Stories From the Thelma C: Exhibit Focus on Boat, Tsunami, and Salmon

As part of the design process for the Thelma C Exhibit, the KMM Board has been working steadily since last fall to complete an interpretive plan for the exhibit. The interpretive plan will describe the details of the stories the exhibit will tell.

Plans call for the exhibit to feature the 38 foot wooden seine boat in a small open sided and roofed pavilion near St. Paul Harbor, with outdoor interpretive panels and a cell phone tour.

To help design the panels and cell phone tour, the museum is working with AK Exhibits, a Juneau design firm. The museum hopes to receive a more detailed description of the exhibit design from Exhibit AK in the next few weeks, and a complete interpretive design in hand by December 2015.

A main theme of the exhibit will be the 1964 Good Friday earthquake and tsunami and the impact of the event on Kodiak’s waterfront and fishing fleet. The exhibit will also explore Kodiak’s salmon fishing and processing industry, wooden boat construction in the 1960s, and the day to day lives of commercial fishermen at sea.

Getting to the heart of those stories was the focus of discussion at a public meeting in November, and at numerous KMM board and committee meetings since. How to tell them, and how much information can be accommodated by a limited number of exhibit panels has been an ongoing part of the design discussion.

Because not every story the museum would like to tell about the boat can be fitted onto a limited number of exhibit panels, some information will be available on the museum’s website and though the cell phone tour.

While the interpretive design of the exhibit is moving forward, the museum has also been working to plan and construct the exhibit site and pavilion on a City owned site on the spit near St. Paul Harbor.

The museum received an architectural plan for the exhibit in 2013, and major funding from the Alaska Legislature in 2010. With several other grants in process, the museum hopes to have full funding in hand by the end of 2015.

The Thelma C was constructed in 1965, one of hundreds of boats built to replace vessels lost in the 1964 tsunami. KMM believes the Thelma C is the one of the last of these “earthquake,” boats in existence.

Dennis Knagin, former crewman on the Thelma C, beside the boat in 2005, soon after the museum acquired the vessel. Photo: KMM Archives

KMM to Show Rare Color Salmon Fishing Film at Comfish 2015

Kodiak Maritime Museum will again be part of Kodiak Comfish, noon Thursday April 2nd to 5 p.m. Saturday April 4th at the Harbor Convention Center.

KMM board members, staff and supporters will man the booth on the ground floor of the Convention Center. Information about the museum will be available for visitors.

This year, the museum plans to show a rare color movie filmed in the early 1960s by former long time Kodiak fisherman Bill Torsen.

The silent 8 mm film depicts salmon fishing on the north end of Kodiak Island, including setting the net and delivering fish for processing to the Grimes Packing Plant in Ouzinkie.

The Grimes plant was destroyed in the 1964 tsunami and no longer exists.

Torsen donated the film to the museum in 2010 and passed away soon after.

The film will be showed continuously on a video screen at the KMM booth.

Screen shot from 1960s salmon film to be shown at the KMM Comfish booth April 2-4.
With Comfish coming up as I write this, it's worth remembering that Kodiak Maritime Museum has its roots in commercial fishing and continues to be the only museum in Alaska dedicated to preserving the culture and history of the industry.

The organization was started when four fishing women, Sue Jeffrey, Virginia Adams, Lacey Berns, and Wanda Fields, realized in the early 1990s that the commercial fishing industry and the culture around it were changing rapidly, but there was no one keeping track of those changes, or the history which preceded them.

At the time, IFQs—Individual Fishing Quotas—were just being instituted for halibut and black cod. The new system had ramifications for fishermen in how they fished, how crews were paid, and how managers tracked the catch. It was obvious to everyone that things would not be the same going forward.

These prescient women realized that unless someone stopped to look back and document it, the long and storied history of commercial fisheries in Alaska would be lost. As far as anyone knew, no one was saving artifacts or documents or artwork or photographs specifically related to commercial fishing or the processing industry in any organized way.

There were rumors of people squirreling things away in their attics, but whatever effort there was to preserve this vital history of Kodiak was on an amateur level. The women got organized, gathered other people to the cause and the rest is well, history.

