



D.B. Pleschner

FRANCES SAMUELSON

Living the Alaska Dream

Above: Frances Samuelson fishes the bar for spring run Copper River reds.
Right: Frances Samuelson tends her nets on the Copper River Flats.

With 50 years of fishing experience in her family, Frances Samuelson follows tradition, gillnetting salmon on Prince William Sound.



D.B. Pleschner

BY D.B. PLESCHNER

“Beautiful day for making money!” An anonymous voice crackles over the radio at 5:00 AM, the first day of the 1986 drift gillnet salmon season on the Copper River flats. A salmon-colored sky frames jagged, snow-clad peaks and glaciers stretching as far as the eye can see across the northern rim of the Gulf of Alaska. Ahead, bowpickers line up like an army of ants in the Egg Island anchorage, waiting for the 6:00 AM opening.

Holed up at Point Whitshed since midnight, waiting for the incoming tide, Frances Samuelson cautiously navigates the unmarked channel inside the barrier islands that separate the Gulf from the mainland on the Copper River Delta, heading for Egg Island. Radical tides, shallow water, heavy wind and, at times, huge ocean swells combine forces to make the flats the most unpredictable, most dangerous fishing grounds in Alaska. “Fishermen die with cruel regularity on the sandbars lining the coast from Cordova to Cape St. Elias,” newspapers hasten to report every time another boat is lost. Frances knows the dangers; following in her parents’ footsteps, she has fished here for most of her life.

Strong, big-boned, quiet-spoken, with deadpan wit and soft brown hair that glints auburn in the sunlight, Frances fits the image of Alaska. She was native-born and raised. She began drift gillnetting really on her own at age 30, a few years after the last of her three daughters was born. She started in a 17-foot skiff powered by a 25-horse outboard, pulling net by hand. Two years later, about 10 years ago, she moved up to the *Sally B*, a twin-jet, 500-horsepower bowpicker dubbed “the great American thunder machine” by her nephew Ted, a highliner in the fleet. Frances later converted to outdrives, but to husband Martie, she’s still the “500-horse Swede.” Her daughters often crew in the summertime, but with the season opening May 12 and school still in session, Frances is fishing alone for a few weeks.

A westerly wind is blowing this dawn. The *Sally B*’s fire-engine-red bow roller tosses spray as Frances cuts a turn, scoping out her first fishing hole. “That much wind this early,” she notes, glad to stay inside the bar near Egg Island channel and try a little king fishing. Besides, the run typically starts at the west end of the flats and moves east.

“You play Russian roulette the first of the season, deciding whether to fish king gear (about 9-inch mesh) or red gear (5¼-inch mesh) that can catch kings,” Frances says, having opted for the latter. “Kings tend to catch easier in the gear, fishing inside,” she explains. “Your net isn’t completely laid out, set in the channels, and kings tend to roll up. That doesn’t happen so much outside, with gear more stretched out.”

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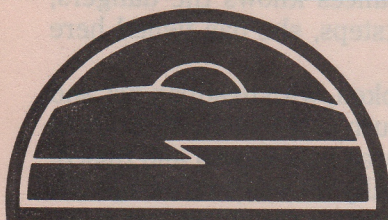
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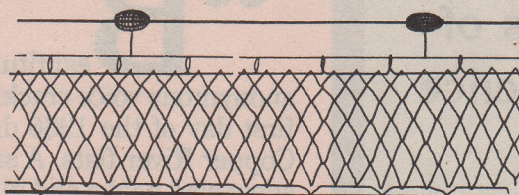


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FRANCES SAMUELSON'S DRIFT NET SALMON GEAR FOR REDS

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 etc.)

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SILVER (COHO) GEAR—@ $6\frac{1}{4}$ " MESH, MAX. 60 MESHES DEPTH ON FLATS—
 MAX. 150 FA. LENGTH

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 LENGTH

SEASONAL CATCH: SPRING—REDS & KINGS @ COPPER RIVER FLATS
 SUMMER—REDS, THEN HUMPIES & DOGS @ COGHILL
 FALL—SILVERS @ COPPER RIVER FLATS

At 5:55 AM she ambles out on deck to ready her net for the first set. A few boats idle within view, but most of the fleet—534 permits in this limited-entry fishery—already have run outside or down the line, seemingly swallowed up in the Delta's 80-mile expanse. Nonetheless, a few minutes after 6:00, hundreds of boats each trail 150 fathoms of net laid in C-hook configuration, a patchwork across the outgoing tide, and fishermen collectively begin the vigil, scanning over 60 miles of bobbing cork lines, eager for the first sign of fish.

