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## WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

## From Alaska to the Pacific Northwest

In much the same way that it's a good idea to assume anyone you talk to here may be related to nearly anyone else you might mention, it's also



MATT WINTERS

fairly safe to assume they have some connection with Alaska. A desirable new book, "Tin

Can Country: Southeast Alaska's Historic Salmon Canneries," drives home the strong bonds between the great state of the north and the Pacific Northwest.

Edited by Anjali Grantham with individual chapters by top historians and experts including my friend, the legendary Karen Hofstad, "Tin Can Country" chronicles the golden age between 1878 and 1949. In that time, canned salmon was one of the world's best and most affordable forms of protein. Fortunes were made and sometimes lost in the adventurous harvest of Alaska's bounteous salmon runs. Lavishly illustrated — largely with rare materials donated for posterity by Karen to the Alaska State Museum — the book explores all the ways in which salmon produced a good living for generations of Alaskans, Washingtonians and Oregonians.

It would be impossible to overstate the strength of linkages between the Columbia River communities and Southeast Alaska. One of my best Naselle friends is there right now, running a shore-based seine with his two teenagers. These long commutes to Alaskan fishing jobs go back a long way: Astoria's M.J. Kinney started a cannery on Chikat Inlet in 1882. Cutting Packing Co., San Francisco-based but with a huge presence in Astoria, got into Alaska canning in 1878 in Sitka. Aberdeen Packing Co. of Ilwaco opened a cannery at the mouth of the Stikine River in 1887.

The most vital local relationship with Alaska was formed just before the turn of the 20th century, when Aberdeen Packing and Kinney became two of the seven component parts of Astoria-based Columbia River Packers Association. CRPA immediately began mounting expeditions to the Bristol Bay fishery that famously engaged the whole Astoria community in preparations for departure of the three-masted St. Nicholas. The first years were perilous, involving dozens of personnel sailing in time for the spring runs with a hold full of tin sheets and solder to make cans, cooking retorts, fishing gear and supplies ranging from cooking oil to cigars. Ships returned stuffed to the gills with full cans, which were labeled here at home before being sent off to consumers throughout the nation and abroad.

The names of other Alaska operators like Astoria & Puget Sound Canning Co. and Alaska-Portland Packers' Association give away their Columbia River nexus, while in other cases you need to have studied local history to know that Alaska Fishermen's Packing Co. was based in Astoria, that Booth Fisheries' West Coast operations were anchored here, and that F.C. Barnes got his start canning oysters and salmon on Willapa Bay. The Hume brothers — vastly prominent in 19th century salmon and shipping — made a fortune on the Columbia and in Alaska, and are remembered with an Astoria street name.

I've made my point: A one-of-a-kind book about canning fish in Alaska is one we should care about — at least we fanatical fans of early Northwest industries. Fishing — along with farming, forestry and mining — is what kept our families alive.

#### Families and heritage

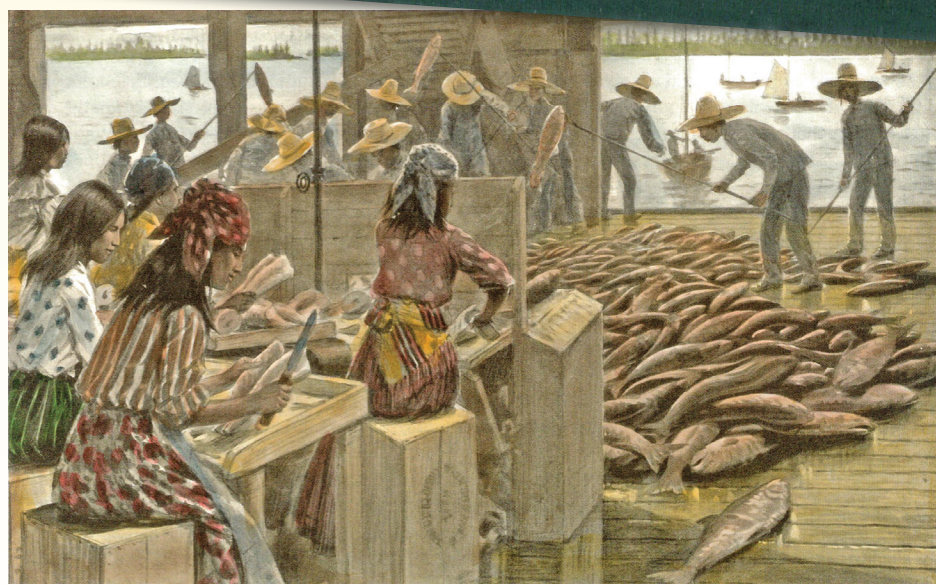
Families and heritage are themes that



## TIN CAN COUNTRY

SOUTHEAST ALASKA'S HISTORIC SALMON CANNERIES

EDITED BY ANJALI GRANTHAM



Karen Hofstad Collection/Alaska State Museum

**The Alaskan salmon business relied on diverse ethnic groups for various aspects of fishing and processing. The book is richly illustrated with one of the nation's most famous collections of related artifacts, donated by Karen Hofstad to the Alaska State Museum.**



