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BURIED DREAMS



THE RISE AND FALL OF A CLAM CANNERY ON THE KATMAI COAST

KATHERINE JOHNSON
KATMAI NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE

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NPS D-87 December, 2002

Cover:

FRIDA NIELSEN (left) and her sister Erna. "Going Clamming" Frida Nielsen, circa 1925, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage, KATM-00296.

Above:

CLAMS. Katherine Johnson, private collection.

Contents Page:

"Shovels" Halferty Papers, Manuscripts, Special Collections, University Archives, University of Washington Libraries, Seattle, MSSUA473.

Back Cover:

FRIDA NIELSEN (left) and her sister Erna. "Clipping" Frieda Neilson, circa 1925, LAKA Studies Center, Anchorage.

BURIED DREAMS



THE RISE AND FALL OF A CLAM CANNERY
ON THE KATMAI COAST

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THE RISE AND FALL OF A CLAM CANNERY
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*‘Dreams come true; without that possibility,
nature would not incite us to have them.*

— John Updike

IN HIS PLAY, *THE TEMPEST*, William Shakespeare wrote, “we are such stuff as dreams are made on.” For those of us who have been to Katmai National Park and Preserve—who have witnessed the park’s dramatic coastal mountains and glaciers, followed meandering bear tracks along endless beaches, and listened to the hum of ocean winds sweeping across the earth—we know that the Bard was right and dreams are made here. Today’s

- ▲ KUKAK BAY, CLAMS ON THE DOCK. *Frida Nielsen collection, circa 1925, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage, KATM-00296.*
- ◀ THE STRIKING, SNOW-COVERED VOLCANOES of the Aleutian Range form the backbone of the Alaska Peninsula and rise over 7,000 feet above the Katmai Coastline. *Terry D. DeBruyn, private collection.*



I n t r o d u c t i o n : B u r i e d D r e a m s

dreams reflect the desire to keep Katmai wild and pristine so that we might retain some of that “wildness” within ourselves. But when Alaska was considered the “last frontier” rather than the “last wilderness,” Katmai country inspired a much different dream—the desire to conquer nature and turn it into profit. During a time of unprecedented mechanization, men and women came to the wild Katmai coast, built a cannery, and canned razor clams. Their dream was not to preserve, but to extract natural resources. Alaskan historian Morgan Sherwood noted “machines may not always make history, but they do unmake wilderness.” *Buried Dreams: the Rise and Fall of a Clam Cannery on the Katmai Coast* is the story of an industrial enterprise that set out to unmake wilderness, and in turn, was eventually unmade by nature.

What makes this enterprise so interesting is that in a region known for its prolific salmon runs, the Kukak Cannery canned razor clams. Within the scope of Alaska seafood species, clams seem somewhat insignificant. The Pacific clam fishery included only one percent of the total U.S. catch. Still, Pacific Northwest and Alaskan clam canners played a vital role in the early development of a U.S. clam industry by pioneering the canning technology used to market minced razor clams. Because clams are extremely perishable, this innovative canning method extended the sale of clams to regions beyond local markets. Clam canners from the Pacific Northwest were able to expand operations northward to exploit the rich clam beds found in southwestern Alaska. East Coast clam canners adopted this technology, which they used to flood U.S. markets that eventually drove West Coast clam canners out of business. Nevertheless, the Pacific razor clam industry remains an important part of the heritage of many coastal communities from Oregon to Alaska. Despite fire, abandonment and damage from natural disasters, the Kukak Cannery was a major processing site for the commercial clamming industry, and the site today maintains a significant association to this relatively unknown part of American history.

The Kukak Cannery is located on the east side of the Alaska Peninsula, tucked into the shoreline of a glacially carved fjord which is characteristic of the bays that indent Katmai National Park and Preserve’s southern coastline. The original cannery faced west, toward the Alaska Peninsula, providing cannery workers a panoramic view of Mount Denison, Mount Steller, and the Kukak Volcano. On most days, however, Pacific storms would have concealed the view, as episodes of fog and rain enveloped the cannery for days at a time. The sheltered bay fronting Kukak protected the cannery from the gale force winds, and provided fishing vessels working the treacherous Shelikof Strait with a safe port.

- ◀ KUKAK BAY is a glacially carved fjord, characteristic of Katmai National Park and Preserve’s southern coastline. Jeanne Schaaf, 2001, *Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.*

Introduction: Buried Dreams

Park rangers describe the immediate environment surrounding the cannery as “almost tropical... comparable to the impenetrability of South American rain forests.” Dense alders, willows, and salmonberry thickets cover the site. Besides being heavily vegetated, the landscape surrounding Kukak is rugged. Rolling hills on both sides of Kukak Bay limited possible building sites, with three specific hills forming the boundaries around the Kukak Cannery. The North Hill protected the cannery from violent winds blowing off the Shelikof Strait; the South Hill supported the cannery water tanks, radio house, and a few residences; and a natural spring atop the smaller East Hill supplied fresh water to the cannery. Although some of the cannery’s structures, such as the watchman’s house and winterman’s house, extended out beyond the main complex, most buildings were tucked snugly within the folds of the undulating hills.

The Hemrich Packing Company of Aberdeen, Washington, built Kukak Cannery in 1923 to can razor clams. The unpredictable market caused a flux of new, short-lived companies to run Kukak. During the next twenty-seven years, four different companies operated Kukak. After only the second year of operation, the Hemrich Packing Company leased Kukak to Seashore Packing Company, which processed clams in 1925, 1926, 1927, and 1929. In 1932 Hemrich Packing leased Kukak to the Pioneer Canneries, Inc., but for two years it remained idle. Kukak reopened in 1935 under Surf Canneries, but despite the promise of a successful season, bad luck struck the cannery, and in September 1936 most of Kukak’s wharf burned to the waterline. Kukak saw renewed life briefly in 1947 when Mainland Fisheries, a Kodiak based company with little clam canning experience, moved its operation from Swikshak Beach to Kukak Bay. It replaced the burnt cannery with a Quonset hut, rebuilt the loading dock, and rehabilitated the scorched mess hall, store, supply buildings and bunkhouses. Kukak ceased operation after the 1949 season, and in 1951 Mainland Fisheries was bankrupt.



◀ **HEMRICH'S OCEAN CLAMS**
LABEL: Elmer Hemrich guarantees the “The contents of this can are packed from the Famous Washington and Alaska Coast Razor Clams under the most modern and sanitary conditions for an appreciative public.” Courtesy of Dorothy Fribrock, circa 1919, private collection.

The Rise and Fall of a Clam Cannery

Kukak was built and managed by two pioneers of the razor clam industry: Elmer Hemrich and Frank E. McConnaghy. Hemrich, who came from a family of Washington State beer brewers, built Kukak and established the infrastructure from which the Alaska Peninsula commercial razor clam industry grew. His superintendent, Frank McConnaghy, who in 1916 had built the first clam cannery in Cordova, Alaska, managed Kukak most of



its operational years. Both men came from Aberdeen, Washington, which at the time was the hub of progressive politics in the Pacific Northwest. Evidence that their actions reflected the ideology of their generation appears in McConnaghy's managerial style and Hemrich's "can do" attitude. In 1924 Hemrich supplied the first radio broadcasts in Alaska to his employees, while Frank McConnaghy was known for his efficient managerial style and fair treatment of his fishermen. To Hemrich, Kukak represented an entrepreneur's dream, which he fought to keep alive up until the

1936 fire ended his clam canning career. To McConnaghy, Kukak was reality where budgets needed to be balanced, machines had to be fixed, and fishermen needed to be paid. After the fire, McConnaghy moved to Kodiak where he became one of the most highly respected superintendents in Alaska. Today, he remains one of the most widely known of that singular breed.

Kukak was a self-contained, small industrial site where workers lived during an entire clam season, usually lasting from April until September. Razor clams were not dug at the Kukak cannery, but were harvested from Swikshak Beach, a wide and sweeping beach located twenty-five miles north of the cannery. In 1924 the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries investigated razor clam resources in Alaska, and the federal biologists' report declared Swikshak to be Alaska's primary commercial clamming beach.

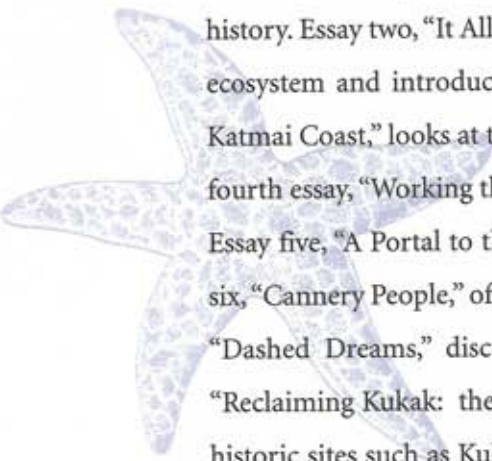
The cannery site came under jurisdiction of the National Park Service in 1931, when President Hoover expanded the boundaries of Katmai National Monument by presidential proclamation. Between 1949, when the last operator abandoned the Kukak cannery, and 1980, when Alaska National Lands Interest Conservation Act (ANILCA) designated the surrounding coastal area as wilderness, the Katmai coastline saw little commercial

▲ AERIAL VIEW of the Kukak Cannery taken from a float plane in July, 2000. George Teague, NPS. Slide on file at Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.

Introduction: Buried Dreams

activity. Though Kukak experienced change during its twenty-seven operating years, the encroaching Katmai wilderness has since caused the cannery's most lasting transformation.

Today, the Kukak Cannery can best be described as a heap of corrugated metal, buckled boardwalk, and scattered machines. Most structures are collapsed, exposing retorts, boilers, and other cannery apparatus. The dilapidated state of the current site presents a serious safety hazard: rusty nails, rotted planks and structural instability make it dangerous to curious visitors. As the Katmai wilderness continues to reclaim one of the last historical remnants of the commercial razor clam industry on the Alaska Peninsula, National Park Service archaeologists and historians are working to inventory, preserve and interpret this part of Alaska's past. Initial investigations have identified and mapped foundations, structures, and machinery while numerous interviews with people associated with the industry helped identify equipment and interpret its use. Much time was spent in archives, everywhere from Kodiak to Astoria, searching for the cannery's untold story. *Buried Dreams* is just one result of these efforts.



Buried Dreams is a collection of historical essays that offer readers a lens through which they can view the life of workers in an Alaskan cannery during the first half of the twentieth century. The first essay, "Kukak: A Clam Cannery on the Edge of the American Dream," places Kukak into the larger context of American history. Essay two, "It All Begins with a Dimple in the Sand," examines the role razor clams play in the coastal ecosystem and introduces readers to the area's first clam diggers. "Commercial Clamming Comes to the Katmai Coast," looks at the rise of the commercial razor clam industry and how Kukak came to be built. The fourth essay, "Working the Swikshak Beach," describes what life was like for clam diggers on Swikshak Beach. Essay five, "A Portal to the Past...and Future" describes the Kukak Cannery complex and its purpose. Essay six, "Cannery People," offers readers a glimpse into cannery work and Kukak's social fabric. The seventh essay, "Dashed Dreams," discusses the decline of the commercial clamming industry. Finally, the last essay, "Reclaiming Kukak: the Paradox of Preservation" asks readers to contemplate the importance of preserving historic sites such as Kukak within the context of our national heritage. Kukak Cannery was one of Alaska's largest clam canning facilities and a historical account such as this reveals an otherwise obscure industry and the people who pioneered its development on the Pacific Coast.

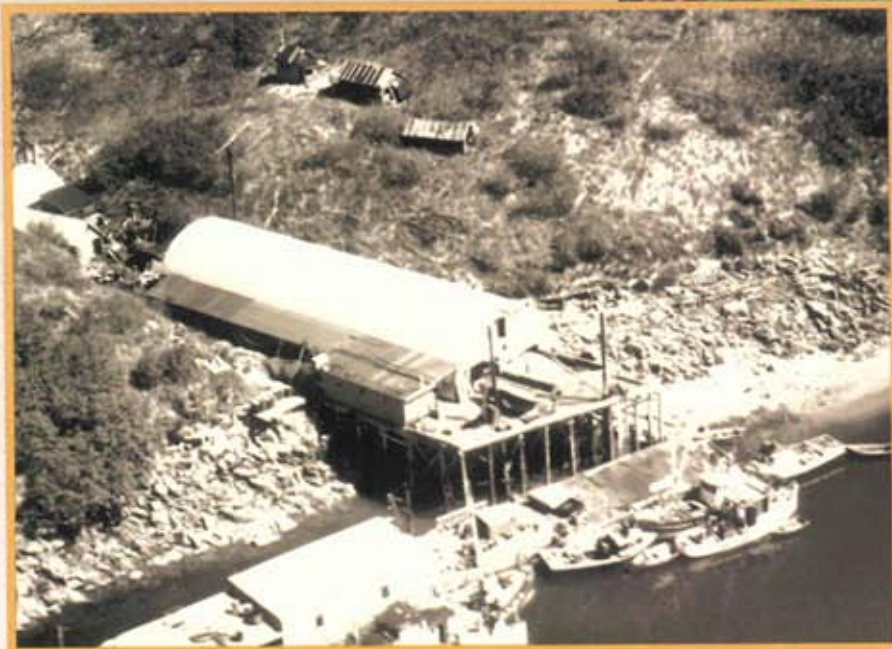
Central to *Buried Dreams* is a collection of historical photographs taken between 1923 and 1951. Some capture extraordinary events, such as the aftermath of the 1936 fire, but the photographs that bring the Kukak



▲ KUKAK CANNERY WATERFRONT, circa 1925. Frida Nielsen collection, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage, KATM-00296.

Cannery to life were taken by cannery workers in the course of their daily lives. One worker in particular, a young woman named Frida Nielsen from Homer, Alaska, made a “Kukak Scrapbook” which illustrates her adventurous journey to the Kukak Cannery where she worked as a clam-clipper during the summer of 1925. Through her camera, this young clam-clipper shows us life beyond the dark canning lines. Nielsen takes us along as she journeys to Kukak on the steamship *Redondo*. She invites us on her explorations of Kukak’s vast hillsides and we attend her swimming parties in the bay. We relish with her the rare taste of fresh watermelon and anticipate the fall arrival of the Alaska Steamship coming to transport both product and people south. Behind these snapshots of daily activities, unobtrusively stands a one year-old Kukak Cannery—looking as fresh and hopeful as its young photographer.

Absent from either archives or photographs are descriptions or images of Kukak’s canning process. Written records from canneries remain sparse because owners and managers considered processing technology top secret. They zealously kept information from leaking to the competition. Likewise, machinists were usually reluctant to reveal information about their skills, intending to protect their jobs. Lack of light hindered a photographer’s ability to shoot inside the buildings. Thus, we must rely on the rubble piles of wood and corrugated metal, the footprints of bunkhouses, and the scatterings of rusted machinery to learn about Kukak’s workplace and the overall industrial process. By studying industrial artifacts, workplaces, and



- ▲ AFTER WORLD WAR II, Mainland Fisheries replaced the burned cannery with a Quonset hut. "Clam Cannery at New Kukak" Lowell Sumner, June 24, 1951, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage. Box 1 540-A.
- THE GOOD FRIDAY EARTHQUAKE IN 1964 caused severe structural damage to the Kukak Cannery, which contributed to its eventual collapse. Jeanne Schaaf, 2001, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.





Introduction: Buried Dreams

landscapes, as well as documentary sources, we can understand how work was carried out, what natural and economic resources were used, and what skills were required of workers and managers.

Though archeological investigation is crucial to understanding Kukak's past, some of the best descriptions of clam digging and cannery processing came directly from a scattering of people who worked in the industry. Through the course of several interviews, Carl Asplund, Robert Deere, Ralf Peitsch, Nick Pestrikoff, Del Valentine, Ivan Foxx, Ed Opheim, Sr., Dorothy Fribrock, Julie Knagin, and Emil and Frieda Norton offered valuable insights on everything from mechanical expertise to digging techniques. Their stories and experiences made much of this book possible.

Cannery people are geographical in their communication with each other. They assign significance to place rather than people, and instead of calling a cannery by its owner's name—the Hemrich Packing Plant or the Surf Cannery—industry participants refer to canneries by location. Usually everyone involved in the operation understood the difference between “Kukak” the cannery and “Kukak” the nearby abandoned village, which lent its native name to the cannery, the bay and to Kukak Volcano. Throughout *Buried Dreams*, “Kukak Cannery” or simply “Kukak” describes the cannery.

Finally, the title *Buried Dreams* underscores several themes: the little-known world of the intertidal ecosystem; the overlay of industrialization upon nature; the notion of the American dream that drew people north; the financial wealth that razor clams represented; dashed opportunity caused by fire and earthquakes; and lastly, the surrender of an industrial landscape back to nature. From cultures to corporations, many people have perceived this stretch of coastline along the Alaska Peninsula as a place brimming with prospects. Razor clams sustained Alutiiq people and tantalized entrepreneurs to develop an industry. *Buried Dreams* attempts to uncover the story behind the people of Kukak—the people who became the stuff of dreams.

Katherine Johnson







ONE

K U K A K

A CLAM CANNERY ON THE EDGE
OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

‘Dreams are not so different from deeds as some may think. All the deeds of men are only dreams at first. And in the end their deeds dissolve into dreams.

– Theodor Herzl, Old New Land, 1902

AT THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, razor clams had become a viable industry in the states of Washington and Oregon. Success eventually drove the industry to Alaska, inspiring a brief rush of young dreamers to northern shores, each hoping to uncover his fortune buried in the Alaskan mud. One of those dreamers was Elmer Hemrich, whose ambitions mirrored those of pioneers who had been venturing West for more than a century. By 1917, Elmer Hemrich had reached Alaska to

▲ REMAINS OF HEMRICH’S HOUSE surrounded by fireweed. Jeanne Schaaf, 2001, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.

◀ THE LONE CLAMMER. Courtesy of Illwaco Heritage Museum, 1996.48.26.



Kukak: A Clam Cannery on the Edge of the American Dream

prospect sites for a razor clam cannery. While traveling by dogsled along the Alaska Peninsula coastline, Hemrich discovered what appeared to be a thousand dimples imbedded along a surf-swept seashore known today as Swikshak Beach. Hemrich's first canning enterprise at Snug Harbor near Tuxedni Bay, now in Lake Clark National Park and Preserve, failed. However, his determination to exploit the clam beds at Swikshak Beach brought him to the east side of Kukak Bay in 1921, where he began to build the Kukak Cannery, his American Dream.

Many people are surprised to learn that razor clams were canned commercially in this area, along one the most unlikely stretches of coastline in Alaska. Most picture the massive industrialized complexes built by salmon packers in places such as Kenai, Kodiak, and Bristol Bay. These images come easily, for salmon packers from Seattle and San Francisco dominated territorial politics, and their fish traps monopolized Alaska salmon streams from the turn of the century until statehood in 1959. The Kukak cannery was comparatively small, it made little political impact, and it existed for only a brief period. Its isolated location and unique purpose—to can razor clams, not salmon—make this enterprise seemingly inconsistent, for some, with the rest of Alaska's history. That perception notwithstanding, the fisheries development at Kukak holds an important place in Alaska's and the nation's history.



- ▲ FRIDA NIELSEN (left) and her sister, Erna, (center) and an unidentified friend out for a swim in Kukak Bay. Frida Nielsen collection, circa 1925, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage, KATM-00296.
- ◀ THIS MODEL T TRUCK was used to transport clams from Swikshak Beach to waiting tenders. Here, the truck provided transportation to the beach for a fourth of July picnic. Frida Nielsen collection, circa 1925, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage, KATM-00296.

