

Navigating Troubled Waters:

Part 2: Hoonah's "Million Dollar Fleet"

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to Hoonah seine boat captain Joe White, a pioneer and a highliner in one of the most challenging and dynamic fisheries in Alaska.



The "Million Dollar Fleet" sits at rest. After the 1944 fire, Hoonah got a city dock, seen here. The boat harbor was still some decades in the future. In the early part of the seine season many of the seine fleet from the fishing communities throughout southeast Alaska and Puget Sound came to Hoonah for the "Icy Straits" fishery. While there was no official count, locals recall close to 200 vessels. Many of the seine fleet would anchor out in front of town and others tied up or anchored at the cannery. In this image power blocks can be seen on the booms and diesel power skiffs are stacked on the sterns – an indicator of change in fishing techniques from previous years. Everyone in the region knew who the "Inian Island" fishermen were - the Huna boats, captains and crews. There were two fuel docks, one the Union float at Kane's dock, seen here, and the Standard Oil dock at Hoonah Seafoods, out of the picture to the right. (Circa early 1950's, courtesy Huna Heritage Foundation)

Preface

This study was commissioned by Glacier Bay Superintendent Tomie Lee out of appreciation for the proud history of the Hoonah seine fishery in the Inian Islands. Although that fishery occurred largely outside the boundary of Glacier Bay National Monument waters during the decades it was active - and hence was outside the scope of the bay-specific commercial fishing history we set out to tell in Part 1 - it played such a critical role in the community life of Hoonah that it needed to be included here, as one can't understand later developments in the regional fisheries without that historical perspective. For those fishermen from Hoonah who participated in the Inian Island fishery - and their families and friends who have reveled in the stories and legends which come to us from 'the Island Fishermen' - this brief history is not intended to be an exhaustive presentation on the subject. Personal histories - those that capture all of the sights, sounds and nuances of a magical time and place - are often best shared first person and live. Capturing such rich histories would make for a unique community-based project, but that was not our intent here. What the author, James Mackovjak - himself an Icy Strait resident and active participant in the Icy Strait fishing industry for the past several decades - was asked to do was to glean information from a variety of historical sources as he researched the much broader history treated in Part 1 of this volume. Relying primarily on published historical sources, the author looked at the Hoonah seine fishery much as it was being perceived and reported by the outside world as it was happening. He enhanced the study by referring to several unpublished sources and did a couple of personal interviews with participants and observers to flesh out the story. But to capture all of the depth and nuance of the history - to tell the story of the Inian Islands fishery - only the Hoonah seiners themselves can tell that story.

Huna Heritage Foundation graciously provided most of the black and white photographs with the exceptions of one provided by the Alaska State Library and one provided by Ken Grant. Ken Grant, a Park Service employee and himself an Inian Island fisherman, provided the photo captions. The National Park

Service is pleased to present this brief history. Any mistakes or omissions are entirely those of the author and park staff who reviewed it. It is our hope that the reader will come away with a greater understanding and appreciation of this important part of regional history.

Stylistic Note

Throughout this chapter the reader will see two spellings for the village and people who prefer to call themselves Huna Káawu [People of 'Shelter From the North Wind']. Originally called Xuniyaa [Lee of the North Wind] in Tlingit, the village name was transcribed as 'Hoonah' by the first postmaster, and that name persists. The people however prefer to use the term Huna, both for themselves and their village corporation and non-profit.

Hoonah's Salmon Seine Fleet

"The catching and canning of salmon is far and away Alaska's most important commercial enterprise. ... In terms of value of product, it surpasses all of Alaska's other natural resources and industrial enterprises combined. It would be no exaggeration to say that the salmon industry is the backbone of the entire economy of Alaska."¹ So wrote a U.S. Senate committee in 1956.

For much of Native rural Alaska, however, the committee's words amounted to an understatement. Salmon there were far more than the backbone of the economy. They were an integral component of the culture that developed in this harsh but rich region. Salmon nourished, provided income, and were the subject of much artwork. Fishing for salmon was not just a job, it was a way of life, an occupation that provided individuals with an opportunity to prove their prowess and thus attain status among their peers.

The effort to catch salmon in Alaska is not homogeneous. It is comprised of numerous and diverse fisheries conducted in equally numerous and diverse locations and with a varied array of gear types. Each fishery is in its own way challenging, but some are more so than others. Perhaps the most challenging salmon fishery in Alaska was the purse seine fishery that developed where the marine waters at the north end of southeast Alaska meet the Gulf of Alaska. The fishery provided ample opportunity for reward, provided one could meet the considerable challenge of routinely fishing in waters that, due to tidal conditions, were often just barely fishable. The seine boat captains and crews of Hoonah not only met the challenge, they thrived and came to dominate the fishery.

The object of purse seining is to encircle a school of fish with a specialized net—a "seine"—that can then be closed—"pursed"—at the bottom to keep fish from escaping. Two vessels, a seine boat and seine skiff, are needed. Prior to fishing, the seine is carefully piled on the stern of a seine boat. In making a set, the end of the seine is fastened to a seine skiff, which acts as something of a floating anchor. The seine boat is then run ahead, paying out net as it goes. Floats on the seine's "corkline" and lead weights on its "headline" keep the net spread vertically. The salmon are either encircled immediately or the seine is kept stretched in a semi-circle and held in this position while

migrating salmon (at least theoretically) move into it. All the while the seine, the seine boat, and the seine skiff drift with the current. After the salmon are encircled the seine is immediately pursed and then brought aboard until the salmon are concentrated in the part of the net known as the "money bag." They are then transferred into the boat's hold using a large heavy-duty dip net (brailer) that can be tripped open at the bottom.

