

# The Sitka Maritime Heritage Society



WINTER NEWSLETTER 2012



A seine crew works in the 1975 Sitka sac roe herring fishery. At that time brails were still used to transfer herring from seines onto the boats. (Photo courtesy of Charlotte Tanner)

## SMHS to Explore Herring History At Annual Meeting February 12th

Herring will be the topic of the Sitka Maritime Heritage Society 2012 annual meeting at 7 p.m. Sunday Feb. 12 at Sitka's Centennial Hall. Invited panelists will share knowledge and stories of the subsistence and commercial herring fisheries, and the public will be welcomed to share stories as well.

We will have photos and artifacts on hand, as well as coffee and desserts.

Commercial herring fishing in

Southeast Alaska began in the 1880s. By the mid 1930s there were more than a dozen herring reduction plants in the region.

The commercial fishery has since changed to become a high-valued, limited-entry fishery focused on the herring roe. Meanwhile, the traditional subsistence fishery has remained a critical part of our identity.

Join us Feb. 12 to learn more about the history of our island, its fisheries and its people!

## Section Bases Had Strategic Role in WWII Defense

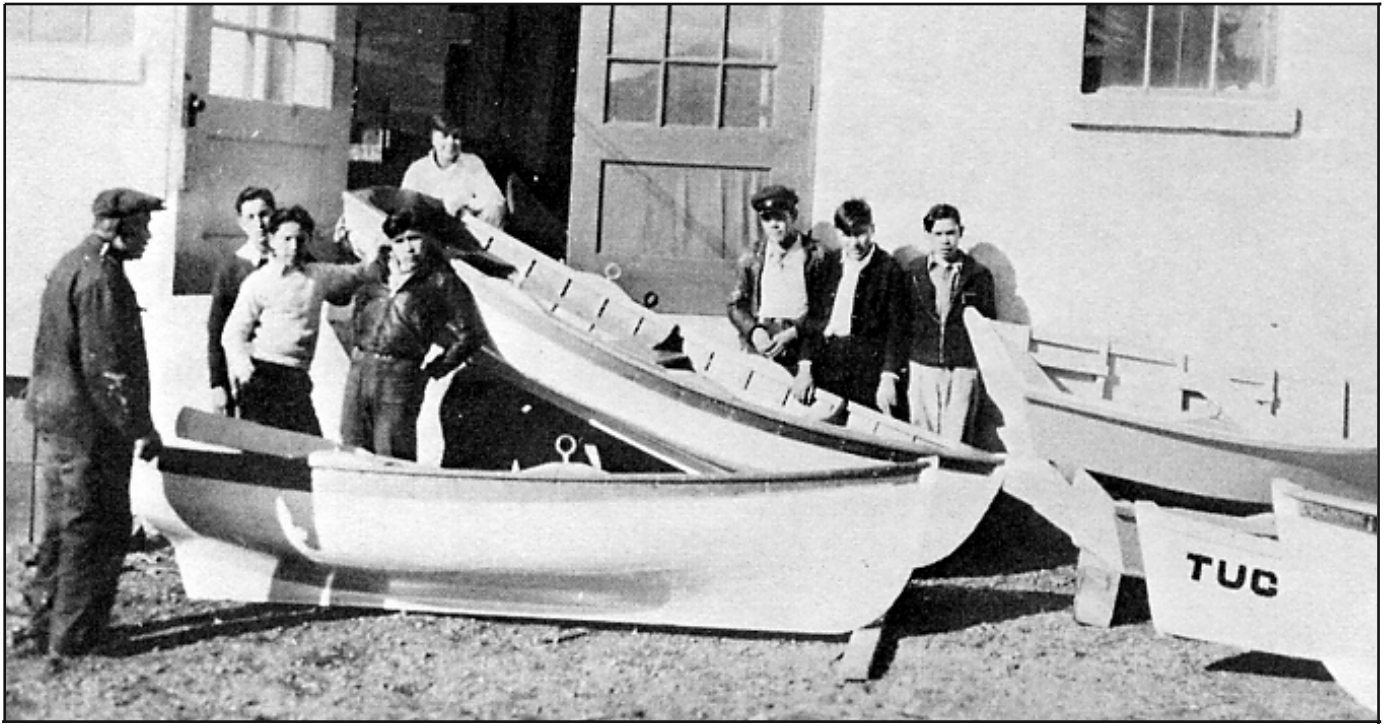
*Note: Matthew Hunter has been researching Alaska's World War II history for more than a decade. Last summer he accompanied the Forest Service on a trip to the site of the old Port Althorp section base on Northern Chichagof Island. This article is based on his study of archived military documents following the trip.*

**By Matthew Hunter**

In 1930, there were 400 combat troops in Alaska. By mid 1943, more than 100,000 American and Canadian servicemen were working together to push the Japanese from the Aleutian Islands.