So here we are, twenty three years later. As we have for the past several years, KMM will have a Comfish booth on the ground floor of the Convention Center. Please stop by to say hello, chat with old friends and check out the color film we'll be showing of salmon seining around Kodiak in the early 60s.

See you in a few days!

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Welcome Aboard! Lon White

Born and raised in Seattle Washington, Lon White came to Kodiak in 1979 to pursue a career as a commercial diver. In 1982 he took a job as a Harbor Officer with the Kodiak Harbormaster Department. Lon was promoted through the ranks to his current position as Harbormaster, serving in the Harbor Department for nearly 33 years.

During his tenure, Lon has been intimately involved in the planning and development of Kodiak’s port and harbors and more recently the establishment of Kodiak’s Shipyard.

He is the current President of the Pacific Coast Congress of Harbormasters & Port Managers, and a 20-year member of the Alaska Association of Harbormaster & Port Administrators. His expertise and experience is well recognized in the industry.

Lon first took an interest in Kodiak Maritime Museum through his job working in the harbor and from sitting on the Ports and Harbors Citizens Advisory Board. In early 2009, as the museum was looking for a place to site the Thelma C Exhibit Executive Director Toby Sullivan brought the plan to the PHAB for advice. With Lon’s counsel, the PHAB subsequently passed a resolution recommending a site adjacent to Oscar’s Dock as the best place for such an exhibit.

“I’ve had an active interest in the Thelma C exhibit for a long time and I think as Harbormaster I bring a good perspective on the project. There’s a lot going on the harbor, and it all has to fit together and run smoothly. But simply as a resident of Kodiak, I think the exhibit will tell an really important story about our history, especially the tsunami in 1964.”

Interested in Kodiak’s Maritime History?

KMM is looking for new faces to help steer us through the Thelma C Project and beyond. If you have a few hours a month to help us in our work we’d love to hear from you!

Contact the museum at 486-0384, or President Wallace Fields at wfields@gci.net, or 486-8370

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Harbor Lights Fest Illuminates the Harbor in December

For the second year, Kodiak’s Harbor Lights Festival, sponsored by Kodiak Maritime Museum, lit up the harbor in late December.

With help from a $1,000 Kodiak Community Foundation grant, the festival drew an estimated 800 people to the harbor to view more than 30 decorated vessels on December 20.

As part of the festival, the museum also hosted a holiday gathering in the Harbor Convention Center. Hundreds of people thronged the Convention Center to visit with neighbors, enjoy holiday cookies and beverages, and look out over the harbor from the upstairs windows. KMM volunteers provided home made Christmas cookies and Isle Bells, St. Innocent’s Academy choir, and the local Girl Scouts provided live music.

Local businesses and residents donated gift certificates, refreshments and various items for a silent auction to support the event and the museum. Business donors included Sutliff’s True Value Hardware, Subway of Kodiak, Harborside Coffee, Kodiak Brewing Company, Cost-Savers, Alaska Pacific Seafoods, Kodiak Marine, and the Alutiiq Museum. Individual donations came from Leslie Fields, Jay Barret, and Marion Owen.

Local boat owners and crew were encouraged to decorate their boats by a set of gift certificates donated by Sutliff’s. The winning boats were, 1st Place: the Horn family’s Gallant Girl, 2nd Place: John and Katgelyn Sikes for their decorated two man kayak, and 3rd Place: Kodiak High Schools training vessel, K-Hi-C.

The inspiration for the festival came out of a 2012 effort by City Mayor Pat Branson and a committee formed to revive and beautify Kodiak’s downtown core. A Kodiak “Holiday Boat Parade,” which ran in the 1990s and early 2000s, had been abandoned after bad weather had caused the event to be cancelled as often as it was held.

Kodiak Maritime Museum decided to take on the new event as a static boat display, encouraging visitors to walk the floats and nurturing a community atmosphere.

Part of KMM’s mission is to encourage appreciation in the community for Kodiak’s fishing fleet, the event has benefited the museum as well as the community and the fleet.

