THE 1951 BRISTOL BAY SALMON STRIKE

ISOLATION, INDEPENDENCE AND ILLUSION IN THE LAST FRONTIER

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THE 1951 BRISTOL BAY SALMON STRIKE

ISOLATION, INDEPENDENCE AND ILLUSION IN THE LAST FRONTIER

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Abstract

Many people consider Alaska the last frontier, isolated and independent from the rest of the United States. An analysis of the salmon industry in Bristol Bay and a strike that occurred in 1951 cast doubt upon this belief.

The labor dispute and preceding events paint a vivid picture of a population clearly dependent on a fishing industry controlled by absentee owners who manipulated events from Seattle and San Francisco. The strikers included Natives and Non-Natives who joined together to fight the powerful cannery owners and west coast unions who sought to expand their membership. Some of these unions had suspected communist members, and Alaska joined in the paranoia that seized the rest of the United States in their cold war fear of Communism. The strike and the actions of participants in the strike illustrate how Alaska's isolation and independence was but an illusion in the last frontier.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

"Alaska, the Last Frontier" evokes quaint images: a miner alongside a frigid stream; a family of settlers working a Matanuska Valley homestead; a trapper in his cabin on the edge of the wilderness. These visions imply independent, hard working souls eking out meager but satisfying livings in a remote land isolated from the rest of the nation, the government and outside control. But history does not support this notion of Alaska and Alaskans living an isolated and independent lifestyle. One need only examine the history of the salmon industry in Alaska to dispel this myth. A specific example that clearly demonstrates the ever-growing dependence on outsiders and outside events occurred during the summer of 1951 in the Bristol Bay salmon industry.

The strike occurred after decades of domination by absentee cannery owners from Seattle and San Francisco. The canneries historically hired and transported fishermen and cannery workers from the west coast to Alaska every year to help them reap the profitable harvest. Beginning in the 1930’s many of the outside fishermen chose to settle in Bristol Bay, and many married local Yup’ik women. By the 1940’s, the Native and non-Native resident population that worked in the Bristol Bay fishing industry had grown. They began to resent the preferential treatment of non-residents by the outside cannery owners. Encouraged by federal legislation that supported the formation of unions, they organized and demanded more local control, better conditions and fair wages. To make their voices heard, workers in the salmon industry sought strong union
affiliation. Unions from outside swarmed to Alaska's fishing grounds, seeing this as an opportunity to strengthen their forces with increased membership.

During this time, many Americans believed that some of these unions harbored Communists. Despite the geographical distances and seeming isolation, Alaskans joined the anti-communist hysteria, and politicians and priests tried to keep certain unions suspected of communist influences out of Alaska and out of Bristol Bay. They encouraged the Yup'ik cannery workers and resident fishermen to unite and fight together for better conditions and wages against the outsiders, the Alaska Canned Salmon industry and the well organized industrial unions.

This struggle for better wages, working conditions, and local control peaked for eight days in the summer of 1951. In June of that year, as the frenzied salmon season approached, resident union fishermen and cannery workers in Alaska's Bristol Bay joined together in a strike to protest low wages and poor living conditions and rallied against nonresident union members working in the Alaska canned salmon industry. The "Bristol Bay Controversy", so dubbed by the local Jesuit priests involved in the strike, united local workers against workers from outside Alaska, against an invading industrial union accused of harboring communists and against the large, well established canneries from the west coast of the United States.
Western Frontier Literature

The strike and events preceding the strike contradict the notion that Alaska was insulated from outside influences and that Alaskans lived an independent frontier lifestyle. Alaskans depended on cannery owners from Seattle and San Francisco. They sought union affiliation and joined in the fight against communism like the rest of the nation. The strike shows that despite its distance from the rest of the United States, Alaska in the 1950's was no frontier.

The frontier is a long held stereotype of the west first advanced by Fredrick Jackson Turner (1861-1932). Fredrick Turner was born in Portage, Wisconsin, in 1861. His father, a journalist by trade and local historian by avocation, inspired Turner's interest in history. After his graduation from the University of Wisconsin in 1884, Turner decided to become a professional historian and received his Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University in 1890. He served as a teacher and scholar at the University of Wisconsin and later joined Harvard's faculty. One of his most noteworthy achievements occurred when he gave a speech in 1893 to the American Historical Association entitled “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” His words, later published in a collection of his essays, The Frontier in American History (1920), espoused the theory that the Western frontier, rather than European influences, played the major role in the creation of American democracy.1 Turner described the frontier as an evolutionary process that Americans went through. This process occurred when white settlers who lived on
sparsely populated lands (less than two persons per square mile) faced many challenges, including how to produce food, how to protect themselves, and how to create a life in a land previously inhabited only by ignorant, unsophisticated Natives. Turner's description of the frontier "begins with the Indian and the hunter; it goes on with the disintegration of savagery by the entrance of the trader... the pastoral stage in ranch life; the exploitation of the soil by the raising of unrotated crops of corn and wheat in sparsely settled farm communities; the intensive culture of the denser farm settlement; and finally the manufacturing organization with the city and the factory system."2

According to Turner, life on the frontier made people self-reliant and independent and was typified by legendary characters such as Paul Bunyan, Davy Crockett and Kit Carson. The literature influenced by Turner rarely discusses the Native inhabitants, women or other minorities in the development of the frontier. Common characteristics of the frontier include ranchers, cowboys, Indians, aridity, mountains, wide-open spaces, mining, territorial government, and vast tracts of lands under federal control. Turner concluded that the frontier had ended in 1890 when the census reported that no place had fewer than 2 persons per square mile.

Although almost totally ignored at the time. Turner's 1893 lecture eventually gained such wide distribution and influence that a contemporary scholar has called it "the single  


most influential piece of writing in the history of American history." Many Americans, who tended to glorify the western movement and admire those who moved west, thought his writings appropriately characterized the true character of the land and its significance to the American soul. His philosophy about the western culture and what it meant as an evolutionary process for the rest of the United States dominated western literature for at least a century.

Alaskan Frontier Literature

While Turner did not reflect on Alaska as a frontier, many authors thought that, on the whole, his definition of the frontier fit Alaska. They noted particular similarities regarding the low population density, the lack of private land ownership and the geographical distance from the eastern power center.

According to Peter Coates, the cliche, "Alaska, the last frontier," first appeared in the literature in the first decade of the 1900's. Boosters and promoters of Alaska soon adopted the epithet to glorify Alaska in attempts to attract tourists, businesses and outside funding for projects that would develop an infrastructure in the territory. In Alaska, the northern equivalent of the frontier cowboy was the Alaskan sourdough. The sourdough, a crusty cabin dweller, was physically tough, ate wild game and held contempt for the federal government. This typifies many of the same stereotypical


frontier characteristics of independence and self-reliance in a distant land dissociated from the rest of the world that Turner wrote about.

Walter Prescott Web disagreed that Alaska should have frontier status. He believed that Alaska’s cold, harsh climate differed too greatly from the hot, dry, western frontier described by Turner. Other writers and historians disagreed and took exception to the fact that Turner did not include Alaska in his discussion of the frontier. Robert A. Frederick, a history professor at the Alaska Methodist University in Anchorage, wrote that while the same characteristics of the western frontier, such as farming and hot, arid conditions do not always fit the north, many other qualities of Alaska did fit the frontier image. He felt strongly that Alaska deserved recognition as a frontier. Historian Morgan P. Sherwood also thought Turner erred in not classifying Alaska as a frontier. He wrote, “The American Frontier had not of course vanished: the coast of all Alaska was still a frontier.” In 1914, Turner corrected his omission of Alaska and included it in his frontier thesis.

Many writers supported and fed the concept of the Alaska frontier through their writings about Alaska. Literature expounding Alaska’s virtues and hardships and glorifying the Alaska frontier concept began to multiply shortly after the American


purchase. During the time of Canada’s Klondike gold rush in 1898, as thousands of gold seekers traveled through Alaska on their way to find their fortunes, numerous books sprang up about the frozen wilderness. These books helped to perpetuate the image of Alaska as a land sparsely populated by happy Eskimos, Indians and hardy pioneers. Although many of these books actually concerned the Canadian gold rush near Dawson, Yukon Territory, many Americans did not know or understand the difference and associated the writings with Alaska. Early books about Alaska included The New Eldorado, A Summer Journey to Alaska, by Maturin Ballou written in 1889. The Truth about Alaska, the Land of the Midnight Sun written in 1901 by Eugene McElwain, Thirteen Years of Travel and Experience in Alaska, 1890, by W.H. Pierce. Alaska, Its Southern Coast and the Sitkan Archiplelago, 1885, by Eliza Scidmore. These books and others tended to perpetuate the image of Alaska as a land populated by independent, frontier settlers.

