

Up North: Chapter Ten - Egegik: On the Beach

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September 7, 2016



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 drain field.

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.