Kukak: A Clam Cannery on the Edge of the American Dream



Panorama of Kukak Bay, Alaska, landlocked and protected from both land and sea, showing plant of the Hemrich Packing Company, when completed

The United States has been described as “a nation by intention.” We are “a people who came into being by our own designing, we are a people of the Dream.” As Henry David Thoreau wrote, “Dreams are the touchstones of our character.” Whether myth or reality, the American dream drew people like Elmer Hemrich across the nation, and north to Alaska, attracted by what they saw as a more abundant and freer life.

The Kukak Cannery was built during the apex of the Progressive Era, a period in American history of unprecedented development and growth. Between 1917 when Elmer Hemrich came to Alaska and 1936, when fire burned down the original cannery, the number of American households that were electrified increased from less than twenty-five to more than ninety percent. Improvement in transportation gave Americans astonishing mobility after the first automobile rolled off Henry Ford’s assembly line in 1913. The radio broadened communications, while mass advertising opened markets and transformed American culture. Optimism embraced the population; politicians hailed science and invention as the keys to American prosperity and as the solutions for social ills. Even though Kukak’s isolated location seemed beyond the reach of progress, Hemrich brought all of these innovations to his cannery. He was clearly a man of his generation.

Progressive historians of the early twentieth century might focus on Hemrich as an example of pioneering sturdiness and independence—traits inherent in the frontier experience and the building blocks of our national character. In his 1893 essay on the significance of the frontier in American history, historian

▲ TAKEN FROM A COMPANY BROCHURE, “Panorama of Kukak Bay” shows what Hemrich intended to build at Kukak in 1923. Hemrich File, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.

► HEMRICH SOLICITS INVESTORS for the Kukak Cannery. Hemrich File, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.

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January 1, 1932	40,000	January 1, 1935	40,000
January 1, 1933	40,000	January 1, 1936	50,000

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Kukak: A Clam Cannery on the Edge of the American Dream



Frederick Jackson Turner argued that the struggle with nature on the frontier had created the distinctive American individualism and self-reliance which separated Americans from their European relatives. About the time Turner declared the frontier closed, Alaska entered the national imagination as the final chapter in the story of the American West—becoming America’s “Last Frontier,” and to many, the last place to achieve the American dream.

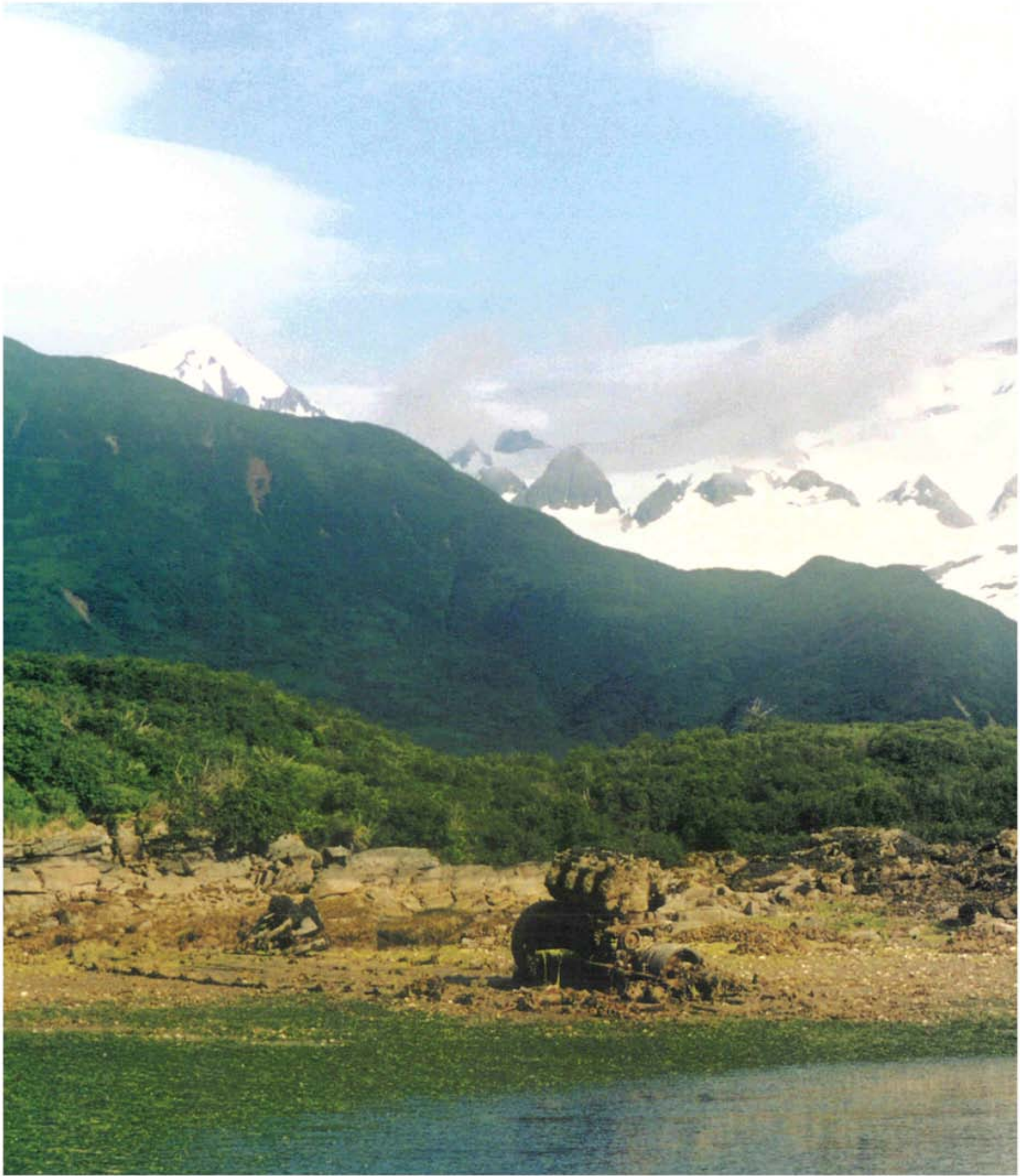
Hemrich was a child of America’s Gilded Age, a time when traits of independence and self-reliance were celebrated by turn-of-the-century capitalists, achievers of the American dream. Men like John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, James J. Hill, and J.P. Morgan personified economic individualism, and participated in a system that treated business as a field of personal competition and heroic endeavor. In many respects, Hemrich represented a kind of post-pioneer businessman who carried to Alaska the notion of continuing the same self-made American frontier saga. Although most historians today consider the so-called “Frontier Thesis” imaginative, they would agree that Hemrich’s desire to exploit what he perceived as an inexhaustible resource corresponds to a process that began more than a century before with the settlement of the American West.

◀ FROM ALASKA SPORTSMAN: "Frank McConnaghy, shown here with the women of his cannery crew in the photo, was liked so well by his employees that many had followed him to Kukak from Aberdeen, Washington, where he started his career as a cannery operator." Photo circa 1936 from Alaska Sportsman, August 1948, page 13.

▶ LIKE GIANT PRESSURE COOKERS, retorts cooked the tins of minced razor clams. "Retort Door" Jeanne Schaaf, 2001, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.

▼ CLOSEUP of retort door. "Ironworks" Katherine Johnson, 2001, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.







Buried Dreams

Other progressive historians would argue that Kukak's superintendent, Frank E. McConnaghy, more readily exemplified the American dream. McConnaghy came to Alaska not as a dreamer, but to build the territory's first razor clam cannery for a company aptly called Pioneer Packing. Unlike Hemrich, who epitomized entrepreneurial independence, McConnaghy represented the truer twentieth century capitalist—the "company man." After fire destroyed Kukak, Hemrich deserted Alaska, but McConnaghy remained in the territory. He eventually became a well-respected superintendent for the Alaska Packers Association, which at the time was one of the largest seafood corporations in the world.

As superintendent, McConnaghy managed Kukak with characteristics that exemplified the spirit of progressivism: efficiency, expertise, and order. But success came not from heroic entrepreneurial endeavors, but with the influence of the modern commercial form of ownership—the corporation. The authority of a small group of directors and managers acted in the name of a larger, faceless body of stockholders, and the corporation provided the capital to create national markets and expand commercial enterprises.

To translate clams into capital, McConnaghy needed more than perseverance. For instance, McConnaghy managed Kukak based on a complicated strategy that included corporate capital, far-reaching markets, wage-labor, factory mechanics, and networked transportation. While individualism and self-reliance dominated America's perspective of progress, Frank McConnaghy maintained business relations with America's seafood processing giants who had influence over Hemrich and his small

- ◀ LOW TIDE REVEALS THE SHIPWRECKED REMAINS of a tender boat that lies in the shadow of Mount Steller. The engine still sits in place within the remnants of the boat's structure. "Mountains and Tender" Katherine Johnson, NPS, 2001, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.

Kukak: A Clam Cannery on the Edge of the American Dream

enterprise. For in the end, it was McConnaghy, not Hemrich, who carved out a career in the Alaska razor clam industry.

It was historian Charles Beard who suggested that American economic progress evolved not in the frontier, but instead germinated from the rise of Western Civilization—from the beginning of modernity, the Enlightenment, to the blossoming of its application, the Industrial Revolution. Philosophers argue that during this time the light of knowledge spread into the dark corners of the human mind, replacing fear and

Minced Clam Chowder

2 7-oz. flat cans Pioneer
Minced Sea Clams
1 tablespoon of salt pork or
bacon, minced
1 cup of potatoes, sliced thin
1 tablespoon onion, minced

1 tablespoon of butter
2 cups of milk
6 rolled crackers
1 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon pepper

FRY the pork until brown. Add the potatoes and onion, and just enough water to cover. When potatoes are tender add the milk, crackers, butter, salt and pepper, and when this is hot, add clams and cook 5 minutes longer. (Serves about 4 persons).



anxiety with rationality. People became optimistic about the future, for they now knew the natural world could be explained, and perhaps more significantly, that it could be controlled and systematized.

Leaders of our nation embraced European Enlightened ideals, giving political activism and scientific experimentation a

practical direction. The first industrial entrepreneurs believed that science, if properly applied, would enhance material wealth, and for them science meant applied mechanics. With the perfection of the steam engine by James Watt and production of the inexpensive watch by the Swiss, power shifted from the scientist to the capitalist. The application of these inventions helped manufacturers produce commodities on an industrial scale, and measure production time. The factory clock replaced the sun and seasons as the regulator of work habits, drastically changing the experience of ordinary people's daily lives.

Industry changed everything. Work and leisure became clearly differentiated, and an industrial work ethic emerged that stressed saving time, artificial rather than natural rhythms, and productivity over individual skills. The new industrial order set punctuality as a premium, and machines set the pace at which men and women labored. As quickly as Alaska was designated the "last frontier," industry, not pioneers, began to mark its landscape.

Kukak: A Clam Cannery on the Edge of the American Dream

The study of these industrial societies, especially in Alaska, is a relatively new approach to explaining the past. Because participants in past canning operations left few written records and only fragments of oral histories describing their work experience, historians know little about how social interactions influenced the way tasks were undertaken at canneries. What impact did the industrial environment have on the cannery workers who ran machines and cleaned clams at Kukak? Did cannery work require specific skills and strength or was the work uniform and standardized? What was the degree of cooperation among these workers? Who were they? And where were they from?

As with the rest of Americans, the industrial experience affected the values, culture, and relationship of Alaskans to the land. Yet Alaska's industrial heritage has been largely explained in the narrow context of heroic capitalists and unscrupulous robber barons (the Guggenheims of Kennecott), or through the conflict over resource management (territorial delegates versus fish canners). Though important to Alaska history, these approaches deal little with the texture of industrial life. Although Kukak has not maintained its structural integrity, the cannery remains intact in time. Kukak's brief existence, combined with its lack of modern developmental influences, makes it a window to the past that helps historical archaeologists address questions related to Kukak's industrial landscape. A better understanding of past industrial experiences like those fostered at Kukak can help explain the conditions necessary for the creation of wealth and their costs; it also reveals the social consequence of replacing old industries with new ones, and helps society to make informed decisions about the use of abandoned industrial sites.

The Kukak Cannery serves as a blueprint of Alaska's, as well as most Western, industrial landscapes. It offers Alaskans a means to observe the pattern of economic development and the social structures that emerged from those landscapes and grew into the larger Alaskan/American culture. Although Kukak sits geographically on the fringe of the United States, its historical place is marked by a confluence between two ideas of the American dream—the individual conquest of the “last frontier,” and the rise of an industry to can it.







TWO
IT ALL BEGINS
WITH A DIMPLE IN THE SAND

When the tide is out, the table is set.

— Beachcomber's Proverb

MY FRIEND KELLIE digs razor clams at Clam Gulch down on the Kenai Peninsula. Each April, she and her husband Josh join approximately 31,000 Alaskans in a race against the tide to harvest their bag limit of forty clams each. Both are amazed by the number of clams harvested at the popular clamming beach despite the many clam diggers competing for space in the sand. Armed with only a shovel and bucket, Kellie reaches her forty in under an hour, while Josh, who works at a more leisurely pace, stops occasionally to absorb the view of Mount Redoubt emerging from the morning mist.

- ▲ A BROWN BEAR WILL MOVE *approximately a half ton of sand per tide while digging for shellfish on the Katmai Coast. "Bear Digging for Clams" Jeanne Schaaf, 1999, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.*
- ◀ MOUNT REDOUBT RISES *above clam diggers working the beach near Clam Gulch on the Kenai Peninsula. M. Scott Moon, 970525-1.*

It All Begins with a Dimple in the Sand



Despite the April sun, a sharp wind sprays off Cook Inlet blasting the clambers' raw faces. Seemingly oblivious to the mud and cold, Kellie grins as she shows a bucket full of clams to the lens of the camera.

As Kellie shows me the photos from her day at Clam Gulch, I wonder how anyone can get so excited over mollusks. Unlike salmon, clams lack the epic story of an ocean journey and dignified death. Clams aren't charismatic like the coastal brown bear or the Alaskan moose, and not as loveable as the sea otter. Clams are neither noble like the eagle, nor fabled like the raven. So what makes Alaska's razor clams so special? Skeptical of Kellie's fondness for razors, I ask her how one goes about digging clams. Smiling as if revealing a secret, she replies, "It all begins with a dimple in the sand."

Alaskans like Kellie, who gather their own food, usually understand what John Muir noticed a century ago—that "whenever we try to pick out any one thing, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe." Not only do razor clams become the main ingredient for succulent chowders and fritters, but the act of going out to dig clams gives Alaskans an excuse to shake off winter and welcome spring. For many, digging for clams connects them to a deeper, more ancient story of the land, animals, and people. Digging for clams, to some extent, is digging into the past.

The Aleut word "Alaska," means "the place where the sea waves crash upon themselves," illustrating the significance of the intertidal ecosystem to the people who for centuries dwelt along the shore. For it was this place, where land meets sea, that intrigued and nourished them. When bad weather prevented hunting or gathering expeditions, Alutiiq people had only to walk down to the right beach to find food sources. In many ways, the razor clams, burrowed beneath the anemones, sea stars, and crabs, contribute to the cycle through which all beach life rotates.

- ▲ KELLIE PIERCE SHOWS OFF HER CATCH *from Clam Gulch with Mount Redoubt in the background. Courtesy of Josh and Kellie Pierce, private collection.*
- ◀ "WHEN THE TIDE IS OUT, THE TABLE IS SET." *Cartoon enlarged from Halferty advertisement. G.P. Halferty Papers, Manuscripts, Special Collection, University Archives, University of Washington Libraries, Seattle.*

It All Begins with a Dimple in the Sand

Biologists estimate that the most abundant beds contain as much as 1100 tons of razor clams per square mile. Not only are these clams prolific, but their habitat is remarkably extensive. The total length of Alaska's coast, a figure that includes all the miles of shoreline wrapped around a plethora of straits, channels, bays, and islands, is estimated at close to 47,000 miles—a distance equal to nearly twice the circumference of the earth. Razor clams live along nearly half of that shoreline.

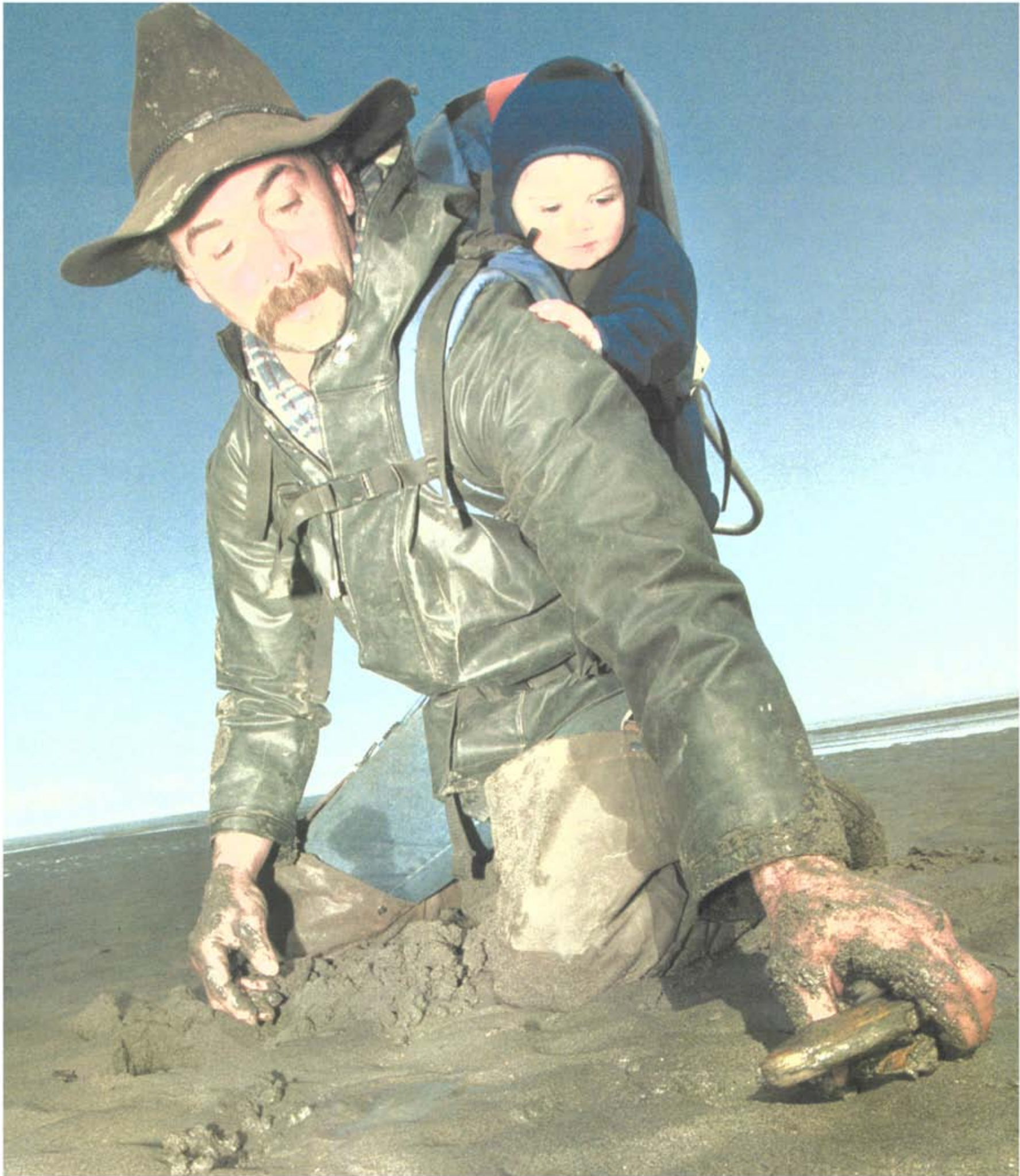
In a land that supports “the largest” of just about everything—mountains, fish runs, even vegetables—it is not surprising that the largest razor clams in the world are found in Alaska, some growing as long as a foot. The largest razor clams in Alaska, moreover, are dug on the Alaska Peninsula at Swikshak Beach. Besides sea otters, foxes, flounders, sea gulls, and ravens, another “largest,” the Alaskan coastal brown bear, feeds at Swikshak Beach on razor clams. In one hour, brown bears move approximately 1166 pounds, or a half a ton, of wet sand to get to the succulent clams, which they consume shells and all. During that hour of foraging, most bears average 117 shellfish, providing up to twelve pounds of food. According to bear biologists, most coastal bears feed for three hours per tide. Those numbers add up to the conclusion that clams are the most underrated animals on Swikshak Beach.

