



Gum Boots:

By LONE JANSON

"Ol' Zipper-shell", called "Gum Boot" by the Tlingits of Southeastern and Prince William Sound, who eat them, is a tough little number (hence the name Gum Boot) found clinging to the rocks at very low tides. He has a great clammy taste, takes excellent teeth to chew, and has an inner core of red eggs greatly savored by Gum Boot lovers.

Also, he's lots of fun to harvest.

My mind goes back to the mid-forties, when I was new in Alaska, and I spent a winter in Katalla, along the north shore of the Gulf of Alaska. Katalla at that time was a ghost town, except that in winter there were about eight families trapping there and living in the old houses that were still standing and quite usable. Most of the population was more or less of Tlingit extraction; people who had at one time lived in the village at Bering River. This village was named Chilkat by a homesick Tlingit woman, after the village by the same name in Southeastern at the head of Lynn Canal.

It was November; a clear, cold night with a full moon. To sea people that means big runout tides. Our little group of "Gum Booters" gathered at one of the houses to begin our outing. We armed ourselves with table knives

to pry the goodies off the rocks, gunny sacks to carry them, and our warmest clothes and hip boots (for those of us who had them; I had rubber shoe pacs with wool socks inside, and a pair of alpaca-lined pants which I found to be more than excellent for such a trip.)

The only trouble was, we had only one lantern, for a party of ten to twelve gum-booters.

We started out toward Martin Islands, about three miles distant. The hike was fun, with yarn-swapping and singing all the way. We arrived at the right stage of the tide; the islands were connected to shore by a sand spit that had uncovered and provided a nice, dry highway out to the rocky islands. We clamored around, sticking our knife under the little zipper shelled critters and popping them loose. It was fun. At first we were doing fine, but after a while Roy Keating, who had the lantern, wandered off in another direction with a contingent of happy gumbooters, while the rest of us were left groping around in the dim moonlight. Finally we sat down to visit and wait for the lantern. We started talking of how fast the tide comes in, and of other unfortunate parties who had not been quick enough to get off the island and had been stuck out there till the next low

Webster: "Chiton (Ki'-ton): a small, edible mollusk (having) a shell made up of eight arching, overlapping plates."

(Sometimes called "badarkis" in other areas of the state.)

water. We shivered in the frosty night air as we thought of that long cold wait. Other stories were told, and the time passed swiftly.

Too swiftly. We looked up, and—horrors!—there was moonlight shimmering on the water clear across the spit! We yelled a warning to the others, who answered faintly from their gum boot heaven, and we started to scramble across the water-covered spit for the mainland. There was only a few inches of water, so it was no big deal. About halfway across was a large rock, so we used that as a landmark.

The only thing we did wrong was to bear too close to the rock. I fell into a deep hole right next to the rock up to my hips. My shoe pacs filled with icy water immediately, but I didn't feel any chill on the rest of my legs because of the alpaca-lined pants, which were completely waterproof.

I hauled out of the water with a shout of warning to the others; to some of them it didn't matter because they had such low-cut shoes and boots they were also wet.

We reached shore and looking back saw the lantern winking around the bend, so we knew the others were coming and were all right. The temperature was below zero, my boots were full of icy water, and we had a three-mile hike

ahead. So we started out at a fairly fast clip for home. After a few hundred yards I thought perhaps I should take off my socks, wring them out, and dump the water out of my shoe pacs. But when I reached down I found the shoe pacs encased in a sheath of ice. My alpaca-lined pants were also ice-coated all the way to the hips, though I was toasty warm and dry inside. I decided perhaps it was better to leave the water squishing between my toes anyhow—some vague idea having to do with circulation or massage or something like that. The water had warmed up considerably inside the footgear anyhow.

When our whole crew got home that night, half of us had wet shoes and pants (someone in the lantern crew also fell into the hole by the rock), but there were no ill effects. A pot of hot coffee, a big vat of boiled gum boots, and an evening of story-telling and laughter capped a fantastic adventure.

If you're ever lucky enough to go "gum bootin'", just pop them in rapidly boiling salted water (preferably sea water) and don't cook them too long. Just a quick dunk will do; they're tough by nature and cooking too long makes them more so. Seaweed or kelp cooked in the same pot is good, too. Kelp is a dunk-it-quick-and-get-it-out food also.