Later, Alaskans wrote earnestly of Alaska’s riches in an attempt to gain statehood status. Ernest Gruening, who served as Alaska’s Territorial Governor from 1939 to 1953, wrote several books that glorified Alaska’s natural resources, including fisheries. In a speech at the Alaska Constitutional Convention he described Alaska as a rich frontier that was being kept in a colonial status and concluded that achieving statehood could improve the management of resources, especially salmon.
In recent years, many western historians have challenged conventional frontier concepts. Among the historians who have lead the way in the development of the new western history are Patricia Limerick, William Cronon and William G. Robbins and many others. These historians dissected and rejected many of the precepts forwarded by Turner and his followers, including the myths of the frontier as isolated and of the settlers as independent. The new historians have denied everything from his basic assumptions to the small details of his argument. Many have long since discarded Turner's assumption that the frontier is the key to American history as a whole; they point instead to the critical influence of such factors as slavery and the Civil War, immigration, and the development of industrial capitalism.

New western historians say that Americans still persist in subscribing to Turner's western theories in spite of overwhelming evidence that shows many of aspects of his theories, including that of an isolated land peopled by independent residents, to be false. Patricia Limerick suggests that this relentless belief is not unlike cultural beliefs still held by American Indians whose value and belief systems continue to remain long after economic and political structures supporting these beliefs are gone.8

The new western historians also complain about Turner’s discussions regarding an independent west free from outside control. In fact, they say, the territorial governments of the west depended very heavily on federal subsidies. One very significant federal subsidy concerned the control of the Indians. The importation of an army to fight the Indians provided economic opportunities to the settlers by way of constructing many public buildings and housing and feeding soldiers. Throughout the west, the new western historians argue, rather than being self-reliant, many of the settlers depended on wages from corporations or governments.

Writings by new western historians also accuse Turner of ignoring the role that Native inhabitants, women and people of non-European background played in the settlement of the west. They reject Turner’s supposition that prior to the arrival of the settlers, the Natives had never been exposed to western ways. In fact, the Natives in the west and certainly in Alaska had experience with earlier invaders. The Indian and non-Indian world of the west was much more complex and its inhabitants more diverse than Turner implied.

Historians writing about Alaska have added to recent skepticism of Alaska as a western frontier. They have questioned, in particular, the assertion of an isolated and independent Alaskan culture. For example, Stephen Haycox, a professor at the University of Alaska, Anchorage, has written that while many frontier historians portray Alaskan settlers as self-reliant, very few early non-Native settlers led self-sufficient lives.

Likewise, few settlers actually lived off the land. Most Alaskans worked for wages, lived in towns, depended on the same sorts of things town dwellers did in other parts of the nation. They also relied heavily on regular steamer traffic from Seattle. 10 Haycox writes that "much of its [Alaska's] history takes on a truer meaning if viewed as part of a larger whole than if seen as separate from its non-native cultural roots, and from the national and international communities which undeniably affect and influence it."11

William Cronon also writes about Alaskan reliance on the outside world in an article about Alaska's Kennecott Mine in the Copper River region, once the greatest copper-milling center in the world. He describes how families who lived at the mine worked for wages and relied not on local fish and game but instead worked for cash to buy typical American food that came from the west coast of the United States and beyond. This is certainly true in the fishing industry where workers labored for wages just as other laborers did across the nation.

James R. Gibson enriches the view of the new western history by describing the role that Natives played in the settlement of Alaska. In one article, he writes about the Russian dependence on the Alaskan Natives and says that the Russians depended on the Natives for food, technology, labor, companionship and sex.12 This contradicts the notion that


Natives who met the first Americans were somehow pure and uninfluenced by western ways as implied in the Turner's concept of frontier. Many anthropologists describe intricate trading networks among the Natives in Alaska that show that far from living isolated lifestyles, they traded goods with early whale hunters and explorers and obtained western goods from Europe through Siberian trade.

Former Anchorage Daily News Editor Howard Weaver also questioned the frontier myth of Alaska. He described the myth of the rugged prospector as an archetypal romantic figure, by definition a hardy loner who roamed the canyons and creek beds in constant search of wealth to wrestle from nature's grasp. He recognized that this figure, while vital still in the minds and hearts of many Alaskans, had a thin basis in reality. He lamented that while Alaskans may describe their identity as rugged and independent, in fact they rely heavily on federal dollars and outside interests.

Further rejection of the myth of Alaska as isolated and independent, comes in the form of a 1977 book co-authored by John Hanrahan and Peter Gruenstein called the Lost Frontier. The Marketing of Alaska. In it, they described how Alaska, while still holding the romantic frontier image in the minds of most Americans, has many conflicts that point to outside influence from oil companies, fishing tycoons and big developers. All of these conflicts point toward a society that is far from independent and isolated.

13 Howard Weaver. 1995 Address to the Annual Conference of the Alaska Historical Society (Juneau, October 6, 1995).

This paper examines how Turner's frontier concept of a land and culture isolated and independent from the rest of the United States does not apply to Alaska. It seeks to do this by following events before and during a large-scale salmon strike in which outside forces played a significant role. The 1951 Bristol Bay strike illustrates the dependence people within Alaska had upon industry, people and events that occurred outside the territory. By tracing the history of the salmon industry in Bristol Bay and the salmon strike in 1951 it becomes clear that independence and isolation in the "Last Frontier" is but an illusion.
CHAPTER TWO

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

_Yup'ik Fishing_

The Bristol Bay region of Alaska in which the strike took place historically had been one of the most highly developed aboriginal fishing complexes on the continent. Bristol Bay, located just north of the Alaska Peninsula at the easternmost edge of the Bering Sea, has huge tides, twenty feet or more, resulting in many muddy inshore areas. In contrast, clear gravel-bottomed lakes and winding streams surround the bay. These pristine lakes and streams provide rich breeding grounds for all five Pacific Salmon species. In terms of unit value, the salmon with the highest per unit value is the sockeye followed by chinook, coho, pink and chum. The enormous and valuable sockeye, or red, salmon run in the Bay lasts about two weeks. The fish generally arrive in the last week of June and peak about July fourth. By mid-July the run is essentially over.

The local indigenous population of Yup'ik Eskimos relied heavily on salmon. They lived a relatively sedentary life with predictable seasonal movements, always returning to the rivers in early summer to fish for salmon. Salmon consumption during the aboriginal era in Alaska’s Central region averaged about 487 pounds per-capita or


about six million pounds a year. They often sun-dried or smoked the salmon and ate the preserved salmon throughout the winter. They also relied on the dried salmon as a prime food for sled dogs, which many used for transportation in the winter.

The Yup’iks developed diverse fishing techniques for catching the different varieties of salmon. These fishing techniques included hooking, spearing, trapping, dipping, netting, and sometimes shooting with bow and arrow. These techniques proved highly efficient. The basic fishing techniques varied little from those employed later in the highly developed commercial salmon fishery. When salmon resources became depleted, Natives moved, giving recovery a chance.

In about 1818 the first Caucasians, Russians, arrived at Nushagak Bay. The Russians, employees of the Russian American Company, traveled from Kodiak Island with the intent to explore Bristol Bay and search for a new source of furs. The Russian-American Company set up a fort at the mouth of the Nushagak River where they traded western items like iron kettles, copper, knives, needles, combs, mirrors, blankets, cloth, tea, tobacco and beads with the local Eskimos for furs, such as seal, beavers and otter.


The Russian Americans also traded in Native products from other parts of Alaska including whale parts from Kodiak, processed sea lion skins from coastal areas and caribou skins from the interior.  

Intercontinental trade was not new to the Native inhabitants of Alaska. Extensive trade took place pre-contact between the Natives in northwest Alaska and Siberia. Trade was linked to aboriginal Siberian trade routes with China and Japan. Trade items from Asia and Europe, and later Russia, reached Alaska well before the Russians arrived on the coast of Alaska. Kotzebue, north of Bristol Bay, held annual trade fairs with an estimated 1,400 participants including traders from Bristol Bay. They traded goods from Siberia and coastal products for inland goods like caribou hides and other skins. The Natives in Bristol Bay traded regularly with the Tanaina Indians of Cook Inlet.  

The Russians encouraged the Eskimos of the Nushagak area, like those in other parts of Alaska, to trade with and become indebted to the company store. Between 1818 and 1840 the exposure of the Eskimos to the fur trade in Alaska became widespread. As a result, Natives began to develop a dependence on European trade goods that soon became integrated into their life.

