

A nonprofit organization devoted to the maritime history of Sitka and Southeastern Alaska

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www.sitkamaritime.org

STEAMSHIP DAYS IN SITKA

(Part One)

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Lifelong Sitkans of a certain age -- say, retirement age, or pushing it hard -- will remember the days when our connections with the rest of the world were pretty much in the hands of three outfits: The Alaska Communications System (ACS)*; Alaska Coastal Airlines**; and the Alaska Steamship Company***.

At the beginning of the 1950s, air travel accounted for a small share of passenger traffic to and from Outside; air shipment a negligible part of the freight business; and air mail -- as differentiated from "boat mail" -- was expensive. What was still called the Alcan was more of an adventure than a practical travel route for cars and trucks. So most of who and what got to Sitka, and the rest of coastal Alaska, was by Alaska Steam. This put the company in a very powerful position, which in turn made it distrusted and resented by a lot of people, whether justifiably or not. People disposed to see things in such terms regarded Alaska Steam and the canned salmon industry (which was then to the Alaskan economy what oil is today) as two horns of the same devil of outside ownership and profit -- with the devil's tail in the form of Harry Bridges, head of the West Coast longshore union. He could and occasionally did tie up Alaska Steam and with it the salmon industry and most transportation in Alaska, sometimes for months at a shot. The salmon canneries relied on the steamers to bring in crews and supplies in the spring -- new machinery, big cargoes of flat cans, box shooks, makings for tierces, huge rolls of chicken wire for the traps -- and take out the pack over the season.

Though it had its problems, those of us who remember the steamship era do so with a lot of nostalgia. It was a nice way to travel, and an essential part of an Alaskan society which in many ways was much closer-knit than that of today. Pretty much everybody who traveled in or out of Alaska traveled of necessity in the steamers, so they all got to know one another aboard ship, wherever in the Territory they lived. In those days, too, Alaskans tended to stay at certain hotels in Seattle -- the Stewart at Second and Stewart Streets, now long gone, was one favorite -- and most of the big hotels had well-known corners of their lobbies and coffee shops where Alaskans would congregate.

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HISTORIC SAILS AND ESSENTIAL KNOTS

In November, SMHS brought Ketchikan sailmaker Louis Bartos to town for a historical talk on his research on the sails of the Vasa, launched and sunk in 1628. The talk was well-attended and offered not only a glimpse of the history of Europe's Age of Exploration, but the story of how this researcher unraveled the mysteries of sail construction and use.

On the following Saturday, Louis presented a hands-on workshop on knots every mariner should know. This included a demonstration of rope making, using sisal twine and a portable rope making machine. Mr. Bartos' experience and extensive research, and strong opinions, made this an entertaining and informative event.

The programs were supported by a grant from the Alaska Humanities Forum.



FUEL DOCK SUBLEASE SIGNED

The past year has seen extensive work among the City and Borough of Sitka, Delta Western, and the Sitka Maritime Heritage Society in completing a sublease and agreement to sublease for Delta Western to build and operate a marine fuel dock from the corner of the Boat-house property.

The float will have fuel pumps and a small shack. Fuel tanks will be buried, and refilled from bulk tanks elsewhere in town, so the operation will have a minimal profile. The Sitka Maritime Heritage Society was instrumental in acquiring the Boathouse property for the City and Borough

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Oil dock lease con't from pg 1

of Sitka from the State of Alaska. The SMHS now leases the Boathouse at a nominal rate for the purpose of creating a public maritime heritage center.

The Delta Western lease will bring the SMHS a minimum of \$50,000 with a cap of \$75,000 annually, which will be used toward hiring a director, a major step in bringing the center into operation.



The flagship of the Alaska Steamship Company fleet, SS Aleutian, on the beach at Sitka National Monument, June 1935. She had swung too wide coming out of Eastern Channel, heading toward town on a foggy morning. She was floated on the next high tide later in the day, with the help of a couple of tenders from the Pyramid cannery, but not before numbers of Sitkans had taken the opportunity to troop out to the Park, take pictures, and make helpful suggestions to the captain and crew.

Steamships con't from pg. 1

After the upheavals of World War II, Alaska Steam continued to operate four passenger-freight vessels to Alaskan ports from Puget Sound, and everyone knew their names: the *Aleutian*, the *Alaska*, the *Denali*, and the *Baranof*. All but the *Alaska* had had careers under other owners before Alaska Steam bought them, and were powered by reciprocating steam engines -- the *Aleutian*, with twin screws, had two -- which a small boy on the passenger decks might be able to talk his way into visiting (there being few examples of human ingenuity more impressive than a big steam engine going about its business).

The *Alaska* was an interesting exception; she was laid down as a light cruiser for the U.S. Navy after World War I, but about the time her hull and engines were finished, the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922 -- a disarmament agreement among the Great Powers of the time -- made her superfluous to the Navy. She was purchased, as was, by Alaska Steam, which had her finished up as a passenger and freight vessel, after a couple of thousand tons of concrete were poured into her bilges to make up for the weight of missing armor and armaments.

She had steam turbine-electric propulsion, much favored for warships at that time, which made her run very smoothly, quietly and fast. Her warship origins showed in the lines of her hull, including formidable flaring bows, the terror of every cold storage manager in the region; there weren't many ice towers she didn't knock down at least once.

