

## Up North: Chapter Three - Meanwhile Back In Dodge

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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.