

Josephson: ‘I saw the fish business as something that belonged to my parents’

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Located directly behind Josephson’s Smokehouse was the old White Star Salmon and Tuna Cannery. After it closed in 1953, Cecil became the cannery’s caretaker and was allowed to buy salmon in the facility. A fire destroyed the cannery in 1973.

The Josephson Fish Co. built a new fish purchasing facility at the foot of 11th Street in 1972. During the 1970s the company purchased gillnet salmon from 225 fishermen.

Some were very steady in delivering to Cecil. The biggest purchases came in August, September and October. Shorter fishing periods occurred in February, March and May.

Mike’s connection

“The thing that means so much to me, is knowing the fishermen and their families,” Mike said.

One would think that Mike’s destiny in the fish business had been preordained. His family had been early fishermen, cannery workers, fish buyers and fish smokers. Mike had other ideas. He wanted to get far away from Astoria. He joined the Navy. He studied at the University of Hawaii. He was focused on the future. He studied computers and mathematics. He aimed to get a doctorate in mathematics and become a math professor, not a fish seller.

“I saw the fish business as something that belonged to my parents. They carried on smoking fish in the old-world fashion of my Finnish grandparents. I never saw my future there,” Mike said.

Yet his memories of the smokehouse go back to his childhood, where he would help with tasks like scaling off rust on the smokehouse’s old iron hooks.

Mike’s grandmother, Signey, could be cranky and seldom thought he worked



Mike’s grandparents, Anton and Signey, his dad Cecil and young Mike in front of the smokehouse in 1947.

as hard or fast as she wanted him to, he said.

Mike’s dad, Cecil “was a man’s man. (He) always wore the standard work clothes of the day. I wanted to be different,” Mike said. “I paid attention to the fashion of the time. I didn’t want to dress like a fish guy. I had my sites set on the nascent computer business. I never saw it intersecting with the fish business.”

A change comes about

About 40 years ago, Mike’s mother, Avis Jacobson, told Mike that his father wasn’t feeling well and that he needed a little help at the smokehouse. One thing led to another and Mike took the helm of the family business.

For years, Mike and his wife, Linda Josephson, ran the smokehouse.

“We were a good team,” Mike said. “We have all sorts of old records. Linda and I used to talk about going through all of them and mak-

ing a roster of all the kids who had worked for us. There must have been hundreds. I remember each of them.”

Mike runs the Josephson Smokehouse on his own now. He’s proud of his legacy in the fish business. Although it wasn’t his intended course, he’s had a meaningful life and lasting friendships that date back to his childhood in Astoria “kicking the can and shooting hoops.”

Mike said he thinks his parents and grandparents would be proud that their little smokeshop continues to craft smoked fish.

Expanding the business

Over the years, the family adapted to and learned from challenges in the fishing industry.

In 1982, like his grandfather Anton in 1920, Mike had visions of expanding the product line at Josephson’s Smokehouse.

A horizontal airflow smokehouse was purchased



Mike Josephson’s grandfather Anton’s butterfly boat.

by AFO, allowing the company to begin smoking a variety of fish and shellfish local to the Columbia River and Pacific coast.

“When you live and breathe the fish business and enjoy it why not continue and adapt to all the changing rules, regulations and fish availability?” Mike said.

Cold smoked salmon jerky was made in Anton’s old-fashioned smokehouse. The Oregon State University Seafoods Laboratory helped Josephson’s develop a shelf-stable version of the jerky.

In 2009, Mike was invited to test process jerky in an

Enviro-Pak smokehouse facility in Clackamas. The visit led to “a leap of faith purchase,” Mike said.

Today Josephson’s uses all three smokehouses: Grandpa Anton’s old-fashioned smokehouse, the AFOs smokehouse and the Enviro-Pak smokehouse.

“There have been hundreds of contributions to the products made at Josephson’s Smokehouse by employees, customers, fish processing companies, regulators, processing authorities, and people who love food,” Mike said. “We are thankful for and are indebted to these people and entities.”

Commemorating history

Mike looks forward to honoring the 100th year of business. The business plans on hosting a celebration later this year.

“We (Josephson Smokehouse) were a tiny slice of the fish business that once covered the riverfront,” Mike said. “But we are still here. We are still smoking and selling fish. It’s pretty something, 100.”

Jennifer Nightingale is an author based in Astoria. Her first novel, “Alberta and the Spark,” is a coming-of-age story about a teenage girl in the Pacific Northwest.

SATURDAY, MARCH 21 at the Liberty Theatre in Astoria
Doors open 6 p.m. Show starts at 7 p.m.
Advance tickets \$25; day of show \$35 - All tickets General Admission
Tickets available Online: <https://libertyastoria.showare.com> & Liberty Theatre box office