Scientists call razor clams *Siliqua patula* (Pacific razor). Clam diggers thought the clam's oblong-shaped, glossy brown shell resembled a folded straight razor. This provided the animal with a descriptive name, but perhaps one that neglects to reflect the razor's centrality to the coastal community. The Dena'ina people, who came from across the Kenai Peninsula to dig clams, called razor clams “Qiz'in,” which means “compact object that is in position.” Their name acknowledges respect for the mollusk. “Qiz'in in gheni dnaghelget ch'u dagheltey—Those clams are fast and strong.”

Clam diggers are aware of more than the razor's copious numbers and know to find them just below the surface as the clams extend their short siphons to feed. A dimple of sand forms over the siphons when they are exposed by the receding tide. While a minus tide makes spotting clams easy, catching clams can be more challenging. Diggers consider razors the rockets of mollusks, because in wet sand, razors pull themselves vertically one inch per second—or five feet per minute. Though fast, razor clams lack the ability to move sideways. The only time in a clam's life when it freely propel through the surf comes at birth. Within a matter

- A TRIO OF RAZOR CLAMS lies on a snow-covered beach, evidence of a successful day of clam digging at Clam Gulch on the Kenai Peninsula. M. Scott Moon, 960405-2.





It All Begins with a Dimple in the Sand



of weeks, the baby clam settles into the sand, where it tunnels into the beach, moving only up or down for the rest of its life, a life that could last nineteen years.

Some of the earliest clam diggers to utilize the beaches surrounding Kukak may have migrated from the Aleutian Chain along with people who eventually populated Kodiak Island and Prince William Sound. They relied on shellfish, particularly during times of population booms which in turn caused resource shortages and the necessity to diversify. Prehistoric clam digging tools and shellfish middens attest to the significance of clams to coastal cultures. While clams were not the most coveted resource on the beach, archaeologists say

that they were the most consistent. After the end of the last Ice Age, the combination of intertidal resource abundance and accessibility made settlement along the beach favorable, and as a result, the Shelikof Strait region supported some of the largest prehistoric populations in Alaska.

Some archaeologists believe that shellfish were, for some cultures, “starvation food,” becoming important when preferred food sources were scarce. Coastal sites with ancient, deep shell middens show that clams and intertidal resources were a dietary mainstay, at least seasonally. It has been speculated that the need for shellfish may have contributed to a major cultural shift in the area about 1000 years ago. During the period known as the Little Ice Age, an episode of cooling temperatures caused the sea ice to flow into areas that had previously remained ice free. Consequently, the sea ice scoured beaches, killing



- ▲ GRASS RECLAIMS a native house near Swikshak Beach. “Kaguyak Barabaras” Lowell Sumner, June 24, 1952, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.
- THIS EXCAVATED SHELL MIDDEN reveals a 2000 year record of shellfish harvest on the Katmai Coast. Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.
- ◀ RANDY BAILEY SETS ASIDE A RAZOR CLAM dug from the Cook Inlet beach at Clam Gulch as his son Rowdy eyes the prize. M. Scott Moon 010510-3.

shellfish along the Alaska Peninsula and causing people to move to Kodiak Island where shellfish did not disappear. It just may be that a mollusk changed history.

While the time to gather beach food was celebrated, it was also a time to work, and to learn. As a Kodiak man said, “a starving man was a lazy man—when the tide was out, the table was set.” Besides clams, people gathered crabs, cockles, mussels, seaweed and kelp. Traditionally, women dug clams, but men took on the task too, especially during more recent times. In the early years of the twentieth century, men from Athapaskan, Alutiiq, and Yupik villages gathered to work for clam canneries built along the Alaska Peninsula. “When the tide went out, they all went out on the flats,” recalled Peter Kalifonsky who worked at a clam cannery when he was a boy. “They came back ashore when the tide came in. I would fire up the steambath for the old men. When evening came, the old men would gather and tell stories. “Come,” they said to me. And I would listen to them.”



BARNACLES COAT ROCKS on the tidal flats of Hallo Bay. Terry D. DeBruyn, private collection.

A DIMPLE IN THE SAND betrays a hole where a razor clam lives. M. Scott Moon, 010510-4.





It All Begins with a Dimple in the Sand

Children dug clams too. A traditional Dena'ina technique was to push a two to three foot long stick, about as big around as a pencil, through the dimple into the sand. The stick pinned down the clam, holding it in place, until the child could dig it out. For many, the chase was as fun as the catch.

Traditional knowledge of clams and clamming appear in stories and art of many people who lived along Pacific shores.



The Yupik people of the Bering Sea made clam masks that represented a woman and her polar bear husband who were turned into a clam shell after their boat overturned in a storm. Art of the Haida people of the Northwest Coast depicts their ancestors emerging from a clamshell. The Quinault people of the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State equate the importance of clams to salmon. To them, the fish and clam are the backbone of their culture. For the Alutiiq culture, all living beings have souls that survive death and return to earth as new creatures.



Influences of the last two centuries have brought significant change to Alutiiq beach life. Erupting volcanoes displaced coastal villages. Russians came, bringing new trade,

religion, and disease. American fish companies brought jobs and cash economies, while one industry in particular, the razor clam industry, disrupted traditional access and harvests. By the turn of the century,

- ▲ A 6000 YEAR OLD CLAM DIGGING TOOL was carved from whalebone. Chris Arend, August 2002, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.
- ▲ YUPIK CLAM MASKS: Whimsical threesome labeled "Yualle Resak Kinakok" (Pretend Clam Mask). The red furrows on each mask's edge may represent the universe through which the creature sticks its head to look in on the human world. "Yupik Mask #1, #2, and #3" Barry McWayne, Anchorage Museum of History and Art, IVA 4418, 4407, 7237.
- HAIDA STORIES TELL of how the first people emerged from a gigantic clam shell on the beach. They got help from Raven, who is the most powerful creature from myth time. "The Raven and the First Man" by Bill Reid (Haida), 1980. Collection of the Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver. Photo: Bill McLennan.



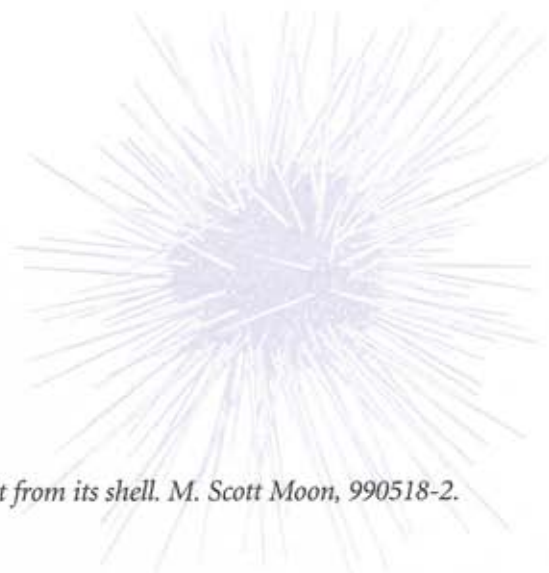


It All Begins with a Dimple in the Sand

capitalism had displaced the traditional economy of the Alaska Peninsula. When Elmer Hemrich “discovered” a thousand dimples in the sand eighty-five years ago, he saw one inextinguishable resource rather than a thousand individual souls.

About the same time Hemrich reached Swikshak, John Muir reminded a changing world that, “perhaps we might pay more attention to the little and the big things that do indeed connect in profound ways to all the rest, miles and eons and cultures apart.” So what makes these little razor clams so special? If anything, the act of digging for one clam at a time allows us to see an abundant resource as an individual soul. Behind Kellie’s smile on that wind blown day on the beach was the knowledge that clams are as valued as bears, salmon, eagles, otters, and moose.

While oil and fish remain major commercial industries, razor clamming has returned to more traditional harvests and the beaches, especially Swikshak Beach, to a more natural environment. Each spring at Swikshak, one can see brown bears gorging on clams to replenish nutrients lost during a long winter of hibernation. People, too, from Cordova to Clam Gulch, commemorate the end of winter with the clam tides and begin spring with a search for a dimple in the sand.







THREE
COMMERCIAL CLAMMING
COMES TO THE KATMAI COAST

*The real price of every thing, what every thing really costs to the man
who wants to acquire it, is the toil and trouble of acquiring it."*

— Adam Smith, The Wealth of Nations, 1776

A MODEL T FLATBED TRUCK can be seen under the cannery dock at Kukak. All that remains of the vehicle is the chassis, gears, and grate. Barely resembling its former design, the truck has deteriorated from innovation to artifact over the years. Fresh off Henry Ford's assembly line a mere ten years prior, the Model T was among the first automobiles to appear on the Alaska Peninsula, about as far as Henry Ford may have imagined his invention

- ▲ A LABEL PLACED ON AN ABANDONED MACHINE at Kukak links this remote cannery to Grays Harbor, where the West Coast clam canning industry developed. "Grays Harbor" Jeanne Schaaf, July 2001, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.
- ◀ SURF PACKING CO. INTERIOR, Aberdeen, Washington. John N. Cobb, 1915 Manuscripts, Special Collections, University Division, University of Washington Libraries, #3812.

Commercial Clamming Comes to the Katmai Coast

The Sunday Oregonian
 PORTLAND, OREGON, SUNDAY MORNING, APRIL 23, 1916. NO. 17.

Display of Cars and Carriages
 Make us see you and we will make you see us.
 90c \$10.35
 4.55 \$24.30
 8.85 \$22.85

Drapery Materials
 Rag and Fiber Rugs
 60c \$1.17 75c

McNeil Whistler Bedroom Suite
 Terms \$10 Cash \$2 Week
 \$79.50

"Model" Dress Forms
 \$1.00 Cash 50c a Week
 \$12.50

First Complete Shaving
 Porch and Lawn Furniture
 \$2.99 \$4.85 \$4.35 \$1.89 \$6.95 \$7.15

Remarkable Table Value
 \$19.75
 \$13.90 \$26.30 \$16.90 \$33.65

Victrola
 \$86.30

Clam Industry Started From Poverty Stricken Oregon Home
 Peter F. Halferty, who started the clam industry in Warrenton, Oregon, in 1894, is shown in the photograph above. The photograph shows a group of men standing in front of a building, likely the clam cannery. The caption reads: "Peter F. Halferty, who started the clam industry in Warrenton, Oregon, in 1894, is shown in the photograph above. The photograph shows a group of men standing in front of a building, likely the clam cannery." Below the photograph is a portrait of Peter F. Halferty.

reaching. In its day, clam diggers used the truck to haul clams from the digging grounds to waiting tenders, while young cannery workers used the truck to haul friends for a rare day-off on the beach.

The beginning of the Pacific razor clam industry echoes a capitalistic fable worthy of Horatio Alger. Peter F. Halferty, known today as "the father of the clam industry on the Pacific Coast," founded the industry in Warrenton, Oregon, in 1894. Desperate to feed seven children, the impoverished Halferty cooked his first pack of clams on a kitchen stove and took the clams, sealed in one-pint jars, to nearby Astoria where he sold the entire pack. For nearly two years Halferty worked to perfect the cooking and canning process, and he eventually built the first razor clam cannery in the West. By the

turn of the century, Halferty had transformed a domestic canning process into a successful regional venture, and he quickly rose from pauper to prosperous businessman. Peter Halferty taught his children the tools of the trade and, eventually turned over his clamming company, Pioneer Packing Company, to his son, Guy P. Halferty.

- ▲ FEATURED IN THE WOMAN'S SECTION of the Sunday Oregonian. "Clam Cannery Started from Poverty Stricken Home," Sunday Oregonian, April 23, 1916, No. 17.
- ADVERTISEMENT USED TO SELL CLAMS for the Pioneer Packing Company. Halferty Papers, Manuscripts, Special Collections, University Archives, University of Washington Libraries, Seattle.

DISHES

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APPRECIATES



THE FAMOUS
RAZOR CLAM



PIONEER BRAND
MINCED SEA CLAMS

REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.

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SEAFOOD
DELICACY

ESTABLISHED 1894
THE ORIGINAL
MINCED SEA CLAMS
NONE GENUINE
WITHOUT THIS SIGNATURE
G.P. Halferty

DIRECTIONS

SOUP—Place in stew pan, 1 pint of milk and juice of Clams. Bring up to but do not boil; ADD MINCED CLAMS, pat of butter, season. Serve hot.

CHOWDER—Mince large slice of bacon, dice one medium size onion, fry together to suit taste. Place in stew pan together with one cup sliced potatoes; add juice of Clams and sufficient water to cover; cook until potatoes are tender; then add Mince Clams, milk desired, pat of butter, season. Serve hot.

Notice—Now already cooked, do not destroy the delicate flavor and tenderness by over-cooking. Can contains the clean white meats of the famous Razor Clams and a concentrated nectar extracted by our special process. Serve these delicious Clams in many delightful ways.

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Buried Dreams



In 1914 Guy (G.P.) Halferty moved Pioneer Packing to Grays Harbor to cash in on the area's unexploited clam beaches. Before long, the generous Washington coast supported Halferty's canneries in Aberdeen, Westport, Grayland, and Copalis. Halferty offered locals cannery jobs and hired Quinault Indians from Taholah to dig razors. By 1916 Halferty's canneries numbered near fifty, and industry expansion continued to increase market demands for clams. That

same year, Halferty sent one of his cannery foremen, Frank E. McConnaghy, to Alaska with instructions to build a major clam cannery there. His destination was Cordova, Alaska, a place locals called "the razor clam capitol of the world."

When McConnaghy arrived in Cordova he discovered that a rival company from Warrenton was renovating a waterfront warehouse into a clam cannery. The Lighthouse Canning and Packing Company was the first razor clam cannery to prepare an Alaskan pack, but once McConnaghy completed construction of a two-line cannery, Pioneer Packing Company overtook Lighthouse in the race to market razor clams. Almost from the beginning, Pioneer Packing became the company associated with Cordova clamming, and it made the Halferty name synonymous with Alaska razor clams. The facility became the largest razor clam cannery in the world, and it established Frank McConnaghy as the youngest and one of the most respected fisheries superintendents in Alaska.

Although G.P. Halferty gave rise to the commercial razor clam industry in Alaska, Pioneer's success brought competition from other entrepreneurs seeking

Commercial Clamming Comes to the Katmai Coast

wealth from Alaskan beaches. The Kukak Cannery started with another prominent Aberdeen family—the Hemrichs. For the Hemrichs’ fame had come not from canning clams, but from brewing beer. Hemrich’s father, Alvin, and uncle, Andrew, owned breweries in Seattle and Aberdeen. His uncle was the president of Seattle Brewing and Malting Company, the company that made one of Seattle’s first nationally recognized products—Rainier Beer. In 1916, the Hemrichs’ brewing enterprises came to a halt when Washington State adopted Prohibition—four years before national voters passed the Volstead Act. Seeking financial alternatives, Hemrich modeled a viable business option after the flourishing razor clam industry in his hometown of

Aberdeen. In 1915, Hemrich and his father incorporated the Surf Packing Company, and in 1916 Elmer Hemrich traveled north to prospect Alaska’s razor clam beaches.



- ▲ THE CORDOVA CANNERY made Halferty’s name synonymous with Alaska razor clams and it established Frank McConnaghy as the youngest and one of the most respected fisheries superintendents in Alaska. Pacific Fisherman, advertisement.
- ◀ ALTHOUGH PETER HALFERTY founded the razor clam industry, G.P. Halferty perfected the process of canning razor clams. “Perfected Canning of Razor Clams,” circa 1916. Oregon Historical Society, Portland, Oregon, HI102652,
- ◀ G.P. HALFERTY’S PIONEER PACKING CO. LABEL for minced sea clams, a seafood delicacy. Halferty Papers, Manuscripts, Special Collections, University Archives, University of Washington Libraries, Seattle.



Commercial Clamming Comes to the Katmai Coast

Hemrich began his one-year journey in Chignik, Alaska, a small fishing village on the Pacific Coast of the Alaska Peninsula. While hiking the shoreline of Shelikof Strait, Hemrich “discovered” the prolific razor clam beaches known today as Swikshak (north of Kukak Bay) and Polly Creek (near Tuxedni Bay). When he reached Anchorage, Hemrich convinced a trapper named George Palmer to invest in Surf Packing, and together they built a small clam cannery near Polly Creek.

When Palmer’s Knik trading post mysteriously burned, he invested \$40,000 of insurance money in Surf Packing, making the trapper the major shareholder. In 1919, the Bank of Alaska funded the construction of a clam cannery, and together, Hemrich and Palmer built the first razor clam cannery in southwestern Alaska, just off what is today the coast of Lake Clark National Park and Preserve, in Snug Harbor at the mouth of Tuxedni Bay.

Failing to reach the level of success he had hoped for, Palmer sold his interests at Snug Harbor to clamming rival G.P. Halferty. In 1923, still determined to realize the potential of Alaska’s razor clam beaches, Hemrich incorporated a new company, Hemrich Packing. Alvin Hemrich retained his position as president (the position he held under Surf Packing), H. F. Korschner of New York became vice president, and Elmer Hemrich became secretary, treasurer and general manager. With capital from East Coast investors, Hemrich built a cannery twenty miles south of Swikshak Beach. This new location was Kukak Bay.

From 1916 to 1964, several razor clam canneries operated in Southwestern Alaska. Built in 1923 by the Hemrich Packing Company, Kukak was once described by industry insiders as

“the best equipped and most efficiently arranged clam cannery on the Pacific Coast.” Elmer Hemrich chose Kukak’s location for its deep harbor, protection from gale force winds, and the abundance of marine life that

Minced Clam Omelet

4 eggs
1 7-oz. flat can Pioneer
Minced Sea Clams

2 tablespoons butter
¼ teaspoon salt
⅛ teaspoon pepper



fire but let omelet stay in hot pan until thoroughly cooked. Turn onto a hot platter and serve at once. Can be served as scrambled eggs.

