

Alaska, Unfiltered

LIFE LESSONS INVOLVING COMMERCIAL FISH CAPTAINS,
BOTH SURLY AND SOLID — WITH A BIT OF FLY-FISHING THROWN IN



Familiar sight in Alaska: a commercial salmon boat.

I got fired for the first time in 1986 after going mano a mano with a fishboat skipper nicknamed “The Bear.”

He took delight — or at least was curious, I learned — in seeing how much ridicule a young man could take. I was 18, and we were king salmon fishing off southeast Alaska’s Alexander Archipelago on a 42-foot steel-hulled troller.

We anchored each night in isolated bays, far from towns and far from authorities. I woke each morning at 4 o’clock with the crank of a diesel. I hit the bunk 18 hours later, trying to stop visions of fish sliding by on the backs of my eyelids. Four or five hours later the engine would fire, and we’d do it all over again.

I never complained about the work, the working conditions or how tired I was; we cruised some of Alaska’s most remote and beautiful country, a pristine, unsettled coastline that cruise ships never see. We anchored in isolated, glacier-fed bays at night, under towering mountains with wolves calling from the beach. We sold our fish and resupplied at buying scows every five or six days.

I’d met The Bear while pounding the docks, asking if any boats needed crew. Like the other skippers, The Bear scoffed. Then, as I walked away, he yelled, “Hey. Can you clean fish?” Two hours later we were cruising out of Wrangell Narrows and into Fredrick Sound, two men who didn’t know each other, never separated by more than 42 feet of wood planking. I’d never been on the ocean.

Not a Quitter

More than anything that summer, The Bear wanted me to quit. He hired me to run gear



The young deckhand worked on a salmon trawler run by a gruff captain during his first summer in Alaska. It was the first time he'd been on the ocean.

and clean fish. And run gear and clean fish I did. But it wasn't good enough for him. A week into the season, his mood soured when it became clear that king salmon abundance was down, right when the price for those fish hit a record high.

If you could find the kings and sell at that price, you could make a fortune. But even The Bear, a very good fisherman — known as a highliner — couldn't find them. This really pissed him off. He'd yell at the ocean. He'd yell at passing boats. He'd shoot at sea lions, sharks and gulls. But mostly he'd yell at me.

When we'd pass in the narrow galley, he might shoulder me into a wall. When I cooked a meal, he ridiculed the attempt. If one salmon

slipped the gaff, he would rip me as if this hadn't happened to him a thousand times. He often bragged about how many deckhands he'd been through, all quitters, of course.

And he cherished the San Francisco 49ers and Green Bay Packers. I'm a die-hard Seattle Seahawks and Minnesota Vikings fan. Deal killer.

I wanted The Bear to fire me because I wasn't about to quit. And that meant we were stuck with each other, fishing the open ocean, where a push could be called a slip, where a line of hooks on a power winch could take a man to the halibut grounds against his will, where on a stormy day in the Gulf of Alaska you might not see a man in the water 15 yards from a boat. *It was an accident* had all

sorts of possibilities. I kept track of that man at every moment.

Somehow I made it back to our home port aboard that boat, alive and employed, with instructions to wash the hold and scrub the bin boards the following morning. I knew what time I was told to be there. I also knew it wasn't good to see The Bear scrubbing the hold when I arrived.

"I told you to be here at 8!" he screamed.

"You told me 9," I replied. "Let me in there, and I'll do the work."

He peered out of the hold and shouted, "Go into the cabin, get your check off the table and get the fuck off my boat!" I took that to mean I'd been fired.

Kings on the Fly

It was gray and rainy, and I slinked around town like a scolded mutt, which made me stand out. During summer, nobody moves slowly in Alaska. It's the time of year for doing, and I had nothing to do. People don't give boat jobs away. Eventually, I'd be seen and someone would ask. I knew what had happened. I was proud of my work. But there are two sides to every story. Word would spread, even far south to my parents in Seattle.