The spring Copper River run is famous for reds, with their high oil content, the number one salmon in the Japanese market. Opening grounds prices in 1986 are lower than pre-season rumor, however: \$1.30 a pound for

reds, \$1.50 for kings. Another rumor holds that salmon haven't yet hit the flats. Set after set, move after move, through low water and flood tide, inside and outside the bars, Frances catches a dearth of fish. By noon the wind picks up and boats begin heading home, long before the end of the 24-hour fishing period. "How ya doin', buddy?" asks a voice on the radio. "Starvin' with the rest of you," comes the reply. By all accounts, it's a slow opening, time to test mechanics, shake out gear, and hope fishing picks up.

A 36-hour opening is set for the following Monday. Frances spends the week mending net, hanging gear for other fishermen, with whom she shares respect, camaraderie, no sense of competition. "I was born and raised fishing," she says, acknowledging a

lifetime of shared experiences. And in lively dinner-table discussion, she and her mother Doris, one of the first white fisherwomen on Prince William Sound, talk about the old days, fishing salmon.

Alaska was a dream to young Doris Anderson, living outside Tacoma, Washington, in 1933, in the middle of the Depression, earning \$1 a week plus room and board doing housework. When she found she could choke herring for \$30 a month guaranteed, with free fare, food, and housing, it was a dream come true. She came by steamship to work from May until October in a herring reduction plant, where she cleaned and cross-layered quality fish in barrels and threw bad fish, along with guts and roe, into a slot for reduction into meal and oil. In 1935 she married a herring boss and moved permanently to Alaska.

In 1941 she changed husbands and fisheries, switching from herring to salmon. Her new husband, Frances' father, trapped in winter and fished salmon in summer on a 29-foot double-ender Bristol Bay sailboat. He began fishing commercially during World War II.

"Women weren't allowed on the flats in 1942," Doris recalls. "It was too dangerous. We had blackouts every night." Otherwise, Doris fished alongside her husband, although she took a few years' leave on the flats after Frances was born. The Andersons also set nets, one end tied to shore, at Eshamy, in western Prince William Sound, camping there all summer to catch mainly reds.

For all their net fishing, they used heavy linen gear, about the same mesh size as today, with Spanish corks and real leads on the lead line. "We had no outboards, no reels," Doris says, blue eyes twinkling merrily. "The nets were all hand-pulled. Every weekend we would haul out, mend, and bluestone the gear in a 1,000-gallon tank. Nets soaked overnight. It

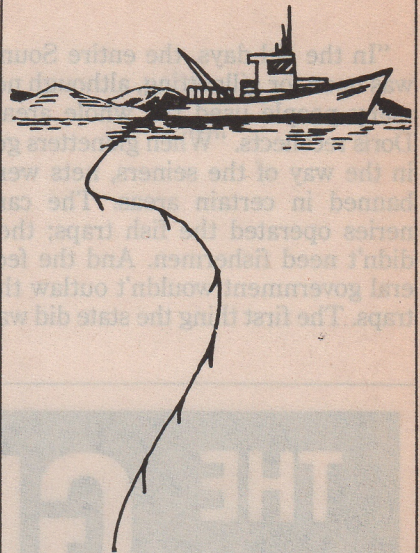
was hard work!"

"That's when I learned to mend net," Frances puts in. "Dad started me mending all the one-bar holes." She was about six at the time. "Frances always wanted to fish 'Just like Dad,'" Doris chuckles.

Doris returned to the flats, daughter in tow, when Frances was five. When she was 12, the family moved to Cordova, closer to the grounds. "Before the earthquake in 1964," Doris adds, reminiscing, "all the fishing was done inside the bars. We could anchor in the sloughs at high tide, when we weren't fishing, and mend gear on the grass and watch the birds." The Andersons also hid in the sloughs when the wind blew hard—rising unexpectedly to gust 80 knots. And fishing with none of the modern conveniences, they used an oar as a depth finder. To pick fish, they left the net set and rowed its length in a skiff.

"Alaska was still a territory, and the federal government managed the seasons," Doris continues. "To open or close a season, the canneries had to go to a federal agent who sent a telegram to Washington, D.C. Sometimes the run was over by the time word got back." In the early days, the Prince William Sound salmon fishery ebbed and flowed at the whim of the canneries, moving through several distinct periods following Alaska's purchase in 1867.

