

A Bristol Bay set netter explains why fishing is more than an income

by Emma C. Nicolet Borbridge
for the Tundra Times

JUNEAU — Seventeen years after Russia gave up its claim to the territory of Alaska, the first cannery began operating in the Bay of Nushagak.

It was the beginning of commercial fishing in Bristol Bay.

Bristol Bay is a large body of water surrounded by about 300 miles of beach. It's on the inlet waters of the Bering Sea coastline between Cape Menchikof and Cape Newenham.

The distance between the two Capes, all open ocean, is less than 150 miles. Within that large body of water, six river systems drain from lakes where millions of salmon go to spawn each year.

At the western tip of the bay, inside Cape Menchikof, is the Ugashik River. Northward, from the Ugashik River, is the Egegik River. And at the top northern corner of the bay, are the Naknek-Kvichak river systems. Westward from that point, is the Nushagak River, and rounding Cape Constantine to the northwest corner on the inside tip of Cape Newenham is the Togiak River.

Each of the river systems is ranked according to its size and the amount of salmon it maintains and produces. Each of the rivers is managed according to its own timetable.

Within that large body of water, a comparatively small area a few miles offshore, and an area outside of the river's mouth, is open to commercial fishing.

Salmon swim in large schools and can be stopped in the passageway that leads to the river they are destined to enter on their way to the spawning grounds, if fishing is allowed to take place outside of that restricted area.

In 1884 the first salmon pack was produced by the Arctic Pack Co. From that time on, the Native people of the Bristol Bay region stood by and watched while strangers came to their shores to catch fish and put them into cans.

The Native people had inhabited the land for uncounted generations before anyone from Russia or the United States had ever set foot upon their shores. They had fished for salmon on the rivers and lakes. Now they were reduced to being mere onlookers, regarded by the newcomers as intruders in their own land. They were barred from selling salmon and working in the canneries for many years.

Each springtime, before the harvesting of salmon began, they observed hundreds of people coming in annual migrations to their shores by great sailing ships to fish the waters and windswept beaches.

The majority of the fishermen were Italians, Yugoslavians and Scandinavians. The first cannery workers were Chinese.

By 1908 there were canneries operating in the Bristol Bay region. While the fishing industry continued to grow and build canneries in other areas of the bay, the Natives saw more and more outsiders come to their shores. Among the many who came were fishermen from the old country, who were newcomers to America. As time passed, some of the newcomers remained in Alaska and became the old-timers, later known as pioneers.

Regardless of the wealth that came from harvesting millions of salmon each year, conditions in the villages stayed pretty much the same.

Finally, around 1920, the Natives were allowed to sell their salmon catch and to work in the canneries. Since that time, the economic survival of the

majority of residents in the villages and communities throughout the Bristol Bay region has continued to be largely dependent on the salmon industry.

From the early beginnings of commercial fishing in Bristol Bay, the drift gillnet fishermen fished in open-hulled sailboats. The vessels were designed to sail over the shallow waters that covered the tide flats of Bristol Bay and the deep ocean waters of the Bering Sea.

The prevailing winds supplied an endless source of power that generally took the boats wherever they had to go. But fishermen whose boats had limited space and comforts endured many hardships.

The sailboats measured 29 feet long

and had 9 foot beams. A long mast, posted at the 20 foot mark of the forward section of the vessel with an attached boom that extended a foot or so beyond the stern, held a large triangle shaped sail, with two or three feet squared off at the top. A heavy wooden rudder at the stern, held in place by a wooden tiller, was used to steer the sailboat.

Most of the available space was sectioned off into bins and was used to hold the fish and nets. About 6 feet of roofing covered the forecastle. The opening in front of the forecastle was covered with a piece of canvas or a roughly hewn diving wall that kept the wind and rain out and the wetness and dampness in.

The men slept and ate their meals in that small space that was home to them for most of the season. When they had to go inside, they had to stoop over and crawl through the small opening.

Coffee was boiled and meals were warmed and cooked on a single burner Swede stove. A single mantel Coleman lantern furnished a meager light and little warmth to that small, usually cold space.

Canned food, cooking pots, dishes and silverware were stored in cardboard or wooden boxes. Canned beans, which topped the fishermen's cuisine, were often eaten cold out of the can with a slice of bread, covered with lumps of butter, and washed down with cups of strong, hot, black coffee known as fishermen's brew.

