

NEW VIDEO RELEASE: THE DAYS OF SALMON TRAPS & FISH PIRATES

Conceived by fishing industry historian Bob Thorstenson, *The Days of Salmon Traps & Fish Pirates* is the story of the most efficient—and controversial—form of fishing gear ever devised, the trap. Narrated by the last of the Puget Sound and Alaska trap men, the 30-minute documentary relies on historic film footage dating back to the 1920s as it treats the viewer to a tour of the bygone era.

Outlawed in Washington State by the passage of Initiative 77 in 1934, and in Alaska by the adoption of statehood in 1958, the salmon trap was once the primary harvesting technique practiced in the region. Traps represented arguably the best method of capturing salmon, and one that ensured the dominance of entities like the “salmon cartel”, the Alaska Packers Association or APA.

Whoever controlled the most productive trap sites controlled the salmon industry, a fact that inspired bitter opposition among fishermen.

Trap fish were of exceptionally high quality because they remained alive until it was time to deliver them to the cannery. The traps also gave fishery managers an easy means of regulating the harvest—whenever they needed to permit more fish to reach their spawning grounds, they simply ordered that the trap openings be closed. Nevertheless, the traps were doomed.

Trap ownership gave the major canneries the power to dominate the price of fish...and the fortunes of fishermen. Unable to compete by day, boat owners discovered that you didn't have to own a trap to brail trap fish in the dark of night. The canners responded to this salmon “piracy” by placing watchmen aboard their traps.

SHOOTING WAR

If trap piracy once bordered on sport, it became a shooting war after World War I as boat owners and the major packers battled for control of the resource. Ultimately, the fishermen relied on the power of numbers and convinced their legislators to do what competition could not—outlaw the traps in favor of “mobile gear” or boats.

Produced by John Sabella & Associates, Inc., in conjunction with the Semiahmoo Park Museum that now occupies the old APA cannery site in Blaine Washington, *The Days of Salmon Traps & Fish* brings the trap era to life through the tales of the industry pioneers who lived it.

JOHN SABELLA & ASSOCIATES

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For example, 87-year-old Carl Gudbranson, now caretaker of the trap exhibit at Semiahmoo, relates his experience as a 21-year old watchman in a tiny one-room trap shack with a partner three times his age but with half his courage. Whenever the pirates approached their trap, the senior watchman sent his young protege out to deal with them.

“He was afraid of the fish pirates,” Gudbranson says. “He’d pull the covers over his head and hide, but I figured out how to get rid of them.”

Brandishing a buffalo gun that could throw a “fearsome chunk of lead into the night,” the young fisherman whispered theatrically that his ostensibly sleeping partner was an ogre who dealt harshly with anyone who awakened him.

“It worked” he says. “No one wanted to deal with that fearsome man in the bunk.”

Other featured performers are 85-year-old Stan Tarrant, the former president of the Pacific American Fisheries Company that outstripped even the mighty APA to become the largest canner and trap operator in the region; former Alaska trap owner Fred Gunderson, 92; Mike Goodman, 90, who recounts the violent death of a trap watchman; 77-year-old reef netter Helgi Thordarson, 70-year-old Phil Hastin and former Alaska “Fish Czar” Clem Tillion, 70, who was once himself a trap man and who reveals the ranks of the trap pirates included some very surprising names.

The Days of Salmon Traps & Fish Pirates is a sequel to Thorstenson’s first historical documentary, the Telly Award-winning *Great Age of Salmon*. Now retired, the founder and former principal of Icicle Seafoods Corporation has launched a series of historical videotapes focused on significant Pacific Northwest and Alaska lifestyles and industries, each produced in conjunction with a regional museum.

VHS copies of *The Days of Salmon Traps & Fish Pirates* are available for \$19.95 plus \$3.50 shipping and handling from John Sabella & Associates, Inc.

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