



**The Struggle for Equity:**  
Resident Participation  
in the Bristol Bay  
Commercial Fishery

Submitted by: BBEDC

BRISTOL BAY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION





On the cover: Sailing off Flounder Flats, Nushagak River, circa 1938. The letter "A" on the stern of this sailboat indicates it is manned by Alaska residents.

Dave and Mary Carlson collection, Samuel K. Fox Museum, Dillingham



# The Struggle for Equity: Resident Participation in the Bristol Bay Commercial Fishery

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Development Corporation

As Alaskans marked 50 years of statehood in 2009, the commercial fishermen of Bristol Bay completed their 125th season. The convergence of these two milestones provides an opportunity to reflect upon the influence of each upon the other.

The Bristol Bay fishery embodies the enduring struggle in Alaska's history to determine who will manage our resources and who will benefit from their exploitation. With statehood Alaskans wrestled the management of fisheries away from the canneries and the federal government. Enlightened state management is often credited with saving the Bristol Bay fishery. Statehood also improved the standing of Alaskan residents with the fishing industry. Statehood, however, has not successfully preserved the benefits of the fishery for those Alaskans who live within the watersheds of Bristol Bay. Differences in expectations and need between watershed residents and nonresidents continue to clash. Many of these differences are rooted in the history of Bristol Bay's commercial fishery.



Native cannery workers at Nushagak, circa 1917  
John Cobb, University of Washington Archives

## Paternalism and Prejudice in the Formative Years

1884 to 1920

Bristol Bay was occupied for thousands of years before the first cannery was built in Bristol Bay. Native *Yup'ik*, *Aleutiq* and *Dena'ina* people settled into the region for the very same reason the canneries did – salmon. Salmon was a resource so abundant and reliably present that it enabled these Native peoples, unlike others in the arctic and subarctic, to give up a wide ranging nomadic life and build relatively settled communities.

The commercial salmon fishery in Bristol Bay dates from 1884 when San Francisco businessman Carl Rohlffs organized the Arctic Packing Co. and built the first cannery on Bristol Bay at the Native village of *Kanulik* across the Nushagak River from present day Dillingham. The fishery in Bristol Bay, as in all of Alaska, was pioneered by nonresidents like Rohlffs. However, in Bristol Bay, Rohlffs probably sought and benefited from the help of John W. Clark who was the trader at Nushagak for the Alaska Commercial Co. Clark arrived in Bristol Bay sometime in the late 1870's. Clark's familiarity with the region and his connections to the local Natives made him an indispensable contact for Non-natives coming into the Nushagak country. The selection of the site for the first cannery was no doubt made with Clark's input. Clark himself operated a small salting station that may predate the first cannery. Clark later became a principal owner in the fourth cannery built in Bristol Bay, the Nushagak Canning Co., at the place that now bears his name – Clark's Point.



John W. Clark, (1846 - 1896)  
Elizabeth NicholSEN Butkovich



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*I was a cannery worker for nearly ten years, until the early 1930's. At this time Native people were allowed to fish, the kind of work we did normally at home. We also had become much more comfortable with English and Gasht'ana life in general. As fishermen we finally had the chance to make more money, and our life at Bristol Bay greatly improved.*

Pete Koktelash

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Andrei, the "River Pilot" at Nushagak, circa 1884. The one local Native essential for early cannery operations was the river pilot who guided the large cannery ships up the shifting channels of Nushagak Bay to anchor. Henry Wienland, Moravian Church Archives, Bethlehem, PA

The first commercial pack of canned salmon from Rohlfs' cannery was only about 400 cases or 6000 fish. A meager beginning, but it was not long before the firm, red-fleshed sockeye of Bristol Bay commanded a premium price. The rush was on. Within six years there were four operating canneries on the Nushagak River. Two canneries were built on the Naknek River and one on the Egegik by 1895. The first canneries on the Kvichak and Ugashik Rivers appeared in 1896. Bristol Bay commercial fishing boomed in the first decade of the twentieth century. By 1910 Bristol Bay produced about 40% of Alaska's canned salmon. Over time more than 50 canneries would be built in Bristol Bay. Most have since succumbed to fire or neglect. Rohlfs' cannery at Kanulik ceased operating in 1905.