Today, on the windswept shores of Bristol Bay, you can see many

masterless and battered hulls, stripped bare of their fittings, their rudderless sterns half-buried in sand, with decay slowly consuming their final remains.

In 1951, the law belatedly changed to allow sailboats to convert to engine power. The old-fashioned sailboat era had come to an end after withstanding the tides of change for more than half a century.

But the final break with the past didn't happen until the need for an overall fisheries resource management plan was recognized.

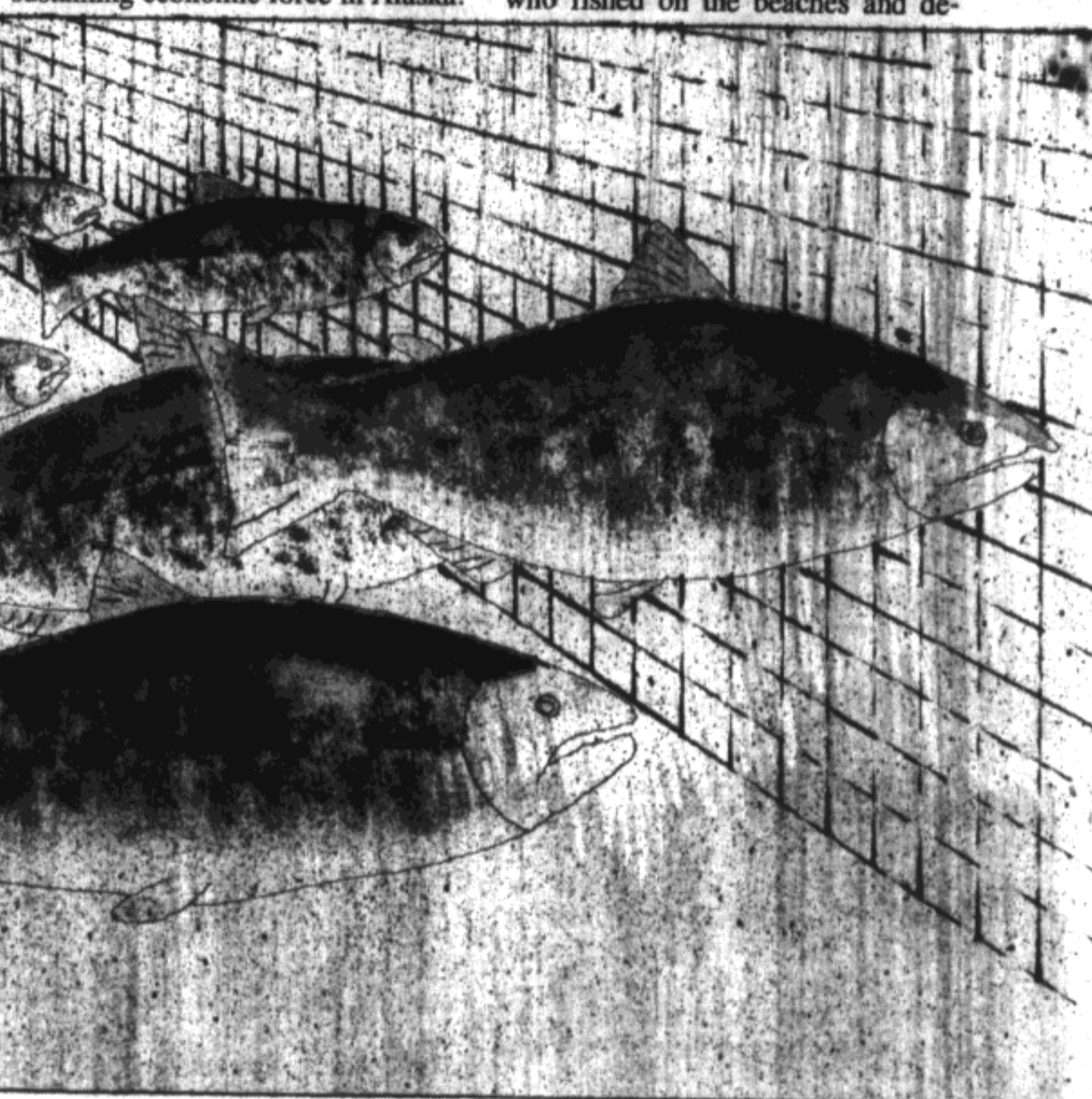
Early on, the owners of the numerous canneries operating throughout the Bristol Bay region lacked the vision to guide the salmon industry into becoming a strong and sustaining economic force in Alaska.