Alaskans are now learning the stories of the "forgotten" Aleutian battles to retake Attu and Kiska in the face of a brutal enemy and an even deadlier climate. Missing are the stories of the thousands of men who served courageously in Southeast Alaska and never saw the enemy.

Sitka was home to slightly  
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Peter Simpson with his students and four newly built rowboats outside the SJ Sage Build. The Tug was built for Margaret Dangel's family. (Photo courtesy of the Sheldon Jackson collection)

## Peter Simpson Remained Most Notable Sitka Boatbuilder Through the 1930s and 40s

*Note: This is the second installment of a two-part feature on the history of Sitka boatbuilding. Part One, which appeared in our Fall 2011 newsletter, told the story of Peter Simpson's early life, including his arrival at the Sheldon Jackson School as a student in the late 1880s. This article focuses on Simpson's later years.*

**By Rebecca Poulson**

Peter Simpson built two seiners in the 1930s, when he was over 60 years of age. In 1934, he built the TWO BROTHERS, named for his grandsons, Henry and Sam Sing. Herman Kitka later rebuilt the TWO BROTHERS from the waterline up and opened up the bow somewhat. The boat then had a larger wheelhouse than when first built, when the galley was below decks.

Peter Simpson's son, boat-

builder Louis Simpson, died in March of 1936 of pneumonia at age 40. This tragedy was followed in 1937 by the death of another Cottages community member, Ray James, a boatbuilder who had worked with Simpson. He died of tuberculosis, after having been bedridden for several years. That same year Simpson's grandson Henry Sing (one of the Two Brothers), Ray James' two sons, and a fourth young man from the Cottages drowned in Neva Strait.

In 1937 Simpson built the SJS for the Sheldon Jackson School. Les Yaw was superintendent of the school at the time. In his book "Sixty Years in Sitka" he writes that Simpson first came to him with a sketch of the boat on brown paper. Simpson may not have used plans, instead building with half models and sketches.

The SJS was built as a seiner, a commercial salmon fishing boat. The first season the boat was leased and came back damaged, and made no money, but later Andrew Hope ran the boat and made a profit for the school. The SJS was also crucial to the Presbyterian church and the school for carrying students and mission staff on church and school trips, and for bringing students to school from their home villages.

Simpson used yellow cedar for the ribs of the SJS. Simpson and Sheldon Jackson School students got the yellow cedar themselves, and milled it at the school sawmill. Yaw says Simpson preferred oak, but used yellow cedar because they had no money for oak, which must be purchased from outside Alaska.

The planking above the waterline, the deck beams and much

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## Section Bases...

over 2,000 residents in 1935. By the end of 1942, 4,000 men had trickled in to live on Japonski and adjacent islands. Hundreds of sailors worked to keep patrol planes flying around Southeast and miles offshore. Additionally, nearly 3,000 soldiers manned guns in Sitka Sound to defend the Japonski naval base and town.

When they were not needed for other duty, military personnel worked long hours with civilian construction crews from Seims, Drake, & Puget Sound to finish defense projects as quickly as possible. It was dangerous work. Disaster struck twice on Japonski Island in 1941: seven men died in a rockslide in August and another six died when a dynamite shed blew up in October.

Flying wasn't a piece of cake either. Normal Alaska weather is not conducive to flying, especially with a map, compass, and sextant as the primary navigation tools. Often crews would land in protected bays or even on the open ocean when visibility became too low for safe flying. Sometimes they were stuck for a day before they could figure out where they were and return to base.

Poor weather was the deciding factor in at least three of the air crashes in Southeast that killed almost twenty crewmen and injured even more between 1941 and 1943. Capt. Charles Paddock, the fastest man in the world; and Lt. General Upshur, commanding officer of the Marines in the Pacific, were among six killed in a crash in Sukoi Inlet in July 1943.

