



# Waterlines

Spring 2017

## Historic Thelma C Documents Come to Light



Shipwrights bending ribs at Commercial Marine Construction, 1955. Photo: Suzanne Dills

Following up on information unearthed by a California writer, KMM recently learned of a trove of documents related to the construction of the Thelma C and other fishing boats at Commercial Marine Construction in Seattle in the 1960s.

The museum has been researching the history of the boat as part of its effort to build a permanent outdoor interpretive exhibit near the Kodiak small boat harbor.

The documents, which include photos, bills of sale, and ships plans, have been stored at the former office of Commercial Marine on Westlake Avenue in Seattle since the 1960s.

The writer, Michael Dobrin, was in Kodiak last fall while researching the boats used by the Madsen bear guiding business to transport clients.

Dobrin learned of the Thelma C Project and became intrigued by the story of the boat and its construction following the 1964 earthquake and tsunami.

Dobrin contacted Suzanne Dills, the daughter of Commercial Marine founder, Dave LeClerq. After LeClerq's death in 2009, Dills had kept much of the paperwork from the boat building business. She plans to donate the materials to a library or historical society in the Seattle area.

Dobrin has since written an article about the Thelma C Project, which appears in the recent issue of North Pacific Focus, a publication of the Alaska Fishermen's Journal.

For more on this story, see Page 6, "Thelma C."

## KMM Hosts Documentary Film on CG Cutter Storis

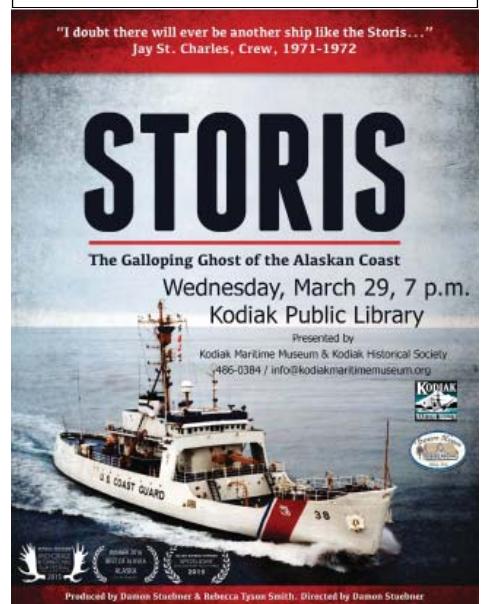
Kodiak Maritime Museum will again be part of Kodiak Comfish, from Thursday March 31 to Saturday, April 2nd. KMM board members and staff will man a booth at the Harbor Convention Center.

Information will be available about the Thelma C Project, KMM's Harbor Tour, and other museum projects.

KMM will also co-host, with the Baranov Museum, the film "Storis: the Galloping Ghost of the North Pacific," at 7 p.m. March 29, at Kodiak Public Library.

The 2016 film, directed by Damon Stuebner, tells the story of the legendary Coast Guard cutter, which was launched in 1942 and scrapped in 2013.

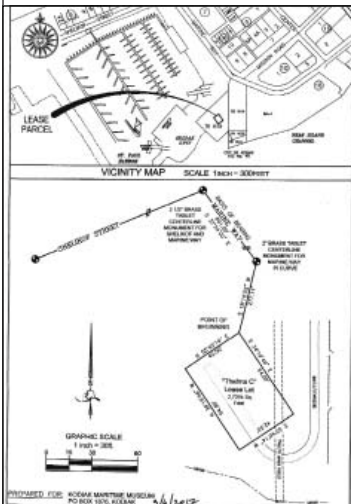
The cutter was famed for its service in Alaska and was at one time homeported in Kodiak.



## From the Wheelhouse —

As spring slowly arrives in Kodiak, the Board and I have been busy with the details of the Thelma C Exhibit Project. While the project has no insurmountable issues, the project has been delayed due to problems with the material underlying the harbor spit, where the exhibit will be located. That the interpretive project we've planned around the Thelma C is being delayed by the consequences of the 1964 earthquake is a small irony which has not been lost on the board of directors and myself.

In late 2015, the engineers advising our architect asked for a geotechnical survey of the soil underlying the original project site adjacent to Oscar's Dock, on the harbor spit.



