

The Days of Salmon Traps and Fish Pirates

A VCR Tape

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correct spelling → **Simoyamo? Parks Museum**
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Note: This tape is owned by Theresa Trebon, historian

For decades, the fishing industry is tasked to harvest salmon in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska. Now lets take a look at the history of fish traps. The aboriginal people who dwelt along the Pacific Rim, depended on salmon for food and trade. From Honcho??? Island in Japan, to central California, the people celebrated the return of the salmon each year.

They treated the first fish with great ceremony and respect so that his spirit would advise his brothers and sisters to return as well. Throughout what is now Alaska and the west coast of North America, native people harvested these returning salmon. They used dip nets, spears and primitive weirs or traps made by placing branches or stones across the streambeds. In Puget Sound, they used reef nets which consisted of pairs of canoes with small nets suspended between them. The reef fishermen cut channels through the kelp to guide the fish into the nets and erected small towers from which they could spot their prey.

White settlers observed the native fishing methods. Beginning in the 1880s the experiment with the pile trap was the outgrowth of white mans methods applied to Indian experience. Techniques for building traps came from Scandinavia, from New England and from the Canadian maritimes where traps or pound nets had been used for generations in the cod, herring and salmon harvests. In Puget Sound, pile trap technology reached its zenith.

Latter, when Washington voters outlawed trap fishing in state waters, Puget Sound trap men and their fishing style, migrated to Alaska. From SE to western Alaska, trap fishing endured until the passage of state hood in 1958.

Each trap relied on a long a long line of piling called the lead that extended outward from the shore lines. The piling supported a fence of trap wire that blocked the path of the salmon. The trap itself laid to seaward. Alaska trap man, Fred Gunnerson gives us a fish eye view.

As they come up and go along shore, they hit the lead. They will try to go around it. The trap was on the outside end of it.

Old timers say there were over 400 trap locations claimed on Puget Sound. Although many of them were fished only during the great???? years when fish were abundant.

Carl Goodbrandson??? is among the last of the Puget Sound trap fisherman. Today he maintains the pile trap model at the Semiamo museum and schools tourists in the art of trap fishing.

This particular pile trap fishes on the flood only and we must assume that the big fish are going to the Fraiser River. The trap is built directly across the tide. The fish, when it hits the lead, can basically go either way. They move up the lead, searching all the time for an opening. When they get up to this part, usually they start to spook and they will head out this way. That's the idea of this, which is called the jigger. When they hit that they'll follow the jigger all the way around and when they get to the end, they'll be back where they were before. Eventually they're going to see this opening and they're going to go into it. On the next flood they will all be against this wall because the tide is running this way and they are bucking into the tide and they go into this tunnel, four inches across. Four inches seems awfully small but the big skates can even go through this one, so the salmon have no trouble with it, even the biggest kings and whatever.

Every fourth year there occurred, what was known among cannery men as a big year, with catches far above the average. Experience taught them when to expect these daily runs and when to prepare their trap sites and processing plants for maximum production. By the big year of 1901, most of the prized trap locations had been purchased by a handful of large fishing companies. The largest was a salmon cartel, the Alaska Packers Association with dozens of trap sites and canneries at Blaine, Point Roberts and Anacortes. Latter, the Pacific American Fisheries Corporation, or PAS, of Bellingham would become an even bigger canner and trap operator. And there were numerous smaller companies engaged in packing salmon. The companies fished all of their trap sites in the big years, then shut down marginal locations when fishing was lean. To protect their idle locations they conceived the dummy trap. Goodbrandson???? explains.

If one abandoned a trap site and if you didn't put one in at least every seven years after that, you would loose your location. And so that's when they got the idea of putting in the dummy traps, which was a phoney through way back, but it was the law and so they put in a makeshift spiller and a small heart and a tiny lead and a few pilings and no jigger. When they couldn't catch that one fish and time was running out, they came to the trap that I was on, out at Bush Point with a washtub one day. They filled that washtub with sea water and packed it away and they didn't say anything to anybody. My brother was on the lifting crew lifting crew and he told me latter that they had gone to the other location and dumped the fish into the spiller and then they all went and lifted the trap, got the one fish and they were able for seven more years.

Many of the early settlers in the Puget Sound region augmented their meager farm incomes by working for the fish trap owners. Trap men worked on the pile driver crews, boat crews???? or wire crews. Others worked as machinists, carpenters, blacksmiths and the like. Women and children also found work in the canneries, usually as employees of the Chinese contractors who supplied the processing labor. Mike Gudman???? grew up near the canneries at Point Roberts. He started working for a China contractor at age ten:

Well, the Chinese needed fish and I was right there around the canneries, always doing something, so that one time they took me in and I went to work and from then on that's what I did. Time was kept by the Chinese and everything was absolutely correct at all times, as far as I was concerned. They took me and gave me food and let me eat with them in the China house and I enjoyed that. I enjoyed being with these people because they were all gentlemen, the Chinese.

Latter, he worked on the wire crew:

I worked right from the start undoing the wire, cutting it up. I knew just exactly From dealing with these traps, how we should make a wire so we can take it out and drop it out and drop it and build this huge fence and that's what we did and we put these six foot wide, two hundred foot long, some of them, and we fastened them together with what they call a hog ring. We'd get the two layers of wire and fasten them by clamping these two together, big huge rolls of wire. Take seven men to roll it.