At the time Rohlfs built his cannery the Native people of the Bay had been exposed to western influence and goods for nearly seventy years. The Russians arrived in 1818 and built a modest fort and trading post on Nushagak Bay. Even though the impact of the Russians was profound, the number of Non-natives who came to Bristol Bay to operate Rohlfs' cannery in 1884 probably exceeded the total number of Non-natives that had ever visited the Bay since the Russians first arrived. Nothing in their previous experience prepared local Natives for the changes that came with the explosion of industrialized salmon canning.

As the industry gained a foothold in Bristol Bay little thought was given to the welfare of the local Natives or the impact upon their cultures and lifestyles. Within a few years, however, a more paternalistic attitude developed. The moral persuasion of Christian missionaries and sometimes simple economics eventually resulted in more concern for the Natives and Native employment. The Moravian church, at the behest of Sheldon Jackson, established a mission near



Bristol Bay's First Cannery - the Arctic Packing Company, also known as Rohlfs' Cannery, circa 1900

National Archives and Records Administration, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, RG 22-FF-A2513.





The "Natalia" at the PAF cannery dock in Dillingham, 1955. The "Natalia" was one of the first Bryant power boats in Bristol Bay. It was owned by Chief Ivan Blunka of New Stuyahok. Chief Ivan was one of the early independent fishermen.

Steve McCutcheon 1955. Anchorage Museum of History and Art, 26733

the Arctic Packing Company cannery at Kanulik in 1886. Within a few years Moravian Missionaries noted how large tent settlements of Natives started appearing around canneries. Some canneries provided employment and also purchased fish from Natives.

Cannery efforts to help local Natives, however, were small tokens, extended less out of a sense of responsibility than to placate federal government officials who began appearing in Bristol Bay around 1890. Despite the fact Native labor was often cheaper to obtain it was not enough to shift cannery employment practices. In some cases it was the simple prejudice of cannery superintendents who thought the Natives too filthy or unreliable. In others it was a preference for imported workers and fishermen who were essentially indentured servants for the season. Imported workers and fishermen were also protective of their employment and discouraged the use of the local Natives. Canneries, however, were quick to overlook the alleged deficiencies of Natives when extra labor was needed to process a large volume of fish.

As the fishery completed its first decade in 1894 the Governor of Alaska was able to report that at three canneries on the Nushagak 468 persons were employed of which more than 25% were Native – an acceptable improvement. By 1901 Jefferson Moser, sent by the U.S. Department of Commerce to investigate the fishery, reported the canneries "employ every Native who is willing to work" and would employ many more "if they could be obtained and were reliable."

Natives benefited even more as increasing numbers were hired when the Chinese Exclusion Act was extended in 1904. However, future prospects for continued employment dimmed as E.A. Smith's new processing machine the "Iron Chink" first went into commercial operation at one of the Nushagak canneries in 1906. The technology spread. The "Iron Chink" beheaded, split and cleaned the fish and was named for the Chinese labor it replaced. It also replaced Native laborer.

High speed cannery lines introduced in the 1920s further reduced labor requirements, but by then much of the Native labor supply had been tragically decimated by the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1919. The epidemic claimed so many lives that the U.S. Fish Commissioner monitoring the commercial fishery that year remarked in his report that Natives would likely "never again be a factor in the fishing and canning operations" of Bristol Bay.



