

Trouble on Cook Inlet

Wasn't there a jet in that hole? In the dim light penetrating the early morning fog, I sit on a bench in someone's duck hunting shack on the north shore of Cook Inlet with a small carburetor in my hand, looking at a jumble of parts. Whether we cross the Inlet today, pulling out at the small boat launch ramp in Anchorage, depends upon correctly reassembling the carb from my old Mercury 35A. I had taken apart and cleaned auto carburetors but never one from an outboard engine. So, why am I in this bind on a salmon gillnetting trip?

Several weeks before I had obtained a personal use gillnetting permit from the State of Alaska Department of Fish and Game for the Cook Inlet District. During my childhood, my family netted salmon along the shore known as Goose Bay, trying to set up as close to Fish Creek as was legal. Often we had to locate over a quarter-mile away because the prime locations were taken on a 'first come, first served' basis. Dragging and carrying the heavy 12-foot wooden boat down then up the steep bank, along with forty to ninety salmon, was slave-like work. But we did this year after year until the State closed down personal use gillnetting in Goose Bay. Between the times of straining on ropes and carrying fish and heavy supplies, there were periods of bliss: lying in the warm sun watching the gulls, listening to their intriguing squawks, which often resembled squabbling children. The four of us brothers played in the deep mud near the outlet of Fish Creek, sometimes sinking up to our knees. We had little respect for the possibility of real quicksand, tempting fate over and over. I remember the adrenaline rush of having to be pulled out by my brothers. Dad was a risk-taker; Mom would never have allowed this fun – but she wasn't there during these times.

Thus, in 1984, two decades later, I was comfortable with the plan to gillnet in the silty Cook Inlet waters, churned by a thirty-foot tide that could match a runner's pace. I'd pull the sixty-plus year-old family boat loaded with the gill net and associated equipment behind my 14-foot 1959 Herters fiberglass runabout, carrying three people, food and camping gear.

My oldest son, Eric, had just given up trying to sleep on the hard drafty floor. Beside me was Russ, one of my co-workers who had been eager to go for a boat ride, net a few fish and otherwise enjoy an easy trip. With little carburetor experience, he was handing me tools and watching that I didn't do something stupid, like drop a small part through one of the many cracks between floor boards.

Last night, after a tide-assisted crossing of the Inlet during the morning hours, a westerly wind freshened, slowly at first such that we hardly noticed, then stronger as the light faded. By dusk – one can't call 11:30pm on an Alaskan July night 'dark' – the wind was augmenting the power of the incoming tide, resulting in breakers that pounded the silty stone-covered beach.

After setting the net, we located the tent on the height of land on this small peninsula (the next day we discovered that the tent was only a few feet above the normal high tide markings). Wasn't long before the incoming tide brought a school of salmon into our net. About mid-evening, we retired to the tent for a few hours of sleep before our midnight task of pulling the net out. Close to midnight, the water approached our tent opening, showing no indication of backing off. I shouted to my son (and Russ) to get up, pack and get out. Eric's eyes widened as he looked across a vast grey sea, rough enough to toss around our small boats like corks. As we rushed to pack our tent and belongings into the boats, I wondered where we would find shelter. The net,

under full siege and trashing with twenty salmon (by a later count), would have to be left for the night, with the hope that it and the salmon would be there in the morning. If Fish and Game flew over before we could get the net out, I'd be facing a fishing violation with a steep fine. Rather than cut the net loose, I took that gamble.

The three of us pulled the two boats up a winding slough, not knowing what lay ahead, hoping at least for dry land. The duck hunter's shack, setting above the mudflats on stilts, came as a welcomed surprise, especially when we found the door unlocked. Under normal circumstances, I would have steered clear of another's property, even if it were just a shack. I told Russ and Eric we'd leave it as we found it. Well, it turned out we didn't quite do that – but I'll get to that later. So after securing the boats, we settled in. With the gusty wind singing a myriad of tunes as it whistled through a plethora of cracks, we didn't get much sleep.

