



Starbound

Alaska history has been profoundly shaped by fish. Its abundant marine resources helped sustain the first humans who crossed from Siberia to the Americas. Vitus Bering, who first charted Alaska for the Russian Tsars, depended on the sea as well. “Fish oil was his butter, and dried fish his beef and pork,” it was said of Bering. British Captain James Cook came to Alaska in search of the fabled Northwest Passage; instead he found one of the richest fisheries in the world. Watching fish jump in the waters around his vessel, he wrote in his logbook, “It must abound with salmon,” and gave it the name Bristol Bay.

Commercial fishing interests were among the most vocal supporters of purchase of the territory from Russia; while others decried it as folly, people in the seafood business knew that Seward’s icebox was packed with salmon and cod. Canned salmon later emerged as the new territory’s first major industry and by the 1930s played the role that oil does today, generating the vast majority of the territory’s revenues. But the salmon packers’ reliance on fish traps drove a wedge between the industry and the Alaska population that pushed the territory toward statehood.

The pace toward statehood accelerated after World War II; as Alaskans returned from overseas deployments, GIs sought adventure in the northland and communities grew around the wartime investment in new roads and airports. Wanting to assert more control over the economy, the Territorial Legislature created the Department of Fisheries and the first fish board in 1949 so residents had a bigger say in its biggest industry: commercial fishing.

But that industry was in serious trouble. The industry was highly dependent on salmon. Mostly canned, salmon accounted for 70 percent of Alaska’s annual catch of fish by weight and 90 percent of its value. Herring made up most of the remaining volume and halibut was a distant second in value. And salmon runs were failing.

Salmon production peaked in 1936 when 130 million salmon were caught throughout the territory. The runs that followed, however, began a steady decline. In the 1950s Alaska salmon runs were declared a federal disaster.

Several reasons were likely to blame. Lax federal management and a lack of basic research

into salmon runs were surely factors. Federal law required half of all runs escape upriver to spawn the next generation, but nobody really counted. Wartime demand for protein resulted in an overharvest of Alaska’s salmon runs which steepened the decline. Long-term fluctuations in climate, later known as the Pacific inter-Decadal Oscillation, also undoubtedly played a role.

The Territorial Department of Fisheries had some early success. In 1951, it helped overturn



territory of Alaska 19 9 Extraordinary session House of Representatives, 19th session. Front row (l. to r.): Keating, Warren Taylor, Doris Barnes, Jack Conright, Stanley McCutcheon, Amelia Gundersen. Second row (l. to r.): George Miscovich, Slim Rydeen, Frank Angerman, Frank L. Johnson (Eskimo), Percy Ipalook, Almquist. Third row (l. to r.): Glen Franklin, Mark Jensen, Dr. Pollard, Wm Beltz, Andrew Hope, Frank G. Johnson (Tlingit). Fourth row (l. to r.): Red Carlson, John L. Heddy (Clerk), Mary Moore, Mildred Hermann, Abel Anderson, Essie R. Dale. Fifth row (l. to r.): Reporter, Jim Nolan, Jack Carlyle.

Photo courtesy of the Alaska State Library Portrait File, Alaska State Library Photograph Collection.

Left: Spawning salmon.
Photo ADF&G.

an outdated federal law that required Bristol Bay fishermen use sailboats and the number of fish traps was gradually reduced. But a new threat emerged on the high seas in 1952 when Japanese fishing fleets were allowed to operate in the Bering Sea and western Aleutians. Permitted by a treaty governed by the International North Pacific Fisheries Commission, the fishery was intended to help rebuild Japan after the war. It took a significant number of Western Alaska salmon, particularly from Bristol Bay. Alaskans protested the high seas interceptions but as postwar tensions grew with the Soviet Union, the United States increasingly needed Japan as a strategic ally. Salmon had become a bargaining chip in the geopolitics of the cold war.

Alaska's dwindling salmon runs and long-standing resentment over fish traps combined in 1955 when delegates from across Alaska came together to write a state constitution. Former Governor Ernest Gruening delivered an opening keynote address in which he offered an obituary for the salmon industry. The previous summer's harvest, he noted was the poorest in 46 years,

a tragedy for Alaska fishermen and fishing communities. Gruening put the blame on Alaska's treatment by the federal government.