BEAT eggs slightly—add seasonings and the minced clams. Melt butter in a heavy frying pan—add clam and egg mixture and cook over a low fire. When omelet has browned on under side, fold over—take pan from

Commercial Clamming Comes to the Katmai Coast

HEMRICH STARTS NEW CANNERY

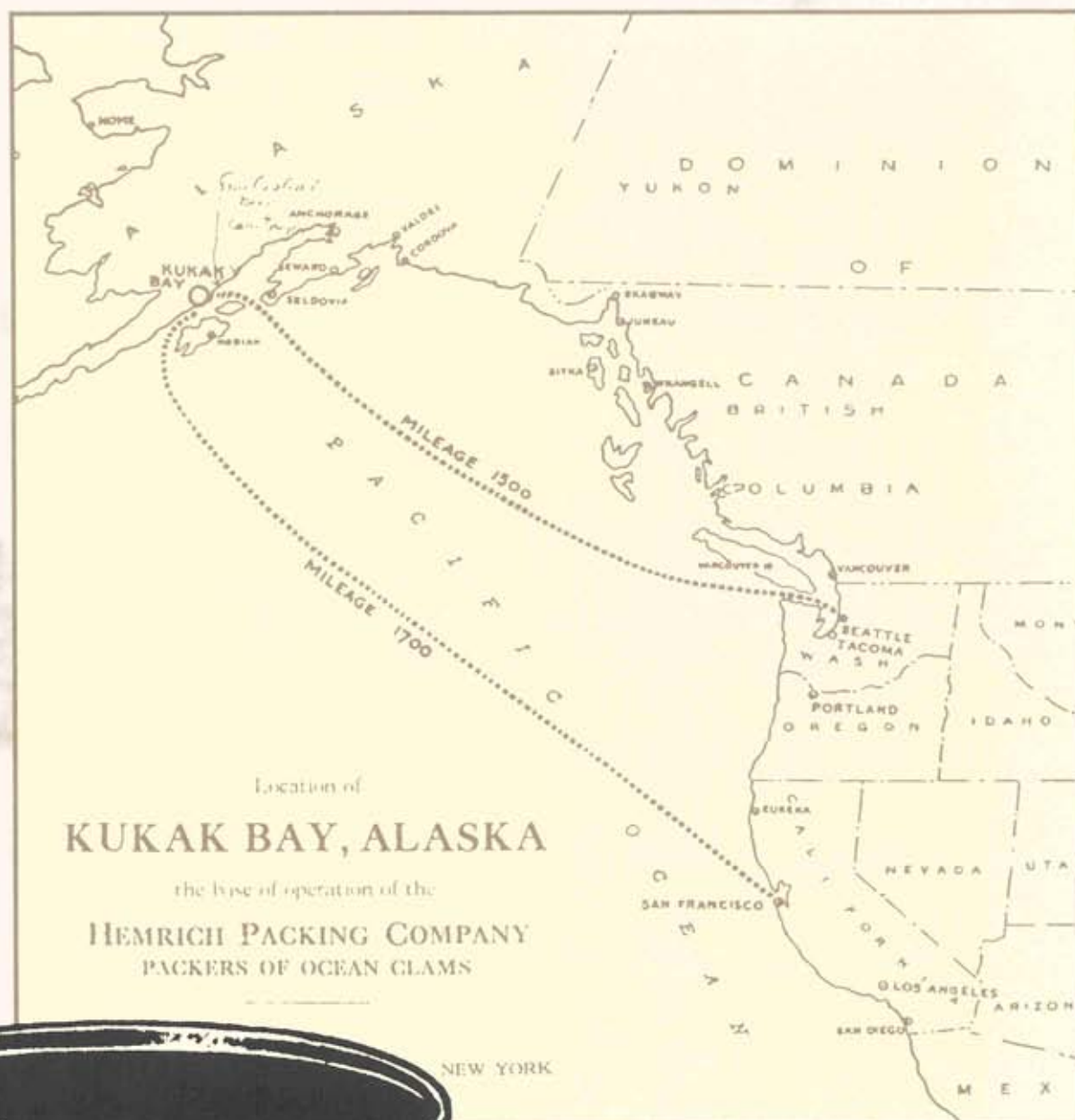
Elmer Hemrich, of the Hemrich Packing company, left Seattle about the middle of February to start work on a new clam cannery at Kukak Bay, on Shelikof Strait, where a permit has been secured to pack 20,000 48-lb. cases of clams. The company was organized last spring under the laws of Delaware, with a capitalization of \$500,000, and is financed with Eastern capital. Alvin Hemrich is president; H. F. Korschner, of New York, vice-president; and Elmer Hemrich, secretary, treasurer and general manager. J. W. Walker, who has been associated with the Hemrichs for years, is foreman in charge of the plant. Elmer Hemrich spent last summer prospecting the shores of Cook Inlet and Shelikof Strait, and picked out the Kukak Bay site, and will supervise the work in the north, while his father will have charge of the headquarters at Aberdeen, Wash., and look after the marketing of the products.

A sawmill was taken up last year, and this will be used during the early spring to get out lumber for the plant, which is expected to start up about the middle of May. The canning equipment has all been assembled at Aberdeen, and will be sent north as soon as the buildings are ready. The equipment for cleaning and cooking the clams was made by the company on its own designs, while a Stickney corn filler will be used for filling. The estimated output is about 600 cases a day, and it is expected to pack about 32,000 cases of minced clams in Eastern oyster cans and some whole clams in talls. The output will be marketed under the "Hemrich's" brand.

fill the waters fronting Kukak. To build Kukak, Hemrich assembled the most innovative technology the industry had to offer. In 1923, the Kukak Cannery was contracted to pack 20,000 48-pound cases of razor clams. Though Kukak never reached this number, it consistently produced a higher percentage of cases in Alaska than any other clam cannery from 1923 to 1936. For example, in 1929 Kukak packed 8,685 out of 16,969 cases, or nearly half of the razor clam pack in Alaska. In 1929 the number was cut in half to 4,887, but surged to 15,000 cases by 1932. In 1935 Kukak produced one-third of Alaska's razor clam pack, and during the 1936 season when the cannery burned, Kukak managed to pack 7,705 cases out of the total 29,900 cases that Alaska shipped to lower-48 markets.

A variety of economic troubles plagued the Kukak Cannery over the years. Kukak never realized the level of success that its idealistic builder hoped to achieve. Production was erratic, while labor and harvesting costs were expensive. Almost within a year of Kukak's completion, financial pressures forced Hemrich to lease the clam cannery to his rival Frank McConnaghy. In 1925, 1926, 1927, and 1929 McConnaghy's newly formed company, Seashore Packing, operated Kukak. But even McConnaghy's clam canning expertise and his reputation throughout the territory failed to keep Kukak running independently. In 1932 Hemrich leased Kukak to the "King of the Clam Cannerys," Guy P. Halferty, who retained McConnaghy as plant superintendent.

▲ HEMRICH'S KUKAK CANNERY received a permit to pack 20,000 48-lb. cases of clams in 1923. Pacific Fisherman, 1923, page 44.



- ▲ HEMRICH PACKING COMPANY'S KUKAK CANNERY was located 1500 miles from Seattle and 1700 miles from San Francisco. Hemrich File, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.
- ▲ HEMRICH'S MINCED OCEAN CLAMS canned at the Kukak Bay Cannery. Hemrich File, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.

- PROMOTIONAL CARTOON. *Halferty Papers, Manuscripts, Special Collections, University Archives, University of Washington Libraries, Seattle.*
- FRANK MCCONNAGHY, wearing his trademark Stetson hat, was a revered cannery boss. As appears in *Alaska Sportsman*: "The Kukak Cannery, on the Peninsula side of the Shelikof Strait, though small, was outstanding because of its superintendent and his operating methods." Gladys Olsen collection, circa 1925, Alutiiq Museum, Kodiak
- ▼ KUKAK CANNERY CREW, circa 1925. Gladys Olsen collection, Alutiiq Museum, Kodiak.



Buried Dreams

In 1932, Frank McConnaghy employed forty-two people. Women who were hired in Kodiak, Homer, and even Aberdeen, Washington, made up the majority of cannery labor. That season, the clam clippers produced the cannery's most successful pack as Kukak processed 15,000 cases of razor clams at an approximate value of \$85,368. They also canned 6,350 salmon, but this number is relatively insignificant relative to larger canneries in Bristol Bay or Kodiak that processed the same number daily.

McConnaghy was a highly respected cannery boss. An *Alaska Sportsman* article credited his "good canning methods and his fair treatment of the men working for him" as reason why fishermen considered Kukak's superintendent "the outstanding cannery operator in the entire district." Del Valentine, who in 1956 was hired by the Halferty Canneries in Kodiak, felt "fortunate" to have worked with McConnaghy. Likewise, Nick Pestrikoff of Kodiak, who dug clams at Swikshak in 1963, summed up his former boss:

"On a person-to-person type thing he [McConnaghy] was very quiet. He wasn't an aggressive type person at all. But you could tell he was all business. Very purposeful in everything he did. When you first met him you'd think he was sort of a laid back guy, and that was just an outward appearance. Mentally, he was always...you could tell his mind was always going for it, you know for improvements, the best way to do something in order for the company to make the money it should be making."

Both Hemrich and McConnaghy were from Grays Harbor, where Populists enjoyed the greatest support of any third party

All my life I've had two baths daily as the tides come in, so I'm very hardy and clean.

RITZY

I was always rather a proud fellow. We Razor Clams are valuable and we won't even speak to our lazy, flabby cousins with whom we are sometimes confused. Way back 44 years ago, our ancestors started the Pioneer Industry. To this day none but Razor Clams can become Pioneers.

PIONEER AMBITIONS

Not even all Razor Clams may become Pioneers. Only the best of us are honored. Secretly, it has been my life's ambition to be one of these nobles of my clan. We all want to be Pioneers, that is why we work so hard to maintain our high standards of living.

LOTS OF EXERCISE

I've always had a lot of fun playing in the sand. My folks told me to get lots of exercise for I would then become a Pioneer, and I wouldn't get a big, flabby tummy like other kinds of clams. Now, I can dig six feet a minute into hard sand.

AMBITION REALIZED

The happiest moment of my life came when diggers told me I was to become a Pioneer. We Razor Clams are responsible for a big industry, supporting thousands of humans. That is why to become a Pioneer is the highest honor of Clam world.

SECRET PROCESS, SH-H

Oh, but it was fun becoming a Pioneer! It's a secret initiation, of course, that only we selected Razor Clams are allowed to know. I'm just packed full of goodness and pep, and I can hardly wait to get into my new suit.

I GET A NEW SUIT

Well, I traded my streamlined shell for a nice shiny tin suit. Now I'm a full fledged Pioneer Minced Sea Clam and believe me the other clams are jealous. But I must carry on with my ambition. First, I've Good Housekeeping to see, then to find a good grocer's shelf.

I'M APPROVED



Buried Dreams



in Pacific Northwest history. Perhaps neither consciously administered progressive managerial styles, but the themes of great social reforms resonated in the social and work experience at Kukak and challenged the stereotype that canneries were sparse, oppressive, and harsh working environments.

Photographs taken at Kukak between 1923 and 1925 show images of families, pets, holiday celebrations, live music, and picnics. Kukak even served as one of the first radio broadcasting stations in Alaska. In 1923, Elmer's brother, Walter Hemrich, became KNT's licensee and transferred the station from Aberdeen to Kukak Bay. The station transmitted only 100 feet and reportedly played concert music for one hour per day. Though KNT only lasted one year, it illustrates Hemrich's attempt to enrich the daily experience of his employees.

In the 1930s, the Great Depression caused a disastrous economic decline in the Pacific Northwest and dealt the region's extractive industries a severe blow. As a result, Kukak remained idle during the 1933 and 1934 seasons despite state-of-the-art machines and management. However, American clam canning rose sharply in

- ▲ KUKAK CANNERY *in the summer of 1936.* Alaska Sportsman, August 1948, page 10.
- KUKAK CANNERY AFTER THE FIRE *in the fall of 1936.* "The rising sun showed us a dismal sight. The cannery was a mass of twisted machinery. A pile of blackened cans showed where the warehouse had been." Alaska Sportsman, August 1948, page 11.

Commercial Clamming Comes to the Katmai Coast

1935 due to increased tariff protection for domestic clams. In the 1930s, commercial clam industries from both coasts were immersed in an international dispute over clam prices. The dispute occurred when Japanese clams were retailed at figures below the price quoted by American packers on the San Francisco market. Before Congress passed the Smoot-Hawley tariff, canned clams were on the free list, while other domestic seafoods enjoyed protected benefits. McConnaghy, who was a member of the Pacific Coast Clam Packers Association, actively supported the movement for a tariff on canned clams. The Pacific Association allied itself with the Maine and Massachusetts Clam Cannery Association, and this united front brought new hope to the American clamming industry. When the Hawley tariff bill was enacted, it removed canned clams from the free list and subjected them to an import duty of thirty-five percent.

The change in the political economy inspired Elmer Hemrich to join forces once again with Frank McConnaghy and re-open Kukak in 1935 under a new company, Surf Canneries. That season they contributed nearly a third of the total Alaskan pack. Local media coverage reflected that many people believed Kukak was finally to achieve its high expectations.

Frustration, however, replaced optimism when the season of 1936 hit Kukak with poor weather, a wrecked tender, and a wage crisis. In spite of the problems, Kukak continued to can clams. At the end of what appeared to be a salvageable season, a fire started in the light plant and jumped to the second floor where it ignited the



Commercial Clamming Comes to the Katmai Coast

belting. The cannery blazed throughout the night and by morning most of the Kukak wharf was nothing more than a pile of ashes. After the calamity, Hemrich knew his clamming days were done. He returned to

Pioneer Minced Sea Clam Meat Loaf De Luxe

1 pound hamburger
½ cup milk
12 soda crackers

1 7-oz. flat can Pioneer
Minced Sea Clams
Salt and pepper
2 slices bacon



DRAIN the PIONEER Minced Sea Clams and add to the ground meat. Heat the milk with the clam juice and when hot pour over the broken crackers. Let soak until soft, add to the meat with salt and pepper to taste—mix well. Form into

loaf, strip the top with bacon and bake about 1 hour in moderately hot oven (375-400°).

Washington State while McConnaghy recovered what he could of Kukak's canning equipment and relocated to Kodiak. There, he rekindled a fortuitous partnership with Halferty, and the two men remained in the razor clam business. They also became major players in the Alaskan canned salmon industry.

Because little physical evidence remains, and because the industry

failed to thrive, scant attention has been paid to the historical significance of the commercial razor clam industry in Alaska. Yet the clam canneries are an important chapter in Alaskan and national history.

Kukak became a meeting place for industry pioneers such as Elmer Hemrich and Frank McConnaghy. Both men constructed razor clam canneries and contributed to the development of innovative canning and marketing techniques. Hemrich, the son of a Washington State beer brewer, built the original cannery and remained involved with Kukak as general manager until the facility burned in 1936. McConnaghy, an experienced razor clam canner from Grays Harbor, forged the industry in Alaska and supervised Kukak for nearly all of its operating years. Though different—Hemrich was an idealistic and determined entrepreneur while McConnaghy was a sensible businessman—both men were instilled with values characteristic of the early twentieth century and shared qualities of resourcefulness, initiative, and originality. Today, the Kukak Cannery represents a progressive influence, for Kukak's improbable location, structural complexity, and community spirit symbolize both idealism and pragmatism and it remains a tribute to human ingenuity.

- MR. PIONEER CLAM lends charm to early marketing efforts. *Halferty Papers, Manuscripts, Special Collections, University Archives, University of Washington Libraries, Seattle.*

PIONEER *Minc'd Sea* CLAMS



Appetizing as the Salt Sea Air

August 1, 1939

SAYS MR. PIONEER CLAM..



The tang of the breeze from the far off seas,
A taste of the ocean blue.

The sunshine and zest of the Golden West,
The sweets of its morning dew.



From the ocean shores I've gathered these stores,
The epicure's palate to woo.



I've strength for the sick and joy for the quick,

When made in a chowder or stew,

A juicy delight for a keen appetite,

I'm ready and willing -

Are you ?



Yours sincerely,

G. P. HALFERTY & CO.





FOUR WORKING

THE SWIKSHAK BEACH

Footprints in the sands of time are not made by sitting down.

—Anonymous

WHEN I HEAR THE STORIES from clammers at Swikshak Beach, I am reminded of the roughneck riders of the Wild West. Instead of rustling cattle, however, these “cowboys” dug clams. Whether working hard or hardly working, these guys never made life boring on the beach. “They were pretty high-spirited bunch of people,” recalled cannery boss Del Valentine, who recruited Swikshak clam diggers for the Alaska Packers Association. “Kodiak accused us of emptying the jail to bring up our crew!”

◀ BIG BEACH at Swikshak Lagoon in 1970 and ▲ circa 1925. “Big Beach,” Frida Nielsen collection, KATM-00296, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage. (1970 photo is not part of accession KATM-00296.)

Buried Dreams



Some diggers came from Kodiak, but most were young adventure seekers from Grays Harbor and the Quinault Indian Reservation. As with nearly all frontier industries, those who came West for great fortunes found only disillusionment. Most came to Swikshak to uncover their buried dreams—to get rich—but all too many just got tired and dirty. As one Swikshak clam digger put it, “clamming just ain’t romantic.”

To paraphrase a common saying, digging clams at Swikshak was no day at the beach. When the tide ebbed, diggers spread out for miles across the Swikshak Lagoon, collecting their catch in wooden Blazo Boxes (brand name for Chevron white gas). Digging equipment included a Westport shovel, hip boots, and warm clothes. Digging for clams was extremely labor-intensive, as it was prolonged, fast-paced manual work. Swikshak’s black volcanic sand made fingers cold and sore, and clammers were constantly vulnerable to brutal spring storms. Digging for hours strained the clammers’ backs, yet they avoided kneeling on the sand because the position reduced speed. It was said that if a clam digger did not have a clam in the air at all times, he was too slow. Diggers also had to protect the fragile razor shell from breaking. Once broken, the clam died and the cannery refused to buy it. Despite the difficulties, a first-rate commercial clammer might dig 450 pounds of razors on one tide.

The clam season usually began in April before the first minus tide of May. Company tenders dropped off sixty to seventy diggers at Swikshak where they lived and worked until the razors spawned in July. The company supplied their skiffs, food, and cooking utensils, and diggers brought their sleeping bags and personal work gear. Diggers counted on twelve to thirteen days of good tidal conditions, but for nine days each month, poor tides left diggers to their own devices.

The mouth of Big River splits and flows into two bays: Swikshak Beach (or Big Beach) and Kaguyak Beach. Intense rivalries developed between the best diggers from opposite shores, but digging clams was only part of the competition. Diggers held boxing matches and adorned their champs with names like “Long Pete”

▲ DIGGING CLAMS *at Swikshak was no day at the beach.* Pacific Fisherman.

► IT WAS NOT UNUSUAL *for clam diggers to feel isolated on the sweeping sandspit. “Kaguyak Bear Tracks” Lowell Sumner, June 20, 1952, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.*

Working the Swikshak Beach

and “Wild Bill.” Gambling was also a favorite pastime. For most people “fifty clams” is considered a colloquialism, but on Swikshak Beach, fifty clams translated to hard cash, as many clambers dug a day’s salary to pay off gambling debts accrued the previous evening. Quite often, diggers at both Swikshak and Kaguyak competed with the Alaskan coastal brown bear for razor clams, but even more exasperating were foxes, which stole freshly dug clams directly from the boxes awaiting pick up.

A truck driven by the beach boss dropped off empty Blazo boxes several hours before low tide, and then, just before high tide, the truck crew loaded the boxes, each filled with fifty pounds of raw razors. Use of the vehicle made harvesting clams more efficient by affording clam diggers more time in the race against the rising tide. Aboard the truck were two twenty-foot planks that an employee called the “swamper” laid down in the sand. His job was to align the planks with the truck tires so that when the beach boss went to grab the clams, the truck wouldn’t sink into the soft sand. After retrieving the clams, the truck zipped down several

miles of coastline to deliver the boxes to the tenders entering Swikshak Lagoon on the flood tide. Once aboard the tenders, the clams were hauled to the Kukak or Kodiak cannery.