The first cannery in the region was built at Eyak, near Cordova, in 1889. From 1889 to 1915, reds were the preferred fish, followed by king and silver salmon, and the major fishery took place along the Copper River Delta, where these fish were abundant. From 1915 through 1959, 10 canneries operated throughout the Sound, and the federal government managed the salmon resource. Pink and chum fisheries developed with the advent of purse seines and fish traps, floating or pile driven, deploying nets from shore to lead fish into big catch pots.



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"In the old days, the entire Sound was open for gillnetting, although not many people used the whole area," Doris recalls. "When gillnetters got in the way of the seiners, nets were banned in certain areas. The canneries operated the fish traps; they didn't need fishermen. And the federal government wouldn't outlaw the traps. The first thing the state did was

to eliminate fish traps." Notwithstanding federal management efforts, pink and chum stocks, then as now the dominant regional salmon harvest, had apparently declined to half their historic high levels by 1960, the beginning of state management. In the third phase of the fishery, 1960-1971, the state adopted escapement goals and the resource

began to recover—until the 1964 earthquake.

Measuring 8.5 on the Richter scale, the Good Friday quake played havoc with the nearshore environment. Land shifted seaward as much as 64 feet, subsiding as much as eight feet, uplifting as high as 38 feet. The Copper River Delta rose about six feet. "The flats used to have six more feet of water," Frances remarks. "My mother never fished as far from shore as I do, even when I fish inside the bars."

Beginning in 1971, the fourth and current period of the fishery, the state entered a new era of aggressive salmon management. The Legislature created the Fisheries Rehabilitation, Enhancement and Development Division with ADF&G in 1971; in 1973 came the Limited Entry Law, with the first permits issued in 1975. (In 1985, the average value of a Prince William Sound drift gillnet permit was \$55,679.) And 1974 saw the formation of two hatchery corporations in Prince William Sound—PWSAC and NERKA, Inc.—thanks to the Private Non-profit Hatchery Statutes.

"Salmon management has improved," Doris agrees. More fish are available, and ex-vessel value has increased. Furthermore, markets have changed. Although four of the regional salmon processors still maintain canning lines, in 1985 more than two thirds of the total statewide salmon catch went to fresh and frozen markets.

Indeed, the fishery has changed; yet it remains the same in many ways. When Frances was young, her family's fishing season began on the flats, moved to Eshamy for the summer, then returned to the flats in fall for silvers. Today, Frances begins on the flats, fishing variable openings for reds and kings. In late June she runs the *Sally B* to Coghill, in the northwest reaches of the Sound, for the summer, fishing weekdays first for reds, then for dogs and humpies. Following tradition, she returns to the Copper and

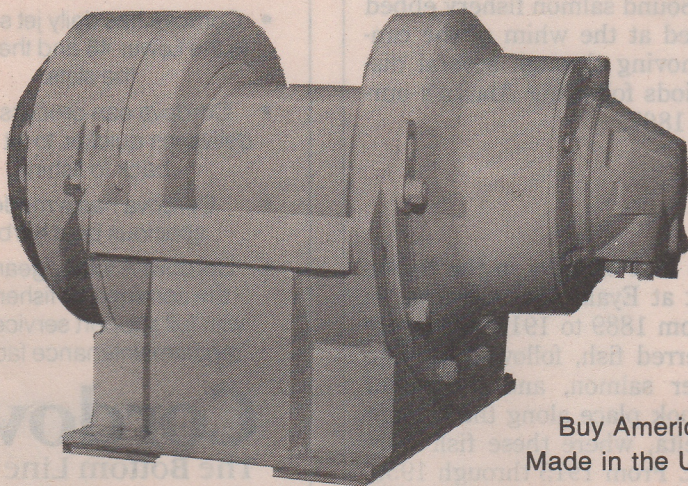
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Bering Rivers in fall to net silvers on a typical Monday-through-Thursday fishing schedule.

Then, too, historic salmon catches ran in boom-and-bust cycles, for reasons not fully understood. They still do, although hatcheries hold promise to even the curve. And for six months a year, fishermen still follow the same pattern: Set before low water and fish through flood tide, grabbing precious shut-eye on the ebb.

"On the Sound, fishing revolves around flood tides. Salmon are most active in big tide swings," Frances explains from her perch behind the wheel of the *Sally B*. It's approaching 6:00 PM on Thursday, May 22; low tide—a 1.5-foot holdup—is at 6:55. After another frustrating fishing period earlier in the week, the third Copper River opening is about to begin.

