

Up North: Chapter Eight - Egegik: Who Knew What and When?

Michael Downey
September 7, 2016



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 Yupik Eskimo origin and the site has surely been inhabited as a seasonal fish camp by the Yupik 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. In order to intercept their fair share of the harvest, driftnet and settnet 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 take off 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 hundred totes and a fleet of rusting trucks and forklifts. Sharp business guys that we were we required them 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 float plane 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 Cesena 206 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 Shelikoff Strait to the Alaskan 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 thread his way through the passes and 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 river snaking its way out of the mountains 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. Later we were to learn that these were the settler 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 who 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. Yea, why not we shrugged. The surface was flat calm and the tide was way out. The pilot set the Cesena down without a problem and taxied into the shallow water until the pontoons 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 wadding 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 floor boards 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 overhauls, a faded red hoodie and a pair of ratty high top rebooks. An even rattier looking Portland Trailblazers 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 side band) 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. It was rumored that his uncle, Paul Tibbets the commander on the Engola

Gay when it flew over Hiroshima making him a minor celebrity. Nevertheless 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 'bone yard' where hulks were dragged to return to the earth. A good shade tree mechanic had to be able to survey the bone yard, 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 fashion out houses 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 effected 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 air strip that could accommodate everything from a piper cub to a four engine DC-6.



Part of Egegik, Alaska