Alaska's Rich Lode of Occupational Folklife

by Peter Seitel

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Metaphors of gold and the mine come easily when speaking of the occupational folklife of Alaskans. So rich and densely symbolic are both gold and the occupational lives of the men and women who turn the Alaskan land to profit, so integral to the dramatic sweep of the Alaskan frontier are both, and so dependent for their economic value on the giant boom and bust fluctuations of international trade, that sometimes for those in "the lower forty-eight" both gold and the lives of Alaskan loggers, fishermen, bush pilots and gold miners are surrounded by an aura that places them at once into the realm of the symbolic, the epic and the heroic.

When the national and international economy is healthy enough to demand the lumber that southeastern Alaska grows and harvests, Alaskan loggers still share the robust life of logging camps. Brought together in such communities, dependent on one another for social life as well as safety in the woods, Alaskan loggers have developed rich traditions of work techniques for handling the giant timber of the Pacfic coast and a rich lore that communicates the human dimensions of work in the woods.

The timber industry was established on a large scale in southern Alaska with an increase in the worldwide demand for wood pulp about 30 years ago. Before then, timber was cut and sawed in Alaskan mills largely to make shipping boxes for canned salmon. The industry was an extension of logging in the Pacific Northwest states of Washington and Oregon, and ties remain close between the two regions. At hiring halls in Seattle able bodied "tramp loggers" (men who live single, in bunk houses) were often given advance money for airfare and a pair of caulk boots (essential logging gear), then channeled up to one of the camps in Southeast. Eventually, the towns around Seattle also became home for many retired Alaskan loggers.

Aboard Captain Siguard ("Sig") Mathisen's boat, the *Marathon*, crewman Darrell Flora (left) and Steve Berry (right) haul in the many fathoms of line attached to a 500 lb. crab pot. Working, respectively, the gurdy and the power block, Darrell and Steve raise the pot from the bottom to the surface, where Sig operates a crane and lifts it from the water onto the *Marathon's* deck.

The fishermen empty the crab pot, repair it, re-bait it, and sort out the king crabs large enough to keep.

Alaskan logger's lore gives names to, comments upon, and remembers the history of work and life in logging camps. Nicknames establish distinct occupational personalities: Grubstake, Packsack Louie, Rhode Island Red, Coos Bay Shortie, and many others (some unfit for a family publication). Packsack's name reflects the inclination of many tramp loggers to quit work at one camp seemingly at a whim and go to work for another. It is said that Packsack once declared he would leave a particular camp because his demand for asparagus at breakfast was met with hot asparagus rather than the cold ones he claimed to have wanted. One group of three loggers, friends supporting one another in a joke, left camp on the same day they entered when they heard the camp was scheduled to be in operation for ten years; they said they did not want such short-term work.

Bush pilots have their stories as well. Many seem to be about the limits of the world of flight that they try to press but not transgress. Stories about almost too heavy loads or unusual ones: a live cow or bear, or oxygen tanks propped out the airplane's side windows, like 2″x4″s out the car window of a weekend repairman. Stories also can be heard of near disasterous landings and of the barely visible treacheries of turbulent wind over a water landing spot. Bush pilots also tell of flying in difficult weather to assist people in extreme conditions, like a badly injured logger or a woman having a difficult childbirth.

Bush pilots and air-taxi operators fly to places otherwise accessible only by dogsled, boat or foot. Traditionally, bush pilots fly anywhere, landing on glaciers with ski-type landing gear, on river sandbars or in thick mud. The more modern air-taxi operators fly only to improved landing strips, of

Sig shows a nice sized specimen as Darrell, in the background, closes the pot in preparation for its replacement on the ocean bottom.
Photos by Peter Seitel

which there are many all over the State. Although in the past there seems to have been a division of opinion between those pilots who valued safety and careful judgment and those who had a more devil-may-care attitude, the question seems definitely to have been decided in favor of the more level heads, who at any rate have survived in greater numbers to have their opinions heard. Although he clearly has considerable luck on his side, the famous flier who is said to have crashed 30 planes in 28 years is not an example to be emulated.