A well-developed low hangs in the Gulf as boats pile up outside Pete Dahl, a popular fishing spot. During ebb tide in the spring Copper River run, salmon congregate in eddies outside the bars and islands; in low water slack they surface and move. Low water and flood, fish start pushing into the beach, seeming to pile up and come inside in concentration. On a hunch, Frances decides to stay inside and fish the Egg Island channel.

"Fish run in the channels, on the beach, in the deep holes," she enumerates. "Low water sets are best. The best time to catch is low slack tide: Fish wash into the channels. In slack water, either high or low, fish move more." Talk stops on the dot of 6:00. Methodically, Frances heaves out the marker buoy and, motoring in reverse, lays the net in a wide arc across the direction of the tide. With power off, the *Sally B* drifts gently, its white-corked umbilical bobbing on the surface, the net suspended underneath.

"You try to set across deep holes for kings," Frances picks up the thread of conversation. "Reds are all over, when they're here. Silvers are a different



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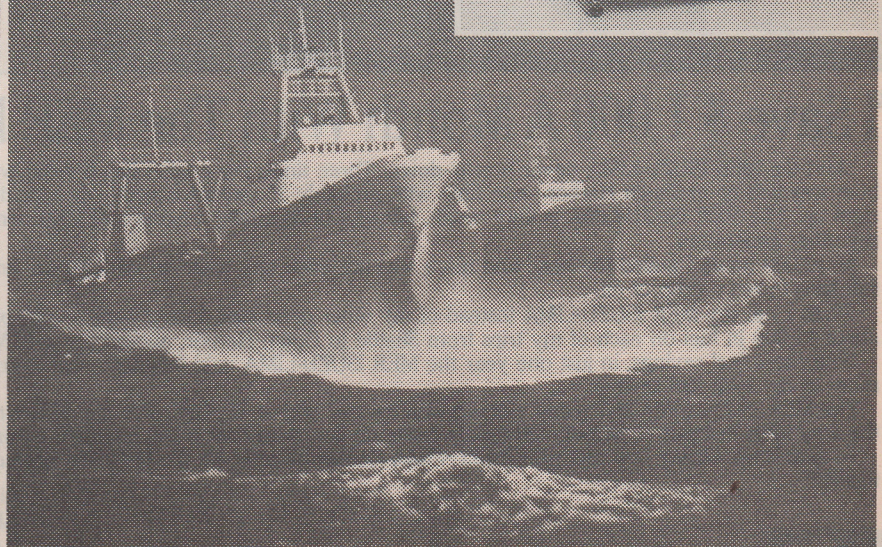
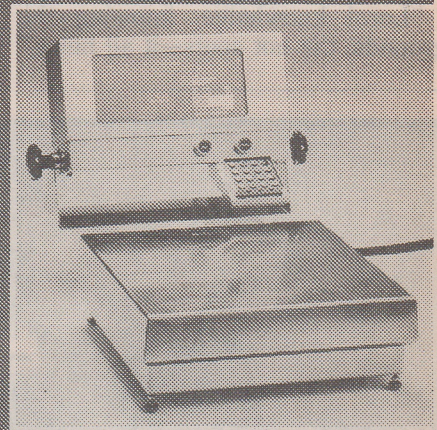
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kind of fish. You seldom catch silvers in daylight; speculation is they can see the net. For silvers you want low tide and pitch black night, and you try to set closer to shore.

"You try to get as close to shore as possible for all salmon. They do seem to follow the beach. That's why fishermen willing to risk their boats and necks in the breakers often get more fish." She smiles, perhaps thinking of her nephew Ted's habitually shredded nets, which she usually winds up patching. And the inevitable—fishermen who set tight to the beach in ebb tide and forget the time, going high-and-dry until the tide changes. Wrecked outdrives, rolled boats—and worse—are also part of the gamble. Considering the time, gear, and money lost, not to mention skin, Frances would rather play it safe.