To facilitate trade, the Russians set up forts, or Redoubts, in Alaska to center their trading activities. In 1818 they established Alexandrovski Redoubt along the Nushagak River, about eight miles below its mouth. The fort, which survived as a major trading post for over twenty-five years, soon attracted Eskimo traders who exchanged furs for western goods with the Russians at the fort. These Eskimos also traveled to the interior, obtained furs from the Indians there and brought them back to trade at the fort, thus acting as middlemen for the interior Indians.24

The Russian traders also began to marry the local Yup’iks. The offspring, known as Creoles, helped to foster trade and brought about additional cultural changes among the Yup’iks.25 The Russian traders put one such “mixed Russian and aboriginal American,” Fedor Kolmakov, in charge of Alexandrovski Redoubt. He helped to spread the Russian-American Company’s influence in the area of the post by encouraging trade and teaching Russian ways to the local resident population.26

Other examples of the changes in the Native Yup’ik culture that resulted from exposure to the Russians included a change in diet, not only by the introduction of tea, coffee, sugar, salt and baking products, but also by the introduction of different cooking and food preservation methods, such as salting of fish. Household utensils such as


metal teakettles and pots became standard equipment in a Yup’ik kitchen.27

The Russians had only minimal interest in salmon as an industry, although some accounts say that the Russian trader Grigory Ivanovich Shelikhov provided dried salmon for the workers of his fur-trading company in Kodiak. The early census reports of the era also describe Russian salteries located in Kodiak, Alaska that processed and shipped dozens of barrels of salted fish back to St. Petersburg. Local fur traders used salmon for their own personal consumption. Some Russian-American Company records indicate the Russians intended to establish a commercial fishery at Alexandrovski in 1866, just prior to the purchase of Alaska by the Americans.28

Commercial Fishing

Not until after the United States bought Alaska in 1867 did the shift to commercial exploitation of the Alaska salmon take place. Klawock and Old Sitka in Southeast Alaska became the location for the first canneries in Alaska.29 Both canneries, built in 1878, processed mostly pink salmon that is the most abundant of the five species of


Salmon in Southeast Alaska. The Old Sitka plant only operated for two years and then moved to Cook Inlet. The cannery at Klawock had begun in 1875 as a saltery which produced about 830 barrels of salmon annually. The owner, an Indian trader named George Hamilton, sold the saltery to North Pacific Packing and Trading Company. There followed several years of cannery build-up in southeast Alaska where the season lasted two to three months.

The cannery business soon expanded to the rich salmon areas on the coast of south central Alaska. The Alaska Commercial Company established a small salted salmon business in the late 1800's at Nushagak Bay with annual exports to the west coast that reached between 800 and 1,200 barrels of salted fish. In 1883, the American schooner Neptune visited Nushagak Bay on a salting and prospecting trip. The Americans had, the year before, established successful canneries on Kodiak Island and along Cook Inlet. That summer, carpenters built the first cannery to operate along the Bering Sea, near the Eskimo village of Kanulik, north of the Alexandrovski Fort at Nushagak. They began operating in 1884. The Arctic Packing Company opened the Scandinavian Cannery near present day Dillingham, and in 1886 the Bristol Bay Canning Company constructed the Bradford Cannery at Kanakanak. Between 1888 and 1889 the cannery industry exploded.


throughout southwestern and southeastern Alaska.32

The Bureau of Fisheries records indicated that in 1881 the packers in Alaska canned 8,977 cases of salmon. in 1884 this number had risen to 60,886, and by end of the 1880's the number of cans of salmon packed reached 714,196.33 The numbers of canneries also greatly increased during this time. In 1888, 17 canneries operated in Alaska. A year later, 37 canneries operated and by 1891, 45 canneries were in operation in Alaska.34

The overabundance of canneries affected salmon prices. In 1891, a deluge of canned salmon flooded the market and prices plummeted. This caused such great alarm among the Seattle and San Francisco based owners of the early Alaska canneries that they decided to consolidate to help stabilize the market and keep the industry profitable. Thirty-one of the forty-five canneries in Alaska merged to form the Alaska Packing Association with headquarters in San Francisco35. The association appointed trustees to dispose of the unsold salmon of that season's pack (365,000 cases). The Alaska Packing Association had planned to dismantle after they sold the fish. Instead, in 1892 the group changed its name to the Alaska Packers Association for the purpose of consolidating the 31 existing canneries to better regulate and control the industry. Only a few canneries


remained independent from the Association.36

This established the tendency of the Alaska salmon industry to concentrate ownership and control of canneries in the hands of a few large corporations from the west coast that could absorb the high costs of doing business in Alaska. Throughout Alaska but especially in Bristol Bay, the Alaska Packers soon became a formidable influence with a monopoly on fishery production for many decades. In Bristol Bay the Packers had a particular strong monopoly because of the high cost of business associated with its distance from the market. This tended to discourage independent cannery operations. One can note the extent of the Alaska Packer's control by the fact that the Alaska Packers Association processed at least half of the total fish output of Alaska, their opening quotations established market prices, and even the governors and special fisheries agents relied on their records.

The impact of the fishing industry upon the economy of the west coast of the United States went far beyond the profit associated directly with salmon caught and processed by the Alaska Packers Association and the independent canneries. West coast merchants profited by selling to the canneries vast quantities of supplies that they brought north to Alaska every year. Supplies included fishing gear, groceries and cannery equipment. In 1899, one author complained about the use of imported boxes stating, "In the preparation


of salmon an enormous quantity of boxes are used, but the sawmills of the Territory are not patronized: for the material is imported and the boxes are put together as they are needed, though they might be manufactured in the country of as good quality of timber at less cost than they are furnished under the present system."37 Thus, a wide variety of merchants and suppliers from Seattle and the west coast profited from the Alaskan salmon. Seattle and San Francisco also became the storage and marketing centers from which canned salmon was shipped by rail and water to American and overseas markets.

Labor in the Canneries

This proliferation of canneries created a tremendous demand for a dependable supply of seasonal labor. In southeast Alaska, the canneries encountered a higher Native population, less distant from the processing plants than in Bristol Bay. This brought about the practice by canneries in southeast Alaska to buy the majority of their fish from the Natives who worked directly for the canneries. To process the fish, the canneries in southeast initially sought local Natives to work in the canneries. Some of the canneries declared that they found the Native Americans desirable because they fed and housed themselves, which reduced the cost to the owners. Some companies also found they could recoup wages paid to Native families by supplying credit through company stores. Some canneries tried to attract Native American workers by providing medical care or schools near the canneries. Bringing Native Americans into a monetary economy through the canneries encouraged a dependency among Native Americans that greatly benefited the owners.

In 1869, O.B. Carlton, superintendent of the Sitka saltery declared. "Last season I employed American [i.e. white] labor, but found it to be expensive both in transportation and wages to make it pay. This year I employed Russians mostly, and find the expense about one-half of last season, but find them too indolent to employ to advantage. Next season I shall employ Indians altogether, except coopering, and I have no doubt but they can also be taught that trade. I found them willing and industrious.
and kind when properly treated... and they will work for less pay than American or
Russians."39 Jefferson F. Moser, a commander in the United States Navy and
investigator to the United States Fish Commission, described the Natives, as “neat,
clean and tidy, perform their work deftly, and receive $1 per day.”40

With the help of low wages, many canneries in southeast Alaska had huge profits. According to Stephen Langdon, the gross profits at the Klawock cannery in one year took care of the entire production costs for harvesting, processing and transporting as well as virtually all of the capital costs, estimated at about $50,000. This meant that after the first year of production, the canneries would have paid off the whole property including the cannery, sawmill, buildings, dwellings, wharves, tools, fixtures machinery, steamers, boats, seines, etc. allowing them to enjoy tremendous profit in the second year. This gross profit was aided by the fact that they paid low wages to the Indians. This helped earn the outside canneries millions of dollars. In 1879, white fishermen on the Columbia River earned fifty cents a salmon while Native fishermen in southeast Alaska earned only one to five cents per salmon. Natives in southeast Alaska likely understood the gross profits made by the canneries and the discrepancy between


wages. They began to protest the low wages by means of strikes.41

"If at the beginning of or during a season, the cannery should decline to accede to the demands of the Indian for increased wages, a strike is apt to result, causing the loss of a pack."42 The cannery owners in Southeast increased the daily wage to $1.50 and later $2.00/day amidst Native strikes and complaints. They had hoped that the reliance on wage labor created by employing women and children in the plants might discourage men from striking for higher fish prices.43 One cannery manager later went to piece-work to thwart further pressure for price increases.44

Further, as Moser said "one-half of the wage is paid in coin and the other half in store checks."45 Due to lack of competition the cannery store likely had high profits, and the coin spent in the cannery store did not go far. This also must have discouraged local participation by Natives in the early days of the cannery industry.

To prevent a total dependence on Native workers, many canners hired outsiders. The cannery owners rationalized this by saying they wanted "workers willing to give their

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employment at all times.” Many canneries generally deemed Native men unreliable and complained that they would quit work to hunt at a moment’s notice. In 1899, J.G. Brady, the Governor of Alaska at the time, wrote in his annual report to the Secretary of the Interior:

“When the fish are caught, they must be canned without delay, and to do this men who are trained and used to it are necessary. They [the canneries] cannot then undertake to deal with natives and others who have no training whatever and who have no compunction in breaking a contract, and leaving their work in the middle of the season.” (Report of the Governor of Alaska...1899:7).

The southeast and the Bristol Bay area differed in several ways. The southeast salmon season lasted up to three months, while the cannery season in Bristol Bay occurred in only about two weeks. With the longer season to catch the fish the canneries in southeast tended to be small and numerous. In Bristol Bay, the short season resulted in larger canneries and a substantial work force employed for a very limited period. Unlike the more populated southeast Alaska, Bristol Bay had a far-flung and limited population from which to draw a labor pool. Also, the Bristol Bay Natives needed to fish for the following winter in that same two-week period when the busy cannery season took place. The one to two dollars a day earned in the canneries could not make up for


the food lost if they did not fish in the short season. In southeast, with the longer salmon season, this was not as problematic.