The date purse seining was introduced in Puget Sound is a matter of conjecture, but by 1882 Natives there were catching salmon with small purse seines fished from large canoes.² In Southeast Alaska, purse seining began supplanting the simpler practice of beach seining in about 1898.³ Seiners powered by gasoline engines (5-horsepower "Frisco" Standards) made their debut in Puget Sound in 1903. The first gasoline-powered seiner to fish in Alaska's waters, the *Ruth*, was constructed at the Northwestern Fisheries cannery in Hunter Bay, on Prince of Wales Island, in 1907. The cannery was operated by August Buschmann, who had operated a saltery at Bartlett Cove, in Glacier Bay, in 1899 and 1900. Buschmann's brother, Eigil, began operating the *Ruth* the same year it was built.⁴ Power seiners made their first appearance in Icy Strait between 1913 and 1918.⁵

By 1914 seiners were catching more salmon in Alaska than were the infamous fish traps.⁶ Government officials at that time, however, had low regard for seining. E. Lester Jones, who investigated Alaska's salmon fisheries for the Bureau of Fisheries in 1914, wrote that, unlike traps, a "purse seine can be moved wherever a fisherman may wish to take it, thus following the fish into the very stream mouths, a most objectionable [but not yet illegal] practice."⁷ Furthermore, there was a fish quality issue. Jones wrote that seining could not be recommended as a "desirable method of fishing" because "it does not rank with the trap as a manner in which fresh and wholesome fish are delivered at the canneries." Jones had no doubt "that a fair portion of the fish brought to the canneries unfit for use have been in this condition on account of the rough treatment they received in the hands of the purse-seine fishermen."⁸ His observations had merit, but he gave no consideration to the importance of fishing jobs to Alaska's economy, particularly in rural areas. Individual salmon traps at good locations and manned by only one or two watchmen sometimes caught hundreds of thousands of

salmon over the course of a season—far more than any purse seining operation.^{A 9}

At Hoonah, the first salmon cannery was constructed in 1911 by the Hoonah Packing Co. What was known as the Hoonah Cannery began canning operations the following year. It was considered to be one of the best equipped canneries in Alaska: there were four canning lines, and among its employee facilities was a modern dance pavilion. In 1917 the Hoonah Cannery put up what was to date the largest pack ever by any cannery in Alaska —152,505 cases.¹⁰ The primary source of salmon for the Hoonah Cannery was fish traps. In 1912 the company operated four salmon traps, but the number grew steadily, and by 1922 there were 24.¹¹

The Hoonah Cannery was shuttered in 1923, and remained so until being purchased in 1934 by the independently-owned Icy Straits Salmon Co. During the interim the Hoonah salmon purse seine fleet developed.

The first Hoonah men to operate power seine boats were Oscar Williams, Philip Reese, and Sam Johnson, Jr., who fished in the early 1920s for the Northwestern Fisheries Co. cannery at Dundas Bay. The men fished almost exclusively in Icy Strait, where in the late 1920s the total seine fleet was comprised of about sixty vessels, only eight of which were from Hoonah. During the 1920s a number of seine boats were built at Hoonah by shipwrights Silas Dalton, Lonnie Houston, and Johnny Lawson. Among those built by Lawson were the *Jericho*, *Victor*, and *Sadie*. Dalton built the *Dorothy*, and later the *Dorothy II*. Lumber for vessel construction was imported from Puget Sound.¹²

Seining in those early days was very hard work. The vessels used were 24 to 28 feet long and were steered from a station located in front of the cabin.¹³ Early seines were about 100 fathoms (600 feet) long and laboriously pulled aboard by hand or with the help of a hand-powered winch. Until the advent of outboard motors in the 1930s, seine skiffs were little more than oar-powered rowboats, sometimes with two pairs of oars.¹⁴

Seine fishermen from Hoonah came to specialize in catching salmon in “the passes”

that connect Icy Strait and Cross Sound and begin about 20 to 25 miles west of Hoonah (see Figure 1). North Passage and North Inian Pass are sections of a channel that lies north of the Inian Islands group and Lemesurier Island. South Passage and South Inian Pass lie south of the islands. Middle Pass separates North and South Inian Islands (see Figure 2). The fishery targeted mostly pink (humpback) and chum (dog) salmon, though some red salmon were targeted as well. Most of the salmon that spawn in the northern half of southeast Alaska pass through these channels. Intercepting them, however, was no easy chore. Tides in the region range in excess of twenty feet, and the current at some locations in the passes can exceed eight knots—faster than some seine boats were able to travel at full speed. Tidal conditions in the passes are exacerbated by the weather: a strong wind pushing against a current could make an area unfishable. Fishing was sometimes hindered by icebergs coming out of Glacier Bay. Icebergs were especially numerous when warm weather coincided with big tides. One area of Middle Pass, because of the turmoil created by the current, eddies, and backwashes, became known as “The Laundry.” Catching salmon in the passes—particularly in The Laundry—required exceptional fishing skill, a depth of local knowledge, a willingness to work very fast and hard, as well as a large dose of boldness.

Hoonah Natives weren’t the first commercial fishermen to seine salmon in the passes. The fishery was pioneered in the 1920s by Puget Sound-based Slavonian fishermen (immigrants from the Adriatic coast of Yugoslavia). The Slavonians at the time had larger, more powerful boats than those of the Hoonah fishermen.

A number of Hoonah seine boat captains studied the Slavonians’ fishing techniques, and over time very they successfully adapted their more modest operations to the fishery. The first Hoonah seine boat captain to fish in the passes may have been Joe White, on the vessel *Jericho*. Apparently some of the Slavonians encouraged his participation, because they provided him with a suitable seine.¹⁵ Seines used in the passes were heavy-duty, and hung with extra lead and corresponding extra corks. Though sometimes to no avail, additional corks were then added to keep the entire seine from being pulled under the water by the currents. During

^A The average season’s catch for each of the 91 salmon traps that operated in Southeast Alaska in 1911 was 102,649 salmon.