Chris Petersen, 1934. Chris Petersen was the son of a Norwegian father and Yup'ik mother. He was raised by Moravian missionaries. He is believed to be among the first, if not the first, resident born in Bristol Bay to become a drift fisherman. Ken Stevens. Collection of Samuel K. Fox Museum, Dillingham, AK



## Protectionism for Nonresidents in the Glory Days

1920 to 1941

The efforts of the Federal government to get the Alaska salmon industry to employ more residents never amounted to much more than a gentle prodding. Cannery interests were well entrenched in the halls of Congress. As a result, federal agencies charged with oversight of Alaska's fisheries rarely had budgets sufficient to take care of the fish, much less those Alaskans who wanted to participate in the industry. Even the elevation of Alaska to the status of

territory did little to help. In 1912 Congress passed a new Organic Act. Fisheries management was normally ceded by the federal government to territorial governments. Not so for new the territory of Alaska. The canners feared an upstart territorial government and convinced Congress to retain federal control of Alaskan waters. Alaska's non-voting delegate was furious, but to no avail. The controversy, however, spurred a small but increasingly vocal opposition as Alaska residents began to resent industry dominance.

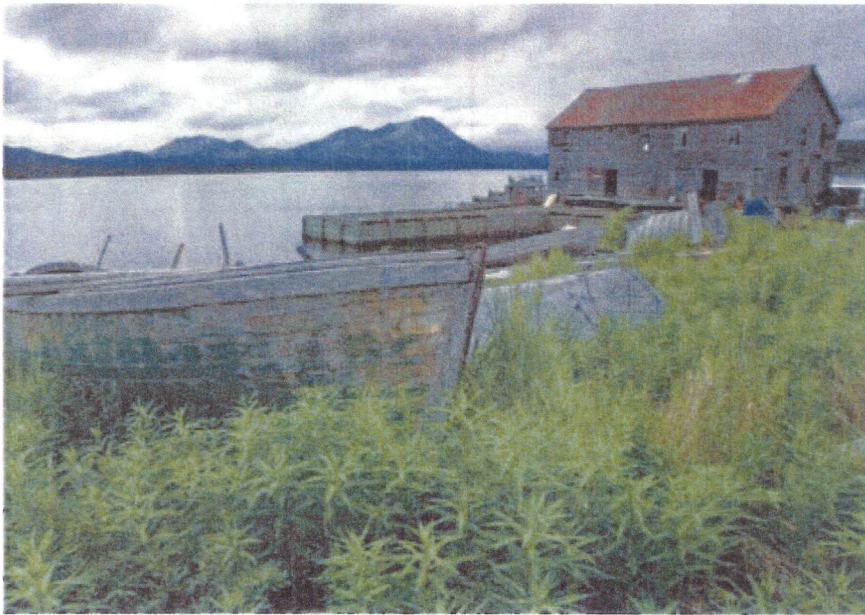
In Bristol Bay this growing resentment was manifest in the practice that virtually excluded residents from fishing. Canneries were generally willing to purchase some fish from local resident set nets, but access to the fishing grounds for drift fishing was from the earliest time the all but exclusive domain of fishermen brought North each year on cannery ships. As the fishery grew more fishermen who came North on those ships stayed behind after the season, married local women and raised families. These skilled fishermen became the first watershed residents to participate in the drift boat fishery. Despite the growing availability of

this skilled labor, however, the canneries continued to favor nonresidents. The canneries owned all of the drift boats and necessary gear.

During the 1920's and 30's, the halcyon years of the Bristol Bay fishery, there were approximately 1,200 cannery sailboats fishing at the mouths of the five major rivers, the Nushagak, Kvichak, Naknek, Egegik, and Ugashik. However, as late as 1929 there were only twenty-eight watershed resident boats in all of Bristol Bay.