"It is colonialism that has both disregarded the interest of the Alaskan people and caused the failure of the prescribed federal conservation function," Gruening said. "Colonialism has preferred to conserve the power and perquisites of a distant bureaucracy and the control and special privileges—the fish traps—of a politically potent absentee industry."

The work produced by 55 Alaskans that winter later became regarded as a model constitution and it uniquely included key provisions intended to preserve Alaska fisheries: reserving



The vintage 1962 Alaska Fish and Game logo above was updated in 1978.

fish as a common property resource, providing for principles of sustained yield management, and prohibiting any exclusive right of fishery.

Alaska's Constitution paved the way for statehood that finally came in early 1959. The state immediately recruited young biologists to take over the federal jobs, but the transfer wasn't easy. "There were a lot of difficult feelings between the Fish and Wildlife Service and ADF&G," remembered Steve Pennoyer, hired in 1959 and assigned to the Arctic Area, now known as the Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim. "We'd go into a village like Rampart or Tanana or



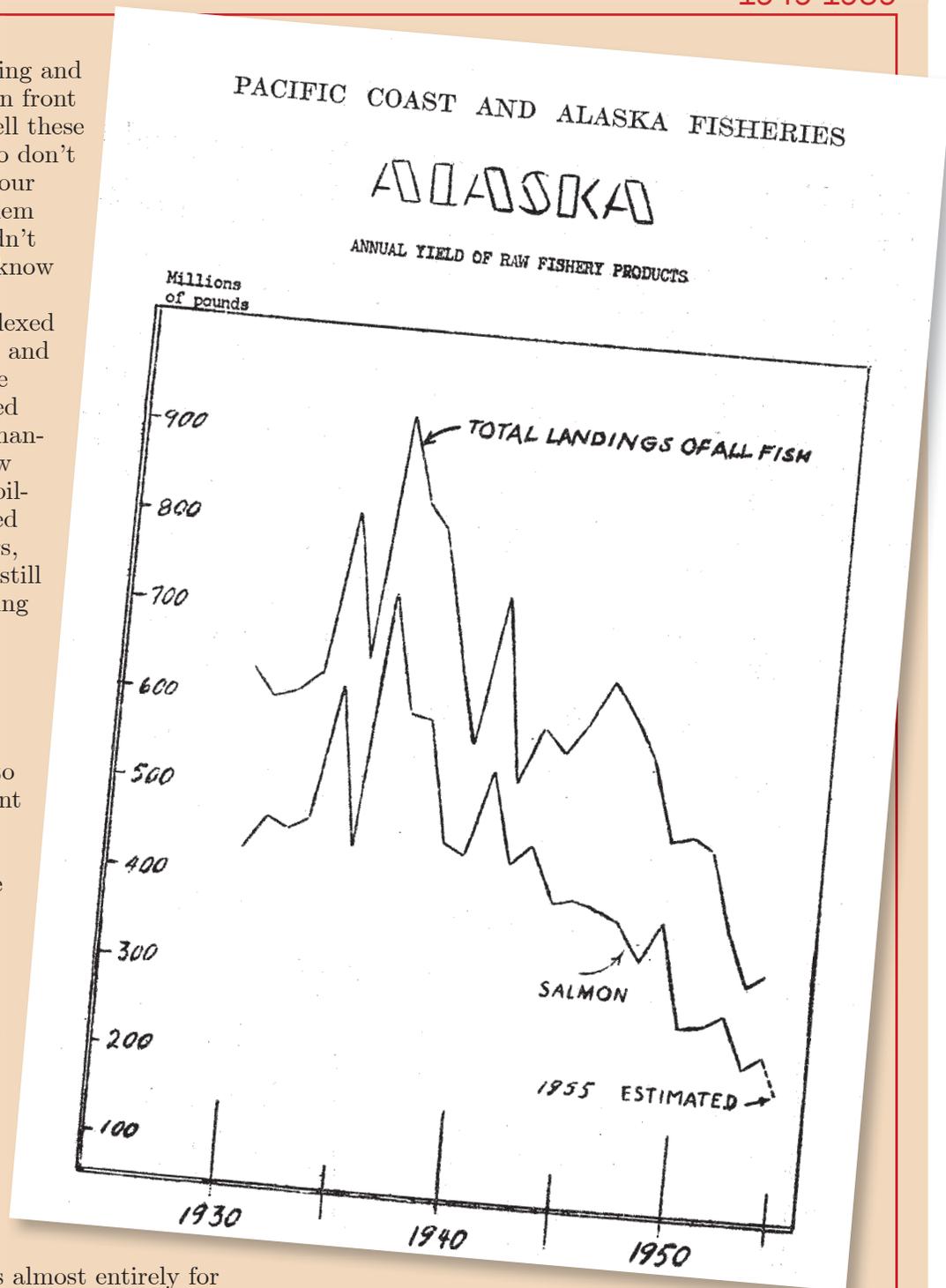
Delegation celebrates Alaska's Statehood by posing in front of a 49 star flag. Identified are Representative Ralph Rivers (far left), Ernest Gruening (beneath flag) and Bob Bartlett (next to Gruening in light colored suit). Photo courtesy of the Ernest H. Gruening Papers, 1914-[1959-1969] 1974, Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Nenana and have a meeting and they would push me up in front of the room and say, 'Well these guys are in charge now so don't burden me with any of your problems. It's their problem now.' And of course I didn't know anything. I didn't know where the hell I was."