Thelma C Project Location Survey

The survey revealed that the material there consists of large armor rocks placed in the 1970s as the City filled in on either side of a new breakwater constructed in 1965. (The original breakwater, constructed in 1958, had subsided during the earthquake and had to be rebuilt.) The size of the rocks made it prohibitively expensive to drive the pilings the engineers required to make the project earthquake and wind proof. The KMM

Board and staff asked the City for a new, more level site not requiring pilings, between Trident Seafoods and the channel-side boat ramp. The City granted a new lease last fall but design changes required by the new site enlarged the footprint of the project, which has required another lease from the City. We hope to obtain this new lease in April and have final construction documents from the architect by the end of March, which will allow us to get a final cost quote from the contractor and begin planning actual construction.

All of this has taken time and effort, but we are conditionally hopeful that we will break ground in early summer and have the Thelma C installed in the exhibit by late summer. Keep your fingers crossed.

## KMM Board of Directors Update



Kodiak Maritime Museum's 2017 Board of Directors and Staff  
 Back Row, Left to Right, Director Lon White, Secretary Trent Dodson, President Wallace Fields, Executive Director Toby Sullivan  
 Front Row, Left to Right, Directors Jessica Edelson, Deb Nielsen and Eva Holm

At the Kodiak Maritime Museum Annual Meeting in February, the Board welcomed Jessica Edelson (front left, above) as its newest board member. She joins President Wallace Fields, Secretary Trent Dodson, Treasurer Marty Owen, and Directors Eve Holm, Rob Hoedel, Deb Nielsen, and Eva Holm.

Former Board member Heather Abena resigned in December 2016 to devote more time to her young family. Former Board member and Vice President Marnie Leist left the board in January to take a job as director of a historical society in New Ulm, Minnesota.

Jessica Edelson is originally from Philadelphia, and after working at a library in Buffalo New York, migrated west, met her pilot husband Jerry, and moved with him to Alaska in 2012 when Jerry took a flying job in Iliamna. They moved to Kodiak in 2015, when Jerry began flying for Andrew Airways.

Jessica worked at the Kodiak Public Library before recently taking on the job of Archivist at the Baranov Museum.

Jessica and Jerry are mariners themselves, having bought a sailboat soon after arriving in Kodiak. According to Jessica, the experience of sailing whetted an interest in all things maritime, and her job at the Baranov, which involves managing their vast photo collection, has made her want to learn more about Kodiak's maritime history.

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### KODIAK MARITIME MUSEUM

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 Marty Owen, Lon White  
 Board Member Emeritus Peggy Dyson  
 Executive Director Toby Sullivan

## KMM Fisher Poets Return in September for Beachcombers Bar Reunion

“Fishermen Out Loud,” the Kodiak Maritime Museum sponsored fisher poets show, will return in September as part of a Beachcombers Bar Reunion. The Fishermen Out Loud show, featuring half a dozen fisher poets performing stories, poetry, and songs about fishing and the sea, last performed in Kodiak in 2014. The event this year is slated for September 21-24.

The Beachcombers Bar Reunion will unite many of the musicians who performed at the legendary Beachcombers Bar on Potato Patch Lake from the 1960s through the 1980s.

The event is planned as a fundraising effort to benefit several Kodiak non-profits, including Kodiak Maritime Museum, and is the brain child of Ray Legrue, the owner of Henry’s Restaurant. Legrue is the son of Henry “Legs,” Legrue, who, with his wife Edie, founded the original Beachcombers Bar in 1957.

While the line-up of the Kodiak Out Loud show is not complete, KMM hopes to feature some of the spoken word artists who performed at its last Kodiak show in 2014, as well several newcomers from within Alaska. All have performed at the annual Fisher Poets Gathering in Astoria, Oregon.

Legrue plans to bring a number of the musicians who performed at the Beachcombers in the 70’s and 80’s to Kodiak to do several live shows. Sam Moon, the lead singer for the band Moon Minglewood, which performed many times at the Beachcombers, has confirmed he will be part of the reunion show. Mr. Moon, who lives in Nova Scotia, has not been back to Kodiak in several decades.



*The Beachcombers Bar on Mission Road in the 1970s. Photo: Ray Legrue*

The Beachcombers began in 1957 nightclub housed in a log cabin built in 1938 on the shore of Potato Patch Lake, adjacent to Mission Road. The 1964 tsunami came across Mission Road and destroyed a number of buildings around the lake, including the Beachcombers.