Canneries owners and government officials noted the short and important subsistence season for salmon in Bristol Bay. Jefferson Moser, in his report to the U.S. Fish Commission in the early part of the century said, “After making sufficient wages to supply their personal wants and getting a few dollars ahead the desire for hunting or fishing seizes them and they are apt to leave when they are most wanted.”48 As Stephen Langdon points out, when they are most wanted is also likely at the peak of the salmon run when the need to fish is greatest. The Natives could only afford to work in the cannery during the slack fishing period.49 The low population and reluctance of the Natives to sacrifice their short profitable subsistence season contributed to the lack of Native hire in Bristol Bay, particularly amongst men.

While the canneries rarely employed Native men in Bristol Bay in those early years, they did hire some Native women and children. They believed the women had "immemorial instinct" in handling salmon, gained from generations of experience in preparing the fish.50 The Native women, the packers believed, had particularly good skills in the task of sliming the fish (removing the guts). Some canneries tried to attract


Native American women by providing medical care or schools near the canneries.

As the number of canneries expanded, even the owners of canneries in southeast Alaska realized that the local labor supply could no longer meet the needs of the expanding market. They also wanted to increase their profits by replacing their Native workers with other workers who worked more cheaply and did not strike for higher wages as the southeast Alaska Natives had done. They began to search elsewhere for willing employees and soon began to use Asian workers to fill their labor needs. The cannery owners particularly preferred Chinese men because they worked cheap without complaints and packed salmon at lightning speed. One cannery executive comparing resident Native labor to the imported Chinese workers said, “Chinese labor was more certain and easily controlled.” 51

Between 1890 and 1910 the total population of Alaska increased from 33,426 to 64,356 persons. In that same time period the Native population declined from 32,996 to 25,331.52 The main reason for this drastic decline in the Native population was due to measles and influenza that claimed many Native lives in 1900. The gold rush contributed in great part to the increase in non-Native population, and some disappointed gold seekers sought other employment and ended up in the salmon industry. As more non-Natives chose to settle in Alaska complaints about the canneries’ preference for outside


hire began to multiply. In 1913, one fisherman protested the hiring of the Asians over the resident Natives and wrote to the territorial governor expressing his concern, "nearly everything inside the canneries is performed by Chinese and Japanese...hardly any of this work is being offered to the residents of Alaska."53

For the Asian workers, the Alaskan salmon canning jobs meant quick, though not easy, money. For extra income the Chinese sold "Sam Shu" or Chinese Gin to the Eskimos. The Chinese bought the gin on the west coast for ninety cents a gallon and sold it to the Natives for eight dollars a gallon. They also taught many Natives to gamble and showed them how to make their own liquor that consisted of graham flour, brown sugar and water mixed to from a mash, which they fermented and then distilled. 54

In 1903, E.A. Smith, a Canadian entrepreneur and a cook by trade, invented a machine that beheaded, split and cleaned the fish. He convinced the president and general manager of the Pacific American Fisheries to let him install three sample machines in his plants near Seattle.55 Some said he invented the fish-butchering machine to displace the Chinese, whom he did not feel worthy of getting the west coast and Alaska cannery jobs. The machine became known as the "Iron Chink" because of the fact that it replaced Chinese labor. Despite the manufacturers' attempt to capitalize on the inventor's reported anti-Chinese sentiment, the canneries did not immediately adopt


54 Chris Friday, Organizing Asian American Labor (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 80.
the machine. The canneries said skilled hand butchers “wasted less meat” and, unlike the Iron Chink, could easily adjust “to different-size fish”.56 The manufacturer eventually improved the machines to eliminate the waste problems, and soon thereafter the machine reduced the labor force in the canneries by about three-quarters. 57

In addition to the new canning technology, emerging racism in the United States caused a further reduction in the hiring of Chinese labor. In 1904, legislation passed that extended the 1882 Chinese Exclusionary Act. This act placed an absolute prohibition on Chinese immigration.58 Without a fresh supply of immigrant Chinese the Alaskan Chinese work force began to age. One cannery worker complained to their Chinese contractor “…you promised by all that was holy to furnish us good men, not old and weak, worn out fellows like you sent.”59 The cannery owners, recognizing the need to keep a younger work force to do the strenuous work required in the cannery, replaced the older Chinese with Mexicans, Japanese, Koreans and Fillipinos. The Chinese, still considered the most experienced and dedicated workers in the salmon canning industry, remained in foremen roles for many years.


56 Chris Friday, Organizing Asian American Labor (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 84.


The anti-Asian sentiment in the United States extended to the Japanese and Koreans. The United States pressured the Japanese government to stop exporting their Japanese and Korean labor (Japan had a protectorate status over Korea in 1905). The canneries then replaced some of the Asian workers with Mexicans and African American workers. In 1905, only thirty Mexicans worked in the Alaskan canneries, but by 1919 that figure had increased to 1900. The increase in Mexican workers was aided by the immigration of approximately 750,000 Mexicans into the United States around the time of the First World War. The Mexicans left their country during the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) and fled to the United States to take advantage of economic opportunities created by the conflict.

The canneries apparently did not consider the new workers as dependable or hard working as the Oriental crews. An official of the Marathon Fishing and Packing Company wrote: “MEXICANS... They are an awful bunch: even Lewis the Chinese foreman says never again Mexicans for him.”

As the number of eligible young Asians continued to decline, and the dissatisfaction with the Mexicans increased, Filipinos began to work in the canneries. Filipinos immigrated to the United States in ever increasing numbers after WWI and found


themselves with no jobs, no families and no place to go. Classified as United States nationals, the Filipinos traveled unrestricted with American passports and were not affected by the Asian ban.

By 1918, Mexicans and Filipinos outnumbered Chinese. The Chinese contract system officially ended in April 1937 when cannery owners and leaders of local unions met and signed an agreement to outlaw the labor contracting that had dominated the industry for nearly four decades. Soon after, Asian workers began to leave cannery work in Alaska. Many Chinese from San Francisco lost their Alaskan jobs when San Francisco packers moved their operations to Seattle and replaced the San Francisco workers with Japanese men from Seattle. Immediately after the bombings of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and Manila in the Philippines in December 1941, the union announced that Japanese nationals were no longer employable. Japanese internment quickly followed, which forced the withdrawal of six hundred to seven hundred Japanese from the labor market.

The men who supplied the fish to the canneries in Bristol Bay were also of mixed heritage. Many hailed from Scandinavia and were called “north countrymen” or “hardheads.” There were also fishing gangs of Italians, Greeks and other southern Europeans who were nicknamed “dagoes.” The fishermen traveled on cannery ships


from the west coast right before the salmon run and left soon after. The total fishing time (boats in the water) was about 15 days. While on board the cannery ships, the fishermen worked as sailors and tried to keep the ships on course. This often became a challenge due to lack of lighthouses and hazardous seas. Occasionally, they even found themselves blown off course as far as Hawaii66.

Unlike the fishermen from other parts of Alaska, some of whom owned their own boats and sold fish to the canneries, the fishermen in Bristol Bay worked as employees of the canneries. When they arrived in Bristol Bay the canneries lent them 28-to-32 foot double-hulled sailboats, referred to as spirit sails. The name spirit sail came from the spirit or stick and boom used to help steer the boats. This non-motorized sail boat dominated the fishing fleet in Bristol Bay for many decades. The Bureau of Fisheries banned the use of motorized boats in Bristol Bay in the 1920's to prevent overfishing. This sailboat, as a less maneuverable and slower boat than the power boat, was less efficient in finding and catching fish. To overcome this, the canneries used a towboat to tow a number of sailboats to the fishing grounds. In this way the sailboats could move rapidly and almost as efficiently as the powerboats67.

The fishermen worked on the boats in pairs using supplies the canneries provided, including a tent, a single-burner kerosene stove, a bottle of wood alcohol to start the


stove, carbolic acid to use as a disinfectant, a gill net and food. The cannery cooks even varied the food allotment depending on the nationality of the fishermen, including olive oil and pasta for the Italian fishermen and hard tack bread and canned meats for the Scandinavians. 68

In 1902 the west coast fishermen joined together and formed one of the first unions in Alaska called the Alaska Fishermen’s Union (AFU). With its headquarters in Seattle, the AFU aimed to help the fishermen negotiate with the canneries and set fair prices. The AFU was typical of the time in that it represented only one craft, fishermen, and did not include workers in other sectors of the fishing industry such as the cannery workers.