Bristol Bay by the salmon industry, and the lack of a comprehensive plan to maintain a balance based on the strength of the salmon run and the amount of salmon taken from the water at harvest time were threatening the survival of the largest sockeye salmon producing region in the world.

In order to restore the shrinking salmon stocks and to maintain them at levels that would bring a steady return each year, it was necessary to limit the degree of fishing time allotted to commercial fishermen in order to counterbalance the excessive amount of gear allowed to fish in the Bristol Bay region.

Too much gear and too little fishing time created hardships for the residents who fished on the beaches and de-

pendent on fishing to make their living. But the people never gave up their dreams for better days to come from their fishing. They believed in the "fishermen's dream" that "next year would be better."



Prior to 1956, opening and closing periods for Bristol Bay salmon fishing generally followed a fairly predictable pattern. The period usually opened at 6 a.m. on Monday morning and closed at 6 p.m. on Saturday evening.

Nothing changed until a constitutional amendment was approved by a vote of the people of Alaska on Aug. 22, 1972, authorizing the State Legislature to create a Commercial Fisheries Limited Entry Commission.

The commission was created to enable the fisheries management agency to include the limiting of gear license users throughout the state's fisheries and to maintain it at levels in keeping with time honored practices . . . in order to stabilize the amount of gear in each fishery at levels which would allow for fair dollar returns to the fishermen, aid in effective fisheries management, and to promote profes-

Too many years of unrestrained exploitation of the salmon resources in Bristol Bay by the salmon industry, and the lack of a comprehensive plan . . . were threatening the survival of the largest sockeye salmon producing region in the world.

Fishermen were allowed to fish for six days of continuous fishing each week throughout the fishing season. The end result: too few salmon managed to make it through the nearly unbroken network that crisscrossed the migratory water gate leading to the spawning grounds.

The need to develop guidelines to regulate fishing time allotted to licensed commercial fishermen was crucial if the rich salmon stocks were to be preserved and the economic survival of the Bristol Bay region was to be ensured.

Too many years of unrestrained exploitation of the salmon resources in

sional and diversified commercial fisheries." (AS 16.43)