Undeterred, the owners, Henry “Legs,” Legrue and his wife Edie, bought a retired steamship, the Princess Norah, had it towed north, floated through a ditch cut across Mission Road, and moored in Potato Patch Lake. After filling in around the ship with gravel, the Legrues built a stairway up to the salon deck, and opened the new Beachcombers Bar in December 1964. The establishment had a nightclub on the main deck, a smaller bar in the stern, a dining room, and operated the staterooms as a hotel as well. The nightclub often featured bands from the Lower 48.



*Moe Bowstern performing at Fishermen Out Loud in Kodiak, April 2014*

## Gerbil Balls Planned for Crab Fest 2017

KMM plans to host their popular “Gerbil Bay,” children’s attraction at the 2017 Crab Fest. The water walking balls were a hit at the festival in 2015 and at the 2016 Kodiak State Fair last fall.

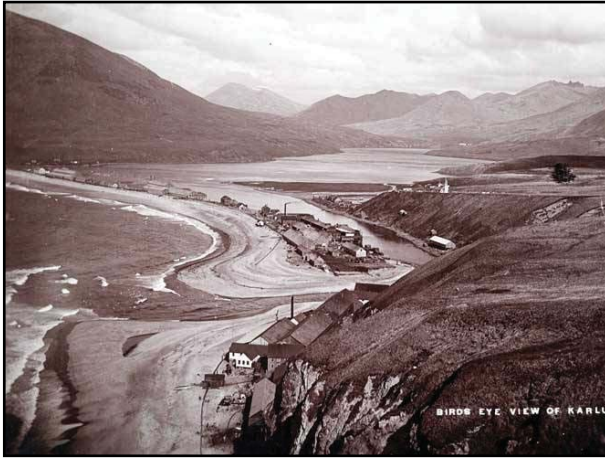
The museum operates the attraction as a fund raising effort to support its maritime history programs.

Due to a no-compete covenant between the Kodiak Chamber of Commerce and Golden Wheel Amusements, the museum was unable to operate the attraction at the 2016 Crab Festival. The Board of Directors is currently searching for an appropriate site for this year’s festival.

The attraction features a large inflatable 30 by 30 foot pool which, when filled with water, floats half a dozen six-foot plastic balls. Kids climb into the balls which are sealed shut with waterproof zippers. The occupants roll around in the pool, but stay dry. The balls are large enough for most kids to stand in, but are not suitable for large human beings. Parents have reported having a good time watching their kids however.



## The Karluk Salmon Fishery: 7,500 Years and Counting



*Karluk Spit, 1889. Photo by W.F. Erskine*

Eight weeks from now, the first salmon from this year's annual migration will begin arriving to Kodiak Island, and large number of those fish will return to the Karluk River, on Kodiak's southwest corner. The Karluk River system supports all five species of salmon native to Alaska—pinks, chums, silvers, kings and sockeyes. But it is the sockeye, the red salmon, which have made the Karluk one of the great salmon rivers in the world.

The word "Karluk," is itself derived from the Alutiiq word for salmon, "Iqaluk," and these noble fish have been spawning in the Karluk since the retreat of the last ice age glaciers about 8,000 years ago. Archeological evidence indicates the first humans on Kodiak arrived not long after the ice went away, in skin boats from Asia by way of the Aleutians and the western Alaska coast. Ancient hunting tools found near the mouth of the Karluk show these early immigrants focused their food gathering efforts on the hunting of marine mammals. During the "Little Ice Age," beginning about 1100 AD, the diet of these first Kodiak people changed

from primarily seals, sea lions, and the occasional whale, to salmon.

Sockeye swim into the Karluk for six months, beginning in May, peaking in late summer, and in decreasing numbers well into the fall, with stragglers as late as December. This easily obtained protein source, available fresh for half the year and handily converted to dried salmon for the fish-less winter and spring months, allowed the Alutiiq people and their ancestors to divert a substantial portion of their time and energy from food gathering to the pursuit of high culture. During the summer they caught salmon with nets in the lagoon at the mouth of the river and in v-shaped stone weirs they built in the river itself, which forced the salmon to pass through narrow apertures where they could be speared or driven into woven basket weirs. When the Russians arrived in the late 18th century, they described an Alutiiq society rich in politics, art, and religion, all made possible by the easy availability of the king of fish.