Unlike the fishermen, the cannery workers in Alaska did not have a union to negotiate for them in those early days. Salmon packers relied on west coast Chinese contractors who located and hired workers on behalf of the Seattle and San Francisco based canneries. These contractors, who had gained experience hiring large foreign work forces for various projects such as for the completion of the Tacoma-Kalama rail line, hired Chinese primarily from the West coast. They negotiated prices with the canneries for the worker’s wages, food and travel and then increased their own profits by supplying mediocre food and other services to the Chinese laborers. A typical contractor’s report indicates that a contractor kept $29,830 out of an allocation of $40,680. Another description stated that “the contractor was given one dollar a day to spend for the subsistence of workers, but would only spend 35 to 40 cents and the rest
goes to his pocket."69

The contracts specified not only the skill level of the worker but even the race. The contract between the Marathon Fishing and Packing Company and the Kwong Yick Lung Company, both of Seattle, illustrates this.

"NUMBER OF MEN TO BE FURNISHED BY CONTRACTOR

The parties of the second part hereby agree to furnish at its own trouble and expense, a sufficient number of good, healthy Chinese and Japanese, all skilled in the packing of Salmon, the number to be not less than forty-two (42) oriental men. (No White men, Negroes or Mexican to be furnished under this contract)..."70

Beginning in 1937, unions began to dispatch cannery crews to Alaska. These unions joined with the stronger national unions of either the AFL or the CIO that helped to pressure the canneries for better working conditions and higher prices. The formation of new unions in Alaska joined a growing trend across the United States due to the passage of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA). This federal legislation enacted by Congress in 1935 and supported by then United States president, Franklin Roosevelt, governed the labor-management relations of business firms engaged in interstate


commerce. Many sources refer to this act as the Wagner Act, after its sponsor Senator Robert R. Wagner of New York. 71

The general objective of the act guaranteed employees "the right to self-organization, to form, join, or assist labor organizations, to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and to engage in concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid and protection." 72 To safeguard these rights and to ensure the orderly exercise of them, the Act created the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), which had, among other powers, the authority to prevent employers from engaging in certain specified unfair labor practices. It also regulated the formation of new unions.

While trade unions existed as labor organizations to consolidate, represent, and protect the rights of workers, unions had two main organizational structures: craft unions and industrial unions. The primary objective of the craft unions was unionization of skilled workers. Those in the craft unions reasoned that if a worker lost his or her job in one location or one factory, the union would assist them get a job within their same occupation elsewhere, regardless of the industry. This occurred because craft unions


represent a single craft or occupation rather than numerous, diverse jobs within a specific industry.73

In contrast, industrial unionism welcomed all the workers in an industry.74 Industrial unions embraced different kinds of workers, skilled and unskilled, within a single industry. When an employee switched industries, they would have to join the union that represented that industry regardless of their occupation. The strength of this type of organization was that within any given industry all workers belong to the same union. As such, they had greater power to bargain and could effectively shut the whole industry down as opposed to just one trade within it.

The American Federation of Labor (AFL), founded in Columbus, Ohio, in 1886, during a period of widespread strikes by workers seeking an eight-hour day, became one of the first national craft unions in the United States. Its primary objectives were unionization of skilled workers, support of legislation beneficial to labor, reduction of working hours, and improvement of working conditions and wages. The AFL started out with 25 unions with a total of about 140,000 members. By 1900 the organization had about one million members.75


The first large-scale organization of industrial unions came with the formation of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The IWW, originally formed in 1905, sought to organize a society of workers. The union advocated the theory of class struggle between workers and capitalists developed by the 19th century German political philosopher Karl Marx. The IWW's early policy was one of direct action, utilizing such economic means as strikes, boycotts, and propaganda, rather than more indirect political means such as arbitration and collective bargaining, to win labor improvements. Later, the IWW began to engage in collective bargaining like other unions, although it continued to advocate the use of general strikes as the most effective negotiating tactic. The IWW intended to expand representation to all workers in a given industry. During World War I they did not support the war, and the government arrested many IWW leaders and accused them of supporting communism. This lead to a severe decline in popularity in the 1920's, and the union became virtually a non-entity.76

In the mid 1930's, John Lewis, a leader in the AFL, became a catalyst in a movement to revive the industrial unions. He and others saw the working class undergoing radical and rapid changes as employment in industries like automobiles, rubber, petroleum and related sectors exploded. Employment in the clerical, service and

governmental areas increased, while jobs in agriculture and older industries such as cotton textiles and iron and steel making shrank.77

Along with Sidney Hillman, president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, Lewis formed a group within the AFL that concentrated on an industrial structure. They called it the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). They originally tried to work within the framework of the AFL. With Lewis at its helm, the CIO began a massive recruitment campaign. They embraced unskilled and minority workers.78

The philosophical differences between the AFL and the CIO finally led to the expulsion of the CIO from the AFL in 1935. The CIO continued to grow and often challenged the leadership of the AFL. The two organizations quickly became bitter enemies fighting for control of American workers.79

Alaska's delegate to Congress, Anthony Dimond, supported union membership. He said in a speech in 1933, "it has been found vitally necessary that the workers of every great industry be organized and thus obtain the power of collective bargaining and representation."80 He encouraged all persons employed in the fishing and canning industries to join a union. He even took it one step further and recommended that all


80 Mary Mangusso, *Anthony J. Dimond, A Political Biography*, (PhD. Diss., Texas Tech University, 1978), 158.
existing unions join together in a territorial organization and affiliate with the AFL. Most people ignored his proposal for a single combined fishery union at the time.

The canneries felt threatened with the potential loss of political influence as the unions in Alaska began to use their recently won powers to persuade the Bureau of Fisheries to develop policies that would limit the canneries' power to exploit the fisheries. In response to the need to remain influential with the regulators and also to assist them in implementing new federal employee regulations, the packers created an organization called the Canned Salmon Industry (CSI). Similar to the former Alaska Packers Association, the new organization had great powers. It set prices and production levels, dealt with labor matters, tried to influence legislation and tackled other tasks that assisted the industry. The group eventually incorporated as the Canned Salmon Industry, Inc., and became the principal organization representing 90% of all canneries in Alaska.81

By the time the United States entered World War II, a complicated mosaic of primarily craft unions had sprung up to replace the contract system in Bristol Bay. Unions thrived in the fishing industry in Bristol Bay with members in many occupations with many different salary scales. Each union had several job classes with different pay rates that often varied between resident and local workers. Most collective bargaining

done on behalf of the Bristol Bay workers took place in Seattle about 2,400 miles away.82

**Communism and Unions**

Industrial workers in the United States formed many powerful unions during the 1930’s. Their leaders pushed social democratic public agendas, and many unions welcomed radicals and communists as leaders and speakers for their cause.83 According to some, the best recruiters and members of the industrial union movement in the United States were those affiliated with the Communist Party. Despite the fact the communists in his organization helped him to gain power in the fight for industrial unionism through a successful recruitment campaign, John Lewis, like many Americans at the time, had no overpowering love for the communists and distanced himself from them when it suited him.

This dislike of communism in the United State had its roots before the end of World War II, going back to the Russian Revolution of 1917, when, after the Bolshevik victory, the United States, along with Britain, France, and Japan, sent troops to Russia to support the anti-Communists. During World War II, the United States and the USSR were allied


but they disagreed on tactics and on postwar plans. After the war, relations deteriorated. The United States and the USSR had different ideologies, and they mistrusted one another. The Soviet Union feared that the United States, the leader of the capitalist world, sought the downfall of Communism. The United States felt threatened by Soviet expansionism in Europe, Asia and the western hemisphere.84

In 1938, Congress formed the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) that sought to expose Communist influence in American life.85 Created on a temporary basis to monitor the activities of foreign agents, it was made a standing committee of the House in 1945. Although it showed an interest in pro-Fascist groups during World War II, the HUAC was best known for its anti-Communist investigations, which were sometimes referred to as witch-hunts by opponents of the committee.86

The HUAC’s interest was widespread and included one of the most famous and controversial men within the industrial union movement, Harry Bridges. Bridges who eventually extended his influence even into Alaska, led the west coast International Longshoremen’s Workers Union (ILWU). Born in Australia, he had a notorious reputation as a radical which made him a prime target for an attack by Senator Joseph McCarthy. Senator McCarthy, from Wisconsin, had first attracted national attention in


February 1950 with the charge that the Department of State had been infiltrated by communists. Although his accusation was never substantiated, during the next three years he repeatedly accused various high-ranking officials of subversive activities.87

McCarthy charged Harry Bridges with being a member of the communist party, despite the fact that Bridges had sworn at his naturalization hearing, "I am not and have never been a member of the communist party."88 Perhaps Bridges told the truth about his official standing in the Communist Party, but according to many, he conferred with Communist leaders, adhered to Communist policy, and helped build up the Communist factions inside his union.89 Despite the investigation and inquiry into his loyalty, Harry Bridges remained president of the ILWU and a strong union leader until his retirement.

