



Digging up Dreams: The Razor Clam Industry in Kukak Bay, Alaska

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Seventy-six years ago, a young woman from Homer brought her camera to work. Her name was Frieda Neilson and her photographs reveal an adventurous journey to Kukak Bay, Alaska where she worked as a clam-clipper at a small cannery during the summer of 1925. Now, after years of abandonment, vandalism, and fire, all that remain at Kukak are rubble piles of wood and corrugated metal, skeletal ruins of bunkhouses, and rusted machinery scattered along a rocky shore.

As the Katmai wilderness continues to reclaim the last historical remnant of the commercial razor clam industry, efforts to preserve this part of Alaska's past are currently underway by historians and archeologists working for Katmai National Park and Preserve. These photographs not only provide a unique perspective of daily life at a razor clam cannery, but they contribute to a larger cultural resource project designed to preserve and interpret the history of this obscure Alaskan industry.

Bringing the Kukak Cannery back to life

is this extraordinary collection of photographs that expose a cross-cultural, multi-aged industrial society where both men and women worked, ate, and recreated together. Still, glaringly absent from the collection are photographs of Kukak's canning process. Lack of light probably limited the photographer's ability to shoot inside the buildings. But through the eye of her camera lens, this young clam-clipper shows us life beyond the dark canning lines.

Through her collection of photographs, Frieda Neilson 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 surrounding bay. We relish with her the rare delight of fresh watermelon and anxiously await the fall arrival of the Alaska steamship coming to transport both product and people south. Contrary to belief that early cannery life was gloomy, oppressive, and inhospitable, these photos depict a liberated, varied, and even fun social life at a cannery. Employees played card games, made music, and even took comfort in pets. And behind these daily activities, unobtrusively stood a one year-old Kulak Cannery — looking as fresh and hopeful as its young photographer.

The Kukak Bay cannery was located on the eastside of the Alaska Peninsula, directly across from Kodiak Island. The deep harbor carved by Pleistocene glaciers cradled the cannery from the gale force winds and provided fishing vessels a safe port along the volatile Shelikof coastline. On a rare day, the surrounding landscape offered our young photographer a panoramic view of the fiery Aleutian Mountain Range, but on more typical days, Pacific storms brought long episodes of fog and rain to the cannery (*U.S. Government 1924*).

In 1923, industry insiders heralded Kukak as “the best equipped and most efficient clam cannery on the Pacific Coast” (*Oliphant 1924*). Despite its notoriety, Kukak was just one of many Alaskan canneries that canned razor clams from 1916 to 1964. The clamming industry itself began on the Oregon Coast by early twentieth century entrepreneurs. These early canners played a vital role in the development of a U.S. clam industry by pioneering the canning technology used to pack minced clams. Because clams are extremely perishable, this innovative canning method permitted the sale of minced razor clams to markets located beyond local regions (*Sunday Oregonian, 1916*). By 1914, clam



Photograph courtesy of Alutliq Museum and Heritage Center

ca 1925—from the collection of Gladys Olsen, Kodiak Island. The cannery gang out for a 4th of July picnic at Swikshak Beach.

Far-left: ca 1925—from the collection of Gladys Olsen, Kodiak Island. Kukak was tucked in the undulating hills that surrounded Kukak Bay. This photograph was taken from the Superintendent's House, which had a panoramic view of both the cannery and the harbor.

Photograph courtesy of Alutliq Museum and Heritage Center

Left-top: ca 1925—from the collection of Gladys Olsen, Kodiak Island. Three cannery workers find time to play music along Kukak's “cannery row.”

Photograph courtesy of Alutliq Museum and Heritage Center

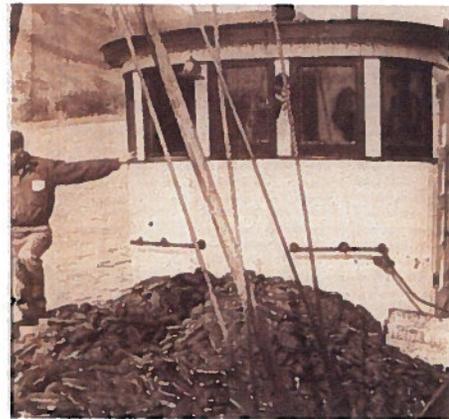
Left-bottom: ca 1925—from Frieda Nielson's photo album. “First watermelon of the Season!” Frieda Neilson and the superintendent's son enjoy the first taste of fresh melon.

National Park Service photograph



National Park Service photograph

ca 1925—*from Frieda Nielson's photo album.* "Cookie Jim," the cannery cook and a cannery worker pose for the camera in front of the cannery building, which protruded out over the deep waters of Kukak Bay on Kukak's main pier.



Photograph courtesy of Aleutik Museum and Heritage Center

ca 1925—*from the collection of Mary Olsen, Kodiak Island.* A tender delivers a boatload of live razor clams to the cannery from Swikshak Beach located 20 miles south of Kukak Bay

canners moved to Grays Harbor, Washington, and eventually, reached the rich clam beds near Cordova, Alaska in 1916. Success of these clam canners inspired 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 E. Hemrich, whose expectations alone marked Kukak, as indeed, significant.

The Hemrich family's fame came not from canning clams, but rather, from brewing beer. Both Hemrich's father and uncle owned breweries from Seattle to Aberdeen; his uncle was, in fact, 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 family's brewing enterprises came to a halt when Washington State adopted Prohibition, four years before national voters passed the Volstead Act. Seeking financial alternatives, Hemrich looked to the flourishing razor clam industry in his hometown of Aberdeen. In 1915, Hemrich and his father had incorporated the Surf Packing Company and in 1916 Elmer Hemrich traveled north to prospect Alaska's razor clam beaches (*Fribrock, 1999*).