These were not large vessels by the standards of today's cruise ships and super tankers; the *Aleutian* measured 400 feet overall, 6300 gross tons, the three others slightly smaller, so they were roughly in the size range of the Alaska Marine Highway's mainline ferries. Unlike the ferries, however, they docked downtown, meaning that they came right through Sitka Channel in those pre-bridge days, and made an impressive sight when they did. The main landing for passengers and freight was the Conway Dock, where Seafood Producers Co-op is now. However, a steamer might also stop at any or all of four other docks, depending on what she had to load or unload; the Union Oil dock, now the Petro Marine North Plant; the Pyramid Cannery, now Murray Pacific; the Cold Storage dock, where the government float is now; or Standard Oil dock, now Petro Marine at the end of Lincoln Street.

The main action though was at the Conway Dock, and that's where people turned out to meet the boat, a popular pastime, even if one weren't expecting anyone or seeing someone off. It was a chance to stare at the tourists in their season, and to make complimentary remarks, if one were so disposed; to see who was arriving with a new wife -- or sailing without the old husband; what the new fall crop of teachers looked like; who had got a new car.

By 1954, they were all gone; the *Alaska* sailed a few more years as a cruise ship elsewhere, the three others were scrapped. For a couple of more years there was a limited opportunity to travel to Vancouver or Victoria in a Canadian passenger vessel in the cruise season and thence by ferry to Puget Sound, but Sitka essentially lost passenger connections by sea until the state ferries started running in 1963.

*The Alaska Communications System (ACS) was a branch of the U.S. Army Signal Corps, and provided all long-distance telephone and telegraph communication within and to and from Alaska up until the early 1960s, when its system was taken over by RCA Alascom. It was nothing to do with the Anchorage phone company which has appropriated the name.

**Alaska Coastal Airlines served Sitka and the rest of northern Southeast with float and amphibian planes, including two ancient Lockheed Vegas and an aged Bellanca, and later Grumman Gooses and PBY Catalinas. It merged with Ellis Airlines of Ketchikan in the 1960s, and the combined operation was merged into Alaska Airlines in 1968.

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Steamships cont from pg. 2

***After the war, Alaska Steam was not the only operator to Southeast from Puget Sound, though it was the only steamship line sailing to the Westward and Bering Sea. The Northland Transportation Company also served Southeast ports with smaller steam and motor vessels, but was owned by the same family that owned Alaska Steam, so was not really an independent operator. The Alaska Transportation Company ran steamships, including the old steam schooner *Tongass*, which served Pelican as well as Sitka during the war years and right afterward, but finally went under in a prolonged strike in 1948.

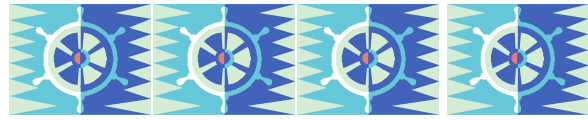


MARITIME ART SHOW AND AUCTION

The Sitka Maritime Heritage Society held a silent art auction in conjunction with the Sitka Spring Festival, March 14-16. Twenty-one pieces of maritime art were donated, some with portholes given to them by SMHS.

Contributing were Tommy Joseph, Keith Gibson (and Cindy and Veronica Gibson), Cyndi and Scott Cassedy, Laura Kaltenstein, Bob Ellis, Lucy Pizutto Phillips, Deb Sellers, Nick Galanin, Dave and Katherine Lewis, Norm Campbell, Gaylen Needham, Rachel Fate, Kathy Baker, Eve Grutter, Sandy Greba, Vern Culp, Rebecca Poulson and Jan Steinbright.

SMHS is very grateful for the artists' donations which helped the organization raise over \$6,000 toward their goal of establishing a maritime heritage museum at the Japonski Boathouse.



\$91,000 GRANT FROM NATIONAL SCENIC BYWAYS PROGRAM

In December, the Alaska Congressional delegation announced the U.S. Department of Transportation National Scenic Byways Program grant of \$91,064 to the Sitka Maritime Heritage Society. This money is for the architectural and engineering work for the Japonski Island Boathouse rehabilitation.

This grant program is designed to enhance the experiences of travelers on National Scenic Byways, through preserving and interpreting natural and cultural resources. The Alaska Marine Highway is an All-American Road, the highest designation of significance in the program. The elements that qualify the Alaska Marine Highway for this status are the very things the Sitka Maritime Heritage Society are focusing on in the Boathouse maritime heritage center project – the history, culture and boats of the local waterways.

The actual funding will be available in the spring. Meanwhile, the SMHS will be developing a request for proposals to architectural firms for the design work.

This funding is important and exciting also in getting to the point of approaching major regional private foundations, especially in combination with previous grants and fund raising.

NEW T-SHIRTS, HATS AND TOTE BAGS

The new SMHS T-shirt has a woodcut image by Rebecca Poulson of the shoreboat *Donna* going in to the Japonski Island Boathouse. The shirts are available in a variety of colors, short-sleeve, \$20, long-sleeve, \$25. This same boathouse image is also on Tote Bags, a large, heavy duty natural cotton canvas bag, for \$25. They are easily the size of a grocery bag.

Our hats have the shore boat (ferries between Sitka and Japonski Island) and Arrowhead embroidered on the front. They are pigment-dyed cotton caps and are in blue or red, for \$20, or oilskin caps, in brown or black, for \$25. The shirt from 2006 features a canned salmon label found in the old Pyramid Packing Company cannery, built in 1918 and now home to Fishermen's Quay and Murray Pacific, on Sitka's waterfront.



**Members get a 20% discount so order today at
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