In Alaska, newspaper accounts kept up with the growing communist panic in articles reporting the events of the HUAC committee and Senator McCarthy’s activities. Soon attention focused on the Alaska fishing industry. The House of Representatives’ Special Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor set up a committee to investigate the supposed communist infiltration of maritime and fisheries unions on the west coast. In October 1948, this committee made its way to where it conducted hearings


The subcommittee subpoenaed approximately sixteen Alaskans and questioned their loyalty and accused them of affiliation and support of the Communist party. Many of those who testified had no connection with the fishing industry but were suspected of having communist sympathies because of pro-communist literature they subscribed to such as the *Daily Worker* or the *Soviet Russia Today*. In Anchorage they interviewed union leaders including members of the Westward Alaska Fisheries Council. This council was created to coordinate the functions of the fisheries and labor unions in the westward area of Alaska. One of the council's aim was to develop a coordinated effort to improve cannery workers wages and working conditions. It represented six unions in the Alaska Fishing industry including unions in Bristol Bay.

The committee also traveled to San Francisco where many noted labor leaders, including Harry Bridges and other west coast labor leaders, did not respond to their subpoenas.

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Catholic Church. Unions and Anti-Communism

The Catholic Church in the U.S. and Alaska also took an active stand against Communism in the labor movement. In 1931, Pope Pius XI published what became a famous social encyclical titled *Quadragesim Anno*. A few years later, in 1937, a young Harvard graduate, John Cort, studied the words of the Pope and became intrigued with a crucial passage that stated, “Side by side with these trade unions, there must always be associations which aim at giving their members a thorough religious and moral training, that these in turn may impart to the labor union to which they belong the upright spirit which direct their conduct.” 92 These words acted as a catalyst for John Cort and a small group of trade unionists and interested Catholics who formed the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU). 93

The association began by assisting the CIO in their organization efforts and by joining picket lines. The Catholic organization, like other growing ideological organizations at the time, such as the Communists, Socialists, and other liberals, excelled in its efforts to organize the unorganized. They took part in labor strikes and received credit for persuading thousands of Catholics to side with the striking workers against the perceived unfair practices of the employers. Their participation may have turned several


strikes around. By 1937, the ACTU had forged ties with the New York City's Jesuit University and the Fordham Labor School, which became one of the first of the Catholic labor schools that sprang up around the country. 94

From its early days, the ACTU voiced strong opposition to Communism. Father F. John Cronin, a leader in the ACTU wrote “Catholic Social Principles” in which he said, “in more recent times, the growth of spiritual ills has intensified. Greatest among these are the denial of god (under communism)...”95 In 1938, the ACTU stated that even though Communists did good work in the unions their objectives were contrary to “any decent idea of democracy or religion.”96

The ACTU published their views in the Labor Leader, their official ACTU newsletter. According to an article by Michael Harrington in a 1961 edition of the Labor History, the leaders of the ACTU corresponded with unionists throughout the country suggesting ways to identify and expose communists within unions. While not always cohesive, the ACTU served as an educational and propaganda force for the general Catholic community.97


In 1945, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops commissioned a report to look into domestic communism. The report, written by a Baltimore priest, was titled, “The Problem of American Communism in 1945: Facts and Recommendations”98. The Church worried that male workers were leaving the church in favor of secularism, socialism and apathy.99 They blamed this exodus from the Church on communism and became committed to combating the leadership roles that Communists held in the labor unions.

Despite its opposition to communism, the ACTU recognized the organizational skills of the communists and continued to support many unions that had communist members. This support fluctuated over the years and after World War II church leaders became more committed to opposing communism. Father Charles Owen Rice from Pittsburgh, a Catholic and member of ACTU worked very actively in the labor movement to oust communism and during the 1950's worked with the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the HUAC committee towards this end.100 While certainly not unanimous, many Catholics in the labor movement supported Father Rice and others who fought to rid the unions of their communist members.


No direct evidence was found that showed a link between the teachings of the ACTU and the Catholic Church in Alaska. However, the Catholic leaders in Alaska were influenced by the same forces that lead the ACTU to despise communism and fear its spread through the unions.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE BRISTOL BAY CONTROVERSY

Resident and Non-Resident Conflicts Brew

As union membership soared in the Alaska fishing industry, more and more non-Natives began to move into Bristol Bay. Many of them originally came from Europe or the west coast of the United States, married local Eskimo women, started families and lived in the Bristol Bay area year round. These non-Native residents, like the local Eskimos, also experienced discrimination. As before, the canneries still hired primarily outsiders for Alaska cannery work and the canneries continued to employ primarily European immigrants as fishermen. In fact, a common clause in the contracts said the canneries must employ six and a half 'outside' boats [thirteen nonresidents] to a cannery line before they could employ any residents at all.101 This meant that in some years the Natives as well as the growing non-Native resident fishermen watched helplessly while the canneries hired cannery workers and fishermen from the west coast and paid them more than local fishermen.

Some accused the packers of helping the nonresident labor groups in an effort to keep the territory in a colonial status. Others said that the industry did what it could to increase the friction between the residents and nonresidents to weaken each group and put themselves in a better bargaining position during price negotiations.

Understandably, residents felt deep resentment against both absentee owners and nonresident laborers. One fisherman said, “They use residents in Bristol Bay, when they have a heavy fish run. There is no consideration given to [employing] the residents unless they get short-handed.” Alaskans soon discovered that despite paid-up membership their union cards were almost worthless.102

AFU representatives defended the practice of hiring nonresidents saying, “As far as our union is concerned and the men involved are concerned, it has been the policy of the canned-salmon industry to hire nonresident labor. That labor in Alaska is no more foreign to Alaska than the canned-salmon industry itself. The vast majority of the owners of the canneries are nonresidents, both in residence and in the finances placed in the industry, as well as we are.”103

When the canneries did hire more locals, they routinely paid them less than the outsiders. The Native residents who owned set-net sites (basically nets strung on the beaches at designated sites) were paid 1/3 less per fish than the nonresident fishermen.104 In addition, union contracts drawn up in Seattle and San Francisco insisted that the canneries pay the nonresident fisherman four cents more per fish than the residents.

The canneries reportedly rationalized the different nonresident and resident (primarily Eskimo) wage scale by implying that the Eskimos did not handle the fish properly and got them dirty.

Many canneries treated the nonresidents and residents different in other ways. In the mess halls, nonresidents ate in their own section, while the resident Eskimos ate their meals separately in another part of the hall or a different room. Another difference concerned how residents were paid. Unlike the cash paid to most employees, the canneries prepaid the Natives in credit at the beginning of every season. The credit only applied to the company store from the cannery where they worked and had to be paid off all, or in part, from summer earnings. At the end of the season the canneries rationed out new grubstakes for the following summer. The Eskimos used their advances to purchase portable kerosene stoves, kerosene, outboard engines, gasoline, oil, knives, rifles and ammunition, clothing, shoes, coats, caps, mittens and underwear from the cannery store. The cannery may even have charged interest on the grubstake. This practice of supplying credit forced the Natives to return to the cannery that had issued them the advance, and in this way the canneries created an obligated work force.105

Many residents in Alaska began to grow weary of the discrimination and the preferential pay scale for nonresident workers. They quickly found that they had great difficulty in making any meaningful changes that worked to their own benefit. One significant reason was that the packers from the west coast had greater access to Congress.

through their state representatives and senators. The resident fishermen in Alaska had only their territorial delegate, who had no vote. Still, Alaska Delegate Anthony Dimond tried to help residents working in the fishing industry. He introduced various bills in the House to try and gradually increase quotas of residents on the fishing grounds and in the canneries. In 1934, he successfully cosponsored an act that opened commercial king salmon fishing on the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers to residents who lived along the rivers. He also succeeded in getting a bill passed that allowed set nets (or stake-nets) for salmon for any Bristol Bay resident who had lived in the region for at least two years. Both of these bills particularly benefited Native residents. Dimond and others considered that residents in the fishing industry in Bristol Bay experienced more discrimination than anywhere else in Alaska.

Anthony Dimond also tried to reduce and eventually eliminate the number of nonresidents who could catch fish using seine nets. A seine net is made of heavy twine supported on the surface of the water by corks. The bottom of the net contains heavy lead weights with a draw rope that the seiners pull taut causing the net to tighten and the fish to get caught. Fishermen, particularly Native men and their families, used seines from a boat or from the beach.

In 1939 Dimond succeeded in getting House Resolution 162 passed. This bill called for a full congressional investigation of the administration of Alaska salmon industry. Late that summer, seven members of the House Merchant Marine and Fisheries

subcommittee held extensive hearing throughout Alaska, Seattle and Washington, D.C., and observed first-hand fishermen and all aspects of cannery operations. In general, the hearings highlighted the chaos that existed in the fishery at the end of the decade. Many criticized the subcommittee’s report. Some thought it did not go far enough and did not offer any corrections to the problem. The packers thought it too critical of the industry. An important concept that the report articulated was the need to consider the Alaskan people in the management of the resource. 107

Despite their inclination not to hire Natives, the canneries had little choice but to employ them to fill out their work force during WWII when outside labor was difficult or impossible to find. The Bureau of Indian Affairs in cooperation with the canned salmon industry recruited Alaska Natives from as far north as Point Hope and as far east as Minto. 108

With the increase in Native employment in the canning industry, the Native cannery workers in Bristol Bay asked a local non-Native man, James Downey, to help them form a union. In 1944, James Downey had helped to organize the Fishermen’s Co-operative Trading Company and worked as its president. He contacted the NLRB about forming a cannery union in Bristol Bay. The NLRB thereupon held an election that legitimized Local 46 as the official bargaining union for the Bristol Bay cannery workers. It


represented about 900 primarily Native cannery workers from Nome, Kotzebue, the Yukon River villages, Hooper Bay, and the Kuskokwim River and Bristol Bay areas. Local 46 affiliated with the International Fishermen and Allied Workers of America (IFAWA), a CIO union.