Thelma C Painting Available at Comfish

As part of Kodiak Maritime Museum’s efforts to restore and exhibit the Thelma C, the museum has for sale a limited number of signed prints of the fine art watercolor “Thelma C,” by renowned Northwest artist C. Allan Johnson. The cost of the prints is $150.00 and money from sales of the painting goes directly towards the Thelma C project.

The unframed limited edition prints are 30 by 40 inches, individually numbered, signed by the artist, and come sealed in plastic. The prints were donated by the Johnson family in 2011.

The painting will be on display at the KMM both at Comfish, April 2-4, and orders can be taken there for delivery later.
In 1981 two young cannery worker union organizers, Gene Viernes and Silme Domingo, were gunned down in Seattle by a corrupt union president in league with Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos. The story has its beginnings in the Uganik Bay Cannery, where Silme Domingo’s father Nemesio began working in the 1940s.

Gene Viernes and Silme Domingo both worked in Alaskan salmon canneries in the early 1970s, part of the long tradition of the Filipino “Alaskeros,” who went north each summer. Their experiences, and those of other young Filipinos, led eventually to reform of the corrupt union hiring system which supplied workers for the canneries, and an end to a century old system of racial segregation of jobs and living facilities in Alaska’s canneries. The fight to end union corruption cost them their lives. The larger fight, to desegregate the canneries, ended up in the U.S. Supreme Court.

Viernes was originally from eastern Washington, and went to work in 1969 at the Red Salmon Cannery in Naknek. Domingo was from Seattle and also in 1969, began working at the New England Fish Company's cannery in Uganik Bay, where his father had worked thirty years before. Like many other young Filipinos in those years, both men found the system of separate bunkhouses, mess halls and jobs for Filipinos a degrading anachronism in a society that had outlawed “separate but equal,” facilities for black people twenty years before.

In 1970, when Silme Domingo, his brother Nemesio, and a group of other Filipinos tried to enter the white mess hall in Uganik for sandwiches and desserts not available at the Filipino mess hall, they were told to leave. In the spring, the Domingo brothers received letters informing them they would not be hired again. In 1972, Viernes, then working at Wards Cove Cannery in Ketchikan, led a boycott of the Filipino mess hall after being denied entrance to the white mess hall. He too was blacklisted.


The first case, (Nemesio) Domingo versus New England Fish Company ended in 1980 when the NEFCO filed for bankruptcy. The second case, Carpenter vs NEFCO-Fidalgo Packing Co., was settled out of court in 1985, providing cash settlements for ten plaintiffs. The third case, Atonio vs Wards Cove Packing Co., went to the Supreme Court, which ended the suit by limiting the rights of workers to sue their employers for discrimination. In response, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1991, which strengthened worker’s rights.

However, under pressure from the salmon industry, Alaska’s Senators Frank Murkowski and Ted Stevens inserted a clause which exempted Alaskan cannery workers from the protections of the new law. The votes of the two Alaskan Senators being necessary for passage, Democratic sponsors swallowed their disgust and voted the Act into law. To this day, Alaskan cannery workers are not protected by provisions of the 1991 Civil Rights Act.

Gene Viernes and Silme Domingo did not live to see any of this. In their efforts to enlist the help of Seattle Local 37 of the International Longshore Workers Union in the lawsuits, they had challenged the local union president, Tony Baruso. Baruso ran the union as a corrupt operation, charging bribes for cannery job placement, and sending gambling shills north to rake off cannery worker’s pay in their off hours. Baruso was also an ally of Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos, no friend of unions, and whom Viernes and Domingo had also angered while on a labor organizing trip to the Philippines in the spring of 1981.

On June 1, 1981, Viernes and Domingo were shot dead in the Local 37 union hall near Pioneer Square by two gunmen hired by Tony Dictado, a local gang leader who worked for Tony Baruso. Dictado, Baruso, and the two shooters were all eventually found guilty of various degrees of murder. Baruso died in prison in 2008.