Hemrich began his journey in Chignik, Alaska, a small fishing village on the eastside of the Alaska Peninsula. While hugging the shoreline of Shelikof Strait, Hemrich "discovered" probably the most prolific razor clam beach in Alaska, known today as Swikshak Beach. On arrival in Anchorage, Hemrich convinced a trapper named George Palmer to invest in Surf Packing, and together they built a small



National Park Service photograph

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ca 1925—*from Frieda Nielson's photo album.* "Two Lovers" was all Frieda Nielson wrote to describe the last photograph in her Kukak photo album.

clam cannery on Polly Creek. Due to little success, Palmer sold his interests to the near monopolistic salmon packers. Still determined to realize the potential of Alaska's razor clam beaches, in 1923 Hemrich incorporated a new company, Hemrich Packing, and with capital from East Coast investors, built the Kukak Cannery, twenty miles south of Swikshak Beach (*Fribrock, 1999*).

In 1925, the same year the Kodiak photographer captured Kukak in time, Hemrich brought on highly respected superintendent, Frank McConnaghy to run the Kukak clam operation. Both Hemrich and McConnaghy were from Aberdeen, where the Populist Movement enjoyed the greatest support of any other third party in Pacific Northwest history (*Schwantes, 1989*). Populists advocated an assortment of social and economic reforms, which in some respects were transplanted in Kukak Bay.

Perhaps neither McConnaghy nor Hemrich consciously administered a progressive and populist managerial style, but the era of great social crusades resonated in the social and work experience at Kukak and certainly debunked the stereotype

that canneries were sparse, oppressive, and harsh working environments. Instead, Kukak's management provided quite the opposite situation. Today Frank McConnaghy is still considered a pillar of Kodiak for contributing to the community, everything from personal loans to church donations (*Pestrikoff, 2001*). Kukak even served as one of the first radio broadcasting stations in Alaska: in 1923, Elmer's brother became KNT's licensee and transferred the station from Aberdeen to Kukak Bay. The station transmitted only 100 feet and supposedly played concert music for one hour per day. Although KNT only lasted one year, it illustrates Hemrich's attempt to improve, perhaps even enrich, the daily experience of his employees (*Broadcasting Station Directory*).

Hemrich never realized the success from clams as his family did from beer. For nearly a decade, the clam canner fought competitive East Coast markets, labor strikes, and poor clam seasons, even rumors that President Harding died from eating Alaskan shellfish. Hemrich exhaustively solicited potential investors and ultimately leased Kukak to other clam packing

companies. In 1936, Kukak was crippled by fire during its most promising season (*Seward Gateway, 1934*). Although a new company rebuilt Kukak, the cannery never achieved its operational potential. When Congress repealed Prohibition in 1933, Hemrich battled for three more years, and then surrendered in 1936 when the once optimistic clam canner deserted Kukak and returned to the beer brewing business in Aberdeen (*Alaska Sportsman, 1948*). 1949 was the final year Kukak processed clams, although Swikshak remained an important clamming beach through the 1960s.

Briefly after Hemrich left, the clam business surged upward along with the booming Dungeness crab fishery. Crab fishermen paid Swikshak diggers a high price for razor clams and used the succulent shellfish for bait (*Nickerson, 1975*). Despite the good bait prices, the market conditions for minced clams declined, forcing a series of consolidations among clam canners. By the 1960s only the industrial giant, the Alaska Packers Association, could compete in the minced clam market. The fatal blow to the



Photograph courtesy of Alaska Museum and Heritage Center

industry occurred in 1964 when the Good Friday Earthquake destroyed Kodiak clam canneries and dropped clam beds in Cordova (*Pacific Fisherman, 1965*).

In 1931, the Kukak Bay Cannery was absorbed into the federal management system when a presidential proclamation expanded the boundaries of what was then Katmai National Monument (*Clemens and Norris, 1999*). Recent decades have worn down the Kukak Cannery to a dilapidated state, but the site's contributing resources, coupled with historical research and photographs, yield significant information per-

taining to the Alaskan clam industry and its meaning to Katmai National Park and Preserve. Since Kukak was a major clam canning facility, the site provides historians a better context in which to understand this obscure industry and the people who pioneered its development on the Pacific Coast.

The National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) mandates that the National Park Service evaluate historic properties found on federal land. The law states "the spirit and direction of the Nation are founded upon and reflected in its historical heritage." Indeed, the Kukak Cannery main-

tains integrity of location, association and feeling and is significant as a site. Echoing NHPA is clam digger Ralf Peiltsch, who told a NPS researcher, "Until the last chunk of cannery machinery sinks into the earth, it (Kukak) still means something to someone." (*Peiltsch, 2001*) The Kukak Cannery and the men and women who were involved in its construction and operation contributed significantly to the development of the commercial clamming industry in Alaska. The site evokes a sense of the forward-minded attitudes in which, despite a hostile and remote environment, a modern and complex facility was built. But perhaps more importantly, for Hemrich or our young photographer, Frieda Neilson, Kukak was a place that embodied the Alaskan Dream.

More information can be found on the National Park Service website www.nps.gov/katm.

Note: Frieda Neilson's photographs are housed in the Lake Clark-Katmai National Parks collections in Anchorage, Alaska.

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