Safe passage is also a value emphasized by fishermen in their occupational tales. In addition to stressing sound judgment, they frequently remark on the years of occupational experience that enable one to know intimate details of shoreline and local weather patterns, thereby finding one's true position even under blinding conditions.

The fisheries of Alaska are many: salmon, halibut, king crab, dungeness crab, tanner crab, herring, shrimp, black cod, albacore and others. Each has its own fishing techniques, methods of preservation, markets, forms of regulation, and its own sometimes turbulent history in the State. Salmon, halibut, and other species were fished in Alaska long before the coming of Europeans. The first outsiders to exploit salmon as a commercial enterprise were the Russians, who held claim to Alaska prior to 1867. By the turn of the century, the salmon canning enterprises of the Pacific Northwest had extended themselves into southeastern Alaska, using giant floating traps to corral and catch the hoards of migrating fish. The companies established canneries run by workers imported from China and later the Philippines. The salmon fisheries have often been an arena of conflict, as competing groups of fishermen have sought to exploit the same waters (for one aspect of this conflict, see pp. 10-14 in this program book).

Increasing numbers of fishermen and greater efficiency of equipment, especially through the use of power hauling, have placed ever greater demand on the natural resource of fish. Fishermen, biologists, and administrators have recognized the necessity of regulating the size of catches to conserve this valuable resource by opening and closing waters to fishing activity. Open seasons have been getting progressively shorter, with the halibut season down to three days for the entire year. The season on roe herring (herring roe being a delicacy much prized by Japanese) is only a few hours, due equally to the great number and efficiency of the fishermen and to the reproductive cycle of the fish. In those few hours, though, a crewman may earn fifteen to twenty thousand dollars. Much commercial fishing in Alaska is structured by relatively short periods of furious activity, followed by relatively long periods of preparation and passing the time.

The epitome of boom and bust cycles is of course goldmining itself, represented at this year's Festival by miners from the Fairbanks area. Not only do a miner's finances fluctuate with his luck and skill in finding a valuable claim; his activity cycle also swings from full bore mining and sluicing the gold-bearing gravel in summer to relative inactivity in winter, when water freezes and the sluice box ices over. The lore of goldmining turns on the uncertainty of economic reward, on the isolation inherent in a non-industrial type mining, and sometimes on the beauty of the landscape itself.

The techniques of placer (pronounced "plasser") mining are shaped by the geological formation in which the gold is found. In placer deposits, gold pieces, ranging from specks to nuggets, have been mixed geologi-

A member of the "felling crew" at work.
Photo by Art Brooks

cally among particles, rocks and boulders of other minerals. Miners first uncover the loose, gold-bearing gravel by removing the "overburden," or top layer of soil. Then they extract the gold by using the action of flowing water on the gravel. Because gold is so relatively heavy per unit of volume, it is not moved as easily by flowing water, but collects as a sediment while other minerals flow by. There are several ways of making water flow through gold-bearing gravel to extract the gold. Alaskan miners demonstrate two at the Festival: the pan and the sluice-box.

Many gold mines are now run by families, and so women and children take their places in occupational tradition alongside of "sourdoughs," the name given to those who first rushed to Alaska in 1886 to pan gold on the Forty Mile River, and those who rushed to the Klondike in 1897. Gold-mining is inextricably tied to the history of Alaska, and gold miners and their families proudly see their own work in the context of a long tradition.

Alaskan occupational traditions, like those found in all lands, give meaning to the world of work. Through these traditions workers know the history and development of their occupation, share similar feelings about remembered events and people, and learn from the skills and knowledge of experienced hands. Occupational cultures, especially like the Alaskan traditions presented at this year's Festival, also have a second side to them—an outside, in the sense that they have symbolic or heroic meaning for us outsiders. The romantic image of the gold miner, the logger, the fisherman and the bush pilot have peopled the popular and literary imagination as symbols of the epic confrontation between society and nature. For these Alaskan workers themselves, however, occupational life has more to do with productivity, safety and cameraderie, even though the Alaskan land and sea they make their profit from is, for them and us, among the most dramatically beautiful and valuable on earth.

Suggested reading

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