Tenderboat captain, Ed Opheim, Sr. remembers hauling clams to Kukak from Swikshak Lagoon in the 1920s:

“I ran the cannery tender for picking up clams a couple of different years...My boat was only a forty-foot boat, but she was a beautiful boat...[I ran her between] the mainland and Shelikof Straits—why water like that is always more or less a big sea. Wind blowing up or down it or off the glaciers. It was the thing you had to use your own judgment.”







Working the Swikshak Beach



It was not unusual for Swikshak clam diggers to develop a feeling of complete isolation. Devil's Desk loomed to the southwest, while the Swikshak tidal flats extended so far out to sea that even seagulls could not be seen along the shoreline. At low tide, a clam digger's view stretched on and on across the rippled beach until sand became indistinguishable from sky. "It's just a strange place," recalled an old-time clam digger, "it's about the only place in North America where you look east and see the Pacific."

Diggers lived in makeshift cabins or shacks, which barely sheltered them from Pacific storms. They were always cold, wet and they ate almost nothing but clams. In the morning they made clam fritters, for lunch they ate clam soup, and then, after a day of digging clams, they would fry clams for dinner.

- ◀ (previous page) DIGGERS COUNTED ON twelve to thirteen days of good tidal conditions, but for nine days each month, poor tides left diggers to their own devices. "Poker Game" Frida Nielsen collection, circa 1925, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center (LAKA), Anchorage, KATM-00296.
- ▲ TENDERS HAD TO GET IN AND OUT of Big River before the tide ebbed and stranded the vessels in the mud. "Swikshak Lagoon" Lowell Sumner, June 20, 1952, LAKA, Anchorage.
- ▶ TENDERS TRANSPORTED LIVE CLAMS down the Shelikof Strait to the Kukak Cannery. According to Ed Ophiem Sr., "water like that is always more or less a big sea." "Joshy" Frida Nielsen collection, circa 1925, LAKA, Anchorage, KATM-00296.



Working the Swikshak Beach

Dependence on the cannery discouraged many diggers. In the early days of clamming, Kukak commercial diggers were paid in tokens, and then reimbursed by the cannery at the end of the season. In 1924 Hemrich paid diggers \$1.25 per fifty-pound box. By 1963, other companies that used Swikshak Beach paid diggers payments worth \$5.00 per box. During the territorial days, merchants commonly used tokens because legal tender was scarce. Clam diggers used tokens to purchase goods and gear in the cannery store, and often fell into debt with the company due to inflated store prices. “I owe my soul to the company store!” was a common phrase among cannery people. Sometimes diggers became so discouraged that they tried to flee Swikshak by jumping aboard the mail plane, which was usually guarded by a supervisor with a sidearm.

For the Swikshak diggers, Alaska’s Last Frontier had gone the way of the Wild West—into the realms of fable and myth. But as much as clam diggers found their experience at Swikshak disillusioning, many I spoke with were saddened to hear that the National Park Service had dismantled the old shacks in the 1970s. In conversations I had with the clammers, none felt bitter about their days on the beach; instead, most seemed to share a kind of wisdom about their experience. “Sometimes it takes dozens of years or sometimes hundreds of years,” observed one clammer, “but when man abandons a place, Mother Nature consumes it.” Others were more protective of the past, “Yeah, maybe you want it all pristine back the way it was, but that’s ignoring what was there.” To me, it seemed that no matter how bad the conditions or how little the pay, Swikshak clam diggers wanted their experience remembered. Nick Pestrikoff of Kodiak, Alaska has fond memories of working the Swikshak Beach: “Got to eat good. Had a lot of fun. If I had to do it again, I would do it again, even though I didn’t make any money.”

Today, the razor clam fishery on the Katmai Coast remains only a memory recalled by few. Most visitors who come to Katmai are unaware that the fishery existed. All that is left on the beach are the rusted frames of flat bed trucks and shallow depressions that mark where several old structures once stood. As far as we know, no one wrote a memoir or documented the adventures pursued by these people. Perhaps the clam diggers of Swikshak Beach were ruffians, and some may have been drunkards, criminals, and thugs. But their story echoes the larger saga of Western expansion and helps us understand how ordinary people dealt with extraordinary circumstances. Their nearly forgotten footprints lead us down new paths of history and towards a better appreciation for the people who lived it. “Like I said,” noted Del Valentine, “it was definitely a different breed of cats we had there.”





◀ IN THE TERRITORIAL DAYS, diggers were paid in tokens and used them to make purchases at the company store. Tokens reveal the procession of companies that operated Kukak. Dick Powell, Private Collection, circa 1923. Photo by Katherine Johnson, NPS, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.

▲ THE SWIKSHAK CLAM DIGGERS, circa 1925. Gladys Olsen collection, Alutiiq Museum, Kodiak.

► A CLAM DIGGER TAKES A BREAK between clam tides. Gladys Olsen collection, circa 1925, Alutiiq Museum, Kodiak.

► (next page) THE KAGUYAK CHURCH IN HALLO BAY was accidentally burned down by clam diggers taking shelter around 1961. "Geologist Chaffee on Roof" Lowell Sumner, June 18, 1952, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.











FIVE A P O R T A L

TO THE PAST...AND FUTURE

*Architecture is a social act
and the material theatre of human activity.*

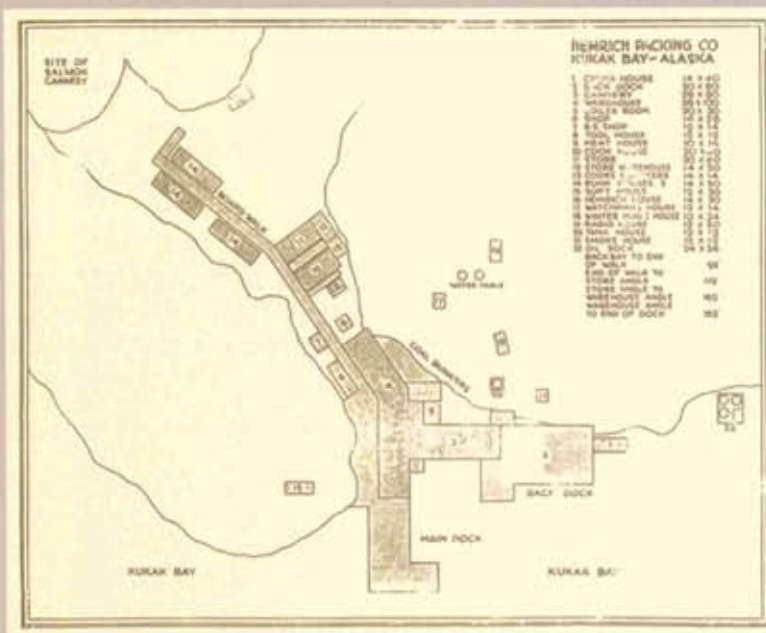
— Spiro Kostof

ALL I CAN HEAR IS RAIN.

It falls softly and steadily on the canopy of alders and willows surrounding the abandoned cannery site. Waist-high grass and fireweed protrude through the broken boardwalk that leads to scrap-heaps of corrugated metal and splintered beams. A fallen dock buckles under the weight of four retorts and a separating table lies turned on its side. Steel

◀ COLLAPSED QUONSET and cannery equipment photographed from onshore at high tide. Jeanne Schaaf, NPS, July 2001. Slide on file at Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center (LAKA), Anchorage.

▲ THE KUKAK CANNERY, circa 1935. Otto Geise, LAKA, Anchorage.



- ▲ THE KUKAK WHARF, circa 1935. Otto Geise, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.
- ◀ THE HEMRICH PACKING CO. map, made circa 1923. Hemrich Files, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.
- ▶ VIEW OF KUKAK'S PIER, back dock and China house from superintendent's house. Gladys Olsen collection, circa 1925, Alutiiq Museum, Kodiak.

A Portal to the Past... and Future

I-beams wrap around boulders like ribbons, and barnacles cover cannery machines that crashed to the beach during the 1964 earthquake. The waters of Kukak Bay mirror gray skies that hang low along the Aleutian Range, and except for the rain and the occasional fish breaking the surface for bugs, the water is still.

The quiet rain and silent Kukak landscape convey a contrasting sense of what occurred here years ago. The tranquility cannot possibly reflect what it was like to work at the cannery when it was alive with productivity. Inside, belts slapped, pulleys spun, shafts turned, and power radiated in every direction, driving machines in different rooms. The entire structure vibrated with the rumble and roar of machines. At Kukak, the alchemy of water power, entrepreneurial capital, and artisan skills forged a dynamic system of production from its concentration of small buildings.

The original Kukak plant consisted of two main cannery buildings, deep-water docks, warehouses, power plant, carpenter shop, machine shop, mess hall, cannery store, wireless radio station, bunkhouses, and several small living quarters. Because of its isolation, Kukak was completely self-sustained. It generated its own power, and shipped in the provisions and supplies needed to maintain the cannery and produce a profitable product. "The primary business of the Hemrich Packing Company," stated Kukak's manager, Elmer Hemrich in 1923, was "the packing and marketing of canned ocean clams." Although salmon was considered the major catch by neighboring fisheries such as Bristol Bay and Kodiak, canning clams was Kukak's main purpose. For every building and machine, whether it housed the employees who canned clams or made the bread to feed them, its core function was to contribute to the operation that canned razor clams.



Built on pilings, the pier protruded over the harbor and supported the cannery and warehouse. The cannery was a plain, technically simple two-story building that reflected twentieth century American industrial architecture. Most cannery bosses eventually chose an orderly and disciplined linear floor arrangement where aisles between rows of machinery enabled movement of materials and people, and provided clear lines of sight for supervisors.

A Portal to the Past... and Future



Carpenters constructed cannery buildings with a tongue and groove rustic siding that prevented structural damage from freezing water. Kukak was supported by strong and relatively inexpensive wood columns or posts. Bracing the timber posts was a structural feature called a corbel. This “Y” shaped prop allowed the post to support considerable weight. Corbels also supported the roof truss, in which beams of a triangular design covered the large open area within the cannery interior that housed engines, boilers, retorts, heavy machinery, and heating furnaces. Roofs were constructed with wood and covered by corrugated tin. A sharp roof angle prevented a build up of winter snow. Because tree stands in the region are sparse, most original buildings were constructed with spruce shipped in from another location. A sawmill was shipped north from Aberdeen and was used to cut lumber, probably logged on Kodiak Island.

The biggest fear for the cannery manager was fire. In the nineteenth century, carpenters used joists, carried by heavier beams, to support thin floorboards. During a fire, the exposed corners of the joists ignited easily, and the floorboards burned through, creating drafts that increased combustion. To prevent the reoccurrence of such fires, an important innovation in cannery building techniques was “slow burning” construction. Kukak’s floor, typical of canneries built by the twentieth century, extended continuously and consisted of three-inch tongue and grooved planks that were covered with a layer of replaceable boards. The



- ▲ A TENDER LOADED WITH RAZOR CLAMS docks at Kukak Cannery. Gladys Olsen collection, circa 1925, Alutiiq Museum, Kodiak.
- ▲ A CANNERY WORKER at the loading dock. Gladys Olsen collection, circa 1925, Alutiiq Museum, Kodiak.
- ▶ A CANNERY WORKER places razor clams into the steam bath. Columbia River Maritime Museum, 0173B.





A Portal to the Past... and Future

flat bottom surface of this floor rested on large beams, spaced eight to twelve feet apart. This design exposed less surface area to combustion and limited easily-burnable materials. Though fire eventually burned Kukak's wharf in 1936, several buildings were spared due to slow burning construction.

Processing took place dockside. After the five-hour trip from Swikshak to Kukak, the clams—still alive—were immediately offloaded, hauled into the cannery, and dumped into a large tank of hot water called a shaker/scalder machine. Within the tank, vibrating baskets loosened the shells. Cannery workers lifted the clam-filled baskets out of the hot water and placed them into a cold water bath. Quick hands dislodged clams from the loosened shells, which were discarded into Kukak Bay. The raw clams were then dumped onto a conveyor belt, where women called clam clippers snipped away the dark tip of the neck and cut away the viscera. Next, workers placed clams onto a splitting table, which moved the clams horizontally on two belts towards a high-speed rotary knife that split the clam in two.

To remove any remaining shell, sand, or viscera, a worker dumped clams into a shaker washer. After the bath, workers lined the remaining white portion of the clams onto a belt and inspectors looked for any foreign matter left on the clam. After passing examination, the heavy baskets full of clean clams were dumped into a hopper which fed the clams into a grinder and minced them. A filler machine packed brine water and four ounces of minced clam meat into 6.5-ounce cans. Cannery workers topped the cans with lids. The cans were then vacuum-sealed and pressured cooked in retorts at the appropriate temperature and time. Finally, cannery workers labeled, packed, and prepared cans for shipment south.



- ◀ QUICK HANDS CLIP THE DARK PORTIONS of the clams and dress them for canning. *Columbia River Maritime Museum, 0173A.*
- ▶ KUKAK'S SEAMER, a machine that vacuum-sealed lids onto tin cans, lies idle along the Kukak Bay shoreline. *Jeanne Schaaf, NPS, 2001, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.*

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Water tanks, or elevated water reservoirs, were built on the South Hill to supply the boilers with water to make steam. Near the boiler room was a coal bunker. In the early days, an entire boat load of coal had to be delivered each season to Kukak, but by the 1930s, oil fueled the cannery. Just behind the boiler room was the tank house that housed the petroleum products such as gasoline tanks, diesel tanks, and heating oils.

Because a major objective of cannery design was to maximize the amount of natural light in work spaces, numerous small-paned windows lighted Kukak's interiors. Shortly after Kukak was built, incandescent lighting was introduced to cannery construction. While steam driven generators provided power to Kukak's canning machines, they also lit electric lights that dramatically enhanced working conditions. Air quality and fire safety improved and there were fewer accidents in well-lighted spaces.

Behind the cannery was a warehouse which stored boats, skiffs, nets, and machinery in the winter. During the summer, cooked cans were stacked and placed in the warehouse to air-cool. The maintenance buildings were located behind the processing buildings. Here, the skilled labor, such as the boiler man, carpenters, and blacksmiths worked to maintain Kukak Cannery's processing operation. In the carpenter shop, wood was worked, skiffs repaired, and boats built. The blacksmith's shop or machine shop housed metal lathes, drills, press shapers, power hacksaws and grinding wheels. Because electric welding technology had not yet been perfected, all welding was done by metal fusion. A blacksmith formed iron and steel in a forge which he used to make and repair cannery machinery. Necessary tools used by such artisans consisted of shovels, wheelbarrows, Swede hooks, timer tongs and hooks, picaroons (a device to handle lumber), adzes, axes, single and double blades, crowbars, jacks (hydraulic and screw type), top mauls, sledge hammers and miscellaneous small tools.

The cannery and office crews ate communally in a mess hall or cookhouse. Most cannery cookhouses consisted of a dining area, kitchen, bakeshop, and scullery (dish washing area). Before refrigeration came to Kukak, the cook hung meats in a fly-screened building called the meat house. The screens allowed free air to blow through, which coated the outside of the meat quarters with a protective crust. This preserved the meat and reduced souring caused by moisture. A smokehouse was also utilized, possibly for smoking fish or ham.

- KUKAK'S KITCHEN CREW. *Clarence, Jerry the waitress, and Jim the cook. "Messroom Gang" Frida Nielsen collection, circa 1925, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage, KATM-00296.*



Buried Dreams



Because there is no record of a main office, Kukak's management personnel probably worked in the building designated as the cannery store. This structure provided some provisions, clothing, shoes, candy, soda pop, toiletries, tobacco products, other personal items and gear to cannery workers and clam diggers. Located next to the store was the store warehouse, a building that supplied extra storage space for goods sold in the cannery store. Another important building to the Kukak management was the radio house (not to be confused with the KNT Radio broadcasting station). This building housed the radioman and his equipment, which was used to make ship to shore broadcasts on a daily schedule. At Kukak the radio house was built on the South Hill, away from the cannery, because static from the machines interfered with transmissions to Kodiak, the tenders, and elsewhere.

The boardwalk was another distinctive feature of cannery architecture. At Kukak, the sidewalk-like passage was constructed with milled planks. It connected cannery buildings for the easy movement of people and small vehicles. During processing, the boardwalk became the center of life at the cannery complex. In 1925, activity buzzed along what employees named "Main Street Kukak Bay." Workers pushed handcarts, women hung laundry, the mess hall gang gathered for smokes and cups of coffee, the superintendent conferred with fishermen, and kids ran back and forth. Machinists, carpenters, and plumbers constantly maintained faulty stoves, broken planks, and severed pipes, and at the end of the day, cannery workers dragged themselves

- ▲ DRESSED IN THEIR SUNDAY FINEST, Kukak's cannery workers pose along the boardwalk, which many called "Main Street Kukak Bay." Gladys Olsen collection, circa 1925, Alutiiq Museum, Kodiak.

A Portal to the Past... and Future

from the wharf to their bunkhouses. The boardwalk started from the dock and extended 165 feet to the store, and then angled to the bunkhouse area for another 119 feet. Another boardwalk connected the cannery boardwalk to the north beach, which canners called “Back Bay.”

Kukak’s domestic housing consisted of bunkhouses for both white and nonwhite labor and individual houses for the superintendent, manager, night watchman, and winterman. “The China House,” as referred to by the Company, was a small bunkhouse located near the cannery; it may have housed Asian, Alaska Native or other nonwhite labor. The building could have included cooking and eating facilities.

The rest of the cannery crew lived in three bunkhouses located at the north end of the cannery complex. The bunkhouses were bare, but once crews moved in, they scrounged for packing boxes, scrap lumber and whatever material they could find to build individual cubicles around each bunk. Usually, men shared a bunkhouse with others having the same work schedule. Because work demanded they rise early to maintain the machines, cannery machinists resided together in a bunkhouse. Likewise, men working the docks had schedules that depended on the tides, and therefore lived together so as not to disturb the rest of the crew when waking or returning from work. Women, who made up almost the entire processing crew, lived separately from the men in their own bunkhouse.

Kukak’s superintendent lived in a small separate house, usually referred to as the White House in most canneries. The color of the house was white—the only building in a cannery complex painted that color—so that the home of the cannery boss was easy to distinguish among the other buildings. The White House refers not only to the distinct color, but the reputation of the superintendent. Highly respected, the superintendent was responsible for the success or failure of the season’s work. He was chosen for his ability to handle men and machines, for his knowledge of fishing, and his ability with figures. The superintendent’s house was the only structure located on the North Hill; it had an unobstructed view of Kukak’s cannery and harbor. This allowed the superintendent to keep an eye on canning activities and on the arrival and departure of vessels.

The manager’s house was located at the east end of the cannery complex. This little cottage provided living quarters for the manager and offered a place for guests to stay. The watchman’s house and the winterman’s house were similar in design, and both were built on the South Hill. The cannery employed a

A Portal to the Past... and Future

watchman to make rounds at night to patrol for vandals, drunks, industrial espionage and saboteurs. A watchman remained through the winter to make repairs and protect the cannery from fire or weather damage.

Kukak Cannery maintained a lighthouse, described as a “fixed white light” by the 1924 Coast Pilot. It was constructed on the southern point of the narrow entrance to Kukak Bay to mark the mid-channel courses for vessels so that they avoided the dangerous northern shore. A Kukak tenderman recalled, “We saw a tiny lighthouse perched on its rocky shore. Instantly we knew we were entering Kukak Bay.”

