

A nonprofit organization devoted to the maritime history of Sitka and Southeastern Alaska
A quarterly publication
P. O. Box 2153 Sitka, AK 99835
www.sitkamaritime.org

Foundation Repair 2006

Saturdays from early spring through the end of September, volunteers cleaned out and inventoried the contents, and rebuilt the foundation under both wings of the Japonski Island Boathouse.

Contractor Greg Reynolds, who finished the job, also volunteered scores of hours, and loaned the specialized gear and experience. It could not have been done without volunteers like Terry Perensovich who went way above and beyond.

Beams and other pieces that had rot were replaced; all the posts were replaced, with treated wood posts on concrete pads. In addition, the joists on a narrow addition to the workshop were replaced, and the inner beam on each side was attached to the main concrete foundation of the ways.

Working on old buildings is challenging, and even more so when the goal is to preserve historic features. Coffee, biscotti, harbor lore and jokes kept it rewarding.

The work was funded by a federal Historic Preservation Fund grant for \$10,170 and a matching grant from the nonprofit Alaska Association for Historic Preservation for \$2500, which went for materials and a week or so of contractor time. The grants were matched with the value of volunteer time, much of it skilled, and some back hoe work donated by Pat Welsh.

What's Next

The SMHS is beginning a major fundraising campaign, to raise the total of \$1.4 million for a complete architectural design and rehabilitation by a contractor. There will also be a small addition for a public entrance/gift shop/restroom, and an outbuilding



Replacing joists in workshop addition, summer 2006.



A view of the wing of the boathouse nearest the bridge, showing new foundation, October 2006.

for toilets and storage.

The SMHS is applying for private and federal grants to match and go beyond a Save America's Treasures grant awarded a year ago for \$325,000. Local fundraising remains the most important piece of the picture, crucial for persuading funders of the project's viability and local support.

There remains some work that can be done on the building before a final design is in hand, which can be done this spring. This work includes repair of doors and windows, replacing the siding removed for the foundation project, adding a beam down the center of each wing, and putting the contents of the storeroom wing into the storage van.

Fall Activities a Hit

The Sitka Maritime Heritage Society again held a popular grilled black cod sale on Alaska Day - thanks to all the volunteers!

A slide show on the history of the fisheries and boat-building in Sitka, an open house at the Boathouse, and a booth at WhaleFest in November, were a lot of fun, and a way to get the word out on the Society.

Delta Western Fuel Dock

Delta Western, a fuel distributor, is interested in locating a retail fuel dock on state tidelands near the city work float, and subleasing 600 square feet of the Boathouse property for the underground fuel storage tanks. Right now they are working on planning and permitting with the state and city. While the view from the boathouse will be affected, the project has potential to

Sitka Rumrunner Alexander Pihl - In Fact, and in Legend by Jerry Dzugan

This article follows Rumrunning in Alaska in a recent issue of this newsletter.

Throughout much of Sitka's history from its Russian founding until the lifting of national Prohibition in 1933, the sale and importation of alcohol were either forbidden or severely limited and regulated. Since thirst remained a human attribute no matter what the law, there were plenty of opportunities for smuggling. No one took greater advantage of these opportunities than Sitkan Alexander Pihl, whose exploits in the slaking of thirst were legion and became legend. He had come to Sitka as a Navy man, with the crew of the USS Pinta, the gunboat stationed here from 1884 to 1897, and, like a number of others of her crew, stayed here after his enlistment was up.

The Sitka newspaper of the time, *The Alaskan*, in its issue of January 5, 1895, announced the launching of a 38-foot schooner of "extremely pretty lines", built by Andrew Anderson, Charles Holmberg and L.P. Johnson on the beach near the Brady sawmill at what is now Thomsen Harbor, and christened *North Star*. The paper remarked that "She was built for service and if you want her you had better speak quick for she's in the market".

Alexander Pihl, then 36, must have spoken quick, because he soon was using the vessel to take passengers out to Sitka Hot Springs (Goddard) and would later employ her in supplying his saloon business.

At that time in Alaska, sale of alcohol for other than "medicinal, mechanical or scientific purposes" was forbidden, and its importation illegal, but enforcement was lax. An 1899 census in Sitka noted that there were two legal and nine illegal saloons in town. They needed supplies, and a favorite source was Canada, where liquor was cheaper. One trick was to decant it into old bottles whose U.S. Customs stamps had been carefully preserved. A small fast schooner that could dodge among the rocks to elude the big steam revenue cutters was of great value in keeping the supply flowing.

Local legend cites a famous exploit of Pihl's in the late '90s, when he was running up Biorka channel in a stiff breeze with a cargo of Canadian whiskey, to find a revenue cutter waiting off the north end of Biorka Island and giving chase. Near dusk, he slipped in among the rocks and set a lantern as an anchor light, while the cutter waited to deal with him by first light. In the morning, the revenue men found the lantern hanging on a tree, and the *North Star* long gone. The place was known locally as Pihl's Hole for many years afterward.

The rumrunning business suffered a blow on July 1, 1899, when prohibition was eased in Alaska. The steamer *Queen* with a cargo of legal alcohol aboard waited in Canadian waters for the great moment, and the newspapers noted that "she was



Sitka waterfront before 1918, showing early motor launches as well as sailing and rowing vessels. E. W. Merrill Collection, Sitka National Historical Park.

met by huge and joyous crowds" when she reached Alaskan ports. Results were predictable, as indicated by a report in *The Alaskan* of July 22, 1899:

Kondraty Zaharoff went into the Greek church [St. Michael's] a few days ago, feeling as though he owned the world, the church, and a mortgage on the

sun, moon and stars. He had an idea that he was the priest, congregation and choir and proceeded to act accordingly. He will spend 90 days in jail to find out who he really is.