Discord among resident fishermen grew as canneries adopted more discriminatory practices. Many of these practices were imposed upon canneries by virtue of collective bargaining agreements negotiated with the Alaska Fishermen's Union. The AFU was dominated by nonresident members. Often resident fishermen were provided older boats and gear and were forced to wait while the boats of nonresident fishermen were allowed to deliver their fish. During peak runs swamped canneries would place resident boats on catch limits before nonresident boats. Canneries would sometimes pay higher prices to nonresidents or did not allow residents to work for "run money" offloading and onloading ships at the beginning and end of each season. Perhaps the most overt act of discrimination occurred when canneries required resident fishermen to paint an "A" on the side of their boats so the tally scows responsible for collecting fish could easily distinguish a resident from a nonresident.

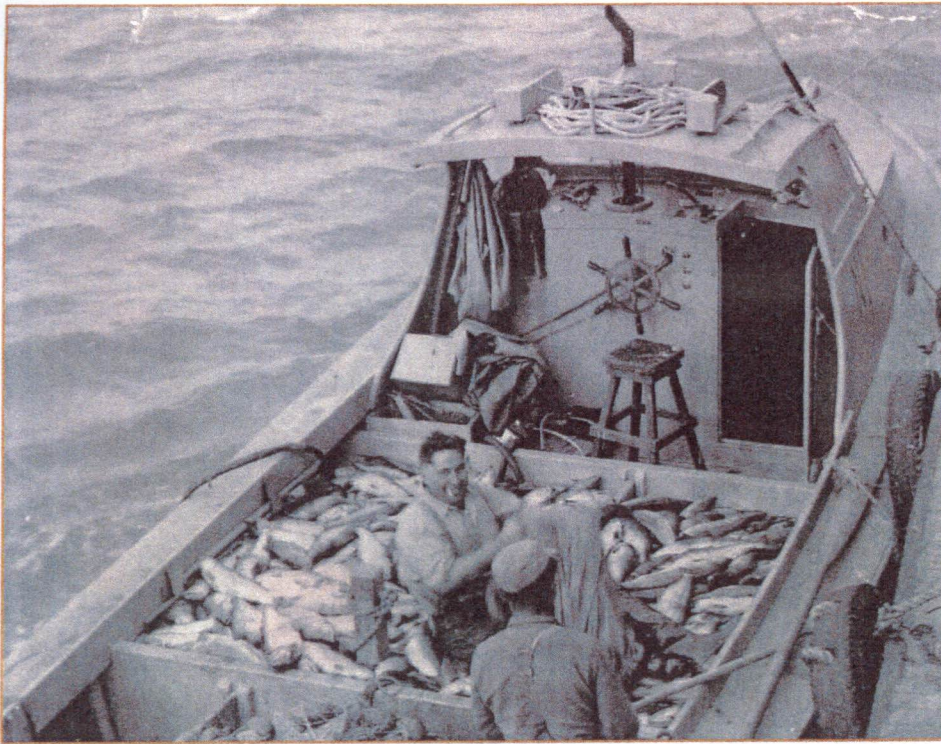
The acrimony of Bristol Bay's resident fishermen reached a peak in 1939 as a result of two practices the AFU secured from the canneries. Canneries agreed to pay nonresidents a bonus equal to one-third of all the money paid to residents for fish that residents caught in Bristol Bay. Also, nonresidents were provided the first six boats for every canning line in Bristol



*Fishermen were mostly Italians, Scandinavians and Finns hired at Seattle and San Francisco. The canneries liked Scandinavians from the Lofoten Islands off the coast of Norway, where sailing boats similar to those in Bristol Bay were used, or Italians from Sardinia or the Messina Straits for the same reason.*

Al Andree





Harvey Samuelsen, circa 1955. Harvey Samuelsen came to Bristol Bay after serving in World War II. He became a leader in the effort to secure more of the benefits of the Bristol Bay commercial fishery for watershed residents.