The salmon industry flexed its muscle one more time and secured a provision in the statehood act that delayed transfer of authority to manage fisheries until the new state demonstrated its ability. The industry expected that might take five years, during which they could still use their traps. But bowing to the will of the Alaska public, fish traps were banned immediately and the new Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) was certified to take over fish management the very next year.

Change couldn't come soon enough. The decline in Alaska salmon continued. By 1959, salmon runs had deteriorated to the point that federal fishery managers ordered Bristol Bay to be closed entirely. Coming as foreign fleets continued to intercept the same salmon on the high seas, Andy Anderson was incensed. "Bristol Bay people depend upon the salmon fisheries almost entirely for their existence," he said. "No sacrifices should be made by these people so as to benefit the Japanese high seas fishery." After fishermen appealed directly to President Eisenhower, a limited fishery was finally allowed but when the

season was over, the harvest of salmon across the new state had slumped to just 25 million salmon. The last year of federal control produced Alaska's worst salmon harvest since 1900.



Above: Prepared for Alaska's Constitutional Convention, this graph depicts the status of Alaska's fisheries as delegates envisioned statehood. After peaking in 1936 at over 900 million pounds, fish production had dropped by over two-thirds and was continuing to fall. Canned salmon accounted for most of the fish production during Alaska's territorial days with herring second in terms of volume and halibut second in value.

Shaping Alaska's History

The Giant Octopus

Nothing symbolized the absentee control over Alaska's resources quite like the fish trap. Not the ingenious baskets woven from alder branches by Alaska's Native peoples to ensure a subsistence harvest, these were industrial-scale traps built by the salmon packers from wood piling and wire fencing. Driven into the river beds or suspended from floating frames anchored along the outer capes, fish traps were impressive harvesting machines, mazes of steel mesh with long arms that stretched into the migration path of the salmon. From there, the salmon were herded into two heart-shaped corrals which emptied into a holding pen or "pot." There trapmen scooped salmon out by the thousands into tenders that hauled the bounty to nearby canneries.

There was no doubt about the traps' efficiency. One early fishery agent described traps as a "giant octopus that grasps everything in its tentacles." There were fears that traps could effectively destroy an entire salmon run. Even worse for Alaskans, they also took jobs away



Photo by Dora M. Sweeney, courtesy of Alaska State Library Photograph Collection.

from resident fishermen. "In its very essence a fish trap is a monopoly, a special privilege," said Alaska delegate Anthony Dimond. "It is not possible for the fisherman who catches the fish with any other device to make a living."

Such concerns over fish traps were nothing new. Fish traps were banished in England by the Magna

Carta in 1215. By the 20th century traps were banned in California, Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia but they flourished in Alaska. At their peak, almost 800 traps were used throughout the territory and landed two-thirds of Alaska's salmon.

Alaskans fought the fish traps from the very beginning. The first territorial legislature called for restrictions on trap use in 1913. By the 1930s, talk had turned to phasing the traps out. In 1948, Alaskans voted seven-to-one to eliminate them entirely.

Over the years, the number of fish traps in Alaska waters had been pared back to around 400, but to Alaskans the traps remained a despised symbol of outside control of the territory that inflamed Alaskans desire for statehood.

Alaskans view a model of a fish trap, described as "Alaska's Enemy No. 1," prior to a 1948 advisory vote. During the October election, Alaskans voted against traps by a seven-to-one margin.