To minimize the risk of the

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The 94-year-old Cummins has fished Alaska waters since 1936. (Photo by Andrew Miller)

## Owner of Sitka Troller Explores Its Connection to Diesel History

**By Andrew Miller**

As its name suggests, the 94-year-old fishing vessel Cummins had an early connection to the Cummins diesel company. For the last few years, Christina Righter, a current owner of the vessel, has been trying to figure out the full story of the Cummins.

Christina believes the 38-foot troller, which she keeps in Sitka's Eliason Harbor, may have been used to promote Cummins diesel engines when the Cummins company was in its infancy in the early 1920s.

Her research has uncovered that the original owner of the vessel, S.V.B. Miller, was a well-known boat racer and boat engine dealer in the Seattle area. He also was related by marriage to Cummins co-founder William G. Irwin.

Ehren Oberndorfer and Christina bought the Cummins from Fred Mork in Pelican in Dec-

ember 2002. The simple fact that the boat was already over 80 years old at that time had Christina interested in its history, but she did not originally suspect it was tied to the Cummins company.

Christina's boat is the only vessel in the country registered with the name Cummins. Its title reveals it has been in Alaska since 1936, and spent almost 40 of those years in Ketchikan. It also was homeported in Wrangell for over a decade. Deeper down the title is the name S.V.B. Miller.

When Christina looked up Miller's name online she quickly made the connection that he was related to Cummins' founder. She also learned that work on her boat began in Everett, Wash., a year before Cummins was incorporated in Indiana in 1919. However, the F/V Cummins was not officially

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This .50 caliber anti-aircraft gun on George Island was installed to defend the Port Althorp section base. It is the last remaining WWII gun installation in Southeast Alaska. (Photo courtesy of Lyle Hancock)

## Section Bases...

weather or the enemy knocking out all the aircraft at once, the Navy created six "section bases," which dispersed planes across the region. These bases included: Port Althorp, Annette Island, Port Armstrong, Cordova, Ketchikan, and Yakutat. (The Navy turned the Cordova and Ketchikan bases over to the US Coast Guard in October 1942.) Between 50 and 120 men manned each of these outposts to provide a safe haven for aircrews.

Naval Section Base (NSB) Port Althorp was the most strategically important and one of the largest. Located at the old P. E. Harris & Company cannery, about two miles west and south of Elfin Cove, the base was near the northernmost point of Chichagof Island. Cross Sound and Icy Strait, the primary convoy route for all supplies heading west to the Aleutians, lay just a mile to the north.

The first sailors arrived at the cannery on November 1, 1941. They found the buildings in "fair to good" condition and spent their first days fixing roofs and getting the power plant operational. By June of 1942, the Navy had only managed to get 40 men to Port Althorp and nearby George Island, where they were working to emplace an eighteen-ton, twenty-five-foot-long 6-inch gun.

Difficulty in transportation to and communication with Sitka proved the most disruptive challenge facing the base. Lt. Schwamm, officer in charge of NSB Port Althorp, wrote constantly to his superiors at Naval Air Station Sitka bemoaning the necessity of waiting days for responses to simple questions.

Once, the public works department at Sitka ordered Quonset huts assembled "4  
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## About Us

The Sitka Maritime Heritage Society is a 501(c)(3) non-profit committed to preserving the maritime history of Sitka, Alaska, and educating the public about that history. Our primary project is to renovate the Japonski Island Boathouse as a maritime museum.

## Board

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## Cummins...

registered until 1925, which was after Cummins had begun to produce its first diesel boat engines.

In 2009 Christina contacted Cummins seeking any additional information they might have about her boat. She received an enthusiastic response from the director of Cummins' Global Marine Business, who could not find documentation of the vessel in a book on Cummins history but was able to eventually affirm that the first Cummins boat engines were 12.5 horsepower diesels targeted at fishermen in the Pacific Northwest in the early 1920s.

Last year, Christina's contact at Cummins put her in touch with a writer who has done stories for the Cummins website, but no story has been written yet. Meanwhile, Christina is continuing to look for new leads in her research on the Cummins.

## Peter Simpson...

of the superstructure were also yellow cedar. He used Sitka spruce for the planking below the waterline, because he said it was tougher.