Not everyone welcomed the employment of Natives in the Alaska canned salmon industry. In the winter of 1945-46, the Alaska Jesuit missionaries in Western Alaska held a meeting at old St. Mary's mission, Akulurak to discuss the recruitment of Natives into the cannery business and the union. Vernon Hilliker, of the Alaska Packers, attended the meeting at Akulurak, and tried to "sell the Companies stand" to the Jesuits. Hilliker talked about work opportunities, conditions and wages for the Natives and asked for collaboration and support. The salmon industry desperately needed the Native workers to continue packing the salmon.

Most of the Jesuit priests present opposed hiring Natives. Like other clergy in the area, they feared the Eskimos would fall under undesirable influences and disapproved of the habits they said the Eskimos had picked up from the Chinese. Most missionaries preferred that the Eskimos stay away from the canneries all together. One Jesuit described this attitude as “salvation through isolation.” 110 At least one man among them disagreed. He was a thirty-five year old Jesuit priest, Father Jules M. Convert.

Father Jules Convert, who arrived in Alaska in 1942, lived at Kashunak, near present-day Chevak, and had a background that likely influenced his dissenting opinion. Before taking his vows, Father Convert, a Frenchman, served as a soldier in the French Foreign Legion and a teacher at St. Joseph University in Beirut. Like most Jesuit priests he was a well-educated man. In addition to holding a doctorate in economics, Convert had abundant labor experience that he had gained when he worked on the docks of Marseilles. His experiences led him to develop a strong interest in socio-economics, which he studied diligently in addition to his theological studies. He studied at the famed Antigonish school of credit unions in Nova Scotia. 111 The credit union school taught a commitment to empower disadvantaged peoples with the knowledge and skills they needed to shape their own destinies. 112


112 http://www.stfx.ca/institues/coady/history.html
Father Jules Convert argued at the Akulurak meeting that, for the first time, the Yup’ik people had an opportunity to share in the exploitation of the region’s natural resources and receive some tangible economics benefits from them. He believed opposing Native employment in the fishing industry would probably turn the Natives against the missionaries when they found out that they had missed the opportunity to earn cash wages. Convert strongly believed that the Church and the effects of governmental policies in Alaska had changed the Natives forever. He knew from personal experience that the Alaska Natives no longer completely relied on subsistence and reasoned that they must get jobs to support their new lifestyle. Vernon Hilliker suggested to Bishop Francis D. Gleeson, S.J., the man with ecclesiastical jurisdiction over all Jesuits in northern Alaska, that he send a chaplain to represent the missionaries and accompany the Eskimo men to the canneries. This representative could see for himself the actual conditions during the actual fishing-canning season at Bristol Bay. Bishop Gleeson had discussed the situation with Convert and shared his concerns. He asked Convert, who readily agreed, to spend the next fishing season with the Eskimos at the canneries and observe first hand how they lived and worked.

Beginning in the summer of 1947, Father Jules Convert, along with several Yup’ik Eskimo men from the Kashunak-Chevak area, went to the McNeil and Libby cannery at Koggiung in Bristol Bay. The canneries cooperated fully with Father Jules Convert and gave him board, room, and transportation. This enabled him to provide religious services at all 17 canneries around the Bay. In return, the cannery owners asked him to give them a report at the end of the season detailing what he had found and to offer advice on how
to make improvements. The cannery owners received the report well and even instituted some of its suggestions.

The following summer, in 1948, the Jesuit priests held another meeting. Father Jules Convert, who by then considered himself an industrial chaplain to the cannery workers, spoke about the employment policies of some of the canneries, particularly the low wages. He strongly felt that the church should stand by the Eskimos, whom he had come to believe the canneries exploited by paying them poor salaries and providing uncomfortable living quarters. Again, most of the other priests disapproved of his involvement and thought they should distance themselves from the social and economic problems of the canneries. They felt it more important to guide the Natives in spiritual rather than temporal matters and wanted to leave cannery affairs alone.

A few of the Jesuits, however, agreed with Jules Convert. These included Fathers John Fox and Paul C. O'Connor who ministered to the people in Hooper Bay, many of whom traveled to Dillingham for the fishing runs. Another strong supporter was Father George S. Endal, the priest stationed in Dillingham. Endal had come from Alakunuk to Dillingham in 1948 and quickly joined forces with Convert to defend the Eskimos against exploitation. They both argued that the time and place had arrived for the Church to take a stand and defend the Eskimo workers from the cannery owners who took advantage of them. They believed that the clergy must protect the Natives from exploitation and that this was the time and place for the Church to take a stand to protect its people. Although, the other priests disagreed, this philosophy matched that of the catholic trade organization, the ACTU.
During the 1949 season Father Jules Convert took on an even greater role. One of the local canneries, Pacific American Fisheries (PAF), refused to pay the workers for preseason work. Convert sided with the cannery workers and maintained that the cannery owed the workers at least $5,000. He decided that to protect the Eskimos' interest, he must become more active. He asked Bishop Gleeson to allow him to return to the cannery, not as a chaplain, but simply as a cannery worker. Convert reasoned that as a worker he could identify the problems more clearly and would have the right to take the floor at any organizational meeting. His request to become a worker alongside the Eskimos followed the trend in France, Convert's home country, and other countries, where Jesuit priests worked among the poor to try and elevate their economic position. Bishop Gleeson agreed that Convert should become a priest/worker, and during the 1949 season the Libby McNeill & Libby cannery located in Naknek hired the Jesuit as a cannery employee at a rate of $470.00 for the season.113

The workers at the Libby Cannery voted unanimously to elect Father Jules Convert as a delegate to their union (Local 46). At first, Convert refused but then accepted on the condition that men from each of the five villages represented elect a delegate to serve on a small cannery council. Members of the cannery council would assist Convert in union matters.114 He believed that in this way the Eskimos could learn how to better function in


the modern world and learn to take control of their own destinies. As a union delegate, he acted as messenger and gave information and encouragement to the Eskimos.

Union Mergers

Union history in Bristol Bay becomes quite complicated about this time. Union mergers took place in order to gain power and to consolidate union positions. Another compelling reason for unions to consolidate may have been due to the expulsion by the CIO of unions suspected of having communist members. By merging, these ousted unions would have the power to join together in strikes, collect dues and function much like they had before with the support of the CIO.

In 1949, a movement to merge several unions took place that had the potential to affect Cannery Local 46. Leaders in the International Longshoremen Workers Union (ILWU), the International Fishermen and Allied Workers of America (IFAWA), and the Food Tobacco and Alcohol (FTA) wanted to merge. The merger was put to the vote. Members of IFAWA included Local 46 members, who voted 700 to 8 in favor of the merger. In great part because of Local 46, the vote passed. The workers in Bristol Bay’s Local 46 supported the merger because Local 46 members in Alaska hoped to get the high longshoremen’s wages enjoyed by ILWU workers for longshoring work done in their home villages. According to Father George Endal, who later wrote about it, those who voted for the merger did not know about the allegations that there were communists in the ILWU. In spite of the favorable vote by the IFAWA, the merger never took place. The reason was due to a small but strong vocal opposition of some of the members of
IFAWA. Leaders of the IFAWA decided to defer the merger indefinitely in the interests of unity.115

In November 1949, a meeting was held in Bethel between the Westward Fisheries Council from Anchorage and Local 46 members including Joe Nashoalook, the Local 46 representative. At the meeting the Local 46 members discussed the issue of merging with other unions and the seed was planted for additional mergers. A few months later, in January, 1950, Joseph Nashaolook, attended the IFAWA convention. While there, he agreed on behalf of the Bristol Bay cannery workers to affiliate with yet another union, Local 7C. Local 7C had strong ties to the ILWU run by suspected communist Harry Bridges.

This alliance with Local 7C alarmed many Alaskan residents and members of Local 46 who feared the connection to Harry Bridges and the communists would result in a communist takeover of the fishing industry in Alaska, perhaps eventually even Alaska. At this time Harry Bridges was under close scrutiny by the House Un-American Activities committee (HUAC) for his suspected ties to the communists. Harry Bridges and the ILWU’s attempts to expand their membership to represent more minorities, such as Hispanics and Afro-Americans along the west coast, and indigenous people who worked in the sugar industry in Hawaii, probably helped to fuel the belief that the ILWU and the communists were now trying to take over the unions in Alaska.