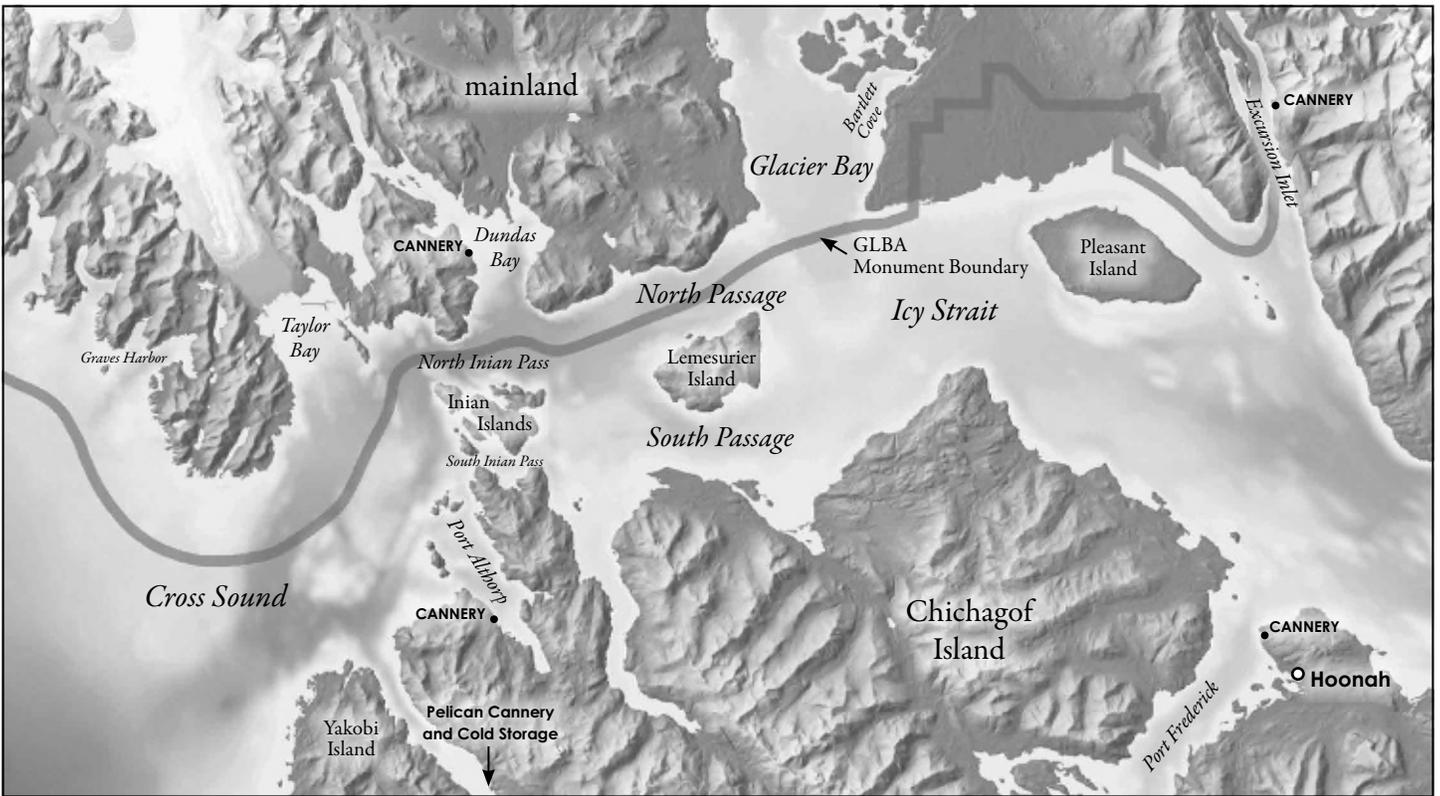


Figure 1: Cross Sound and Icy Strait

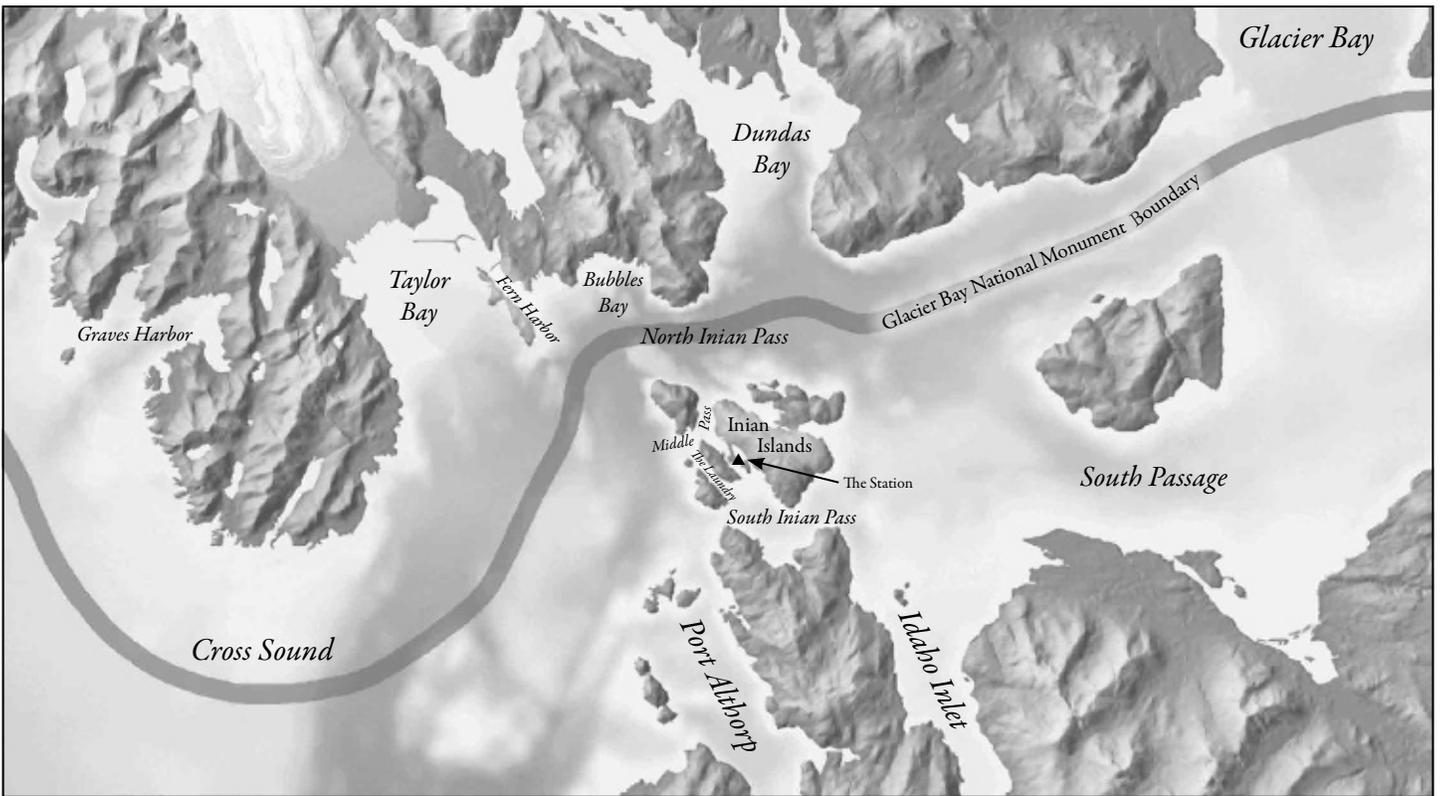


Figure 2: Inian Islands

the late 1940s, seines used in the Inian Islands were 300 fathoms (1,800 feet) long, about 15 fathoms (90 feet) deep, and hung with some 1,200 pounds of lead.¹⁶

Fishermen in the Hoonah fleet gradually developed a profound understanding of how the tides affected the movements of salmon through the passes, and they came to dominate the fishery in the most difficult areas, particularly The Laundry. Among the most successful of Hoonah's early seiners were George Dalton, James Grant, William Johnson, Jimmy Marks, Jimmy Martin, and Joe White. Marks specialized in fishing for red salmon, which were mostly caught along the mainland shore.^B The prowess of these men and others who followed was a source of great local pride, and their knowledge was passed down to the next generation.

