-eight-foot fiberglass boat. Dr. Hendricks was an old comrade and had just graduated as the first Unification Theological Seminary grad to go on and get his Ph.D. Of course, Rev. Moon appointed him to be the head of Ocean Church,

the sponsor of the Ocean Challenge program. We had a great summer hanging out and we caught nine tuna.

Once, Rev. Moon came out to the grounds to see Dr. Hendricks. Rev. Moon's boat came alongside and I caught the lines and held the two boats together. The Rev. Moon started talking about various knots and what they are best used for. Then he talked about Ocean Church and his vision for the ocean. He explained clearly why ocean training was important. He told us that living on the ocean is more difficult than life on shore. If you train to do the difficult things at sea, those same things will become much easier on the land. When the difficult things become easy, you can lead other people. His words that day reinforced my desire to go to sea.

A couple of weeks later they asked me if I wanted to work in Alaska on the boats. I didn't hesitate. I was informed that they needed two guys and if I wanted to go, I had to be interviewed by Rev. Moon. That day I was taken by boat out to the North West corner fishing grounds to meet Rev. Moon. The interview took place via the VHF radio. Daikon Onuki translated. Rev. Moon said that if I went to Alaska I would have to carry a million dollars in one pocket and a pistol in another. I told him I was trained with firearms in the Marine Corps and I could do that. He said go right away. Me and another guy were on a flight out of Logan that night.

When we arrived in Kodiak, Rev. and Mrs. Moon and their son Heung Jin were already there and staying at the Bancroft house, a two-story single family home on Bancroft Road, that we were using as a bunk house. Since we had just arrived, we were invited to have dinner with them. The table sat about eight people and the menu was king crab. I put my head down and focused on eating.

Finally, Rev. Moon asked in English "Mack do you like king crab?" In Alaska, he always called me Mack for some reason.

I replied, "Yes it's my first time."

He said, "Good, eat a lot."

Later Mrs. Moon asked Mr. Choi, in Korean, who are these two guys with the bushy beards. Mr. Choi told her we were Ocean Church guys and we grew beards to hide our baby faces.

That night we all sat with the Moons in the living room and the Rev. demonstrated and taught us how to make an elaborate rig for catching halibut. He was skilled at building tackle, his fingers nimble and hands strong. The next day we all boarded float planes to Shuyak Island for halibut fishing.

When followers of Rev. Sun Myung Moon arrived in Kodiak in 1980, they were not necessarily the pioneer or outdoor types. Most of them were probably more comfortable fundraising, giving a lecture, a sermon or working in an office. For the most part, when they moved to Kodiak to build and operate a seafood processing plant, they took to the local ways like fish to water. Fishing and hunting became de rigueur for the 'Moonies.' Running a small boat, catching and cleaning a fish and shooting then butchering a deer became their new skills.

Of course, Rev. Moon's vision was much bigger than just a business. For him, the ocean, mountains and wilderness of Alaska were the ideal training grounds for church members and world leaders. Over the years, he brought church members and leaders from Korea, Japan and around the world to experience the lifestyle and to be personally trained by him. For several years, he brought Korean university professors, put them in raingear and boots and trained them on the rivers and seas around Kodiak Island. He also brought forty-three Japanese women, all married to American husbands, to work and live the lifestyle. They sacrificed their family life for six years and brought a measure of stability and success to the operation. Later, Rev. Moon sent them out to pioneer seafood businesses around the world.

Summer after summer, Rev. Moon lead the worldwide movement from North Garden, a training center that was built in Kodiak. In the process, everyone witnessed firsthand the daily life of Rev. Moon. He was at the dock every morning at oh-dark-thirty, except in the most inclement, dangerous weather. From first light to the last light each day he labored on the ocean. The marine climate around Kodiak and the sea conditions are more often than not rough, wet and cold. Rev. Moon always went out, not in a cabin cruiser, but an open boat

as close as possible to the sea. There was never a chance for even ten minutes shelter from the harsh environment. He ate rice balls, Hershey bars and Bit-O-Honey for lunch without a pause in the fishing. He urinated in a bucket like everyone else. His boat almost always came back after dark. Of course, they held dinner for him. Over the evening meal, a few were able to share some more intimate conservation with the Moons. Usually, the day's events were reported and discussed. Leaders took this time to report and seek Moon's advice and direction for their activities.

After dinner, Rev. Moon began speaking. For two, three or even four hours he poured out his heart and led the worldwide movement. It was always after midnight when he retired to his rooms for a few hours sleep. Before long he was up again and ready to go back to sea. Mr. Choi, took to sleeping on the floor in front of the Moon's door because several times he was up and out the front door before anyone else in the house was awake. We watched him live this way day after day, year after year and tried to keep up.

Another time, Rev. Moon decided to travel to and fish at many locations around Alaska. At that time, I was running the company's salmon operation at Egegik in the wilds of western Alaska. We had built a guesthouse and we also bought a late model SUV and had it flown out to drive VIPs around. When we got the word from Kodiak that they were coming, we had a Korean lady and a plane full of Korean food flown out. We then stood by.

When the call came that they were wheels up out of Kodiak, we had less than an hour to wait. The problem was the weather. We were socked in. The thick fog was right down on the deck. Our airstrip was, in fact, the beach. I was in the SUV on the beach with a handheld VHF radio when I established contact with the pilot. He couldn't see the ground. I turned on the headlights and drove up and down the strip. I could hear the plane's engines as it flew lower and lower. I tried to talk him down for more than twenty minutes. It was a moment of truth for me. Could we welcome these VIPs or would the weather steal our chance. As I look back on it now, I realize how

foolish I was. Luckily the pilot had no messianic visions and decided to turn back.

