

From AHS Blog

August Buschmann Speaks

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*Note: What follows is an excerpt of the testimony of August Buschmann, pioneering cannery operator and fish trap operator, taken from the Special Subcommittee on Alaskan Problems, House Committee on Merchant Marines and Fisheries, on the Elimination of Salmon Traps in the Waters of Alaska, November, 1949. Not only does Buschmann describe the genesis of many canneries in Southeast Alaska, his testimony clearly shows the speed at which canneries proliferated around the bays and inlets of Alaska. Readers interested in discovering more about specific cannery locations and personalities engaged in the fisheries are encouraged to spend time with historic Bureau of Fisheries and House Committee reports, which contain priceless, untapped information related to Alaska's fisheries history. For those interested in fish traps, Jim Mackovjak's newest book, *Alaska Salmon Traps*, is the place to begin. A huge thanks to Jim Mackovjak for sharing this transcription.*

"I came over here with my parents from Norway in 1891. After arriving here we became interested in fishing and the salting of fish near Port Townsend, at Scow Bay, for a short period of time. Then we moved to Port Townsend and fished and salted and smoked fish there for a short time.

Then we moved to Bellingham and did the same thing there. While we were there we put in the first pile trap that was put in on Lummi Island, that was operated by hand, with a hand windlass on a log float, and we also operated a small floating trap on Lopez Island. That was in 1892.

In 1893 I went to Alaska for the first time with my father and I fished halibut on a halibut schooner in Alaska out of Ketchikan. And later on in the season we fished halibut and salmon, dogfish, and sharks. That fall my father located a cannery site in Mink Bay off of Boca De Quadra Inlet in southeastern Alaska.

In the spring of 1894 I accompanied my father to Alaska again, where he built his first cannery, in 1894 in Mink Bay, operated it through the season and packed about 10,000 cases. We operated there for several years and then my father located a saltery site in Taku Inlet, close to Juneau, Alaska, and operated a saltery there for several years.

We located a trade and manufacturing site at Petersburg in 1896, and commenced construction of a cannery that was first operated in 1898.

From there I was transferred to Sitkah [Sitkoh] Bay, to construct a new cannery there at a location now called Chatham, Alaska, it was called at that time, Sitkoh Bay, in 1900.

[Buschmann omits the fact that during the 1899 and 1900 salmon seasons he operated a salmon saltery at Bartlett Cove, in Glacier Bay, where he also constructed a cannery building that was never outfitted with canning machinery.]

At that particular plant, which was completed and operated that year, we packed about 60,000 cases. The reason for constructing this plant was that the Petersburg cannery, located about 100 miles away, which was operated the first year in 1898, received most of its fish from this area, since there were practically no salmon in the area around Petersburg that particular year.

The year 1900 was the return cycle for that heavy run in the Chatham area. There happened to be no fish whatsoever in that area, and it is believed that the tremendous run and escapement that was there 2 years before of which very few could be taken created the shortage of that year. Out of a pack of 60,000 cases which we had prepared to can, we could only get 20,000 cases of pinks in that area with 3 big tenders and 14 hand seine boats covering Chatham Strait, Icy Strait, Chichagof Island, and Baranof Island areas where we had expected to pack principally pinks that season.

That goes to show that even in olden times we had smaller runs of pink salmon in southeastern Alaskathan we have ever had since that time. This was in 1900.

In the fall of 1900 and spring of 1901 father sold out of the three canneries and two salteries that his companies owned, to a company called the Pacific Packing & Navigation Co. that has accumulated a number of canneries along the coast of Alaska and also on Puget Sound.

In 1901 I built and operated the first pile trap close to Port [Point] Couverden at the entrance to Icy Strait, and operated that pile trap with several others for 3 years.

In 1904 I operated a steamer for the Killisnoo fertilizer plant at Killisnoo, Alaska, and we caught principally herring, but when herring were scarce we would always load up with salmon at the neighboring bay so as to bring home a load of fish.

In 1905 I took a contract to deliver two shiploads of dog salmon for the Japanese Government. These ships sailed into southeastern Alaska, and with 1 little seine boat and a small crew of 5 or 6 men, including my brother, we loaded these ships with approximately 200,000 dog salmon at Chaik Bay. In 1906 I operated a cannery for the Northwestern Fisheries Co. at Sana Ana, and in 1907, 1908 and 1909 I operated a cannery at Hunters Bay, on the west coast of Prince of Wales Island, where we also operated a salmon hatchery, here we also built and operated the first power seine boat that ever came to Alaska, which was operated by my brother Eigil at that time.

In 1910 I was transferred, and instructed to build a cannery—on Cooks Inlet—for the Northwestern Fisheries, and I believe I had the luckiest season of my career that year, since we left here on Friday, March the 13th.

In 1911 I built a cannery of my own at Ford Arm on the west coast of Chichagof Island, southeastern Alaska and packed about 20,000 cases, operating exclusively with seines.

In 1912 and 1913 we operated at Ford Arm on the west coast of Chichagof Island, putting up small packs. In

1915 I also built a cannery in Cooks Inlet on Knik Arm, across from Anchorage, which I operated for 3 years.

Then in 1918 I built and operated a cannery at Port Althorp, at the entrance to Icy Strait, southeastern Alaska not far from Juneau, where we had prospected the fishing conditions for some time. I supervised the operation of this cannery myself until the fall of 1919, when I sold this cannery to the Alaska Pacific Salmon Co.

I also in the meantime had become interested in the Hood Bay cannery, at Hood Bay and I had financed Nick Bez on his first canning operations in Peril Straits, at Todd—the Todd Cannery. I think that was 1924.

I was also interested in a cannery at Sitka, which we sold just a few years ago.

Since the early 1930s I have not been so very active in the business, although I have had interests in several canneries, and up to the present time have made trips to Alaska every year, and I have since 1893 spent anywhere from 2 or 3 weeks to 9 months in the Territory every year.

I graduated from the commercial branch of the Pacific Lutheran College, in Parkland, Wash., in 1899; received my pilot's license to operate cannery steamers and other small steamers in 1902; I took out my United States citizens papers in Tacoma, Wash., in 1903.

I was appointed by President Hoover and served as a dollar-a-year man under Judge Royal Gunnison, Food Administrator for Alaska, during World War I, as fisheries consultant and advisor in connection with catching and canning salmon in Alaska.

I was selected a member of the Fact Finding Board of Three, operating under the supervision of the United States Department of Labor, to determine a fair price to be paid for fish and labor in the Alaska salmon industry in 1938...

I served as first organizing chairman of the consultant committee, appointed as a war measure by the Secretary of Interior in 1942. The purpose of this committee was to devise ways and means of producing the greatest quantity of canned fish by concentrating all fishing and canning operations along the entire coast line of Alaska into the most efficient operating units, to save labor, transportation, and floating equipment, since the Army and Navy had commandeered and actually taken over most of the salmon industry's efficient tenders, scows, and other floating equipment, including several canneries, which were so desperately needed when war so unexpectedly broke out.

I have spent all or part of every operating season, ranging from 3 or 4 weeks to 9 months in Alaska since 1893, and expect to continue doing so since I am very much interested in the Alaska fisheries.

I am at the present time interested in a cold-storage plant at Sitka, Alaska; a cold-storage plant we built last year at Sand Point, Shumagin Islands, Alaska; have an interest in five fish traps in southeastern Alaska, and have a very small interest in the Alaska Pacific Salmon Co., operating canneries in Bristol Bay and south of the peninsula."