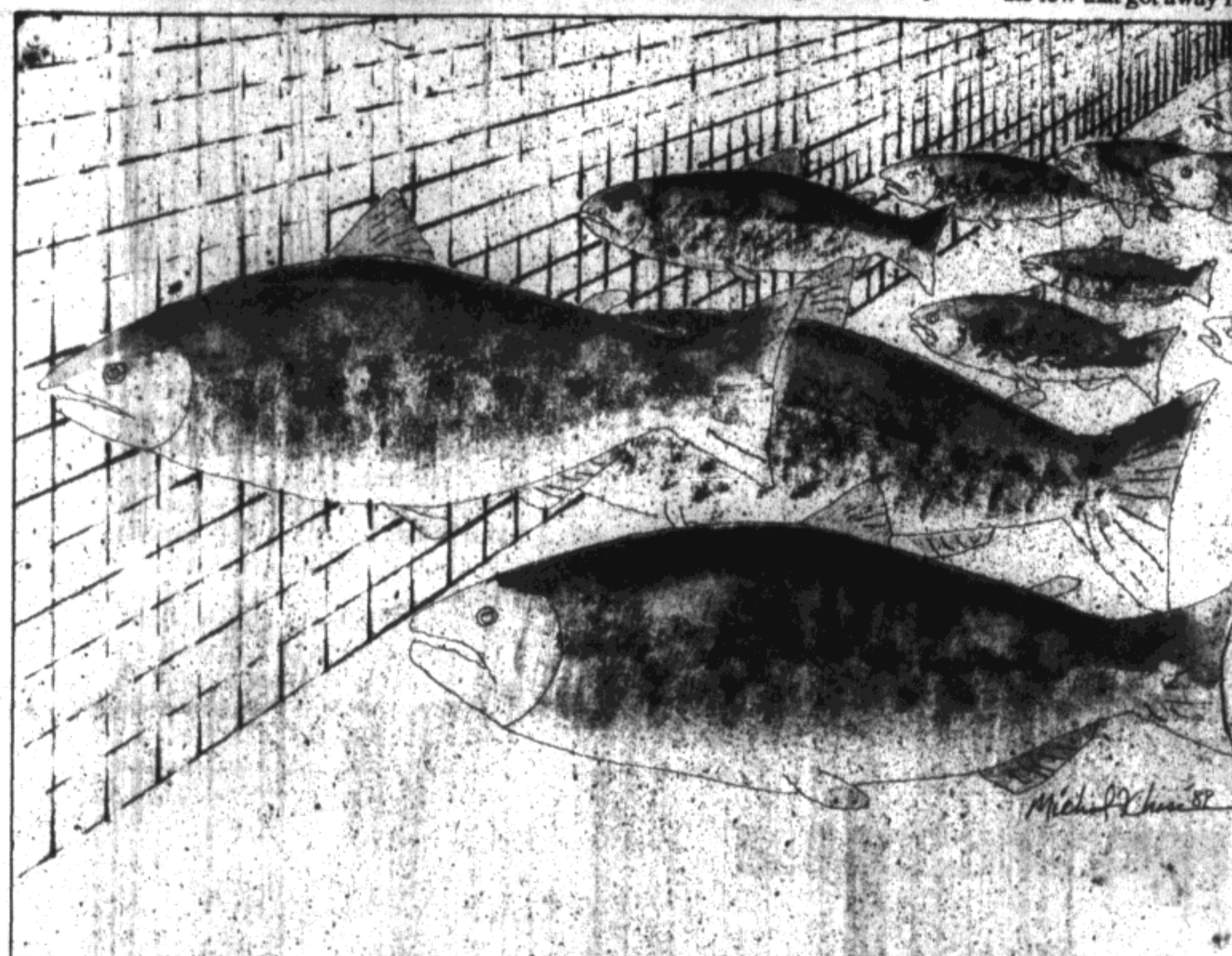
Data contained in the Public Review Draft of the Bristol Bay Comprehensive Salmon Plan of 1986 by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game states that, in 1972 there were 1,764 drift gillnet and 854 set gillnet license holders registered to fish in Bristol Bay.

In 1973 when the State Legislature acted to create the entry commission, it became the first of its kind ever to be created in the history of the United States. The number of fishing licenses registered to fish in the Bristol Bay region then was the highest recorded in over a decade. There were 3,203 drift gillnets and 1,010 set gillnets, for a total of 4,213 gear license holders,

fishermen, the number of participants registered to fish had more than doubled the number registered for the 1974 fishing season.

There were 2,057 drift gillnet and 920 set gillnet licensed fishermen, for a total of 2,979 registered to fish in Bristol Bay. The optimum number ascribed by the commission . . . is the number of permits that will maintain an economically healthy fishery, allow for the orderly and efficient harvest of the allowable commercial take, and not cause serious economic hardship to those currently engaged in the fishery." (AS 43.290)

The Legislature did not intend to use the limited entry act to reduce the number of traditional partakers in the commercial fisheries plan, but to pro-



topping the 1972 season by 1,595 gear licensed participants in the Bay's fisheries.

The year 1973 also recorded the lowest number of sockeye salmon harvested in 80 years of commercial fishing in the Bristol Bay region. A total of 761,322 sockeyes were harvested that year, compared to a total harvest of 2,416,233 sockeyes in 1972.

In 1974, the Limited Entry Commission was empowered by the Alaska State Legislature to limit the use of gear when the Legislature designated the Bristol Bay drift gillnet and set gillnets fisheries area as a distressed fisheries because of the unmanageable amount to drift gillnet gear license users allowed to fish in Bristol Bay in 1973.

In the same year, the commission also initiated the first limited entry permit program. Only those who had fished as drift gillnet gear license users before Jan. 1, 1973, were entitled to purchase a permit for the 1974 Bristol Bay fishing season.

Eight hundred and seventy-two drift gillnet and 530 set gillnet licensed permit holders totaled 1,402 that year. The total was the lowest on record in more than a decade that were registered to fish in Bristol Bay in 1974.

When the Limited Entry Commission approved guidelines in 1975 to establish the optimum number of permits to be awarded to qualified

vide the managing agency with an added tool to aid in the management of the state's fisheries resources.