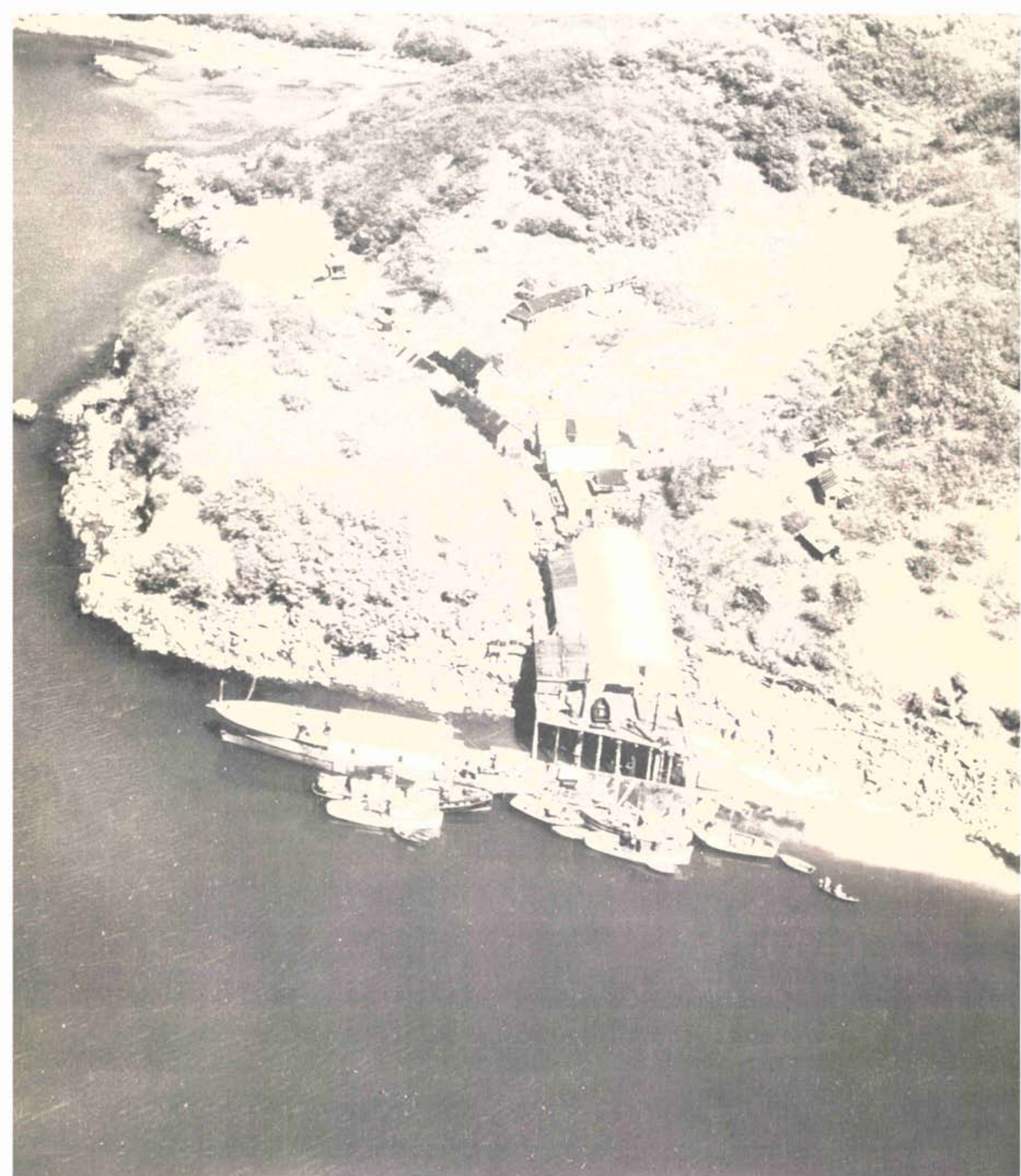
Of the original buildings constructed by the Hemrich Packing Company, eleven burned to the ground in 1936: The main cannery, China House, warehouse, boiler room, carpenter shop, blacksmith shop, tool



- ▲ HEMRICH PUT THE KUKAK CANNERY UP FOR SALE in 1935. His lawyer, Otto Geise, sent this photo along with other photographs of the cannery, to O.A. Tomlinson, Regional Director of the National Park Service, in 1946. Otto Geise, circa 1935, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.

- TODAY, THE KUKAK CANNERY SITE is densely overgrown. Ruins of the watchman's house are in the foreground, overlooking Back Bay to the north. Jeanne Schaaf, NPS, 2001, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.





A Portal to the Past... and Future

house, smoke house, tank house, and both the back and oil docks. After Kukak was abandoned, brown bears were observed inside the remains of the warehouse scrounging for discarded canned goods. The bears would roll canned clams on the dock, press them with their paws, and squish out the clams. "He just sat there eating..." recalled tender captain Ed Opheim, "...one can right after the other."

In 1947, Mainland replaced the burned cannery with a Quonset hut and revitalized the original bunkhouses, cookhouse, and store. Mainland also extended the manager's house into a full-sized bunkhouse. Mainland Fisheries chose a forty- by one hundred-foot Quonset hut to replace the Kukak ruins, rather than to reconstruct following the original cannery design. The Quonset was a corrugated steel structure with arched ribs and with insulation between the steel exterior and a pressed wood interior wall. The Quonset hut design was uncomplicated, efficient, inexpensive, and easy to transport. These factors were significant to Mainland, a new company that had little experience in the clam canning business. After the war, the Army declared Quonset huts surplus. In Anchorage, where the post-war years saw a boom in population, the excess pre-fabricated structures served as temporary housing. In 1947, the Alaska Railroad moved more than 120 huts to Government Hill, located just outside the Anchorage city limits. It is quite possible that Walter Fuhrer, president of Mainland Fisheries, found the Kukak Quonset hut at Government Hill and shipped the structure to Kukak Bay.

New Plant for Kukak Bay

Mainland Fisheries, Inc., recently organized in Seattle with Karl G. Paulus as president; Gene Scheerer, vice-president and Walter Fuhrer, secretary, is establishing a new salmon and razor clam cannery on Kukak Bay, on the mainland opposite Kodiak Island, with equipment for both 1-lb. talls and halves. Seattle headquarters has been opened at 807 Lowman Bldg.

Mr. Paulus is also secretary of the Orcas Canning Corp. and Cape Douglas Canning Corp.; Mr. Scheerer is a well known cannery foreman, and Mr. Fuhrer was formerly manager of the Alaska Salmon Industry, Inc.

Clearly, the biggest impact to the Kukak site was the 1936 fire that destroyed most of Kukak's original buildings. Since 1949, when the cannery was abandoned, weather, the 1964 earthquake and vandals to a lesser extent have contributed to Kukak's current lack of structural integrity. Graffiti etched in the walls of the manager's house include messages and names, most certainly scribed by commercial fishermen and other

▲ THE NEW PLANT WAS NOTED *in an article in Pacific Fisherman* . June 1948, page 29.

◀ MAINLAND FISHERIES replaced the cannery with a Quonset hut in 1947. "Cannery in Kukak" Adolph Murie, June 24, 1951, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage, Box 2 L-733.

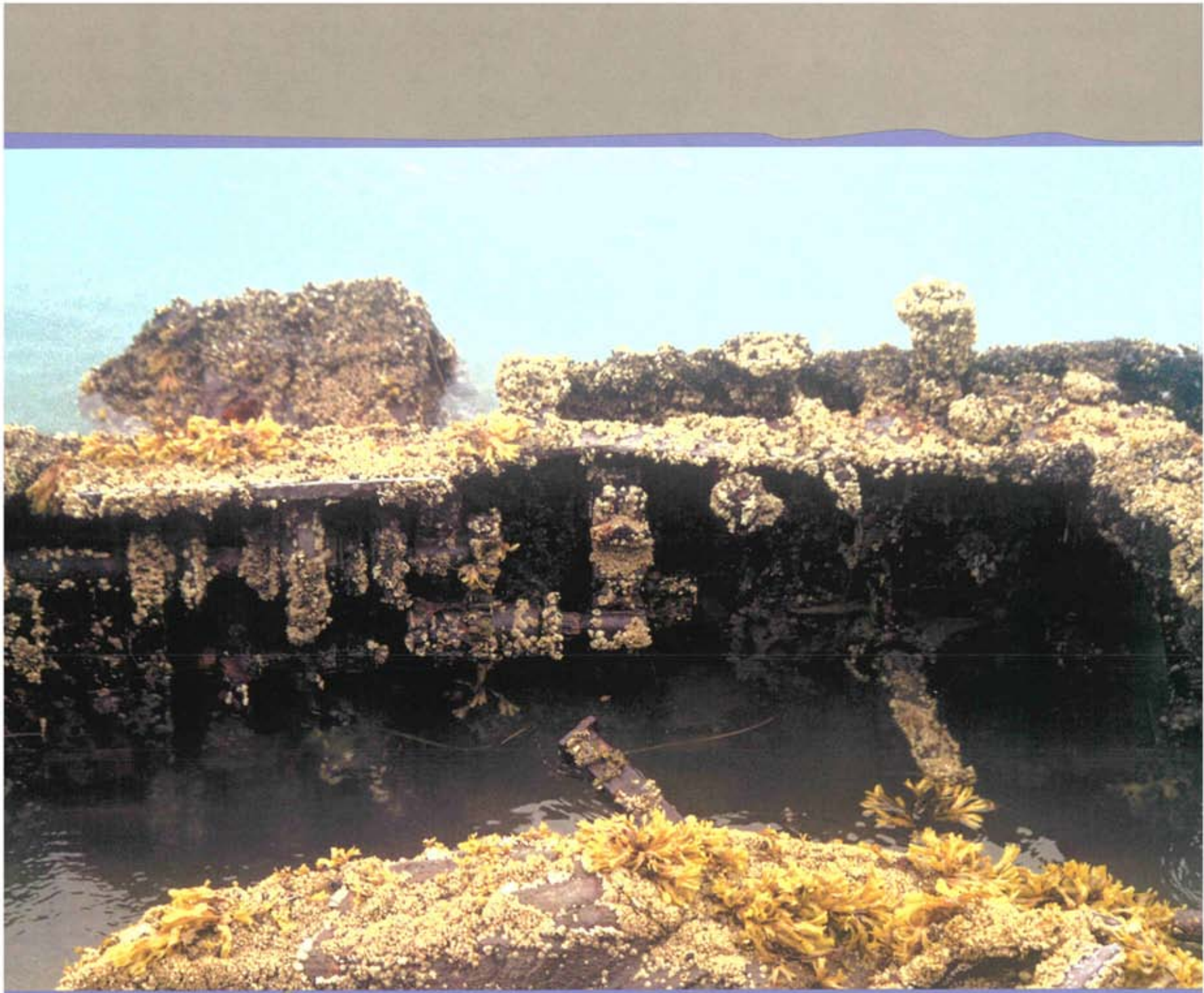
A Portal to the Past... and Future

curious visitors. The bunkhouses, mess hall, store and living quarters have collapsed; most of the wood and furnishings have long since been removed.

Photographs and oral histories reveal that sometime between 1963 and 1968, Mainland's dock and half the Quonset hut vanished. The buckled buildings, collapsed Quonset and scattered machinery recall a catastrophic event. The Good Friday 1964 earthquake shook the pilings right off the bedrock, forcing the pier to slip into Kukak Bay. This dislodged a large segment of the Quonset hut, and pulled the structure filled with machines and equipment into the waters of Kukak Bay.



- ▲ THE INEXPERIENCED COMPANY neglected the cannery and in 1949, Mainland Fisheries went broke. "Wreckage at Clam Cannery" V.H. Cahalane, August 2, 1953, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage, 2-SB2-11889.
- CANNERY MACHINERY that tumbled to the shore in 1964, now serves a different purpose. Katherine Johnson, NPS, 2001, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.



A Portal to the Past... and Future

The Kukak ruins evoke images of a Western ghost town—something that was once grand but has since grown old, been destroyed, or has turned to rubble. Yet there is something hopeful that remains here—maybe it is the lingering optimism that went into building the cannery. The year before Elmer Hemrich came to

Alaska, an aspiring Calvin Coolidge told Americans that “the man who builds a factory builds a temple.” Kukak may have met a fate similar to other frontier enterprises, but its ruins remain a portal into America’s past, when progressive ingenuity built structures such as the Golden Gate Bridge—structures that defined the American “can do” spirit.



At Kukak’s shoreline I come to the place where the cannery equipment tumbled to the beach during the 1964 earthquake. Now, the cast-iron machines perform a very different function. The ebb and flood tide nourish barnacles and other sea creatures that make the old machines their home. Today, this industrial landscape offers a different kind of hope. As much as humans alter, develop and change the land, in the end, nature takes it back. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in 1870, “Nature predominates over the human will in all works.”

- A LITTLE BOY DRINKS from a water pipe along the boardwalk in Kukak Bay, circa 1925. “Main Street, Kukak Bay” Frida Nielsen collection, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage, KATM-00296.
- ▲ GRASS REPLACES THE BOARDWALK in 2001. The same water pipe can be seen in the foreground. Katherine Johnson, NPS, 2001, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.







SIX
CANNERY PEOPLE

*Our fathers had their dreams;
we have ours; the generation that follows will have its own.
Without dreams and phantoms, man cannot exist.
— Olive Schreiner*

IMAGINE CLIPPING CLAMS at Kukak in 1924. How old would you be? Where are you from? Did you come for work or adventure? Is the work difficult, challenging, or simply boring? Is it dignified or oppressive? Did you bring family or come alone? Have you made friends? How do you see the world around you?

◀ KUKAK WAS A CROSS-CULTURAL, MULTI-AGED INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY where men and women worked, ate, and socialized together. "Musicians" Frida Nielsen collection, circa 1925, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage, KATM-00296.

▲ A CANNERY WORKER TIES LINE during a coffee break, otherwise known as mug-up. Gladys Olsen collection, circa 1925, Alutiiq Museum, Kodiak.

PIONEER PACKING COMPANY - 1932 KUKAK BAY CANNERY CREW

Name	Position	Rate	Steamer Fare
Jones, Raymond	Bookkeeper & Storekeeper	65.00 per month	1st. Class
Smith, John	Cook	135.00 " "	" "
Towne, Allan	Flunkey	60.00 " "	2nd. "
Neiminen, Elmer	Beach Boss	100.00 " "	" "
Howell, Harry L.	Truck Driver & Auto Mechanic	90.00 " "	" "
Elway, Robt.	Truck Driver	65.00 " "	" "
Brown, Neal	Swamper	65.00 " "	" "
Local Man	Swamper	65.00 " "	" "
Edward, Farnie	Cannery Machinist	1,000.00 per Season	1st. "
Fee, W. A.	Warehouse & Retort	90.00 " month	" "
Rasor, Walter	Fireman	90.00 " "	2nd. "
Lightfoot, Harold	Asst. Machinist	85.00 " "	1st. "
Seiling, C.	Scalder	75.00 " "	2nd. "
Local Man	Sheller	65.00 " "	" "
Local Man	"	65.00 " "	" "
Local Man	Clam Weigher	65.00 " "	" "
Rasor, Robt.	Pickup man	60.00 " "	2nd. "
Local Man	Filling Machine	65.00 " "	" "
Fraser, John	Nightwatchman	65.00 " "	" "
Local Man	Process	65.00 " "	" "
Dove, Marcia	Clam Cleaner	P. W. 70¢ cwt.	1st. "
Edwards, Mrs. E.	Can Shute	Hour Work 25¢	" "
Fosberg, Mrs. W.	Clam Cleaner	P. W. 70¢ cwt.	" "
Hoover, Mrs. F. L.	" "	P. W. " "	" "
Jensen, Gretta	" "	P. W. " "	" "
Kelley, Mrs. D. J.	" "	P. W. " "	" "
Nicholson, Mrs. C.H.	" "	P. W. " "	" "
Sumerlin, Mrs. Alvin	" "	P. W. " "	" "
Sumerlin, Annette	" "	P. W. " "	" "
Wilkins, Mrs. L.	" "	P. W. " "	" "
Amuknuk, Marion	" "	P. W. " "	Local
Gregoroff, Gladys	" "	P. W. " "	" "
Gregoroff, Mary	" "	P. W. " "	" "
Johnson, Jesse	" "	P. W. " "	" "
Magnusson, Mrs. Pete	Clam Inspector	Hour Work 25¢	" "
Kelley, D. J.	Captain PIONEER	150.00 per month	1st. class
Vosberg, George	Engineer "	135.00 " "	" "
Hemphill, Melvin	Deckhand & Cook	80.00 " "	" "
Local Man	Captain NORMAN	125.00 " "	" "
Local Man	Engineer "	100.00 " "	" "
Local Man	Deckhand "	60.00 " "	" "
Local Man	Web Man & Fisherman	125.00 " "	" "
	while working on fishing gear.		

All Steamer fares are to Kukak Bay, Alaska and Return.

Cannery People

The answers we can only infer, for most cannery people who worked at Kukak never wrote about their experience. Few subjects in Alaskan history rely on such scanty facts as the role cannery workers played in the industrial landscape. Unlike fishermen who capture the imagination, or the cannery owners who became the rhetorical target of most territorial politicians, historians have usually overlooked the cannery worker in Alaskan history.

Kukak was a cross-cultural, multi-aged industrial society where men and women worked, ate, and socialized together. Each spring, the Alaska Steamship Company's steamer, the *Redondo*, transported cannery workers to Kukak Bay. Crews shared the ride with all necessary supplies for the season: tin (for cans), cannery



equipment, food, hardware and office supplies. According to the superintendent's trip log, the steamers embarked in Seattle, maneuvered through the Inside Passage, stopped in Cordova, Kodiak, Kukak Bay, then returned to Seattle along the same route. Many people who made up the Kukak crew were men and women from Seldovia, Kodiak, and Homer, as well as from Grays Harbor, Washington. Isolation required Kukak to be self-sufficient. And self-sufficiency made Kukak more than a workplace; it nurtured a community.

At Kukak, as with most Alaskan canneries, two tiers of labor merged in the workplace: those associated with the organization from the inside, and those hired from without. The first tier consisted of men who dedicated their career to the canning industry. The pecking order of these "company men" began with the superintendent. He oversaw all operations, ordered necessary supplies and hired Kukak's forty-person cannery crew. Next on the list was the bookkeeper, who balanced company books and accounted for every

▲ THE ALASKA STEAMSHIP, THE *REDONDO*, brought cannery workers to Kukak in the spring, and in the fall shipped both people and product south. "In Halibut Cove" Frida Nielsen collection, circa 1925, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage, KATM-00296.

◀ FRANK MCCONNAGHY'S CANNERY CREW in 1932. G.P. Halferty Papers, University of Washington Special Collections.

Cannery People



cent spent. Mariners and tendermen also ranked high on the ladder, for they made sure clams arrived at Kukak in good condition. Carpenters and machinists maintained the cannery's operation. Though the cook resided at the bottom of the first tier, he fed the entire cannery crew, and thus, he became either the most liked, or the most dreaded man in camp.

Seasonal workers comprised the second tier. At Kukak, these were the women hired to clean the clams and the men hired to do the actual canning. In the past, the salmon canners hired Chinese laborers to can fish. But the combination of innovative machines and federal exclusionary laws forced most Chinese laborers out of the cannery workforce by the time Kukak Cannery was built in 1923.