Seining in the passes was structured around the stage of the tide. "Setting" the seine a few moments on either side (before or after) of the "right" time in a given location would likely result in few fish, and possibly a damaged seine and lost fishing time. The right time to set wasn't determined by looking at a tide book and a clock, but by very subtle indicators, such as a change in the amount of foam that waves were leaving on the rocks. By far the most productive fishing in The Laundry and North Inian Pass was during the earliest stages of the flood tide. The best an individual boat could do was to make two sets before the current made fishing impractical. Knowledgeable fishermen, however, were able to fish "round the clock" by proceeding through a series of fishing locations as the tide rose and fell.¹⁷ By necessity, one of these locations was the waters around Three Hill Island, in Cross Sound, where tidal action was comparatively modest. Hoonah seine boats tended to have more crewmen (up to ten) than their competitors (usually six), and thought nothing of making twenty sets in a day, a feat few others could match.¹⁸ At the end of the day, the fishermen who had made the most sets tended to have the most fish.¹⁹

One particularly noteworthy adaptation of the Hoonah fishermen for successfully catching salmon in the passes was the "hook-off." Hook-offs, in which the seine skiff's end of the seine was fastened to the shore, were useful where productive water deep enough to fish was surrounded by shallow water in which the

bottom of a drifting seine could hang up. Steve Langdon, a University of Alaska anthropologist who did considerable research on this fishery, noted that James Grant of Hoonah, who operated the seine boat *Alberta*, introduced the use of hook-offs in the Inian Islands fishery.²⁰ In using a hook-off, the crew of the seine skiff would fasten their end of the seine with a quick-release connection (sometimes a special knot) to rope or cable that had been tied around a rock or tree on the shore at a suitable location. Once the set was complete, the quick-release connection would be tripped and the seine skiff would take its end of the running line to the seine boat. Some hook-offs were designed to be used during flood tides, while others were for ebb tides.

Hook-offs were named after the captains or the boats that pioneered them. "Grant's hook-off," for example, was named after James Grant; the "Washington hook-off" was named after George Dalton's boat. The captain who pioneered a hook-off was tacitly accorded an unofficial property right, and other fishermen usually did not use it unless invited. In general, however, there was considerable cooperation, as fishermen took turns at the various hook-offs, with deference given to the pioneering captain.²¹

Hoonah fishermen did not necessarily cooperate with strangers. Fishing wasn't done just at hook-offs, and at times several boats might be jockeying for position in the current as they waited for the right moment to begin setting. The first boat with its net in the water usually caught the most fish, but a stranger who was too aggressive in trying to gain an advantageous position might find himself "corked" by a seine set nearly on top of his. Sometimes a Hoonah vessel would attempt to trick a stranger into setting before the time was right by faking a set and hoping the less-knowledgeable fisherman would make a real one and suffer the consequences.²²

Due to a record run of pink salmon and the fact that cannery operators gave uncharacteristic preference to seine-caught salmon over those caught in traps, the Natives of southeast Alaska were reported in 1930 to have made more money than in any of the previous fifteen years. A considerable number treated themselves to scenic airplane flights around the region. Native fishermen's earn-

^B A favored location was a small indentation just west of Pt. Wimbledon that was unofficially known as "Bubbles Bay." (Jumbo James, as related to Wayne Howell)

ings in 1931, in contrast, were very poor, in part because cannery operators reverted to their preference for trap-caught salmon, which was their inclination until the traps were outlawed with Alaska statehood.²³

At Hoonah, the new owners of the cannery (in 1934) promptly installed new, high-speed canning machinery and began canning operations. The Icy Straits Salmon Co. stood out among southeast Alaska canneries in that it did not operate fish traps, but secured its supply of salmon from independent fishermen. The reason for the lack of fish traps was likely not a matter of preference: The 1925 regulation that required the interval between fish traps north of 58° north latitude—which included Icy Strait and Cross Sound—to be a minimum of 1-1/2 miles made it likely that by 1934 all the productive trap sites were already occupied.²⁴

To help build a seine fleet at Hoonah the company purchased about 20 surplus seine boats from a fleet in Puget Sound that was being upgraded. The vessels were sold to Hoonah fishermen, with the best fishermen getting first pick. Among the vessels were the *Alberta*, *Clara*, *Clarice*, *Edna S*, *Frisco*, *Key City*, *Maine*, *Olympic*, *Ralph II*, *Rosario*, and the *Sophie II*.

The following article about the Icy Straits Salmon Co. appeared in a 1936 issue of *Pacific Fisherman*:

An interesting example of the canned salmon industry's contribution to the welfare of Alaska is seen in the fact that the Icy Straits Salmon Co., a relatively small concern operating at Hoonah, during the 1936 season paid out well over \$100,000 in the territory.

Major items of direct expenditure in Alaska, totaling \$65,000, including the following: paid to native fishermen of the Hoonah district, \$34,000; local labor, comprising 75 per cent of all labor employed in the cannery, \$8,500; supplies purchased in Alaska, \$20,000; taxes paid to the territory, about \$4,000. [The expenditures listed total \$66,500]

The Icy Straits Co. made particular efforts to extend opportuni-

ties for employment to the people of its district and thus to benefit the district and the territory materially. Officials of the company express the opinion that the season was a successful one for the fishermen, cannery workers and merchants at Hoonah who, in most instances, were enabled to pay up all their existing liabilities and still have enough for their winter's "grub-stake," which heretofore has been a serious problem for the territory, necessitating provision for a great deal of relief [welfare]. The company feels that its efforts in behalf of the local residents of Hoonah have been fairly successful, and attributes this success directly to the fine cooperation of the residents, fishermen, cannery workers and merchants of that district.