Photo courtesy of the Russell W. Dow (1915-1992) Papers, University of Alaska Anchorage, Consortium Library, Archives and Special Collections.



Shaping Alaska's History

Real World Economist



George Rogers.
Photo courtesy of the Alaska State Library
Photograph Collection.

When George Rogers studied economics in college, he was frustrated by his fellow students who knew all about economic theory but didn't know the basics of bookkeeping. Rogers considers himself a real world economist. Growing up in California during the depression he had to be. Fresh out of high school in the 1930s, he needed a job. Standard Oil recognized his aptitude for numbers and hired him as a statistician.

When the war broke out, Rogers was passed over for the draft due to a leg injury, so he went to college and earned a degree in economics. A government job took him to Alaska. The Office of Price Administration controlled prices during the war, but didn't include fish, which wasn't considered an important part of the national diet at the time. It was to some. "The Department of the Army said, 'Look, we've got Catholic boys who expect fish on Friday and the price has gone so high we can't afford to buy them that.'" Rogers recalled. "They told me, 'We want you to roll back the price of raw fish.'"

It was an impossible assignment Rogers admits, but it got him to Alaska at a time of dramatic growth. The potential of the territory caught Rogers's attention and he caught the eye of Alaskans. Governor Ernest Gruening asked him to stay and gave him assignments from revising the tax code to helping organize the Territorial Department of Fisheries. His work in resource economics earned him an invitation to the Constitutional Convention.

"Fisheries was the key to statehood all along and Ernest Gruening recognized that," Rogers said. "First of all you had the fish traps. They were the big bugaboo: owned by outside interests and taking jobs away from Alaskans. And the federal government had done a lousy job managing fisheries. I referred to Alaska as the farthest north banana republic because it was controlled by the canned salmon industry."

As a consultant to the constitutional convention Rogers helped write the natural resources section



The canned salmon industry wielded enormous influence in Alaska.
Photo ADF&G.

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—George Rogers

with its provisions for common property and sustained yield. The constitution did not ban traps outright. It set out broad principles and goals and tended to avoid such micromanagement but language that prohibited special fishing rights underscored the intent of its framers. And just to make sure, they called for an advisory vote to ban traps that was part of the Constitution's ratification.

"They were tied together and that was critical. It helped get out the vote," Rogers said. "I don't think we'd have gotten the constitution approved by the general population unless they had some gimmick like that to bring them in." The ploy worked. When put before Alaska voters for ratification in 1956, the constitution passed by a two-to-one margin. The vote against fish traps that year passed five-to-one.

George Rogers went on to a distinguished career as an Alaska resource economist, later advising the International North Pacific Fisheries Commission and North Pacific Fishery Management Council, writing several books on Alaska's natural resources, always with his feet firmly planted in the real world.

Shaping Alaska's History

Territorial Department of Fisheries

Before Alaskans ever called a constitutional convention, they created a Department of Fisheries. Passed by the Territorial Legislature in 1949, the goals of the Department were to better conserve the fish resource and “overcome the present depleted condition of the salmon runs,” foster resident ownership, management, and control of Alaska fisheries and, lastly, to cooperate with the federal fishery managers. Actually, they were not in a particularly cooperative mood.

“The people of Alaska just last year voted overwhelmingly in favor of the elimination of fish traps for capturing salmon for the general

economic welfare of Alaska as well as the proper management of salmon,” the Department said in its first annual report and called on the federal Fish and Wildlife Service to rid the territory of traps.