Most of Kukak's seasonal workers needed the physical endurance to deal with repetitive work, wet conditions, and long hours. The unpredictability of the catch and the perishable nature of the clams demanded that cannery workers be available twenty hours a day, day after day. Workers had to be dependable. A cannery could not afford to have even a few of

▲ FRANK McCONNAGHY, *superintendent of the Kukak Cannery*. Gladys Olsen collection, circa 1925, Alutiiq Museum, Kodiak.

► POSING ON THE KUKAK DOCK, *Frida Nielsen (left) and her sister Erna demonstrate their art. "Clipping"* Frida Nielsen collection, circa 1925, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage, KATM-00296.



Buried Dreams

its crew quit in the middle of the season—such an event could mean bankruptcy. Seventy years later the cannery experience remains much the same, as described by a contemporary worker:

Working for a cannery is more than a job. It's your life 24 hours a day for about two months. You work, eat, and sleep for the company. The work is long, hard, boring, wet, and miserable. And once you're there, you're stuck. You could leave of course, without any money, a lot less pride, and about a 2000 mile plane ride to think about it.

Cannery work, though distinct in its various jobs, operated as a living organism, with all parts working separately for a common purpose. At Kukak that purpose was to can razor clams. With the prompt blow of



the steam whistle that announced the beginning of the work day, workers reported to various stations and canning commenced. Once the clams began to arrive, the work accelerated to a feverish pace lasting well into the night. While clam clippers cleaned fresh clams and sent the product down the assembly line to be canned and cooked by the retort man, machinists kept the gears rotating and belts spinning. Carpenters fixed broken boards along the boardwalk, and the boiler man supplied the cannery's power. Clerks rushed about, checking inventories. In the office, the bookkeeper unlocked the safe and spent the day bent over paperwork. The mess hall crew prepared the meals and kept coffee brewing around the clock. The storekeeper received his goods from the big ships that moved back and forth between Kodiak and Kukak Bay. The

- ▲ DRESSED IN A WHITE-COLLARED SHIRT, the cannery bookkeeper takes a break with a cup of coffee in front of the main office. Gladys Olsen collection, circa 1925, Alutiiq Museum, Kodiak.
- TIRED CLAM CLIPPERS head to their bunkhouses after a long day of work at the cannery. Gladys Olsen collection, circa 1925, Alutiiq Museum, Kodiak.

Cannery People



superintendent, like the town marshal, was in charge of it all; he made sure that at the end of the season there was a pack of clams to send south and a set of books that balanced.

From the kitchen to the factory, many considered the canning process an art, and called those who practiced it artisans. Some jobs were routine and undemanding, but others challenged the intellect and manual dexterity of even the most skilled and experienced employees. For instance, pressure cooking cans—a seemingly simple task—required judgment, experience and precision to successfully operate the retort. If done incorrectly, a significant portion of the pack could be lost.

Industrial technologies such as pressure cooking advanced primarily by the many successive incremental improvements made by cannery artisans. In the earliest canneries, cans were packed almost entirely by hand. Chinese workers cut and soldered the tins, Native laborers packed and filled the cans, and other cannery workers boiled the cans in salted water. Machines replaced human hands: a can-making machine, a soldering machine, and the retort to automate the canning process. Artisans also introduced other manufacturing methods; their dexterity, planning, and resourcefulness define craftsmanship, an essential component of manufacturing and industrial technology. Unfortunately, we know more about the machines than about those men who, over the years, perfected them.

When authority shifted in the industrial landscape, management,

Mermaid Cocktail

8 artichoke hearts, chopped
2 7-oz. flat cans Pioneer
Minced Sea Clams, drained

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup mayonnaise
12 pimento stuffed olives
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup catsup



Mix together well, mayonnaise, catsup, and clam nectar drained from the two cans of clams. Then mix together lightly all ingredients. Serve in cocktail glasses or on crisp lettuce. (Serves 6)



▲ TWO CANNERY WORKERS
BRIGHTEN SPIRITS with
costumes made of moss.
*Gladys Olsen collection, circa
1925, Alutiiq Museum,
Kodiak.*

► "COOKIE JIM" AND A
CANNERY WORKER clown
around. "Cook and a Loving
Match" *Frida Nielsen
collection, circa 1925, Lake
Clark Katmai Studies Center,
Anchorage, KATM-00296.*

► CANNERY WORKERS COVETED
FRESH FRUIT at Kukak. When
the first watermelon arrived,
everyone enjoyed the treat.
"The First Watermelon"
*Frida Nielsen collection, circa
1925, Lake Clark Katmai
Studies Center, Anchorage,
KATM-00296.*



Cannery People

not the machinist, took control of the cannery floor. Individual machines were redesigned to eliminate the special knowledge needed to run them. Uniformity and standardization of specific tasks in the cannery gradually replaced the skills of the individual artisans. Mechanization was now the key element in the development of the cannery system, and standardized cans were packed by unskilled labor on an assembly line using interchangeable parts. This was a significant departure from traditional practices where one artisan drew on a number of distinct skills.

Even with mechanization, Kukak needed competent cannery workers to assemble and maintain the complex equipment, and hand labor was still required for many tasks.

As important as competent work skills, were the informal relationships formed among workers. "If you do stick it out through all the hours of stress and strain," recalled a veteran cannery worker, "you'll probably find that working in a cannery isn't all that bad, because you go through the ordeal with people." Kukak required dynamic and extensive social interaction. Entire families worked at Kukak. Children played on the boardwalk, while husbands worked alongside wives. Contrary to the general notion that early cannery life was gloomy, oppressive, and inhospitable, life at the Kukak Cannery could be liberating, varied, and even fun. Employees played card games, made music, and explored the surrounding countryside.

In part, it is Kukak's social structure that gives the cannery historical importance—for we know some of the workers and how they saw the world. Industrial historians suggest that early twentieth century laborers



Cannery People

who wrote about their work were likely to be exceptional individuals. Though no worker wrote about Kukak outside the context of business records, a few did take photographs. In doing so, they left behind images of young faces and spirited independence. In 1925, friendships endured and a community thrived at Kukak.

“We live and work among the same people day after day for a month or two each summer,” noted a cannery worker. “During my summers there I discovered that there is more to this cannery job than making money by working long hours while being cold and tired. There is a community atmosphere that begins immediately among those of us who return each summer and begins within a few weeks among first timers.”

These informal relationships contributed to the degree of cooperation needed among cannery workers to perform such demanding tasks. Workers looked out for each other, and created a safer and better work environment. As the workday wore on, a joke from a friend improved spirits or a ride on a hand truck relieved a clam clipper’s sore feet. A costume party created a reason to relax and a hillside hike restored the soul. The nurturing social structure that grew around Kukak’s collaborative efforts could account for much of the canneries success.

When new operators rebuilt Kukak in 1947, the sense of community created by earlier managers was not reestablished. Transient workers replaced a more youthful generation of cannery people. Families no longer arrived together—everyone was a stranger. New owners ignored facilities such as indoor plumbing and running water. Such deficiencies in the workplace translated to poor production, and within two years Kukak failed.

- THE GRAHAM BROTHERS *expand the boardwalk*. “Graham Brothers” Frida Nielsen collection, circa 1925, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage, KATM-00296.









- ◀ A CANNERY WORKER GETS A RIDE on a hand truck along Kukak's main dock. "Taxi" Frida Nielsen collection, circa 1925, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center (LAKA), Anchorage, KATM-00296.
- ◀ FRIDA NIELSEN, CLARENCE SELIQ, AND DICK MADDEN explore the hills surrounding Kukak. "Mountain Climbing" Frida Nielsen collection, circa 1925, LAKA, Anchorage, KATM-00296.
- ▼ FRIDA NIELSEN dressed to leave Kukak for the season. "Myself" Frida Nielsen collection, circa 1925, LAKA, Anchorage, KATM-00296.



▲ CANNERS BROUGHT CATS TO KUKAK to chase mice. "The Kukak Family" Frida Nielsen collection, circa 1925, LAKA, Anchorage, KATM-00296.



Cannery People

Besides plunging markets for canned razor clams, perhaps a contributing factor in Kukak's decline was that cannery workers were no longer valued. As the "bottom line" began to increasingly undermine operations, the quality of life for cannery workers declined. Yet, hour after hour, these workers devoted constant attention to each aspect of the canning process. Problems could arise at any moment—a belt might slip or a shaft might snap. A production stoppage meant a loss to the company. Most of Kukak's workers stood on their feet all day, walking miles within a small area. They endured vibrating floors, dust-filled air, dim light, and deafening noise levels. When managers failed to provide a decent quality of life to cannery workers, the work became intolerable.

Somewhere in the crux between intense labor and idleness, a culture of work emerged at Kukak during its early (pre-1936) years that provided dignity to many of its cannery people. "Working at the factory," recalled a female food processor, "gave my time value. It gave my body value. It gave me value." Though cannery managers and machines established the pace of work, cannery workers supplied Kukak with energy—with life.



- CHILDREN WERE BOTH SEEN AND HEARD at the Kukak Cannery. "Erna and Anna" Frida Nielsen collection, circa 1925, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage, KATM-00296.







SEVEN DASHED DREAMS

THE COLLAPSE OF THE ALASKAN RAZOR CLAM CANNERIES

*Yet, no doubt, nature will know how to point it out in due time,
if it be necessary, by methods yet more searching and unexpected.*

— Henry David Thoreau

AFTER HEMRICH LEFT KUKAK in the late 1930s, the razor clam business briefly surged upward along with the booming Dungeness crab fishery. Crab fishermen began to pay Swikshak diggers a high price for razor clams and controversially they used the succulent shellfish for bait. This surge attracted Kodiak industry man Walt Fuhrer to the razor clam beaches of the Alaska Peninsula. In 1947 Mainland Fisheries, previously known as

▲ AUGUST SUNLIGHT HIGHLIGHTS DISCARDED MACHINERY at Kukak. George Teague, NPS, July 2000. Slide on file at Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.

◀ A MARSH SEEPS INTO THE AREA where Kukak's mess hall and store once stood. Jeanne Schaaf, NPS, 2001, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.

Buried Dreams

the Cape Douglas Canning Company, rebuilt Kukak, but instead of rising from the ashes, the operation barely remained above water. Mainland Fisheries replaced the scorched cannery with a Quonset hut. They also rebuilt a forty- by 110-foot dock and rehabilitated the mess hall, store, supply building and bunkhouses that had been consumed in the 1936 fire. That season Kukak produced a relatively small pack of 5,309 cases.

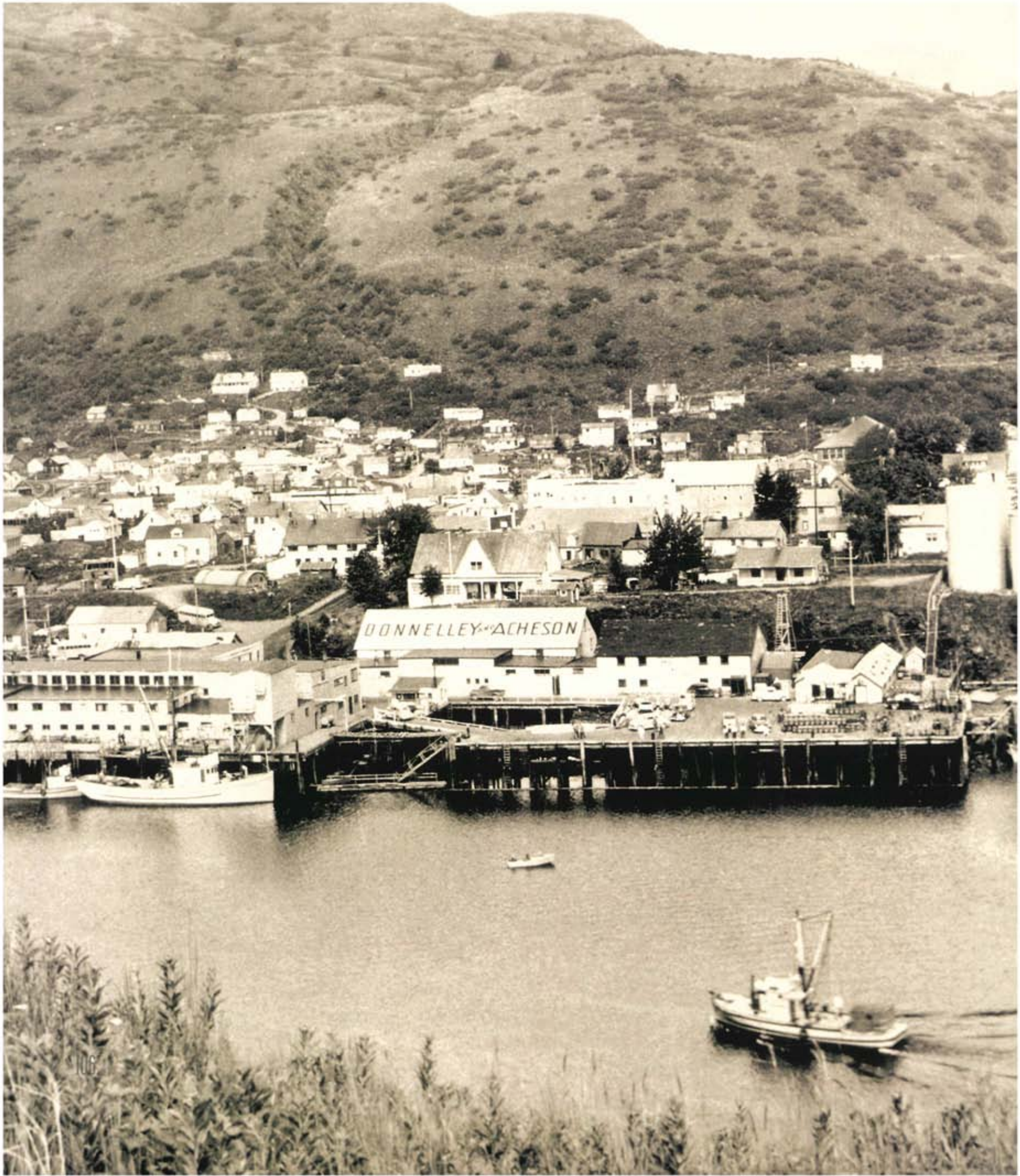
Cannery employees who worked at Kukak in the 1940s recall a rundown, shoddy operation that lacked working toilets and running water. The Kukak of 1947 was a far cry from the progressive institution it was in the 1920s. Neither children nor families gathered along cannery row. The respected superintendent had left for Kodiak more than a decade earlier. Displaced drifters replaced the workers' spirited community at Kukak, while efficiency and expertise gave way to incompetence and disorganization.



- ▲ AFTER ABANDONMENT IN 1949, the cannery steadily deteriorated "Wreckage at Clam Cannery, East End of Area" V.H. Cahalane, August 2, 1953, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage, 2-SB2-11890.
- KUKAK CANNERY four years after it closed in 1949. "Clam Cannery, Looking West" V.H. Cahalane, August 2, 1953, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage, 2-SB2-11881.







DONNELLY & ACHESON

Dashed Dreams: The Collapse of the Razor Clam Canneries

Mainland's difficulties began in 1946 when they were issued a five-year permit to dig clams at Swikshak from the National Park Service. Although they packed 3,064 cases in 1947, the company neglected to renew the NPS permit when they expanded clamming operations to Kukak.

The root of the misunderstanding between the canner and the government goes back to 1923 when Hemrich built the Kukak Cannery. That year the cannery and Swikshak's clamming beds were located beyond the original 1918 boundaries of Katmai National Monument. When Katmai's boundaries expanded in April 1931, both the cannery and the clamming beach were absorbed into the monument. In June 1936, a presidential proclamation was issued that recognized the rights of all user groups prior to the boundary expansion. Hemrich intended to follow up by obtaining a patent to its lands. But after fire destroyed the cannery three months after the proclamation, he made no further attempt to patent the Kukak and Swikshak properties; instead he decided to desert his company's interests altogether.

Hemrich's abandonment of Kukak without the patent caused problems for Mainland Fisheries. In 1949 the National Park Service caught Mainland operating at Kukak without a permit. While Mainland halted its clamming operation to wait out the lengthy permit process, Frank McConnaghy approached the Park Service with a proposal. McConnaghy, who had been working as general superintendent for Halferty's plants in Kodiak and Cordova, offered NPS officials a plan that would allow Halferty to harvest clams at Swikshak and process them at the Halferty-McConnaghy cannery in Kodiak. In 1951 National Park Service granted Halferty the permit. Kukak Cannery was not involved in the agreement, and after 1949, it never operated again.

- ◀ *APA-Halferty cannery complex in Kodiak in 1951. Here the cannery appears before the 1964 earthquake...*

Kodiak Historical Society, circa 1951, Kodiak, P78N.

- ▶ *...and here it appears after a tidal wave caused by the earthquake washed the waterfront away. Kodiak Historical Society, March 1964, Kodiak, P633-31-N.*



Dashed Dreams: The Collapse of the Razor Clam Canneries

By the 1950s, Kukak's abandonment reflected the state of the entire Alaskan razor clam industry. Tough competition came from the East Coast where hardshell clam packers used dredges to harvest clams. The labor-intensive Pacific clam fishery proved too expensive, and West Coast firms eventually dropped out of the market. Though Alaskan clam beds are the most prolific in the world, they are vulnerable to severe weather. This caused the industry to fluctuate greatly with Alaska's variable razor clam populations. Besides poor clam seasons, Halferty, McConnaghy and other razor clam packers faced labor strikes, questionable health related-issues regarding the hazards of consuming clams, even rumors that President Harding had died after eating shellfish during a trip to Alaska in 1923.

Competition was not only fierce among clam canners, but larger, more powerful Alaskan fisheries geographically and economically overshadowed the clamming industry. Only a handful of clam canners stayed in the business for long, and those that did had to diversify their interests. The seafood industry's journal, *Pacific Fisherman*, relegated razor clam catch reports to its back pages; they more closely followed reports from the salmon, halibut and crab fisheries. Crab fishermen who were now using razor clams as bait

CANNED CLAMS Suffer in Earthquake

● Pacific clam canning dwindled to nominal volume in 1964 under the impact of a number of adverse circumstances: 1. earthquake; 2. high clam costs; 3. competition from sports digging, from Atlantic Coast clams, from foreign imports.

Canvass conducted by *Pacific Fisherman Yearbook* produced pack figures of only 853 cases of razor clams and 2,559 cases of hardshell clams. These data are on the basis of standard cases of 48 halves, or their equivalent.

In Alaska the packers included Glacier Packing Co., Big Point Seafoods, and Point Chehalis Packers, all of Cordova; and Ekren Packing Co. of Kasitsna Bay.

Alaska's reported clam pack for 1964 consisted of 329 cases of razor clams and 49 hardshell.

Apparently the only pack of razor

clams in Washington was 524 cases produced by Mohawk Packing Co. at Moclips.

In the hardshell category the only pack reported was 2,559 cases by Guilford Canning Co. at Port Townsend.

● The razor clam resource of Alaska—the principal commercial source of this finest clam in all the world—suffered severely in the Alaska earthquake of March, 1964.

The resource itself, the clams in the beaches, was damaged seriously as result of *emergence* on the easterly side of Prince William Sound and the area of the Copper River delta; and their availability by *subsidence* of the beaches around Kodiak Island and Cook Inlet, west of the epicenter.