Several days later they tried again and this time, the weather cooperated. I toured them around the plant and we had lunch together at the guesthouse. Rev. Moon told me that I was a lucky man because I was able to live in this paradise of ocean, rivers and tundra. He said he envied me. Of course, the main point of the trip was to fish. This was late August and what was left of the salmon run was up in the river and wouldn't take a hook. I knew this but failed to clearly report the situation. I had learned early on not to give a pessimistic report. Anyway, there was a small chance that we could snag something.

I drove them down the beach and up along the Egegik River to a spot where I had stashed a skiff. Along the way, we had to cross the land of one of the local legends, a hard-drinking fishing captain who had opened a hunting lodge on the river. We stopped briefly and I introduced them. To get down to the riverbank, we had to drive down a trail that was rough and washed out. The alder bushes scrapped both sides of the truck and no matter how carefully I tried to drive; everyone was bumped and tossed around.

The skiff was an 18-foot flat-bottomed aluminum boat with a 40 horse Johnson kicker. It was a typical western Alaska workboat. I had tried to clean it up as befitting the guests. We loaded up the guests and the gear and set out. In the boat were Mr. Choi's son, me and Rev. and Mrs. Moon. Needless to say, it was not a stellar day of fishing. By the time we started up river the tide had already turned and the sand bars became a problem. Although the flat-bottomed boat was pretty good in shallow waters, we kept running aground on barely submerged sand bars. I tried to keep to the channels but before long I was in the water pushing the boat off the bars.

Mrs. Moon was in fairly good humor and at one point called out "Oh Mack, swimming in Alaska"?

The fishing was non-existent. We moved the boat and the Moons cast again and again.

Over and over, Mrs. Moon gently urged her husband "Let's go." Her husband grimily ignored her.

To add to the good time, the mosquitoes swarmed us. Finally, Mrs. Moon made a joke using a play on two similar Korean words, moegi meaning mosquito and mool gogi meaning fish.

"We can't catch fish. Only we catch mosquitoes."

Finally, the Boss said let's go back.

Back the guesthouse we had tea and snacks and waited for the plane to come and pick them up. Rev. Moon told us that I had a special kind of character because I was a former Marine. Then he ordered me to get a bulldozer and fix that trail down to the river.

Of course, I said, "yes sir."

But what could I really do? The land was owned by the state of Alaska and was adjacent to a salmon stream. I could borrow the equipment and do it in the dead of night. The legal exposure would be huge and the PR fallout would damage our ability to work in the area. Furthermore, during the very next spring flood, the trail would be washed out all over again. How could I explain these complexities to the big boss? But Rev. Moon had ordered it done. I have a great deal of sympathy for the church leaders who were with Moon constantly and were often ordered to do impossible things. It's the Korean way.

My most enduring image of Rev. Moon in Alaska is him sitting cross-legged, back straight on the engine cover of an open boat. No matter what the weather or sea conditions he always sat staring out to sea, unchanging. When I remember him on the ocean, I remember his unchanging posture, completely in control of his mind and body in the midst of the constantly changing marine environment. I greatly admired this persona of self-control because I myself always struggled to control my mind and body.

Although he has passed away, Sun Myung Moon has left an enduring legacy on Kodiak Island. His unique concept of blending church and ocean life and the training of young people on the ocean remain as the core of the Ocean Church and Ocean Challenge programs. Young people from around the world still gather at North

Garden each summer to challenge themselves, the ocean and to meet God.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
THE ALASKANS

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 may 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. By the end of the twentieth century, 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 has it that while in the Navy he had been 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 that was 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 Alaska 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 highschool 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 oil spill in 1989 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's 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 Swierkowski. Of indeterminate age and cadaverous 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 Nabetani 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 antiChrist. 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 retch 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.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN
That's a Wrap

Regrets? I've had a few, as The Chairman of the Board sang, but too few to mention. In writing this book, I've relied mostly on my own memories. I have endeavored to tell stories about things that I saw and experienced. Of course, it is not a full telling of my ten years Up North. I had to pick and chose which stories to include and which people to tell about. The primary criteria for my choices were to tell stories that the reader would find interesting, informative or amusing and give the flavor of life in Alaska at that time. For anyone whose memories of people and events differ from mine, I fully understand the limitations of my own memory and look forward to reading your book.

After almost ten years in Alaska, I walked away, as they say, to pursue other interests. A decade is a big chunk of a guy's life by any estimation and the Alaskan lifestyle was so different from any I have experienced before or since that it has stayed with me and as affected my life in a profound way.

Wherever I go, if I tell folks that I've lived in Alaska, they are always curious and usually the first thing they ask is about igloos. Well, the fact is I have never seen an igloo and I have to explain that an igloo is really only an emergency shelter constructed by Native Americans when caught in blizzards on hunting expeditions out on the tundra or ice. Excuse the pun but it is an ice breaker.

Now days, as a guy who earns his daily bread talking to others, my life in Alaska has become a rich source of stories and material that people find exotic, interesting or at least fun. At the drop of a hat, I can stand up and talk about the salmon fishery, big game hunting, Eskimos, bush pilots, commercial fishing gear or a myriad of other topics connected to the great Alaskan outdoors. As a writer, Alaska has been a treasure trove of ideas for characters, settings and other material. It was ten years well spent.

I often think of Alaska especially during the almost unbearable hot, muggy summers where I live now. In the cool of the early morning, I recall and long for the smells and feeling of Alaska. Someday I will go back again.

Up North: Photos

Michael Downey
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