I took a direct route through the hard-packed streets, kicking at puddles while rain fell steadily on my head. Clouds scuttled through the spruce trees, and ravens picked through the garbage. For the first time in my life, I had nothing to do. And it tasted a little like death.

When I got to my friend Chris' house, he said, "I saw your boat leave. Why aren't you on it?"

"The Bear," I said, and asked, "Why aren't you fishing?"

"Temporary closure," Chris answered. He looked me in the eyes, frowned and said, "Incoming tide this afternoon."

"So you can hit the slough to fly-fish for kings?" I asked.

We stopped at Scow Bay, bought a bottle of Canadian Hunter whiskey and headed for Blind Slough. Before we got there, Chris had already chucked the bottle's cap out the window and into the brush.

Back in the 1980s, Blind Slough offered some of the best king salmon fishing you could find anywhere. These hatchery-born kings, which ranged between 15 and 50 pounds, would arrive on incoming tides from Wrangell Narrows and ascend a series of flooded rapids. When the tide dropped and the water receded, the rapids were as exposed as a rock garden and prevented the downstream movement of these kings.

Essentially the fish became trapped in a shallow lake, where they schooled — 10 to 20 fish in a pack — and swam circles until the next tide allowed them to move upstream or return to the salt. Chris and I climbed onto the tallest exposed rocks and scanned the water like blue herons, waiting for the kings to pass. When they did, we cast in front of them with the only flies we had: Mickey Finns. The lake was no more than 5 feet deep, which made these kings run and jump repeatedly. They tore line from our reels in yards per second and threatened to take our entire fly lines if we couldn't slow them down. I don't remember that we even had backing wound to our reels.



The work was hard, but the downtime allowed the writer to fish for steelhead and kings on the fly.

At that time, Chris and I weren't dedicated fly-fishers. Mostly we trolled hardware and herring, or flashers and hoochies, in the salt water. But my father, the artist Fred Thomas, had illustrated one of Sage's earliest catalogs, and as partial payment for the work, he secured a 9-foot 6-weight RPL rod. He gave it to me as a graduation present. I packed it when I went to Alaska with dreams of becoming a real fly-fisher, and fished it for everything because it was all I had.

Chris was in the same boat: He tackled these monster kings with a Fenwick 6-weight. I think we both used ancient Pflueger Medalist small-arbor reels. We broke off way more fish than we landed. And the amount of time we spent on the water was dictated by when we ran out of gear. After fishing a tide at Blind Slough, our palms and fingers were line-burned to hell.

The best fish I ever took at the slough weighed about 50 pounds. I let it go because I had nowhere to keep it. Some other anglers,

a husband and wife on a trip north from Seattle, took photos of me with that fish and the 6-weight rod. They took my address, too, and said they would send photos when they returned home. Months later I got a note saying that the only roll of film that didn't turn out included the images of that king.

In a Rhythm

My sister lived in town, and I couldn't keep the news from her forever. After fishing with Chris, I walked up the narrow stairway to her apartment, which was set above a clothing store and offered a clear view of the main street. It was like entering a room with your own conscience. You could see it all from there, and what I saw were fishermen buying supplies and groceries, and maybe a last beer at the Harbor Bar, and heading down to the docks to cast off lines and catch fish.

Earlier that day, I'd approached a logging company and asked for work. They'd told me to



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buy some cork boots and then we'd talk. They'd sized me up as if they were looking at livestock. I knew I'd be the guy setting chokers, meaning the guy with the best chance of dying. I was concerned: I didn't want to blow a few hundred bucks on corked boots and not get hired.

After I'd stared out the window for a while, my sister said, "Laurie's boyfriend, Mark, is looking for a deckhand, and he's leaving in a couple hours. You should meet him at PFI. He's getting ice right now. And he's expecting to see you."

I didn't want to head for the ocean with another person I didn't know, but I had to. And when I did, Mark and I only needed simple conversation to reach an agreement.

Mark: "Who were you fishing with?"

Me: "The Bear."

Mark: "Why aren't you fishing with him now?"

Me: "Got fired."

Mark: "How long did you last?"

Me: "A month and a half."