After evidence was produced that Philippines President Marcos had supplied $15,000 to pay the gunmen, the families of Gene Viernes and Silme Domingo filed a wrongful death civil suit against Marcos’s estate, and in 1990 a Federal jury awarded $15.1 million in damages. Later reduced to $2 million, the case is the only successful lawsuit against a foreign government for the death of a U.S. citizen.
From the KMM Archives: Roxanne Fisheries

The Roxanne Cannery, a storied crab processing plant on Kodiak’s Cannery Row, was operated by Kinnear and Wendt from the mid 1960s to the early 1980s. Originally a ferry in Puget Sound, the vessel was hauled north after the 1964 earthquake and tsunami to a new life as a Kodiak crab processing plant.

The Roxanne was moored on a grid beside a still existing dock just west of what is now Pacific Seafoods on Shelikof Street. In the 1970s another former ferry boat, the Skookum Chief, processed crab for Northern Processors between the Roxanne and the harbor breakwater, where Pacific Seafoods now operates. Ursin Seafoods operated just to the west of the Roxanne on Shelikof St.

In the 1960s and 70s the Roxanne was manned by Kodiak housewives and young women on the crab shell pickbelt line, while young white transients and Filipino men from Seattle and San Francisco unloaded and butchered the crab, and packed the leg sections into boxes and freezer vans. In the mid-70s about a dozen men lived in staterooms aboard the vessel.

When king crab ended in Kodiak in 1982 the vessel was towed away and sunk somewhere east of Long Island.

A further note to this story is that as a way to gather crab data, ADG&G tagged hundreds of crabs every year with tags worth $50 to anyone who found them and turned the crabs in. In 1978 ADF&G tagged 753 legal male king crabs and in October of that year the unloading crew at the Roxanne found one of the crabs in the hold of a crab boat.

New Program to Document Kodiak’s West Side

A new endeavor by the Kodiak Historical Society, with support from Kodiak Maritime Museum, will document the lives and culture of people living on the west side of Kodiak Island.

The project will begin in June with Baranov Museum curator Anjuli Grantham and local photographer Breanna Peterson traveling to Uyak and Uganik bays to record oral histories and create images of people who live and work there.

“West Side Stories,” is planned as a public arts and humanities project which will “document and preserve the history and culture of the west side of Kodiak Island through oral histories, photography, community-created art and writing projects, social media, public radio broadcasting and a museum exhibition.”

The Kodiak Historical Society hopes the project will capture stories of place from people living on the west side in a way that will inspire other communities on Kodiak to create their own place-based narratives.

Grantham and Peterson plan to travel first to Larsen Bay and from there to a number of setnet sites in Uyak and Uganik Bays to interview setnet fishermen. They also hope to visit with longtime year-round residents in Uganik and Uyak Bay, to gather stories of place and take photos of the residents in an informal setting.

The oral histories will eventually air on KMXT, and an exhibit is planned for the Baranov Museum in 2016. Funding is being sought from Alaska Humanities Forum and the Rasmuson Foundation.
With funding from the Alaska Humanities Forum, and the talents of local photographer Alf Pryor, KMM recently created nine new images for its “Faces of the Kodiak King Crab Fishery,” program.

Since 2010, the program has produced large format photo portraits of more than 40 people who lived in Kodiak during the king crab years, from the 1950s to 1982. An exhibit of the images and an accompanying cell phone tour, first seen in Kodiak in 2011, has been viewed by more than 6,000 people at venues in Anchorage, Wasilla, Homer, and Astoria, Oregon.

The images grew out of a desire by the museum to augment its Kodiak King Crab Fishery oral history project with a visual element to help people more fully appreciate the Kodiak King Crab Fishery years.

KMM museum staff considered ways to present the congruence of the present and the past visually, and worked with Kodiak photographer Alf Pryor to design and shoot the image series, combining present day portraits with snapshots of the participants during the king crab years.

The museum hopes to exhibit the new images, and others created since 2011, along with an oral history cell phone tour, sometime in the next year.
Membership

The KMM Board extends a sincere thanks to all of our new and renewing members for 2015. Your support is truly appreciated!

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