

Southeast History

Fish pirates of Icy and Chatham Strait



Pat
Roppel

Stationary salmon traps of yore invited those with few morals to seek free fish. In recent research, I found several references to pirates storming fish traps in the Chatham area. In 1919, cannery men estimated their losses due to the activities of fish pirates at a half a million fish, valued at \$60,000.

In June 1920, the fish pirates were becoming more aggressive in armed midnight raids on the lonely traps of the packing companies. One or, more often, two men lived in a shack on the floating traps to observe closed periods, help the tender crews brail accumulated salmon, and keep the trap lanterns lit at night as required by the Department of War because traps were in navigable waters. The only armaments the trap watchmen had were rifles. There was a skiff to get to shore.

The Hawk Inlet Trap No. 3 of P. E. Harris & Co. was the first to be raided in late May. The pirates opened fire on the trap's watchmen, who returned fire. The watchmen believed they wounded one of the pirates. Being wounded or shot at in an illegal activity didn't seem to deter the renegades.

A few nights later the pirates hit the company's No. 10 trap. After that, raids were made on fish traps of Libby, McNeill & Libby in Shelter Cove on Shelter Island between Favorite and Saginaw channels near Juneau; the Funter Bay traps of the Thlinket Packing Company; and the Gypsum trap of Columbia Fisheries at Tenakee. All of this took place despite an armed submarine chaser boat patrolling the northern part of Southeast Alaska to protect traps from the bandits.

The raid on the Shelter Island

trap was made at midnight by a large fishing boat painted black with only a mast. A small boat was dropped over the side and carried several men ashore. One of them, armed with a rifle, acted as a sentry on the beach. Fearing the sentry, the watchmen on the trap were afraid to go ashore and hunkered down in their shack mounted on the floating trap. The other pirates brailed the trap. The men kept possession of the traps for four hours and left with not only the fish, but also the watchmen's skiff. The raid netted \$1,000 in cohos and kings. The watchmen were rescued from the trap a few days later by one of the Libby tenders. The watchmen reported that before the pirates left, they thoughtfully fixed the gear so the traps could continue to fish.

Alaskan fishermen hated traps because of the numbers of fish that were supposed to be common property, for everyone to take their share. The fishermen were dependent upon the cannery to buy their fish. Isn't it logical that the trap fish cost "nothing" to the canner? The trap controversy is too complicated to condense to a few words. I found an advertisement in a 1916 Seattle newspaper by P. E. Harris & Co. looking for fishermen who owned their own boats to fish for the company with an expected payment of \$1,200 to \$1,500 in six weeks. No wonder pirates, who earned \$1,000 for a night's work, found ways to sell the stolen fish to other companies, most times without being caught.

A former fisherman told me he frequently robbed traps without being caught. However, once he ran into the local cannery superintendent on the street. The cannery man said, "If you persist in robbing my traps, the least you could do is sell the fish back to me!"

Pat Roppel, a 50-year resident of Southeast Alaska, is the author of numerous books about mining, fishing, and man's use of the land. She lives in Wrangell.