Mark: "You lasted that long with The Bear? You can fish with me."

Me: "I got to know something: Do you like fishing? Do you enjoy it when you're on the water? Or do you just yell at the ocean, too?"

He laughed.

An hour later we were underway on the *Elding*, a 32-foot wooden double-ender that listed heavily when we stood at either gunwale. This boat had sunk twice in the harbor before

Mark claimed her, which didn't surprise me:

The *Elding* was tiny, compared to the 42-footer The Bear ran. When Mark and I anchored in Patterson Bay and finished a chess match, I made a table into a couch and threw a sleeping bag onto it. I locked one leg under a brace so I wouldn't roll off in the night.

In the morning we rounded Cape Ommamney on our way to Mark's favorite king salmon grounds off Baranof Island's west coast. This ranks as the scariest hour of my life. The tide was building, and giant waves towered, then broke over the *Elding*, washing through the scuppers and across the deck and eventually right into the wheelhouse. We made no headway against the wind and tide. We could only keep her bow pointed into the waves and hope for the tide to turn. The *Elding* listed catastrophically a couple of times, and I considered putting on a survival suit. Mark didn't flinch. Why, I wondered, was he so calm when we were about to die?

I had good reason for concern. Cape Ommamney has a reputation as being one of the easiest places to die in Alaska. This started when George Vancouver tried to round its tip back in 1794 and nearly lost both of his ships, the *Discovery* and the *Chatham*, on the rocks. The ships survived, but one of his crew, Isaac Wooden, fell overboard and wasn't recovered. Vancouver named a towering pinnacle off the

cape in his honor. He called it Wooden Island. That was the rock I'd decided to swim for.

After a few days, Mark and I developed a great rhythm and caught a lot of kings, mostly around submerged pinnacles. This was big-risk fishing because those pinnacles would eat gear and snap outrigger poles if we made a mistake. But if we fished these pinnacles on the right tide, and the fish were there, we could rip them up.

That's what happened one day at a place called the "smoke hole." It keeps that name because you can see black diesel exhaust coming out of the stacks when a fisherman misjudges the depth and starts to hang gear on the bottom. Fortunately, we were the only boat in the fleet on these fish, and it didn't take long to know that this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The catching started when we first set gear, and it didn't stop until we quit after dark. It seemed as if every king salmon bound for the Columbia River had massed here, just for us. We slept for a couple of hours and went back at it.

Most skippers won't let a deckhand gaff the largest kings, the "money fish." Each of those fish, especially when you're getting almost five bucks a pound for them, could fetch a few hundred dollars. We were getting a lot of them, and they were big. Thirty-pounders came over the rail every half-hour. You could tell that these fish were hooked when our taglines, which are attached to outrigger poles, started shaking. One tagline on my side of the cockpit was shaking like mad, and the line was stretching far from the pole.

Mark saw it and said, "It looks big. Bring it up."

I worked the hydraulics and brought the first brass spoon in, then a second and a third before we could see a king's silver side about 10 feet down. It was a giant, and Mark struggled to keep his composure.

"I should take it," he said, quickly reversing to, "You take it. I'm just going to stand over here. I'll shut up. Just don't miss."

Just as quickly, Mark was on my shoulder again. "Don't lose him, don't lose him." That easily could have happened — if you don't hit a large king, even a 20-pounder, perfectly with the back of a gaff, the fish digs wildly for escape and breaks the monofilament leader. And this was no 20-pounder.

The most beautiful sound I've ever heard was when I smashed that king over the head with the back of my gaff, which made a hollow thunk, like rapping on a watermelon with a wood mallet. I gaffed him clean and swung



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the fish over the rail during his death quiver. He slammed on the deck, and I perceived the *Elding* to list just a bit more. Maybe that was because Mark had jumped on my back as both of us hollered, "What a fish!"

Later that day, Mark told me to pull the gear. We were the smallest boat in the fleet, and we were plugged, meaning we couldn't have secured the hatch cover if we'd killed another king. By this time there were 250 of them in the hold. They averaged 25 pounds.