"The company," says Frank Wright, Jr., who participated in the management of the operations, "was particularly fortunate in having the cooperation of some very fine native seiners, whose untiring efforts enabled the company to make a good pack.^c It also had seven Puget Sound boats fishing for it, these boats returning to the Sound the latter part of August after fishing in other districts of Southeast Alaska."

The records made by the native seine boats *Jericho*, owned by Archie White and captained by Joe White, and the *Dundas*, owned by Oscar Williams and captained by William Johnson, are considered worthy of special mention. The *Jericho* was the high boat of the native fleet, with the *Dundas* a close second. The owners and captains of the other native boats, however, likewise were good fishermen and cooperated to the best of their ability.²⁵

The Icy Straits Salmon Co. encouraged competition among its seine boats by posting a weekly tally of the previous week's production by each vessel. In Hoonah, being a captain or crewmember on a highline seine

^c The Frank Wright, Jr. quoted was not Frank Wright, Jr. of Hoonah.

boat engendered a lot of respect, all the more so if your boat's name was at the top of the production list. Captains and crews fished extra hard to be on top. In addition to the recognition among their peers, the captains and crews made more money, and the cannery got more salmon.²⁶

In 1938 the Icy Straits Salmon Co. paid 97 cannery workers a total of \$12,157.09, an average of \$125.33 each. Some 185 fishermen were paid \$34,513.17, an average of \$186.56.²⁷

Also in 1938 the Department of the Interior's Office of Indian Affairs (renamed Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1947) began making economic development loans to chartered Indian corporations in Alaska. A provision of the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act had authorized a revolving fund of \$10 million from which the loans would be made. In 1939, in part to take advantage of this program, the Hoonah Indian Association (HIA) was established as a federally recognized tribal association. The HIA received loans, and then lent the money to fishermen for the purchase or upgrades of boats and seines. Power rollers - which used power from a seine vessel's main engine to help pull the seine aboard - had just been developed and were a common upgrade. The loan terms were very generous; repayments were based on success in the current fishing season. Loans for expenditures on boats averaged about \$1500 and on seines from \$800 to \$1500.²⁸

The Hoonah seine fleet peaked during the 1930s at about 20 boats. A 1973 history by students in Hoonah noted that in the early years a small cannon was fired to signal the return of the salmon fleet.²⁹

The National Park Service's Frank Been visited Hoonah during the canning season in 1940. He reported that about 150 men were working on 19 seine boats that were owned by Hoonah men. Nine or ten seine boats owned by others employed Hoonah men. Each seine boat had a crew of about six. About 60 people from Hoonah were working in the cannery, where they were represented in labor negotiations by the Alaska Native Brotherhood (ANB) and Alaska Native Sisterhood (ANS). Minimum wage at the cannery was 65 cents per hour.³⁰

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service reported in 1943 that the most successful seine boat in

the three Juneau fisheries regulatory districts was the *Clarice*, which caught 72,000 fish, about four times the average for all seiners in the area. The crew share was \$1085. The *Clarice* was operated by William Johnson, of Hoonah, who fished for the Icy Straits Salmon Co.³¹ In a Congressional hearing in 1949, Hoonah's mayor, Harry Douglas, stated that the average earnings of his community's fishermen in 1947 and 1948 was "about \$800."³²

The last year of operations for the Icy Straits Salmon Co. was 1953, the same year President Eisenhower proclaimed southeast Alaska a disaster area because of a collapse of the salmon run. In 1954 the cannery was leased by the Pelican Packing Co., which used the facility for storage and boat repair.^{D 33} Pelican Cold Storage purchased the Icy Straits Salmon Co. outright in 1956.³⁴ During the 1950s the Hoonah seine fleet stabilized at 12 to 14 boats.³⁵ They were associated, at least after 1953, with the cannery at Pelican, where a part of town was known as "Little Hoonah."³⁶

Van Baker, of Gustavus, was a 16-year old crewmember aboard the seiner *Gony* during the 1954 salmon season. The vessel made one set in front of North Inian Island. Baker recalled soon being drawn into a whirlpool, with the boat and net going in circles. He said the crew could pull the net in while facing one direction, but could barely hold on while facing the other. Once the seine was finally aboard, the captain decided he had had enough of fishing in the passes, and the *Gony* retreated for the remainder of the season to less turbulent waters in Icy Strait. Baker recalled that Native crews had a reputation for hauling gear very fast, and that very few whites could match them. In addition, the whites didn't want to fight the currents and rocks in locations such as The Laundry.³⁷

Statehood for Alaska in 1959 brought many changes. The elimination of fish traps was among the most significant. At Pelican the Pelican Packing Co.'s cannery operated for the last time in 1960. The following year the company's salmon were custom canned at the Excursion Inlet Packing Co. (XIP), and in 1962 XIP purchased Pelican Packing Co.'s cannery equipment as well as the mortgages of the Hoonah seine fleet. The sale agreement

^D Pelican Packing Co. was formerly the Whiz Fish Products Co., which had operated a salmon cannery at Pelican in 1951. Now long defunct, the Pelican Packing Co. was associated with Pelican Cold Storage.

included a no-compete clause. The ban on traps had essentially left XIP without a source of salmon, save the production of five mediocre seine boats.³⁸ The purchase of the seine fleet mortgages virtually guaranteed that Hoonah fishermen would sell their production to XIP, at least until their mortgages were paid off. Bob Syre, the cannery superintendent, termed the Hoonah fleet “star fishermen.”³⁹ He had particular respect for Johnny Hinchman, who owned and operated the *Yankee*, *Alice H*, and *Johnny A*. Syre added to the Hoonah fleet by contracting the construction of the seiners *Gypsy Queen*, *Ocean Queen*, and *Vagabond Queen* and the purchase of the *Monitor*.⁴⁰ XIP appreciated the quality of the salmon caught in Cross Sound and Icy Strait. The fish were still feeding, and their appearance as well as the quality of their flesh had not yet begun to deteriorate. Although the company could not control where fishing was done, it discouraged fishermen from fishing anywhere except Cross Sound and Icy Strait. The quality of fish from areas such as Frederick Sound simply did not match that of those caught in Cross Sound and Icy Strait.