In addition, facilities for utilizing the resource were affected more in

proportion than those devoted to any other Alaska fishery. The cannery which in recent years had put up the largest pack of razor clams in the world was utterly wiped out. This was the establishment of the Alaska Packers at Kodiak. Other canneries handling clams in the Kodiak area also were damaged severely; and those in the vicinity of Cordova, long the traditional center of this industry, were crippled by *emergence*, which left them high-and-dry and unable to operate on clams in 1964.

The result was that the Alaska production of this distinctive seafood in 1964 was minimal, and largely devoted to supplying the local Alaska demand.

● Principal United States distributors of razor clams had recourse to the limited packing operations in British

Dashed Dreams: The Collapse of the Razor Clam Canneries



paid diggers high prices for their catch. Clam packers struggled to compete with the fishermen's prices, and by the 1950s, companies either consolidated or abandoned razor clamming completely. Pioneer Packing merged with the Whiz Packing Company from Seattle, and in 1958, Halferty sold his clamming interests to the industrial giant Alaska Packers Association. Frank

McConnaghy's reputation as an efficient clam cannery boss gained him employment with the Alaska Packers Association, the only company in Alaska still canning minced razor clams.

After 1960, the Alaska clam canning industry continued to decline. In 1963, concerns about poisonous shellfish led the Alaska Department of Health and Welfare to prohibit commercial harvesting from Alaskan beaches. This prohibition remained in effect until 1970. But the fatal blow to the industry occurred in 1964 when the Good Friday Earthquake destroyed the Kodiak clam cannery and dropped clam beds in Cordova, ending the commercial razor clam industry in Alaska.



- ◀ "CANNED CLAMS SUFFER IN EARTHQUAKE" *Pacific Fisherman*, January 25, 1965.
- ▲ THE KUKAK CANNERY today. *George Teague, NPS, July 2000. Slide at Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.*
- ▶ BY THE 1960's, the Alaska Packers Association was the only American company on the west coast that could compete in the canned razor clam market. *Courtesy of Richard Sturgill.*





EIGHT RECLAIMING KUKAK

THE PARADOX OF PRESERVATION

*The historical and cultural foundations of the Nation
should be preserved as a living part of our community life and development
in order to give a sense of orientation to the American people.*

—National Historic Preservation Act (16 USC 470 et seq.) Section 1(b)(2)

IN AN INTERVIEW IN THE SPRING OF 2002, Ralf Peitsch, a clam digger who worked Swikshak Beach in 1963, said, "Until the last chunk of cannery machinery sinks into the earth, it (Kukak) still means something to someone." As the Katmai wilderness continues to reclaim the last historical remnant of this commercial razor clam industry on the Katmai coast, most people have forgotten what Kukak means.

- ▲ MACHINERY SCATTERED along a rocky shore. George Teague, NPS, July 2000. Slide on file at Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center (LAKA), Anchorage.
- ◀ A SCRAMBLED PILE of iron and corrugated tin is all that remains of the Kukak Cannery. Katherine Johnson, NPS, 2001, LAKA, Anchorage.

Buried Dreams



Kukak's ruins do intrude upon Katmai's coastal wilderness. The site with its rotting planks, twisted piles of metal, and rusty nails poses a serious hazard to the occasional visitor. And, historically, the cannery was a natural resource extractor—it used technical and organizational skills, engineering knowledge, and energy to transform natural resources into canned clams.

Kukak released waste into the pristine environment and by building workplaces, it altered the landscape. Yet, this site is important to us because America's history matters.

America is blessed with a panoramic history beginning with the First Americans and continuing with the accomplishments of successive waves of immigrants from virtually every nation in the world. Preserving the material culture of the American story for future generations is, for many, a profound article of faith. Our history and the places where it happened are important touchstones of national and personal identity. We preserve these places because they impart the larger stories and truths about who we are as individuals, as families, as communities, and as a nation.

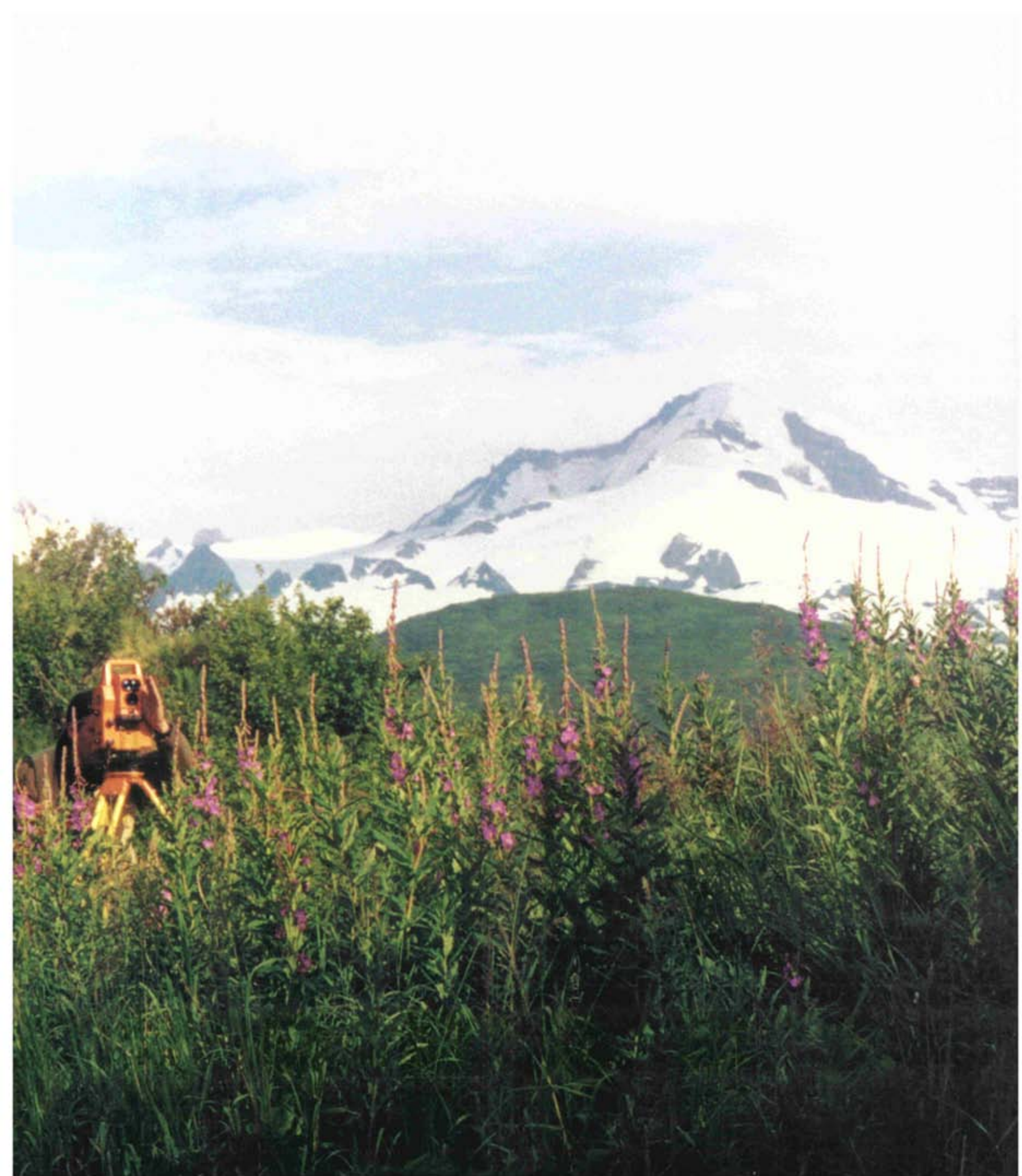
— The National Park Service Cultural Resources Challenge 2000

More simply put, we preserve this history because people such as Ralf Peitsch still remember it.

- ▲ FIREWEED AND ALDERS surround the remains of the winter watchman's house. Jeanne Schaaf, NPS, 2001, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.
- RANGER AL HOFFS assists NPS surveyors in mapping the cannery site, July 2001. Jeanne Schaaf, NPS, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.



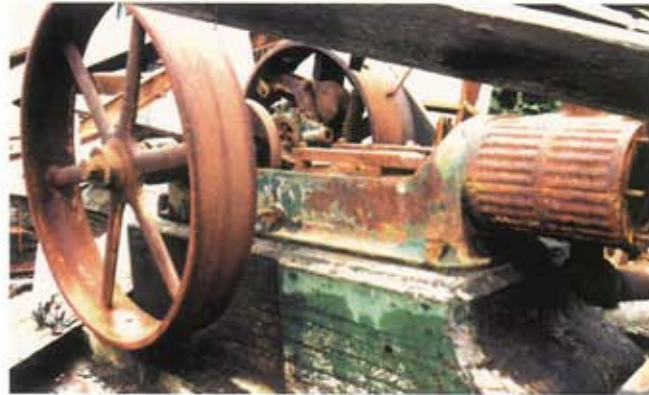




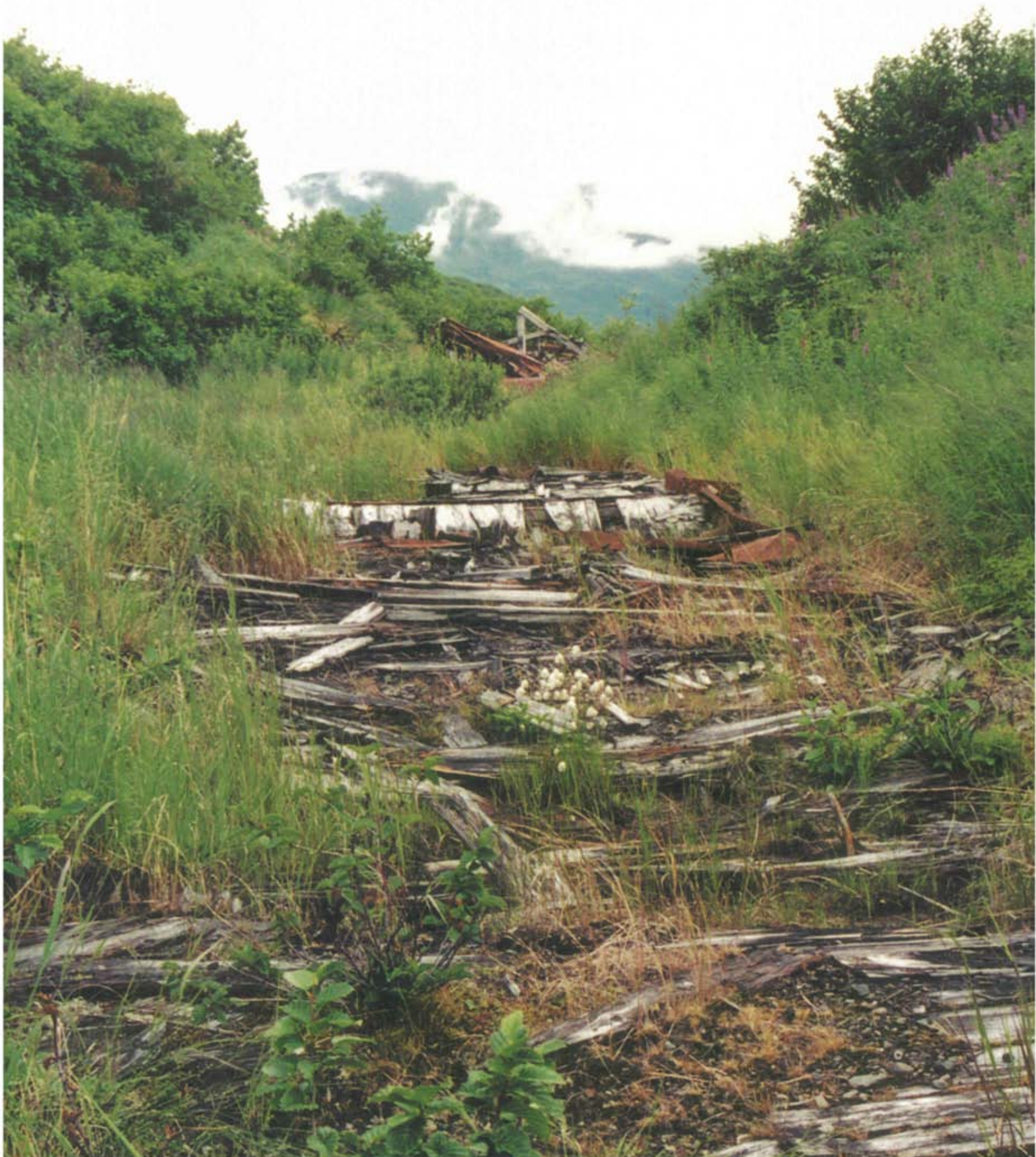
Reclaiming Kukak: The Paradox of Preservation

The National Park Service, mandated by the National Historic Preservation Act to protect significant places, considers the Kukak Cannery a cultural resource. When we look at Kukak from a historical perspective, the cannery becomes a participant, rather than an intruder, in the processes that have shaped the Katmai landscape. The commercial clam canners were among many

human enterprises to leave their mark on the Katmai coast. Ancient travelers left the remains of their campsites along this coast 8,000 years ago, and were followed by a long series of resident Native cultures, hunters, trappers, traders, travelers, priests, scientists, conservationists, fishermen, and tourists, to name a few.



- ◀ NEARLY ENGULFED BY FIREWEED, Bob Strobe surveys the Kukak site in July, 2001. Katherine Johnson, NPS, 2001, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.
- ▲ A STEAM ENGINE with a flat belt pulley drove the cannery machines at Kukak. Jeanne Schaaf, NPS, 2001, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.
- ▲ NPS ALASKA REGIONAL DIRECTOR ROB ARNBERGER and his wife Elvira explore the cannery site with Katherine Johnson and Katmai and Lake Clark National Park and Preserve Superintendent Deb Liggett. Jeanne Schaaf, NPS, 2001, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.



Buried Dreams



Historical landscapes like Kukak inform us about the past; they also contribute to better use of natural and human resources in industries today. Only by examining these activities can we truly understand their costs. Technology changes rapidly, but the interactions of people with tools, machinery, and other workers have enduring significance. The stories of people who worked at Kukak contribute to a national dialogue that attempts to explain where we have been so we can better understand where we are going.

Buried Dreams represents a small part of a larger effort by National Park Service Superintendent Deborah O. Liggett and park staff to preserve Kukak's unique history and to remember the voices of its people. The stories of Hemrich and McConnaghy, the Swikshak clam diggers and the young clam clipper Frida Nielsen remain alive throughout these pages. So "until the last chunk of cannery machinery sinks into the earth, Kukak will always mean something to someone."

- ▲ CLAM CLIPPERS RELAX *outside of their bunkhouses in 1925. Gladys Olsen collection, circa 1925, Alutiiq Museum, Kodiak.*
- ◀ CANNERY ROW *in 2001. Katherine Johnson, NPS, 2001, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage.*



G L O S S A R Y

CASE: A measurement of the productivity of a canning line. A case contains 48 pounds of canned product, either 48 one-pound cans or 96 half-pound cans.

CLINCHER: A machine which partially secures the lid by a single turn in a seamer. After the can is filled with clams, the lid is left sufficiently loose to permit the escape of air and some steam during the exhausting process, but sufficiently tight to prevent spilling or the entry of air.

CLIPPER: A cannery worker who used scissors to cut away the viscera from razor clams.

COOLER TRAY: A large shallow tray made of flat, iron strips which holds several dozen cans. Several coolers filled with cans are placed in a stack on a small car which rolls on tracks or transfer rails into the retorts for cooking.

DOUBLE SEAMER: A machine which seals the top of a can with a double seam. It follows the exhausting process on the canning line. Also called a *closing machine*.

EXHAUST BOX: A larger steam chest of wood or metal which removes the air in the headspace of a can. Steam replaces the air in the can and then condenses during the cooling period leaving a partial vacuum. Follows the clinching process.

LINE SHAFT: A traditional method of powering machines on an assembly line. A single shaft, usually suspended from the ceiling, powers machines by a system of belts and pulleys.

PACK: The measurement of productivity of a canning line based on the number of cases of cans packed per canning day or per season. Also refers to the total productivity of the canneries in a given year.

REFORM LINE: A line for reforming collapsible sanitary cans, which were designed for easier and cheaper transport to isolated canneries.

◀ A SMALL GIRL sits along the Kukak dock, circa 1925. "Anna Kerr" Frida Nielsen collection, circa 1925, Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, Anchorage, KATM-00296.

Glossary

RETORT: A large pressure cooker, usually horizontal and cylindrical, of robust construction, riveted or welded, of mild steel with a door that can be bolted in position and made steamtight. By increasing the internal pressure of the steam the temperature can be raised above 100 degrees Celsius.

SKIFF: A small flat-bottomed vessel, usually powered with a small engine.

TENDERBOAT: A vessel powered by steam or an internal combustion engine which is used to transport clams and supplies but which does not engage in fishing.

TRANSFER RAIL: A rail system by which dollies of cooler trays are fed from the end of the line into the retorts.

VACUUM SEAMING: A system in which a can enters a gas-tight chamber and thereby trips the exhausting mechanism. A lid is then seamed on, the vacuum released, and the can travels along the conveyor. This process is performed by a vacuum machine which replaced the steam box and double seaming process.

VENTING: the earliest method of creating a vacuum in a can. The cans were sealed and cooled for 80 minutes in a retort or open tank, the so-called "first cooking". They were then removed and vented by being punctured with a mallet with a protruding nail to let the hot air escape, after which they were immediately resealed with a drop of solder.

WHARF: Where clams are unloaded from boats or scows. Usually at the short end of the traditional cannery's L-shaped design and in the deepest water to facilitate unloading at all stages of the tide.

Pioneer Minced Sea Clam Hors d'Oeuvres



SLICE bread in desired shapes, and toast on one side—butter untoasted side. Drain one 7-oz. flat can **PIONEER** Minced Sea Clams, and combine the meat with 1 package Philadelphia Cream Cheese. Spread this clam and cheese mixture on buttered sides of the toast, then brush each hors d'oeuvre with beaten egg white. Sprinkle with paprika, and place in broiler under top heat, until delicately browned. Serve hot immediately.

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The Lake Clark Katmai Studies Center, established in February 1999, is a research and curatorial facility for the museum collections from Katmai National Park and Preserve, Lake Clark National Park and Preserve, Aniakchak National Monument and Preserve, and the Alagnak Wild River. The Center supports the Cultural Resource program for these parks with responsibilities that include stewardship of historic buildings, museum collections, archeological sites, cultural landscapes, oral and written histories, and ethnographic resources.

Our mission is to identify, evaluate and preserve the cultural resources of the park areas and to bring an understanding of these resources to the public. Congress has mandated that we preserve these resources because they are important components of our national and personal identity.

The National Park Service Cultural Resource Preservation Program: Historic Resources Studies provided funding for this publication to identify and evaluate the subject historic resources and to nominate them to the National Register of Historic Places.

Mention of trade names of commercial products does not constitute endorsement or recommendations for use.

Jeanne M. Schaaf
Cultural Resources Manager
September 2002

BURIED DREAMS



THE RISE AND FALL OF A CLAM CANNERY ON THE KATMAI COAST

AT THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, during a time of unprecedented mechanization, men and women came to the wild Katmai coast of Alaska, built a cannery, and canned razor clams. This is the story of an industrial enterprise that set out to unmake wilderness, and in turn, was eventually unmade by nature.

...Our history and the places where it happened are important touchstones of national and personal identity. We preserve these places because they impart the larger stories and truths about who we are as individuals, as families, as communities, and as a nation.

— The National Park Service Cultural Resources Challenge 2000