We ran dangerously low in the water and carefully south, around Cape Ommaney and then north up Chatham Straight to Kuiu Island and Gedney Harbor. Along the way all the big boats passed us, likely wondering why we sat so low in

the water. When we finally pulled up to the buying scow, the highliners massed. One of those Norwegians said, "Mark, whatcha got in dere?"

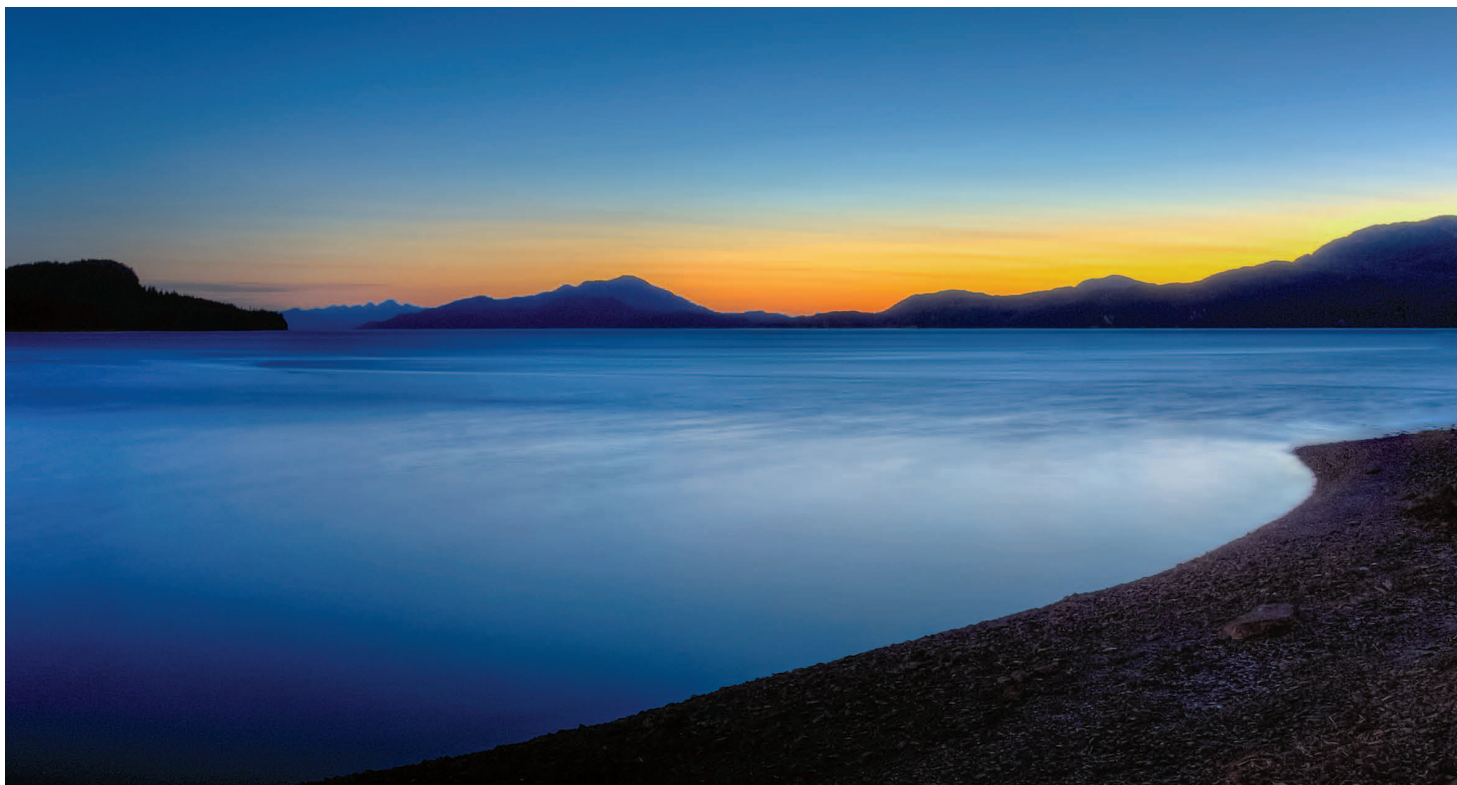
As I lifted the hatch, silver shined so brightly you wanted to cover your eyes. And when I hoisted our prized fish, which weighed 65 pounds after being gilled, bled and gutted, I felt all of my despair melt away. I'd proven The Bear wrong. I hadn't quit. And Mark and I — the little guys — were the envy of the fleet. At the end of the season, Mark said, "You've got a job with me for as long as you want to fish."