Like all trap men, Goodman had a higher????????

The fish traps were the very finest way of catching fish. They came out, into the boats, free of any bumps or scratches or anything. They were absolutely perfect, because they swam right into the boats, you might say without any problems. That's one reason that the fish trap canneries had the finest fish there could be.

Although the processors praised the traps for their efficiency and claimed that hundreds of jobs would be lost if the traps were eliminated, fishermen hated them because they gave the canners and exclusive right to fish important areas. Traps were expensive to install and operate and ownership was consolidated in the hands of a few corporations. opposition mounted until trap owners had to confront a new problem, piracy. Independent fishermen discovered that you didn't have to own a trap to bait trap fish in the dark of night. In coastal communities, the trap pirates were initially viewed as somewhat like Robin Hood who robbed from the rich for the sake of the poor. Early day trap robbery was not considered to malicious. Although some cannery men were quick to invoke sanctions, most were reluctant to do anything about the situation and the robbers thought they were taking only fish that unfair competition had deprived them of. If trap robbing once bordered on sport, it became a shooting war after World War I and trap owners resorted to placing armed watchmen aboard their traps. Goodbrandson signed on as a watchman in his early 20s:

Basically it was a type of fishing shack, trap shack, which we lived in. Some were on traps that had a night watchman and a day watchman. This kind of a house was for two watchmen. Once you got out there, which would usually be in the tail end of June, you wouldn't see land again until the middle of September. So it was a long dragged out thing, especially when I was 21, then I got on trap 12 in Flounder Bay. My partner was three times my age, you know, and a kid of 21, that's kind of hard to spend the next three months with but that's what had to take place. I don't know exactly how big these were, but here's the stove, right in this corner, a tiny table here, one bunk went this way and the other bunk went this way. That's about all it was. But, we live out there and got by. It wasn't easy, but I spent a lot time rowing around and cleaning the lead and stuff like that and you kind of had to make yourself busy. We burned coal in the stove. That was the life of a watchman.

After a few encounters with the pirates the young fishermen acquired a dramatic means of discouraging further visits:

The gun was a 45-90, lever action Winchester. It was probably the one that used to kill the buffalo. It was old enough to be anyway. It would drive a fearsome chunk of lead into a fellow if any fish pirates came around. The fellow that I trapped with, he was afraid of fish pirates and when he would hear something, he'd say 'Carl, there's somebody out there. Go out and chase them away.' He'd pull the covers over his head and go back to sleep again. I finally got onto a scheme, and I'd always go out and talk to them, never let them up the ladder, I'd talk to them and I'd say 'boy, we got a bad one inside there. He has a terrible temper and I don't want to wake him up. For God's sake, don't make any noise.' And they would move, usually. Didn't want to face that fearsome man in the bunk.

During the hay day of Puget Sound trap fishing, the salmon industry depended on sockeye or red salmon from Canada's Fraser River. In 1917 the fish run suddenly declined with disastrous consequences for fishermen. Marine biologists soon discovered the problem. A rockslide at Hellsgate Canyon, four years previous had traded water conditions so turbulent that few fish could reach their spawning ground. The lack of the sockeye runs became apparent in 1917 as dramatically fewer fish returned from the sea to spawn. Latter, the US and Canadian government would restore the salmon runs by creating a fish ladder through the Hellsgate blockage, but that couldn't save the fish traps of Puget Sound. The declining resource and the great depression combined to bring the Puget Sound salmon industry to its knees. For the trap men, the knock out blow was delivered by the passage of initiative 77 in 1934 which outlawed virtually all forms of fixed gear. Only the reef net was spared. ?????? Ferguson was a reef net fisherman more than 50 years ago:

Fish generally ???????? like kings in schools. Kind of strange how king salmon forty, fifty pounders and we'd get fifty cents apiece for the white ones and a dollar

for the red ones. They were pretty widely fished ????????Spring salmon traveling by themselves are kind of wild and hard to catch, just the shadow from the man on the perch would scare them. So it was fun, just watching for salmon.

With the demise of the Puget Sound trap industry, the trap men headed for Alaska where the traps endured until the passage of state hood in 1958. To fish the deep waters of the southeastern Alaska panhandle, where piles couldn't be driven all the way to the seabed, the trap men devised floating traps. Floating traps are constructed on the beach and then towed to the fishing location. Each trap had to be precisely surveyed and then installed with its lead oriented across the earth that carried the fish. Well, fishing the trap even slightly off it's mark and it wasn't likely to catch many fish. Gunderson understood the problem:

We had one trap that would drag anchor and we finally ended up putting three five ton anchors on the head side. That trap could drag fifty feet and quit fishing.

While the floating trap predominated in SE Alaska, the Puget Sound traps persisted in central and western Alaska. The Alaska traps were productive but there were unique hazards like icebergs.

Note: I did not record this part of the tape. It was all on traps in Alaska. One interesting part was the discussion of the trap owners. Nearly all of them were outsiders, not locals. They were deeply resented and trap piracy was common. They did not consider it as being illegal to raid a non-resident's trap.

The salmon trap era marked a unique period in the history of the Pacific Northwest and Alaska. The traps are gone now, but the memory of this remarkable fishing style is on