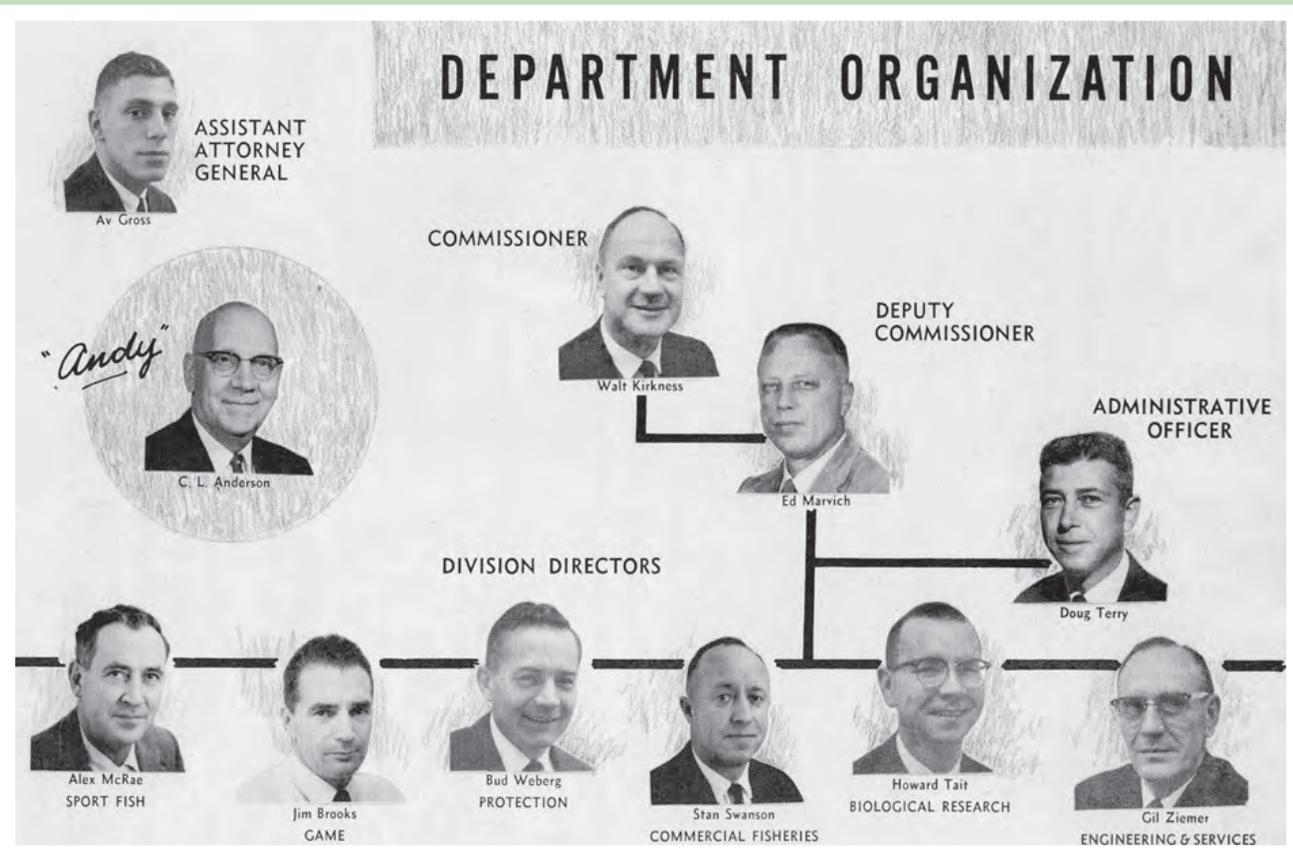
They fought regulations seen as discriminatory against resident Alaskans such as the requirement that Bristol Bay fishermen work from sailboats. “None of these sections can be justified on conservation grounds,” the Department railed. “The safety of the fishermen has been entirely overlooked.”

They demanded that Alaskans have a voice in fishery regulation. “It has been our practice to meet with the fishermen and discuss these

problems and get their reactions to them,” said Andy Anderson. “I have

...the goals of the Department were to better conserve the fish resource and “overcome the present depleted condition of the salmon runs”

—Department of Fisheries



The first organizational chart of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game honored Andy Anderson for his work in forming the Department during territorial days. Photo ADF&G.

Shaping Alaska's History

been around this game for a long time and my impression is that the fishermen are more conservation-minded than most of the rest of them, including the packers."

The change sought by Alaskans was slow to come. The salmon packers still held a powerful sway over federal fishery managers. But the Territorial Department of Fisheries and the Territorial Fish Board emerged with a steady voice and a clear vision for the future.

"The rate of development of the Alaska Department of Fisheries will be dependent upon the speed with which statehood is achieved," they wrote. "By good management and cooperation of all people and companies concerned there is no reason why Alaskan fishery products cannot be diversified and increased in volume and quality until they become world famous."

They were right. And they had the right man to lead them, Clarence L. Anderson. Alaskans knew him as Andy.



A.W. Winn Brindle next to scow full of fish at Wards Cove Packing Company salmon cannery in Naknek.

Photo courtesy of the Wein collection, Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center, Library and Archives.



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Sockeye salmon being offloaded onto a cannery conveyor in Bristol Bay, 1954.

Photo courtesy of the Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center, Library and Archives.