Courtesy Robin Samuelsen

Bay. The latter practice virtually assured nonresidents of employment through out the season, while resident fishermen might only be engaged during the peak of the run. The Alaska Territorial legislature attempted to address the plight of resident fishermen with the introduction of a bill in 1939 to require a hiring preference for residents in Alaska's fisheries. The bill passed the Territorial Senate unanimously, but failed for lack of one vote in the House. That failure provoked resident fishermen to seek help from Anthony Dimond, Alaska's non-voting delegate to Congress. The cause became even more urgent when the Federal Bureau of Fisheries announced that commercial fishing in Bristol Bay would be curtailed by 50% in 1940 to allow for greater escapement. Bristol Bay resident fishermen feared they would have no work at all. Dimond introduced legislation that would require "all persons engaged in fishing in Bristol Bay in 1940 be residents of the territory." The bill failed to garner the necessary support.

## World War Two and the Rise of Independent Fishermen

1941 to 1975

**N**atives and other watershed residents did not significantly enter the fishery until it became virtually impossible for nonresidents to participate - a condition created when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and invaded the Aleutians.

The Second World War changed the fishery. The labor traditionally employed by the canneries was drafted to fight or was needed in the burgeoning war industries. Cannery operators had to draw upon resident labor. Cannery workers were not only needed, but fishermen as well. During the war canneries were no longer reluctant or beholden to nonresident fishermen to put residents into fishing boats. After the war there was a partial return to the former reliance upon nonresidents, but the proportion of residents working in both the canneries and as fishermen continued greater than before the war.

The war also foreshadowed the end of sailboats. Soldiers returning from the fully mechanized experience of war had little patience for fishing from quaint sailboats. Their growing

*World War II saw a great change in Bristol Bay fishermen. Many of the Italians, Scandinavians and Finns were caught up in the military, or in wartime work and couldn't travel to Alaska to fish. Before the war the canneries didn't want to hire residents, but with the shortage of nonresident fishermen, they suddenly discovered that the Native Aleuts and Eskimos were marvelous boatmen and seemed to have been born to sail. Some of us resident whites didn't do so bad, either.*

Al Andree



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*The outside fishermen, immigrants from Italy, immigrants from other nations of the world; Norway, Finland, that came to this country were able to catch 2,000 fish a day when we were on limit and us residents, if we were lucky, we were limited to 1,350. That went on until the '50's until we started raising a little bit of hell ourselves. Then we were also given second hand equipment by the great salmon industry. . . . Even when we became independent fishermen, they still wouldn't take 2,000 fish a day from certain fishermen. Well, all the resident fishermen. It still makes me mad today.*

Harvey Samuelson

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intolerance was bolstered by safety concerns raised after many fishermen lost their lives in a storm in 1948. The "sailboat days" of the Bristol Bay fishery ended in 1951 when the ban on power was lifted.

The introduction of power, however, did not come without real economic concerns raised by residents. The sailboat was a great leveler. All fishermen used the same obsolete gear. The difference between an average fisherman and a "high-liner" was a measure of skill, strength and endurance. Some residents feared the economic benefits of the fishery would once again shift heavily in favor of outside fishermen who generally had the resources to purchase bigger boats and better gear. To some extent this fear appeared justified in the early days of power. Natives in particular were frequently relegated to "conversions," that is, sailboats with rebuilt sterns and makeshift engine installations. However, they did surprisingly well in these cumbersome fusions of sail and power and emerged as the backbone of a fishery increasingly populated with independent fishermen.

Though nonresident fishermen did not return to their pre-war position of influence with the canneries they did not hesitate to exert the influence that remained. In 1953 nonresident fishermen demanded that canneries stop hiring independent fishermen, most of whom were residents. The canneries quickly capitulated and independent fishermen, whose only income had been commercial fishing, found themselves without work. It took two years but Alaska's territorial legislature finally passed a law requiring canneries to buy salmon from independent fishermen.

Eventually, independent fishermen became the norm and cannery employed fishermen disappeared. Watershed residents pioneered the independent fishery, but as the decades progressed nonresidents were once again dominating the fishing ground with bigger boats and better gear. As some feared most resident fishermen were simply not in the best economic position to keep up.