Simpson had to lower the shop floor two feet to build the SJS, so his earlier boats must have been smaller, or launched before the superstructure was put on, or built in some other place. A photo of the building of the SJS shows Joe Ozowa, David Howard, John James, and Simpson's son-in-law Peter Sing working on the boat.

The Sheldon Jackson School sawmill had only just been put together from an old mill that school staff and students salvaged from an abandoned mine on Indian River. The school annual says this sawmill was the only one in town. Simpson helped get it running, and ran it for the school. He also encouraged Les Yaw to salvage a donkey from the site of John

Brady's sawmill at the present Thomsen Harbor. The donkey was a portable engine and winch for pulling logs out of the woods, or up to a sawmill. Simpson may have used this same engine when working for Brady just after the turn of the century.

The salvaged sawmill burned down in 1940 but was rebuilt with different machinery in 1941 and operated into the 1960s, run at various times by Simpson or by Andrew Hope. It probably provided wood for many of the Sitka boats, as well as a few homes, built after that time. The donkey winch is still sitting near the maintenance shops on the Sheldon Jackson campus.

There is some movie footage of the new sawmill, the first log being run over it, building the SJS, and building a rowboat on the DVD *Sheldon Jackson School 1936-1941* available

from the Sitka Maritime Heritage Society. This footage was made by Les Yaw, and later narrated by him in the late 1980s. His son Charles Yaw had it converted to digital form and generously made it available to SMHS.

This film also shows the students carrying a large pine across the campus to the sawmill. Simpson had selected it from the Indian River valley to be the keel of the new boat, but it turned out to be unsuitable for use. Instead, they used a beachcombed "Jap square," which was a cant (a log that has been squared) of Douglas fir from Canada, Washington or Oregon, lost overboard from a vessel bound for Japan.

The SJS was renamed the MISS LINDA, and may still be fishing. It had a few features that put her at the cutting edge of modern boat construction: she is supposed to have been the first boat built locally with the galley (cooking area) on deck, that is, in the wheelhouse, rather than below decks.

The older seiners only had a small wheelhouse, with a place to steer the boat, and sometimes a bunk, on deck. A large wheelhouse was a later addition to many of the old boats. In addition, the SJS is supposed to be the first boat built locally with a high-speed diesel, instead of a gasoline engine. This was an innovation of the school engineer, Charles Stuart.

Stuart had been an engineer in the British merchant marine, and was the engineer at SJ for over two decades, from 1924 to 1945. He had been involved

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The SJS (Sheldon Jackson collection)

## Section Bases...

feet below the surrounding grade." It took a week to get the order changed, which stopped all work as digging four feet into muskeg would mean living as amphibians. Another time the civilian construction crew actually threatened to quit if they had to wait any longer for their mail.

Eventually the Navy reorganized the section bases as "Naval Auxiliary Air Facilities," giving each commanding officer enough authority to get things done.

## Peter Simpson...

in the sawmill rehabilitation, and with his students did the metal and machine work on the PRINCETON HALL.

Peter Simpson taught boat building and sawmill engineering at Sheldon Jackson from 1938 until 1945. He and his students built four skiffs and six round-bottomed boats in 1938-39, and built six skiffs and round bottom boats for the local military in 1942. For those boats he used red cedar and yellow cedar. His granddaughter, Isabella Brady, says he also built a new round-bottomed boat each spring for her grandmother (who died in 1936), which they would use a year, then sell.

Older Sitkans remember his boats as well crafted, and a pleasure to row. His round bottom boats were "on the Davis model." The Davis family, who were Tsimpshen, made rowboats at their Metlakatla shop in the 1920s and 30s, which they would sell all around Southeast Alaska for handtrolling and general purposes. Their early boats were double-enders, built

The 80 enlisted men at Port Althorp and a newly arrived crew from the 22 Naval Construction Battalion (SeaBees) fought a heroic battle against freezing water pipes for two straight weeks in December 1942. All day and all night, the crews shoveled a 3/5-mile pathway along a wooden water pipeline. 700 feet of pipe had to be completely drained, broken down, thawed, and reassembled - twice!

At one point over four feet of snow buried the pathways

and aircraft ramp. When not out in the snow, the men assisted pharmacist mate Homer Harvey in his campaign against cockroaches.

These men in Southeast were lucky. The enemy never came. While their routines did not consist of the hours of tedium and moments of terror faced by those in combat, there was plenty of tedium and some grief as they lost friends to the senseless accidents that remain all too common in Alaska.

for rowing, but the majority of their production had squared off sterns, for mounting an outboard motor.