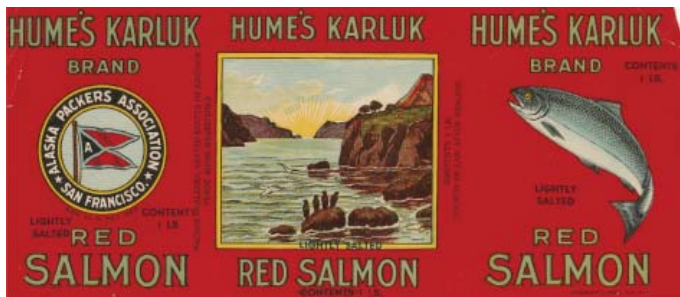
The Russians were single-mindedly obsessed with the gathering of sea otter skins, not salmon, and viewed the fish almost exclusively as a food source for themselves and their newly subjugated Alutiiq hunters, not as a source of capitalist wealth. So while the Russians sold some dried and salted salmon from Karluk to markets in California, they never exploited the incredible resource of the river's sockeye run to its full potential. In some years, because they often forced their Alutiiq subjects to kill sea otters, rather than catch fish, and because supply ships from Russian sometimes sank before arriving in Alaska, the colony went hungry.

Historians have long conjectured on what might have been if the technology of the hermetically sealing fish in cans had become available to the Russian American Company in those last years of their Alaskan venture, when the sea otters had been hunted out and the colony was bleeding money and short on food

The basic technology of canning food had been invented in France in 1810 after by the French government, looking to feed Napoleon's army, offered a cash reward to anyone who could preserve food in a safe and economical way. A brewer named Appert had noticed that food cooked inside a sealed jar did not spoil as long as the lid stayed on, and after perfecting the technique, he collected the 12,000 franc prize.

By 1864 the technology had matured, and the Hume Brothers began canning salmon on the Sacramento River. Two years later a cannery was operating on the Columbia River, and in Southeast Alaska by the early 1870's. The Russians, who must have been aware of these canneries, lacked the resources to set up any canneries in Alaska, and missed their chance to take advantage of the bonanza.

Immediately after the U.S. acquired Alaska in 1867, Americans began salting and drying salmon at Karluk, and in 1882 Oliver Smith and Charles Hirsch, who had been doing that themselves there, built the first Karluk cannery. They had the spit to themselves for six seasons, but the size of the sockeye run caught the eye of others, and by 1890 there were four more canneries on the spit, including the Hume Brothers.



Within a few years the spit was covered with other wooden cannery buildings, net warehouses, workshops and housing for the seasonal workers. The money to build the canneries came from San Francisco and New York, the fishermen were mainly working class Americans and recent European immigrants, and the cannery workers were Chinese. The local Alutiiq found their livelihoods

## Karluk Salmon Fishery (continued)

where they could in this strange new industrial scene, as cannery workers or as fishermen working for the canneries.

In these first years of the canning industry at Karluk, before a glut of canned salmon ruined the market, the wealth taken from the river was enormous. In 1882, 58,000 salmon were canned at Karluk, in 1887 a million, and for several years in the 1890's, more than three million fish a year were commercially harvested and canned at Karluk. The largest Karluk harvest ever was in 1901, when 4 million sockeye were caught and canned, and the largest recorded escapement was in 1926, when 2.5 million fish made it past fishermen's nets into the lake. (This number must be qualified by the fact that escapement was not measured at Karluk before 1920) The run declined from there, unsteadily, with good years and bad, but trending always downwards, until the nadir of the Karluk fishery in 1955, when



*Salmon cans awaiting shipment.*



*Beach seiners at Karluk, early 1950s. Photo: Tim Smith*

fewer than 30,000 sockeye were caught.

Until the 1940s the fish were mainly caught with beach seines, some as long as 300 fathoms- 1,800 feet. One end of the net was anchored to the beach on the spit and the other end was towed out into the water with a steam launch, around the schools of salmon, and back to the beach, at which point the fish were loaded into carts and rolled directly into the canneries. It was a very efficient system.