"Local knowledge, knowing the grounds, the hot spots—it all helps,"

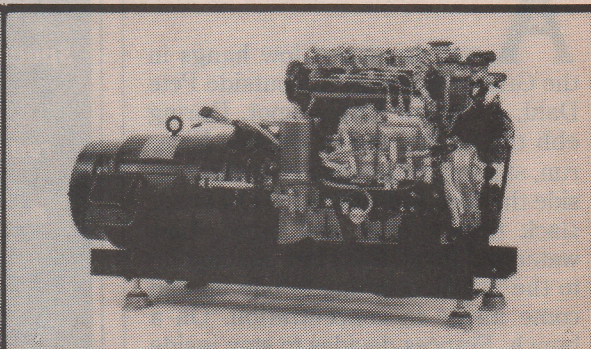
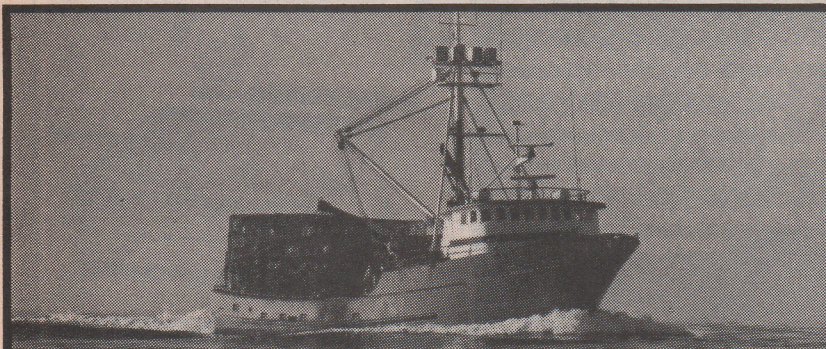
she adds, reaching for a box of raisins. "Coghill," she changes tack, "is like setting on a postage stamp surrounded by ocean. You set across current, but there are no channels. There are points and beaches, holes where fish like to go, though. It's like fishing outside on the flats, only it's much safer—all inside waters and no ocean swell.

"Most reds run the Coghill River. Humpies go to any of the streams feeding Port Wells. Humpies lay in closer to the beach, to an extent. And you fish smaller mesh (about 5 inches), deeper gear—about 100 meshes deep compared to 60 for reds. For dogs and silvers (6¼-inch mesh net), it's personal choice how deep the gear is—60 to 90 meshes. . . ."

Suddenly, the cork line twitches,

then begins to dance in earnest. Grinning, Frances reels in the catch: a few reds and half a dozen big kings. Two roll out of the net before she can brail them aboard. The tide is ripping inside on the flood; the drift is clocked at better than one knot, according to radio talk. Frances runs outside and down the line to try her luck, but fishing is slow. There's a minus 3.4 low water at 7:43 AM. The morning sky is clear. The wind is supposed to blow 40 knots northeast by afternoon, but it's flat glassy inside now. Dropping her net in the deepest hole in Egg Island channel, Frances hits another slug of kings. Delivering to a tender, she finds the price for kings is down a dime a pound, but reds have gone up twenty cents.

Heading outside for the morning flood tide, Frances sets in about 60 feet of water. An hour later, over 20 reds lay in the fish box. She works the



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same area for a few more hour-long sets, but the catch drops off. Radio chatter is incessant, and except for a few good scores, the lament is the same. Against background country music, one fisherman drawls, "Faster horses, younger women, older whiskey, and more fishes." After a record 1985 salmon season in Prince William Sound, it's the song of the flats in 1986.

With sets yielding only a few fish by 3:00 PM, and with swell and wind on the rise, Frances hightails it inside. The price for reds hits \$1.75 a pound as she cashes out, unloading a few hundred pounds of fish. The fishing period ends at 6:00 PM; low water is at 7:40. A few boats sit high and dry, waiting for the tide change. On the radio, talk is that Softuk and Strawberry bars have closed out. Outside, the swell is over 20 feet. Fishing until the last minute, about 30 boats buck it outside Strawberry, waiting for high tide. A boat flipped in the breakers at Softuk. One fisherman is trapped in the hold; the other is swept to sea. (Both are later rescued with no major injuries.)

Hearing the news, Frances is glad she ran inside when she did. Intuition? "Or plain chicken," she deadpans. "I'm not a foul-weather fisherman. I'll never be a rich fisherman, but if I can pay the bills. . . ." She trails off, leaving unsaid what everyone knows: She fishes because she likes it.

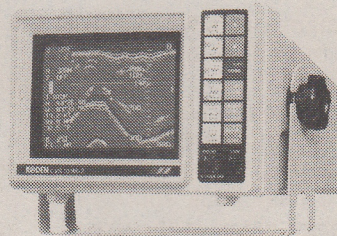
She prefers fishing Coghill to the flats. "You can still get in trouble, but Coghill's more predictable," she says. In a few weeks she'll make the run north. She'll fish Coghill all summer, taking her youngest daughter along as crew. In fall, she'll return to the flats for silvers. Then there's next season. After 50 years on the Sound, tradition continues. **PF**

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