Throughout 1950's and 60's the resident share of the total income from the fishery steadily increased. Despite these improvements, however, a study published by the University of Alaska noted that in 1970 nonresidents still caught more than twice as many fish as resident fishermen. The ADF&G area biologist for Bristol Bay in 1970 speculated this disparity may be attributable to differences in expectation and need:

*Most of the nonresident fishermen are high-liners, that is, they consistently make large catches and are able to do so due to better gear and boats than possessed by many resident fishermen. A nonresident who comes all the way up from outside is going to fish pretty hard. Many of these fishermen have fished Bristol Bay for many years. On the other hand there are about three major groups of resident*



fishermen: (1) the high-liners who consistently make good catches and can and do compete with the non-resident; (2) the part-time or weekend fisherman who cannot compete. Most of these vacation fishermen use either skiffs and/or older gear and vessels which cannot compete with the larger mobile high-liner fleet; (3) the last group of resident fishermen are the upriver Native fishermen – they largely can't compete due to inadequate vessels . . . Further, these upriver fishermen have an entirely different approach to fishing as a livelihood. They normally catch just what they need to through to the next season.

The factor most directly responsible for differences in productivity between watershed resident and nonresident fishermen in the late 60's and early 1970's was that many watershed residents were set net fishermen. A much larger proportion of nonresidents were drift fishermen. For the years 1970, 1972 and 1973, 89% of nonresidents used drift gear compared with 63% of residents.

## Limited Entry

### 1975 to Today

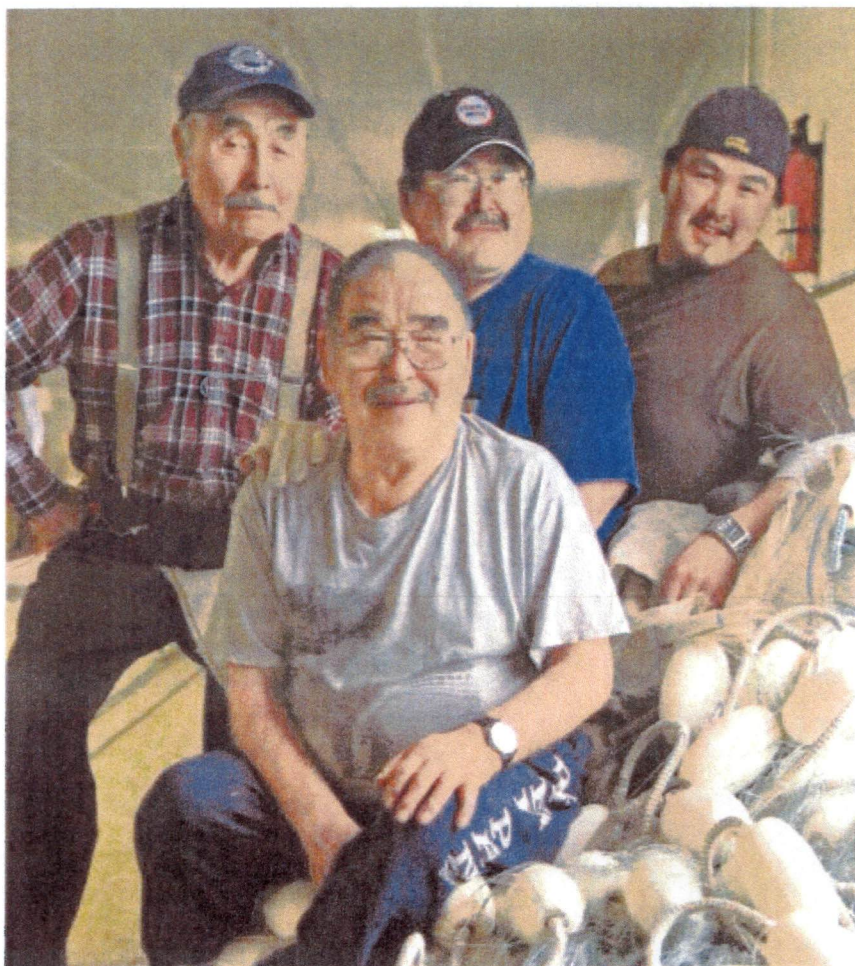
In 1973 Bristol Bay experienced one of its worst returns ever. Fishing was closed by emergency order and federal authorities declared the region an economic disaster.