Despite the concern for quality, salmon throughout Alaska during the 1960s were poorly handled and cared for by fishermen and canneries alike. Salmon were mostly transported in the holds of boats or on open scows. No ice or mechanical refrigeration was used. Well into the 1970s salmon were routinely moved about by using a pew—a 5-foot wooden pole with a sharp curved steel spike at the end (or: similar to a pitchfork, but with one tine). Salmon were supposed to be pewed only in the head, which was discarded in the canning and freezing process, but unloading fish always seems to be a hurried affair, and salmon were commonly pewed in the body, which damaged the flesh that was to be canned or frozen.

With fish traps gone, the number of seine boats increased dramatically. They needed a place to fish, and many chose the Cross Sound and Icy Strait area. As newcomers arrived, some idled by to observe the Hoonah Natives fishing in The Laundry. Few had the nerve to fish there. In 1963 Hoonah fishermen reported that about 200 seine boats had fished in the Inian Islands. An additional 60 to 90 were expected for the 1964 season.⁴¹ The number continued to grow and eventually some 400 seine boats were competing against each other in Cross Sound and Icy Strait. This fleet came to be called

“The Million Dollar Fleet” and all along the waterfronts of Southeast Alaska wherever it was mentioned everyone knew that it referred to the rich seine fishery in the Inian Islands.

For fisheries managers, there are basically two types of salmon fisheries: intercept fisheries and terminal fisheries. In an intercept fishery, mixed stocks of salmon are caught indiscriminately as they migrate toward their respective spawning areas. The fundamental problem with this type of fishery is that the stocks of some spawning areas might be over-harvested, while others are under-harvested. Weak stocks (i.e., small spawning populations) are typically most susceptible to over-harvest in a mixed-stock fishery.

In a terminal fishery, salmon are caught close to where they spawn (i.e., near their natal stream), and managers adjust the fishing effort to ensure adequate reproduction. In southeast Alaska only the larger systems are monitored and individually managed. The region has on the order of 5,000 salmon spawning streams, and most host only small spawning populations. Overall, the salmon fisheries in southeast Alaska are a combination of intercept and terminal fisheries.

The salmon seine fishery in Icy Strait and Cross Sound was an intercept fishery without equal. For fisheries managers, effectively monitoring this fleet—a critically important step in the comprehensive management of the salmon resource in northern southeast Alaska—was a daunting, if not impossible, task. And the intense fishing effort had ramifications throughout northern southeast Alaska. Fishermen in places like Frederick Sound were being starved out because the stocks they relied on were intercepted in Cross Sound and Icy Strait.

The shortage of salmon in inside waters was felt most acutely in Petersburg. Unable to catch sufficient fish on their home grounds, a number of Petersburg fishermen joined the crowd in Icy Strait and Cross Sound. Their catch was tendered to Petersburg in vessels equipped with refrigerated seawater systems, but the distance—some 20 hours of travel—made the situation far from ideal for fishermen or the Petersburg canneries. The “Petersburg Mafia”—Petersburg Fisheries (now Icicle Seafoods) executives and Ernie Haugan, Petersburg’s representative in the State’s legislature—lobbied hard in their own interest to end the salmon seine fisheries in Cross Sound and

Icy Strait, but it was for the aforesaid management rationale that the fishery was terminated in 1974.

It was in a sense ironic that Petersburg Fisheries was so involved in closing the home waters of the Hoonah seine fleet, for it was that fleet that saved a financially teetering Petersburg Fisheries from possible bankruptcy only a decade earlier. Petersburg Fisheries had been formed in 1964 by Petersburg businessmen and fishermen to purchase and operate the former Pacific American Fisheries cannery in Petersburg that had been closed as part of a liquidation process. The 1965 salmon season was very poor throughout southeast Alaska, and the Excursion Inlet cannery closed at the end of the summer. Usually the cannery would stay open to take advantage of a September run of chum salmon in Excursion Inlet, which some years was very considerable. Not long after the cannery crew had left, a great number of chum salmon appeared in the Inlet. The Alaska Department of Fish & Game assessed the run and immediately opened the season. At about 400,000 fish, it was to be the largest fall chum run Excursion Inlet had ever experienced. The Hoonah seine fleet started fishing and Petersburg Fisheries sent every tender it had to purchase the fish. The revenue from canning the fish was enough to keep the company solvent, and today Icicle Seafoods is among Alaska's largest seafood processors.

In all, the salmon seine fishery in the passes lasted only a half century, barely two generations. In the closure of the passes to salmon seining, the Hoonah seine fleet essentially lost the foundation of its proud existence. The wealth of knowledge about catching salmon in this unique location that had accumulated over the years became almost valueless. Although other factors, such as limited entry, were at play, Hoonah's seine fleet gradually fell into disrepair and its numbers dwindled. In 2009 there remain only two Hoonah-based seiners. The prowess of Hoonah seine boat captains and crewmembers at fishing in the passes, however, will always remain an important part of Hoonah's legacy.

Endnotes

- ¹ *Pacific Coast and Alaska Fisheries*, 84th Cong., 2d sess., Sen. Rept. No. 2801, 1956, 3.
- ² George A. Rounsefell and George B. Kelez, "The Salmon and Salmon Fisheries of Swiftsure Bank, Puget Sound, and the Fraser River" *Bulletin of the Bureau of Fisheries*, Vol. XLIX, Bull. No. 27 (Washington DC: GPO, 1938), 726.
- ³ Jefferson F. Moser, *Alaska Salmon Investigations in 1900*, in *Bulletin of the United States Fish Commission, 1901*, Vol. XXI (Washington: GPO, 1902), 310.
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Photo Gallery

Figure 1: In this image, the crew of the FV *St. Paul*, possibly a Puget Sound boat, hauls its net by hand. Seine fishing was first introduced to the Inian Islands in the 1920s by boats hailing from Puget Sound. A group of Slavonian fishermen who brought seine fishing from the Adriatic Sea to Puget Sound were the first to share the technique with Huna natives, who then adapted it to their environment and came to master the fishery in the Inian Islands. All of the techniques of the fishery are evident in this image. (Circa 1950, courtesy Huna Heritage Foundation)