Data contained in the Bristol Bay Comprehensive Salmon Draft Plan and the synopsis of Alaska's limited entry program indicate that the State Legislature, through the Limited Entry Commission, accomplished some of its objectives by stabilizing the amount of gear allowed to fish in Alaska's water and by maintaining a high level of salmon returns and adequate escapement goals.

The managing agencies, however, have not responded in a manner that effectively addresses the economic hardship besetting some of the bay's gillnet fishermen. Set netters are not properly recognized as equal partners in the allocation practices of the fisheries resources management agencies.

Set gillnet fishermen comprise about one third of the total gear license holders registered to fish in Bristol Bay. They catch about 5 percent of the total harvestable take. They are allowed to fish with one length of 50 fathom gear per permit and set net site.

Drift gillnet users, on the other hand, are entitled to use 150 fathoms of gear per permit. The fishing time allotted to drifters is much greater than the time allowed for set netters due to the actions of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, which usually opens each fishing period at low tide.

Prior to each opening, aggressive drifters position themselves at the outer boundary line marking the legal fishing area to await the incoming tide.

Salmon usually school up at low tide in deep water outside of the channel that leads to the river of their origin. When the tide comes in and the nets are dropped into the water, there is little chance for salmon to pass by the immense amount of gear that stretches 3 to 4 feet deep from point to point on the boundary lines.

There isn't room enough for every drifter to fish on the line. The ones forced to the inside fare poorly compared to those who fish on the line. While the drifters are watching the splashes in their nets, the set netters are still on dry land, waiting for the water to reach their nets. By the time the set nets are in the water, the areas are pretty well fished out, leaving only the few that got away from the drifters.

changed with the coming of modern machinery. In the early times, people did everything without the aid of trucks, tractors and skiffs that are now a basic part of set netting in Bristol Bay.

Unlike their predecessors who came to Alaska's shores over 100 years ago by sailing ships, fishermen and cannery workers now arrive in large jet planes. Just prior to fishing, several plane loads a day touch down on the runway at King Salmon Airport, the connecting link between the outside world and the small communities of Bristol Bay.

Upon leaving the plane, passengers are sometimes hit by a blast of wind or blitzed by swarms of attacking mosquitoes or sandflies. Passengers waiting to claim their baggage stand outside, where the baggage is eventually dumped on the ground in front of the terminal.

Buses and taxicabs line up to take passengers heading to downtown Naknek over 15 miles of paved road that rises and dips in various places due to the frozen conditions beneath the earth's surface called permafrost.

Passengers traveling to canneries in other districts or preparing to work on processors anchored outside of the rivers in deep water, are dispatched by small amphibious airplanes.

Set netters who fish on the Naknek-Kvichak river beaches head for their camp sites, where many will remain for the entire fishing season. Most set netters, however, who fish the Naknek-Kvichak river watershed, live in communities situated on the banks of the Naknek River.

I am a Bristol Bay set netter. I fish on the beach of the Naknek-Kvichak river watershed. My mother fished on that same spot for more than 30 years. She was 80 years old when she gave up her fishing days. Her example and the example of others who live and fish in that area has taught me to value a lifestyle that keeps me close to the land that is part of who I am.

I look forward to going back to Naknek in the springtime. I look forward to seeing my friends and my fishing site neighbors. I also look forward to teaching my grandchildren how to fish and how to grow in an environment that's safe and secure.

I have deepened my appreciation for, and sensitivity to living things that coexist in a harmonious environment that has resisted mankind's efforts to change the world.

The air is fresh and clean. The ruffled water that captures the reflection from the crimson sky at sunset fills me with a sense of peace and wonder that I cannot always find in a world too busy to respond to the awe, awesome wonder of life that is there for all to see and to enjoy.

Fishing is vital to the economic well-being of all of us who fish the waters of Bristol Bay. But anyone who goes there just for the dollars is blinded to all else that the bay offers to those who fish its alternately calm and stormy waters.

No matter who you are or where you come from, Bristol Bay is where hopes are renewed and dreams are inspired for a better life. The next tide and the next season always hold the promise of a bigger catch.

I believe that set netters should be given a fair chance to realize their share of that promise.

Emma Christine Nicolet Borbridge, 63, is a Yup'ik who is originally from Bethel. She spent much of her early life in Bristol Bay. Today she lives in Juneau, and she is a set netter in Bristol Bay during the summers.