Karen Hofstad Collection/Alaska State Museum

**Wooden salmon crates like this protected the contents of 48 one-pound cans and generated a market for the lumber industry. A transition was made to cardboard in the mid-20th century. This crate's markings are a reminder of the strong connections between Alaska and Western Washington state.**

permeate "Tin Can Country," which in less-sensitive hands could have been nothing but dried-out fish tales. Appropriately, it begins with an essay devoted to the fact that respecting salmon and making a living from them long predate white settlers and corporations.

Fred Hamilton, who was the oldest living Haida man when interviewed in 2017, was 12 when he started fishing in 1933. His grandfather, George Hamilton, founded the North Pacific Trading and Packing Company in 1878 in the village

of Klawock. His native ancestors started fishing back in the tangled roots of time, and Alaska's original inhabitants still play active roles in the industry.

Grantham writes, "Today, the Craig and Klawock boat harbors are full of salmon boats. ... Some of the boats are owned and crewed by members of the Ghaanaxh.ádi clan and the descendants of George Hamilton, including Fred Hamilton's grandchildren. When these fishermen leave the dock, they pass over the remnants of (ancient) fishing weirs. They can look up to see ... the site of Alaska's first cannery. And they will catch salmon descended from the same stocks their ancestors stewarded for millennia, and their more recent ancestors packed into the Klawack Brand salmon can."

The chapter on Petersburg concentrates on the role of newcomers from Norway. "The Pacific Northwest was teeming with Norwegian immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century, and they knew fishing," Sue Jensen Paulsen writes. "Many had come from rural Norway and were skilled at prying a living from rocky northern coasts. Gaining a foothold, they sent for families and friends, and settled in Petersburg. As the town grew, families put down roots as deep as cannery pilings." Some settlers bought home sites from the Pacific Coast & Norway Packing Company. A 1920 Shriner convention centering on the Sons of Norway Hall featured a rendition of "Bow Down to Petersburg" sung to the tune of the University of Washington's fight song.

Being part Norse myself and knowing of author Hofstad's long career in Petersburg, I found this chapter especially charming, but nearly every page of the book has items of interest to anybody who

**'Tin Can Country' draws upon the expertise of many who have intensely studied the Alaskan salmon industry.**

cares about salmon, Alaska and regional history. From Chinese cannery workers to the pragmatic art of salmon can labels, there isn't an aspect of this delicious business that isn't explored. Chapters provide background on the complex politics of salmon harvests and conservation, for example mirroring the debate in Washington and Oregon over fish traps versus net fisheries, a sometimes-vicious argument that still echoes today.

#### Epic collection

There's no getting around the fact that many who buy "Tin Can Country" will do so to get a glimpse of Hofstad's remarkable collection of cans, photos, labels, stencils, boxes and other ephemera. She is one of an elite handful of preeminent experts on the Alaskan salmon business. Her collection — half a century in the making — has to rank among the top 10 on the West Coast. By giving her stuff to the Alaskan public and leading the way on this book, she has ensured that essential memories will survive.

The editor didn't necessarily choose to feature the rarest labels, but most will be unfamiliar to non-cognoscenti. For the few of us who are deep into the field, the Rainbow Brand label on page 11 is a treat. Used by the Metlakahtla Industrial Co. — partly funded by Tsimshian villagers — it features fairly accurate artwork depicting the cannery shoreline in about 1900.

"There's so much history in here of Southeast that people have no idea, it's amazing," Hofstad told an Alaskan reporter. "It's just [wide-ranging]; it covers every facet."

While Alaska salmon remain comparatively abundant, the industry is much changed, with consumer preferences having strongly switched to fresh or frozen instead of canned. Hofstad notes only four canneries operated in Alaska's Southeast last year.

"The future is uncertain; the past was complicated," Grantham says to close the book. "Now is the moment to cherish salmon and the life and cultures that they have created for us. Now is the time to recognize the struggles and contributions of Alaska's salmon people. Now is the time to plan for our mutual survival."

Matt Winters is editor of the *Chinook Observer*: Only 1,500 copies of "Salmon Can Country" were printed and fewer than 300 remain unsold. Contact Karen Hofstad at 907-518-1400 to order one.

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