Figure 2: This picture shows what looks to be a good set in Middle Pass at slack high water. The FV *Key City*, Captain Jim McKinley, is brailing fish from the "fish bag," also called the "money bag." The turn table has a small roller which suggests the boat was operated mainly by hand power. The light rigging, lack of power blocks, presence of Spanish corks (true cork, later replaced by synthetic materials) and non-motorized double ender skiff all suggest fairly early date for this picture. The presence of the anchor in the stern of the skiff suggests they had used a hook-off for this set. The Middle Pass, high-water-slack-set was a very competitive and difficult set which only the Huna fishermen mastered. (Circa 1940, courtesy Huna Heritage Foundation)



Figure 3: The Marks brothers, Willie and Jim, had a hook-off site between Fern Harbor and "Bubbles Bay." Jim Marks captained the FV *Evolution*, seen here. In this very peaceful photo the crew appears to be taking a break in action during a haul – the turn table had been turned at the start of the haul, the seine has been pursed and the skiff crew is already aboard and the the purse rings are on deck. The corks that were pulled by hand and stacked on the stern have been dumped back into the water, and it appears that the operation of pulling seine and stacking it on the turn table is about to begin. The fish are still in the water, soon to be brailed in the "money bag." In the far right background another boat, probably the FV *New Annie*, captained Willie Marks, can be seen. Both seine vessels were crewed primarily by family which was true for most of the seiners from Hoonah. (Circa 1950, courtesy of Huna Heritage Foundation)



Figure 4: The *New Annie* owned and operated by the Marks family is at anchor and most likely waiting for the right tide for their hook-off. This hook-off site was well known for the percentage of sockeye salmon caught. (Circa 1950's, courtesy Huna Heritage Foundation)



Figure 5: The crew of the FV *Clarice*, Captain William Johnson, is hauling in the net. As the purse is drawn in the corkline would be hand pulled by the "skiffmen" and stacked into the skiff's hull, seen here, as well as on the stern of the main boat, which we are seeing in the photo. When the pursing was complete and all of the rings were hauled on deck, the corkline was then dumped overboard. It was important to do all of this in an orderly fashion, but as often times happened, some part of the net would snag on the propeller or rudder shoe of the boat, in which case a crewman would take the plunger – the thin pole sticking out from the stern of the boat – to un-snag the net before hauling could proceed. (Circa 1940's, courtesy Huna Heritage Foundation)



Figure 6: A group of salmon seine boats are rafted together in front of town. There are men and women aboard and many of the people have on dress clothes and one boat flies the American flag, suggesting a holiday gathering. Given the amount of snow on the mountains in the background it was likely a Memorial Day gathering, a popular annual event in Hoonah. The presence of the American flag indicates a common practice, as the Huna Tlingit were loyal Americans and many served in the armed forces. Five of the vessels have turn tables with rollers on their sterns, and the skiffs include both the old oar powered double-enders as well as one newer skiff with a gas motor, a real step up from hand power. (Circa 1930's-early 1940's, courtesy Alaska State Library, PCA 222-302, Leslie Melvin collection)



Figure 7: The FV *Alberta*, Captain James Grant, rafted to the *Sunbeam* at the small boat harbor known as the City Float in Juneau. The Juneau Cold Storage building is visible in the background. Grant's Point hook-off, also called Alberta's hook-off, was named after James Grant who was among the early Inian Island fisherman. Captain Grant spoke only Tlingit and didn't use a tide book to fish the complex and unforgiving tidewaters of Inian Islands. He also took the *Alberta* to the Puget Sound to fish. (Circa 1940-50, courtesy Ken Grant)



Figure 8: The FV *Tahola*, Captain John G. Fawcett, Sr., tied alongside the float at Kane's dock. The 55 gallon drum at the front of the cabin is fuel for the power skiff. The long stack in the bow is from the galley stove below. Many of the fishing boats during that time had their galleys forward in the forecastle (foc'sle). (Circa 1940-50's, courtesy Huna Heritage Foundation)



Figure 9: Things didn't always go as planned. In this image we see a disaster unfolding at the cannery floats. The FV *Maine* has "swamped." The turn-table is missing – perhaps floated away – and hatch is open. No fish can be seen in the fish hold. The FV *Tahola* is coming alongside to assist. (Circa 1940-50, courtesy Huna Heritage Foundation)



Figure 10: The FV *Sapho* is tied along-side the fish elevator float. This is where the local kids would come to watch the fleet, and many young men can recall standing on the dock above watching their fathers, uncles, and grandfathers unload fish. This is where many young men got their entry into the seine fishery – young boys envied their older brother who had risen to the level of "bull cook," the chief dish washer and go-fer. The official title was "bull." To move the fish from the boat to the processor, the fish were pitched with a fish pew (a single-tined pitch fork) from the fish hold to the deck while others on deck pitched to the fish elevator, which lifted them to the dock level above. The salmon were separated and tallied by species, as each had different prices, but the set price was per salmon regardless of size or weight. (Late 1940's or early 1950's, courtesy of Huna Heritage Foundation)



Fig. 11 - During the pre-season many Hoonah families used their seine boats for subsistence. This photo would have been taken in April, as hemlock branches with herring eggs can be seen stacked on the turn tables of both boats. At this time of year the bulky seine nets were not yet on the boats, as many would still hanging in the web house at the cannery while others were being repaired. The turn tables on these boats were state of the art for the time. Turn tables were a revolving platform on the aft deck, and worked much like a "lazy Susan." The seine net would be stacked on the turn tables, which would be oriented aft during net deployment then pivoted to the side for the haul. The turn tables in this image were called "power rollers with center drive." In the older system of turn table the roller was driven by a v-belt from the deck winch to a shaft and universal joints to the roller on the turn table. Many a crewman has a story of lining up the "u joint" with the roller as the turn table was quickly turned while making a round haul in "The Laundry." A double-ended rowing skiff can be seen tied along side. The "double-enders" were more efficient than the older skiffs, as they caused less drag in the water and were also ideal for hand trolling. Local shipwrights built these wooden skiffs, now a lost art. (Circa 1950's, courtesy of Huna Heritage Foundation)



Figure 12: A "deck load" of salmon is being off-loaded. Here Karl Greenwald (left) uses a fish pew to pitch salmon from the fish hold up onto the deck. From the deck Louie Halverson (center) pitches them over to the fish tender. In the foreground Johnny Lawson is repairing a ripped net along the lead line. (Circa 1949, courtesy Huna Heritage Foundation)