Peter Simpson was building boats from at least 1908, and more than a dozen men worked with him over the years. Most of the fishing boats built in Sitka were built by Alaska Natives, and most of them either worked with Simpson or with those who had. These men included the most prominent and prolific Sitka boat-builders, Peter Simpson's brother-in-law George Howard and his sons, and Howard's son-in-law Andrew Hope.

Simpson was a craftsman, who would not let his students use a dull tool. His grand nephew, George Howard Sr. said Simpson would tell him, "do it once and do it right."

Glenn Howard, George's brother, remembers their mother would have the children sit on the floor and listen to Peter Simpson, whom they called their grandfather. He wore a long black coat, and told them about the Bible, and

to always have manners: you may not finish school, but manners are always important. He was a loyal Christian and had no vices - except for the movies. He was especially fond of Joe E. Brown, "Mr. Big Mouth," according to Isabella Brady. Everyone I have talked to remembers him as a pleasant man.

Peter Simpson was a founder, and more than once Grand Camp President, of the ANB. He is remembered as a calming influence, a persuasive, quiet man who was more important behind the scenes than in the spotlight. Land issues were very important to him. The family says that one reason the Gravina sawmill, of which he was a founder and shareholder, was not rebuilt after it burned was that the owners could not get title because Natives were not considered citizens.

## SMHS Makes Plans for 2012

The Sitka Maritime Heritage Society is entering 2012 with momentum. In 2011 we replaced the roof on the Japonski Island Boathouse, obtained a \$125,000 grant for a new ground source heating system, grew our membership, and hired our first executive director.

The plans for 2012 are to get permitting and design plans completed for the ground source heating system, secure the funds to complete renovation work needed to get the Boathouse operational, and expand our efforts to document Sitka's maritime history.

We thank you for your support in 2011 and look forward to informing you of new progress in 2012!



Terry Perensovich pours chowder at the SMHS Alaska Day fundraiser. (Andrew Miller photo)

## Help the Sitka Maritime Heritage Society

### Share Your Ideas and Stories

We are seeking ideas for future events and lectures. We also are exploring on-going educational programs, such as a boat-building class, and are looking for personal stories for our website and newsletters. Contact us at [sitkamaritime@gmail.com](mailto:sitkamaritime@gmail.com) to share stories, ideas or more.

### Contribute Financially

Our 2011 fundraising efforts raised over \$25,000! We would not have been able to complete our roof project without the support and are greatly appreciative.

We are now looking to build on our fundraising success to help us move into the second stage of our Boathouse renovation project in 2012. You can make a tax-deductible donation with your credit card on our website [www.sitkamaritime.org](http://www.sitkamaritime.org), or by returning the form on the back of this newsletter.

### Volunteer

Volunteers are needed for cleaning and other work at the Boathouse this spring. If you would like to lend a hand, please contact us at [sitkamaritime@gmail.com](mailto:sitkamaritime@gmail.com).



The Japonski Island Boathouse and Mt. Edgecumbe (Andrew Miller photo)

# To Contribute to the Sitka Maritime Heritage Society

Please return this page with your tax-deductable contribution to  
P.O. Box 2153, Sitka, AK 99835 or give online at [www.sitkamaritime.org](http://www.sitkamaritime.org)

A one-year membership in the Sitka Maritime Heritage Society is \$30. Contact us if you'd like to know when you last made a membership contribution. Contributions to our boathouse fund made during our summer fund drive count as membership contributions. Thank you for supporting Sitka's maritime heritage!

## We offer premiums for contributions of \$100 or more to our Boathouse fund

- Contributors of \$100 or more receive the choice of a SMHS hat, shirt, or a DVD of footage taken by Sheldon Jackson School superintendent Les Yaw in the 1930s.
- Contributors of \$500 or more receive the choice of Rebecca Poulson prints
- Contributors of \$1,000 or more are listed on a plaque at the Japonski Island Boathouse

More information on premiums and membership benefits is available at [www.sitkamaritime.org](http://www.sitkamaritime.org)

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Annual Membership: Individual (\$30) \_\_\_\_\_ Family (\$40) \_\_\_\_\_ Senior/Student (\$15) \_\_\_\_\_

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