Though liquor was now legal, the price could still be lowered by smuggling, and Pihl kept busy. The *North Star* was lost December 20, 1903 in a snowstorm off Cape Ommaney, but those aboard and the cargo were saved. Gasoline engines were coming into common use by that time, and henceforth Alex Pihl used fast power boats for his supply operations. Sometimes these were disguised as salmon trollers, and he was known to do commercial fishing when in a pinch.

After gold mining got started on Chichagof Island in 1905, Pihl occupied himself supplying the miners with liquor, and the following year he bought the *Golden Gate Saloon and Dance Hall* in Sitka.

The rumrunning business in Sitka picked up again in 1914 when the town voted to go dry. The Alaska Bone Dry Act of 1917 and national prohibition in 1919 further increased the attraction of smuggling, though the risks went up with increased enforcement. The law in Sitka by that time was familiar with Pihl's business and kept a close eye on his comings and goings among Canada, Sitka and Chichagof. On February 16, 1923, the *Sitka Tribune* reported:

Alexander Pihl came in on his boat *Maybird* from Chichagof Tuesday. [U.S.] Commissioner [R.W.] DeArmond and Deputy Marshal Thomas made him an official call.

That encounter with the law may have been the one that gave rise to another story of a close escape by Pihl. According to Bill Sarvela, the commissioner and the marshal came down to the 24-foot *Maybird* and asked Pihl if they could come aboard and look for booze. He said, "Sure, help yourselves. But first help me take this skiff down from the cabin top and put it in the water for me. I've got some business to attend to." Pihl was by then well in his 60s, and the officers didn't hesitate to help him launch his skiff. Rowing away, he shouted back to them to "have a good look". That night he came back to town and regaled people with the story of how he had got away with his booze, hidden in the false bottom of his skiff.

Local legend has it that Pihl was never busted until the end of his smuggling career, but in fact newspaper and court records show that by 1927 he had been arrested three times and

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New! Print of Nancy Taylor Stonington painting of the Boathouse is \$95. Maritime T-shirts and caps. Shirts are heavy weight cotton with a label from Sitka's Pyramid Packing Company. They are \$25 for long sleeve and \$20 for short sleeve shirts. Colors are blue, tan, black and turquoise. Hats feature the shore boat (the ferries between Japonski and Sitka) Arrowhead. Oilskin caps in black or brown are \$25, and cotton caps, tan or red, are \$20. To buy one call 747-3448, or send a check (include \$2 postage per item) to the SMHS, P. O. Box 2153, Sitka Alaska 99835.

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had forfeited several boats and quite a lot of money.

His rumrunning ended after what turned out to be his last run, from Prince Rupert, B.C. in July 1927. He was by then nearing 70 and very hard of hearing. He moored in an isolated spot near Cape Fox to get some rest, and didn't hear the Coast Guard cutter Cygan pull alongside and hail him. A blast from the vessel's horn finally roused him; he staggered to the deck and blurted out: "Well, you got me, boys; there's 30 cases in the hold". The cutter's skipper said later he felt sorry for the tired-looking old man, but had no choice but to take him to court in Ketchikan, where he admitted to having 353 bottles of booze in his boat. He went to jail, by that time very sick with heart and kidney trouble, and according to legend got the judge to prescribe him daily medicinal whiskey.

By 1929, he was out of jail, but old and very sick, and went to live with a sister in Vancouver, Washington, where he soon died, and is buried. The Juneau Empire, reporting his death, noted that:

Those who knew him best, said he was generous to the extreme, charitable and ever extending a helping hand to the unfortunate."

"The unfortunate" apparently included those plagued by thirst . . .

Pihl's reputation around Sitka only grew after his death. As the late Jack Calvin put it years later, "People liked him 'cause he sold people booze when the government said they couldn't have any."

Thanks to Bob DeArmond, Bill Sarvela, Willis Osbakken, and Chuck and Alice Johnstone for sharing their stories



about Alexander Pihl, and to Bill DeArmond for editing . J.D.



Dave Hardy manning WhaleFest booth, November 2006.

Got a Porthole?

The Sitka Maritime Heritage Society is seeking the donation of portholes to be modified by artists for a maritime art and collectibles auction event in April. If you have one to donate, call 747-3448. Donations are tax deductible.

Upcoming Events

February: Sitka Maritime Heritage Society Annual Meeting - date tba. The theme will be seining in the glory years.
 March 17th: 2007 Beta Sigma Phi, in conjunction with Fishermen's Eye Gallery, Art Auction at Westmark Sitka, will benefit the Sitka Maritime Heritage Society.

If you received this newsletter by mail, your most recent membership expiration date is above your address. If there is no date, your membership expired more than one year ago.

Please help make the Japonski Boathouse maritime heritage center a reality

As a member, you will receive our quarterly newsletter and a 20% discount on t-shirts and other goods. We are a non-profit corporation with 501 (c) 3 status so your membership donation is tax deductible.

If you would like to become a supporting member, or donate to the building fund, please fill out the form below and return it, along with your check, to:

Sitka Maritime Heritage Society
P. O. Box 2153
Sitka, Alaska 99835

I would like to get my newsletter by email regular mail

Name _____

Address _____

- \$40 Entire Crew
- (family)
- \$50 Mate

Phone: _____ Email: _____

-
- \$15 Students and Elders
 - \$30 Crew member

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