I'm sure, by now, you are wondering why I'm working on a carburetor. Best we could figure was that waves had broken over the back of the runabout and water had flooded into the carburetor via the air intake. Probably happened while we were attempting to sleep in the tent. Despite the many pulls on the starter cord last night, the engine never fired. The gas tank wasn't empty, however, there was far less left than I wanted to see. After removing the cowling and a damp air filter, I could see beads of water on the carb exterior. That I'd packed the right tools to remove the carb was a minor miracle. However, without Russ' pocket-size utility tool, the disassembly would've been impossible. All we had available for absorbing water was wet tissues – no help there. I recall we burned one of their candles, prominently displayed on a window shelf, to finish drying the carburetor parts. Before I lit the candle, we blow-dried the parts as best we could. One of us spotted a five-gallon gasoline container, which was over half full. Eric set

the can outside on the steps. I still didn't like the idea of an open flame close to the carburetor, but we took that risk. Although I don't clearly remember, I think it took most of the morning to rebuild and mount the carburetor. During this time, the sun had broken through the dissipating fog. Eric recalls sitting on the crude boardwalk leading up to the shack, legs dangling over the edge, studying the northern shoreline in anticipation of a long difficult walk. Not to be, for this time, within a few pulls, the engine started. Cheers from the three of us filled the air.

While I had been preoccupied inside, the wind had abated. By now I felt certain that our illegal net had been spotted. Perhaps there would be some consideration in light of our predicament. But more likely, an admonishment accompanied by a fine – the penalty for our misjudgments. Oh well, live and learn, I had thought.

Before leaving the cabin, we cleaned up, and set the can of gas back inside. I kept thinking about our return trip and the amount of gas we'd already used. *Their* gas would be assurance that we'd made it to port. Yet, taking it was stealing – unless we left something of equal value. The three of us dug through our belongings, only coming up with five dollars – not as much as I wanted to leave. Russ found a scrap of paper and a broken pencil. I scratched out a thank-you note, adding a few words about our predicament. I concluded the message with my name and phone number. Shamelessly, we emptied their gas into the runabout tank.

By early afternoon, we were back at our fishing site. The net with twenty salmon was lying on the rocky beach. What a beautiful sight to behold! After freeing the salmon and packing the net into the front of the old boat, we cleaned the fish, laying them on the floor of the boat near the stern. Seeing a few planes flying over the Inlet, once again I wondered whether our net had been spotted by a patrol.

The tide was more than halfway in by the time we pushed off, wooden boat again in tow. For several hours, progress was good and our spirits were high. Now and then I checked the gas tank, very thankful of our decision.

Where it happened, none of us knew. First indication was the back of the old boat slouching low in the water. Then we noticed the salmon were floating back and forth with the sway of the boat. Had some rogue wave crashed over the back while we were merrily looking at the outline of Anchorage inching closer? No. Eric saw the problem first – the top part of the transom was missing, allowing water to sporadically overflow into the boat. If the accumulating water got much deeper, we'd have to cut the old boat loose. Some time later, I heard a shout from Russ, who was riding in the back seat. Turning my head, I was shocked to see the salmon, one by one, float over the broken transom and disappear into the opaque inlet water. Skunked in a way I never imagined!

Perhaps we should have cut the rope, and sacrificed the boat, gillnet and supplies but we didn't. Forward progress became noticeably slower. Eric was checking the gas tank every few minutes, reporting ominously lower levels. The old Merc was flailing the water, working hard to drag what was effectively an anchor. As we churned into the final hundred yards of the port channel, the engine sputtered several times before catching again. I turned our flotilla toward shore, short of the loading ramp. Seconds later, the engine quit but our momentum carried us through the calm water. When the forward movement stopped, Russ leaped into the knee-deep shallows, bow rope in his hand.

Later, my wife told me she came within a few hours of calling the Coast Guard. I never got a call from anyone associated with the duck hunter's shack, nor from Alaska State Department of Fish and Game.

What did I take away from all of this? Plenty. Number one, Cook Inlet is no place for boats 14-feet or less, especially old boats. Weather can change quickly, even in the dead of summer. Know the tide table for every hour you are on or near the water. Take twice as much gas as you think you'll use. Tie your fish securely to the gunwale with a stout cord.

The old wood boat wasn't repaired and never touched water again. Despite years of hard use, it had served Dad, the person who had sold it to him and me very well, holding up until the powerful tides of Cook Inlet claimed another victim. The runabout sets in my backyard, awaiting a new engine and minor body repairs.

Despite our problems and several close calls, this salmon-bust has to be included as one of my most trying and dangerous experiences. For how else would my son and I have recalled so much of what happened almost thirty years ago?