After the Second World War beach seines were gradually replaced with seines deployed from boats using the same kind of net, except that a boat held both ends of it, which allowed fish further from shore to be captured.

Fishing was allowed six days a week, with what minimal management there was decided in Seattle before each season by cannery company owners and Federal fisheries managers. Concern for the future of the run was trumped by the desire for profit.

And then in 1959 Alaska became a state, and as our local narrative has it, with the end of 80 years of cannery influenced management, the hiring a young cohort of Alaska Department of Fish and Game fish managers, and decisions based on the best available science, the salmon runs were saved. The Karluk sockeye run has been rebuilt, though not to historic levels. Though nothing in salmon fisheries is for sure, more than 500,000 returning sockeye a year have escaped into the Karluk River in each of the past four years, and fishermen have caught between 300,000 and 900,000 fish in each of those years.

Kodiak salmon, and especially the Karluk sockeye, have been lucky in their choice of spawning habitat. In recent years it has become apparent to fisheries scientists that rearing habitat is the single most important factor in the health of a salmon run. This would explain why hatcheries, fishing reduction, and even the elimination of fishing altogether, cannot always save a salmon run which has no clean place to mate and lay its eggs. The placing of thousands of small streams around Puget Sound into culverts since the 1960s has been blamed for the decline of a once massive silver salmon resource there, and the threat of mines in the watershed of Bristol Bay looms as an existential threat to that fishery. But with neither an encroaching population nor mineral wealth, managers and fishermen on Kodiak are cautiously hopeful that,



*Brailing salmon, 1950s. Photo: Tim Smith.*

## Thelma C Research Reveals Details of 1960's Boat Building Process

Recently discovered documents, as well as discussions with the daughter of the famed Seattle boat builder who built the Thelma C in 1965, have revealed that the construction of the boat was accomplished using both old and innovative boat building techniques.

While doing research on the Madsen bear guiding business in Kodiak, California writer Michael Dobrin learned about KMM's Thelma C Project. Intrigued by the story of the boat and the museum's plans for an interpretive exhibit built around it, Dobrin contacted KMM Executive director Toby Sullivan in October 2016.

The two began a wide ranging conversation about Kodiak's maritime history that culminated in Dobrin making contact with Suzanne Dills, the daughter of Dave LeClerq, the founder and owner of Commercial Marine Construction in Seattle, which built the Thelma C. In January 2017, Sullivan and Dobrin met with Dills in her office on Lake Union, on the site of the former Commercial Marine boat yard where the Thelma C was built.



*The newly launched Thelma C in front of Commercial Marine in Seattle, Spring 1965  
Photo: Suzanne Dills*

with screws, with the heads of the inset screws covered with dowel plugs.

Other documents in the collection include sheets of graph paper with the tasks involved in building specific boat models down one side, and the names of his work crew listed across the top. LeClerq used these graph paper spreadsheets to calculate construction costs for each model of boat he built, based on

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*Magazine ad for Commercial Marine, 1962. KMM Thelma C Collection*



*Dave LeClerq, owner of Commercial Marine Construction, works on the shop floor in 1955. Photo: Suzanne Dills*

When her father, Dave LeClerq, died in 2009 at age 92, Dills saved much of the records and documentation compiled over the six decades of her father's boat building career. Included in the trove of documents are bills of sale for many boats built in the 1960's, including details on the specific engine to be installed, whether a flush toilet would be included, and other options for deck equipment and amenities.

Also in the files were photographs of the actual boat building process.

The photos reveal that, unlike methods for larger vessels, LeClerq built his boats upside down, and from the inside out.

To build his hulls, LeClerq and his men first bent longitudinal hull stringers across a set of forms, then steamed oak ribs to make them more pliable, and bent the ribs down across the hull, from the keel to the bull rail. Yellow cedar planking was laid on last and attached



*Chuck Wells, future owner of the famed crabber Shaman, drilling engine mount holes for his new gillnetter Rea in 1955.*

the time it took his workmen to accomplish each task.

Also revealed in the documentation was the fact that Leclerq and his men worked fast. The 38 foot Thelma C class boats were often built within ten days from the time a contract was signed.

"He was very efficient," says his daughter. "And he worked so hard. He was in the shop every day at 5 a.m."

Dills plans to donate the documents to a local Seattle historical society or museum.

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