Figure 13: The FV *Karen Jean*, Captain Joe White, is hauling in the seine "outside the island" off Middle Pass at the Inian Islands, while the *Sea Ranger* tows his net nearby. Taylor Island can be seen in the background. White is reported to have never looked at a tide table, yet he intimately knew and mastered the tides at the Inian Islands. (Circa 1960's, courtesy Huna Heritage Foundation)



Figure 14: A crew hauls the net during "brailing." The "brailer" was a bag for transferring the fish from the seine to the hold. Each crewman had a station with specific duties. The man on the left is pulling the brailer line forward while the other two men – one on deck and one in the power skiff – are rolling the fish into the brailer. The man on the stern is shoving the brailer handle forward to scoop up the fish. Unseen is the "winchman" who coordinates with the "deckmen" pulling up on the brailer line until someone yells, "take 'er away!" Visible above the stern railing is the ring bar – an innovation that helped the crew organize different gear components around the deck. (Circa late 1950's-1960's, courtesy Huna Heritage Foundation)



Figure 15: "Take it away!"
The winchman would hoist the brailer over the fish hold, where the "brailerman" on the stern would release the fish into the hold. Lots of cheers! The sight of a brailer being hauled up caused a thump in the hearts of all crewmen watching. If your boat was brailing, there was no doubt all other crews nearby were counting the haul with envy. The more efficient brailermen got their nets in the water faster and hauled more fish. The ring bar, the "spongex" corks on the corkline and the aluminum brailer date this image. (Circa late 1950-early 1960's, courtesy Huna Heritage Foundation)



Figure 16: It must have been a hard week of fishing as no one can be seen on any of the boats or the floats in this image. If it had been pre-season the scene would have been a hive of activity, as it was an unwritten duty for crewmen to scrape, sand, and paint the boat and to re-hang the seine net. This meant you were hired. When in port the fish hold and decks were thoroughly scrubbed and disinfected. The cooks also took pride in having a clean orderly galley. The engineers kept the main engine polished, oiled, and shafts greased. The same held for the skiff man. Many of the non-Hoonah boats co-mingled with the local boats and maintained a mutual respect while in port, but out on the fishing grounds, competition was fierce. In this image no limited entry permit numbers can be seen on any of the seine boats nor the smaller pleasure cruisers and skiffs, which were used for hand trolling for salmon. Limited entry came about when the Alaska Legislature passed the Limited Entry Act in 1973. That act forever changed the fortunes of the Huna seine fleet. (Circa 1960's, courtesy of Huna Heritage Foundation)



Figure 17: Repairing the net during weekend lay-ups was the job of the crew, who took great pride in the condition of their boats and nets. Comradery and teamwork was shared among the Huna boats and crews. During those years seining was the only way of life the seine crews. In this image the crew of the Vagabond Queen work in unison at a common task. (Circa late 1960's-early 1970's, courtesy Huna Heritage Foundation)



Figure 18: All crewmen were expected to become experts in repairing nets and everybody was expected to participate. This meant sewing up rips and patching larger holes. But when the nets were tended to, there was other fishing to be done. The 50-gallon drum on the float was probably outboard fuel storage staged on the float for hand trolling. Many seine crewmen owned smaller boats and supplemented their seining incomes by hand trolling in the early morning hours and during seine closures. No limited entry numbers can be seen on any boats. Limited entry (Circa late 1960's, courtesy Huna Heritage Foundation)

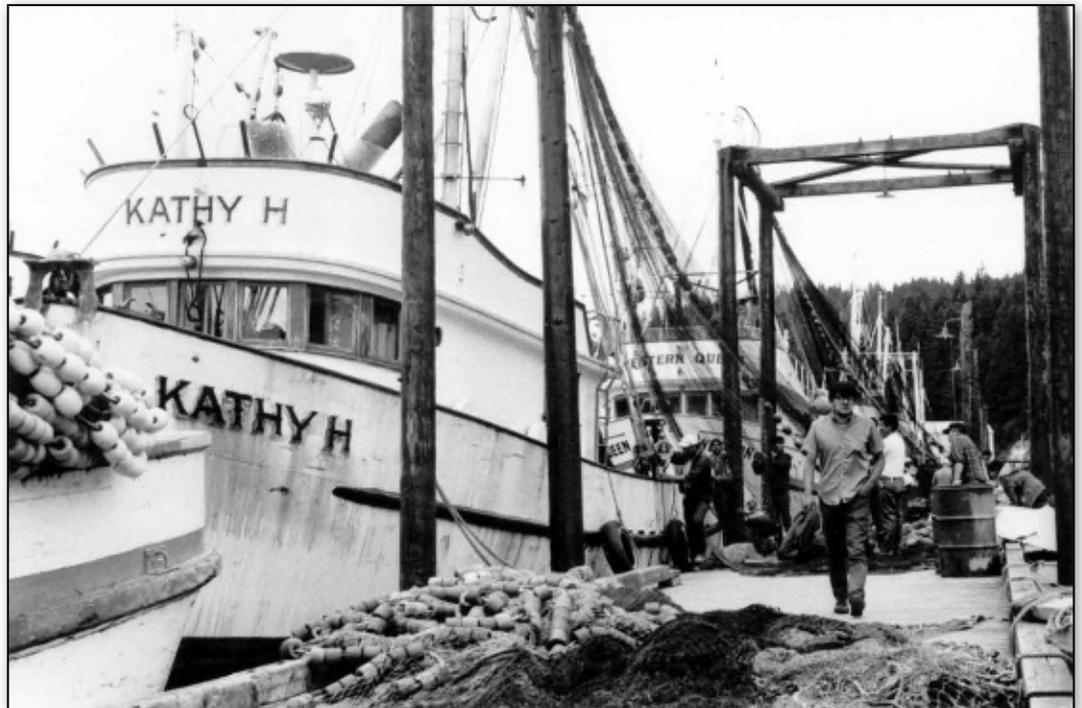


Figure 19: The *Patricia Mae*, *Ocean Queen*, *Mermaid* (?), *Alberta*, and *Alert* (?) sit idle at the cannery. Halibut bait sheds on the aft decks indicate the boats are in from halibut fishing before the start of the seine season. Many captains and crew had to rely on halibut fishing to help make ends meet. The building seen in the far right is the “web house” which burned up in the early 1970’s. The boats appear to have been freshly painted, most likely over the winter at the company shipyard in Seattle. Many captains took select crewmembers to Seattle in the spring to paint the boats and bring supplies north for the coming season. (Circa 1960-70, courtesy Huna Heritage Foundation)