The years before and after were not much better. In 1975 the State of Alaska finally imposed restrictions on the number of fishermen as the Limited Entry system was implemented to protect the resource. Qualifications for the right to fish in Bristol Bay were based upon past participation in the fishery and economic dependence on the fishery. A fixed number of permits were established. The desire of the State to limit the number of fishermen to protect the resource was tempered by its desire not to exclude past fishermen. The maximum number of permits was high – 1669 drift permits and 803 set net permits – and grew larger as a result of court challenges. The rules governing qualification were not particularly sensitive to the inability of many Bristol Bay fishermen to read and write English, or the fact that before 1975 many Bristol Bay fishermen fished with family or friends, shared expenses and profits and were often not concerned about who owned boats and gear – all qualifying factors for eligibility. Some watershed residents who fished all their lives were denied permits.

There is little debate now whether some form of limited entry was needed. In the 1960's and 70's there were simply too many fishermen chasing too few fish. After thirty years, however, it remains unclear whether limiting entry has protected the resource. What is clear is that limited entry has not helped retain or improve the access of watershed residents to the benefits of the fishery. The provisions of the law that enabled fishermen to transfer permits effectively privatized the salmon of Bristol Bay. Of the 754 drift fishing permits issued to watershed residents in 1975, only 398 remain. Likewise watershed residents held 661 set net permits in 1975 and that number is now 375.

*The reason I was against power boats was because every Tom, Dick and Harry might fish. After legalization of power and the establishment of limited entry, it seems there are now twice as many fishermen. These include doctors, lawyers and other professionals; it seemed all the pencil pushers started fishing.*

John Nichol森



Nick Gumlickpuk, Sacally Wonhola, Wassillie Gumlickpuk and Gusty Gumlickpuk.



## Conclusion

The development of the commercial fishery altered forever the life of Bristol Bay's original Native inhabitants. Fortunately, it has not taken from them the subsistence resource upon which they still rely – salmon. It did, however, far more than the earlier Russian fur trade, create a dependency on goods and services that could only be imported from outside the region. The cash made available from the commercial fishery eventually became essential for maintaining a lifestyle that required frame houses, electricity, water and sewer, heating fuel, gasoline, medical

services, imported food, education and the like. Indeed, this growing need for supplemental cash income spurred the push by residents for greater participation in the fishery. Now, as the first decade of the twenty-first century comes to a close the cost of living in Bristol Bay is perhaps greater than at any other time in its history.

Today, despite 125 years of fishing, 58 years of power, and 34 years of limited entry the issue of resident access to the Bristol Bay fishery remains a matter of serious concern, particularly for watershed residents. The struggle is no longer about gaining access, as it was during most of the sailboat days. The struggle now is more about preserving the access literally ripped from the clutches of canneries, unions and the federal government.

The one advantage Bristol Bay residents and all Alaskans should have now that they did not have for most of Alaska's commercial fishing history is a state and a Board of Fish appointed by a governor and approved by a legislature that Alaskans elect. Statehood, however, eventually brought limited entry which led to a significant erosion of resident access to

the Bristol Bay fishery. Bristol Bay residents are now engaged in an economic struggle to hold onto the benefits they secured from the fishery and regain some of those lost through the out-migration of limited entry permits.

It would be a sad comment on our failure as Alaskans if 50 years from now historians look back on the Bristol Bay commercial fishery and conclude that the decisions made during statehood brought the fishery full circle – Bristol Bay residents were once again sitting on shore while non-residents did all of the fishing.