Green Butt Skunk

I talked to Chris several times during the winter, and he put the steelhead bug in me. He

told me that they flooded into local streams in March and April, and that on the good days you could hook 10 or more. He said you bushwhack into wild country where nobody is willing to go, and you have them all to yourself. All wild. No hatchery fish. Perfectly bright and incredible fighters. Could I afford, I wondered, to skip my spring semester at the University of Montana and instead work in Alaska and fish for steelhead as often as possible?

I came to the depressing conclusion that I could not and then booked a flight to Alaska, anyway. The day I landed, I went to work for my sister, grading herring roe, chopping the heads off black cod with an automatic guillotine and supervising a cold-storage operation at a cannery.



When the writer looks back on his stint in Alaska, he sees a short time, centered on fish, that set a course for his life.

Some days I'd climb high into crow's nests and paint the masts that skippers wanted nothing to do with. They loved me for it and paid well. But when an opportunity to work the night shift arrived, I jumped at the chance. Working the night shift meant I could spend parts of each day fishing steelhead with Chris, then rarely sleep and often walk around in a zombie-like state.

Most days we caught one or two. Some days we caught none. When I got time off from the cannery and we could speed away in Chris' 18-foot Lund, and spend the night along a river and fish from dawn till dusk, we absolutely hammered them. In southeast Alaska, most steelhead range between 6 and 10 pounds. A 15-pounder is a giant. But they do get larger than that, as Chris and I discovered one day.

We were fishing a stream where we'd hooked 30-some steelhead in eight hours just a few days prior. Now those fish had moved up-stream, and nothing, it seemed, had moved in to replace them. Above one of the best pools, Chris and I sat in the rain and took a break.

From our elevated position we thought we saw a fish flash in the chop below a rapid. Chris said, "Go ahead and find out."

I said, "No, I don't want to blow it. You go ahead."

Chris said, "Forget it. I get to do this all the time. You take it."

I picked my way down a steep bank and started swinging a Green Butt Skunk. On the second cast, a fish took. I could tell right away this steelhead was unique, and I knew it for sure after crossing the stream three times in pursuit. Each time was a leap of faith as I stepped off a ledge and into the tannin-colored flow, hoping my wading boots hit bottom. A couple of days earlier, Chris had attempted the same trick, and all that had been left of him was a hat floating on the surface.

Thankfully, each step found purchase, and eventually I brought this great fish to the bank. Chris and I stretched a tape to it: 42 inches. Its back angled up into high shoulders and then slowly angled down to the snout. This buck, I guessed, weighed 25 pounds or more. At that

time we were shooting SLR cameras with film. One shot of that steelhead turned out on that dark day, but we didn't know it until weeks later, after Chris sent the film to Seattle and the slides finally got back. Photographers today, myself included, have it good.

A lot has changed since I fell in love with Alaska in my teens and 20s. The Bear died alone on a treadmill in Saginaw Bay. Mark bought a 42-foot wooden troller that he and I ran from the West Wall in Seattle all the way to the Southeast. The *Elding* sank under a new owner. Chris moved out of Alaska, and I now spend most of my time taking care of two daughters and coaching sixth-grade girls' basketball in Montana.

When I look back at that stint in Alaska, I see a short time, centered on fish, that set a course for my life. To this day, I plan my year around swinging flies for wild steelhead, deep in the Northwest's rainforests. And despite how overburdened and outlandishly busy we've all become, I know the worst feeling in the world is not being overworked but, instead, to wander around with absolutely nothing to do.