Ignoring or perhaps unaware of growing concern back home with his actions to affiliate with a union having suspected communist ties, Joe Nashaolook told Local 7C that they could negotiate a contract on behalf of Local 46. At this time the cannery had a trade association called the Alaska Salmon Industry, Inc. (ASI), representing thirteen companies that owned seventeen canneries in Bristol Bay. Similar to the former Alaska Packers Association created in 1892 and the Canned Salmon Industry formed in the 1930’s, the ASI acted on behalf of these canneries on matters such as union negotiations and setting the price of fish for the season. Winton Cumberland (W.C.) Arnold, chief counsel and managing director (i.e. chief lobbyist) for the ASI, led the negotiations on behalf of the canneries with Local 7C. Arnold, born in Walla Walla, Washington, in 1903, earned his law degree in Idaho and worked as a United States Commissioner in Hyder, Alaska, from 1927-1928 and in Ketchikan from 1928-1933. He vigorously defended the canned salmon industry in all of its dealings.

When news that Joe Nashaolook had allowed Local 7C to sign a contract on behalf of Local 46 reached Father Jules Convert and others in Alaska, they feared not only that communists might invade the Bristol Bay fishing industry but non-residents might once again take over the cannery work force, displacing the Eskimo workers. Journals and letters written by Fathers Jules Convert and George Endal illustrated their anti-

116 “United States of America Before the National Labor Relations Board Region Nineteenth. In the Matter of the ASI and Bering Sea Fishermen’s Unions. Case No. 19-RC-746;” Record Group 111, Office of the Secretary of Alaska, Series 103 Fishermen’s Aid Program, National Archives, Pacific Alaska Region, Anchorage, Alaska.
communist sentiment and their concern that communists were entering the Bristol Bay through the proposed union affiliation.

On May 25, 1950, at 10:30 p.m., in an attempt to counter criticism surrounding the union affiliation, Joe Nashaolook spoke over KQFD radio in Anchorage. His speech, which Local 7C representatives reportedly prepared, dealt with the reasons for the affiliation with Local 7C. He described the contract he had just signed with the ASI and assured listeners that the new union recognized the importance of fair wages and working conditions among the Bristol Bay workers. Then, in Father Jules Convert’s own words, “the fireworks began.”

Father Jules Convert and other Local 46 representatives thought that the communists had duped Joe Nashaolook and that the new union would not fairly represent the Bristol Bay cannery workers. They believed that eventually the outside union would become the dominant union, rendering Local 46 useless. Alaskan labor leaders reacted swiftly and angrily to Nashaolook’s speech. Just six days after he spoke, on May 31, James Downey, organizer of Local 46, bought Anchorage radio time to denounce Joe Nashaolook. James Downey recounted the history of Local 46 and said the Native workers of Local 46 no longer recognized Joe Nashaolook as their representative. Furthermore, James Downey said, members of Local 46 rejected the contract and affiliation signed with Local 7C.


On June 2, 1950, the Bristol Bay cannery workers met, signed an official resolution severing all ties with Local 7C and fired Joe Nahaolook. With this action they rejected all negotiations done by Local 7C with the ASI on behalf of the Bristol Bay cannery workers. After the May 31st radio broadcast, James Downey asked Governor Ernest Gruening to notify the NLRB in Seattle that neither Local 7C nor Joe Nashaolook had the authority to sign any contract for Local 46. Governor Gruening obliged and the ASI was put on formal notice that the contract that Joe Nashaolook has signed was invalid and the ASI instead had to conduct negotiations for the cannery workers for the upcoming season with the Bristol Bay union, Local 46.

In the meantime, Harry Bridges and the ILWU leaders in Seattle had their own talks with the ASI. They tried to get ASI to recognize Local 7C and the contract it had signed on behalf of the cannery workers in Bristol Bay. To force the issue the ILWU picketed all of the cannery cargo in Puget Sound destined for the Alaska fishing grounds. The ILWU leaders figured that unless the ships sailed with the cargo and crews, the canneries would have to forego the 1950 fishing season. This seemed to put the ILWU in an advantageous bargaining position to get the ASI to recognize Local 7C.

ASI feared the affect the ILWU boycott could have on that season’s production. They informed James Downey and Local 46 that they had tried to get a court injunction

against the illegal boycott and picketing by ILWU. ASI said that, because of limited time and the imposing power of the ILWU, "it [the effort] was worthless." 120

W.C. Arnold insisted that they had to make a choice between honoring the contract they had signed with Local 7C for the Bristol Bay cannery workers or lose out on that year's fishing. Since the Bristol Bay salmon catch alone grossed between 15 million to 40 million dollars, greed won over principle, and the salmon packers agreed, against the objections of the Bristol Bay resident cannery workers, to honor the contract with Local 7C. As a result, the ILWU dropped its boycott, stopped its picketing and allowed the cannery ships to sail to Alaska.

It appeared at first that the ILWU had won and the ASI would only recognize Local 7C. But as soon as the ships left the Port of Seattle, Father Jules Convert, James Downey and members of Local Union 46 got busy. They contacted ASI and reiterated that Joe Nashaolook had no authority to negotiate for the cannery workers in Bristol Bay. ASI listened. Before the ships arrived Local 46 and ASI had successfully negotiated a contract for the 1950 season. With this quick action Local 46 had thwarted that season's attempt by Local 7C and the ILWU to take over the canned salmon industry in Bristol Bay. Convert, Downey and others no doubt saw this as a victory over an attempted communist takeover in the fishing industry.

This turn of events angered Harry Bridges. On July 19, 1950, he wrote a scathing letter to Bishop Gleeson complaining about Father Jules Convert's involvement with the

120 The Beacon, Dillingham News, (Dillingham), June 8, 1950.
union in Bristol Bay. He wrote that the ASI wanted to disrupt and divide the unions in Bristol Bay and that "to this end they procured a Father Jules Convert and a Father George Endal" whose actions assisted them in achieving their goal. In the letter he said that Father Jules Convert, as a priest, had no right to take the job of cannery worker. He said that Convert had displaced another more needy worker. He complained that Convert was a tool of the company and a "union-buster to boot." Father Jules Convert later heard about these charges and vehemently denied them all. At Bishop Gleeson's urging, Convert wrote a line-by-line rebuttal, answering each of Harry Bridges' charges. To show his support, Bishop Gleeson added his own conclusion supporting the priest.

The Formation of the BSFU

After the 1950 fishing season ended, another union dispute broke out, this time between the non-residents in the Alaska Fishermen's Union and its Bristol Bay members. Again, the fear of a communist takeover affected union business. Bristol Bay fishermen believed that many of the candidates running for office in the Alaska Fishermen's Union had pro-communist leanings. They alleged that the Alaska Fishermen's Union rejected


their votes for anti-communists because they branded the resident Bristol Bay fishermen as rebels. At the heart of the matter, the local fishermen said, they should have a voice in the disposition of the resources of their own community. Harry Bridges, who still wanted to represent workers in the Bristol Bay fishing industry, invited the Alaska Fishermen's Union to join the powerful ILWU. To the dismay of many of the resident workers, the Alaska Fishermen's Union obliged, perhaps believing the powerful union might help force the industry into more advantageous contracts or perhaps because of similar political philosophy. Whatever the reason, this new development greatly alarmed leaders in the territory. In Bristol Bay, Fathers Jules Convert and George Endal and James Downey became furious. They had fought hard to keep Local 46, the cannery union, out of the ILWU the year before only to have it reappear in Bristol Bay through its affiliation with the Alaska Fishermen's Union.

The Bristol Bay fishermen accused Alaska Fishermen Union leaders of letting the communists rig the election. They let the union know that they regarded affiliation with ILWU as intolerable and theorized that with the Alaska Fishermen's Union aligned with the ILWU, Harry Bridges would spread communism throughout the Bay. James Downey wrote a letter to Governor Gruening which said in part, “As you no doubt are well aware, the ILWU have been making strong attempts to take over all Alaska Fishermen's Union Branches... We are firmly resolved that we will handle our own affairs here and not take orders from Harry Bridge's gang.” 124

The local Bristol Bay fishermen also believed that the Alaska Fishermen’s Union, run from Seattle, did not take care of their interests. Because of this and the distrust of the supposed communist element in the Alaska Fishermen’s Union, the residents got together and decided to take action. Approximately 1,400 of the total 2,600 Bristol Bay members broke off from the Alaska Fishermen’s Union and formed their own independent organization, which they called the Bering Sea Fishermen’s Union (BSFU). The BSFU membership included the local fishermen of the Bering Sea, primarily white and some Natives. They elected James Downey to represent them.125

On March 21, 1951, Downey filed pledge cards with the regional office of the NLRB in Seattle and asked that it accept BSFU as a legal bargaining agent for the Bristol Bay Fishermen. Although the NLRB required only 30% of the present membership to sign up, approximately 70% of the Bristol Bay resident fishermen signed the pledge cards. Downey described the need for the split by stating, “The residents and non-residents are incompatible, are separated and need a divorce.”126

Responding to the effort by the Bristol Bay fishermen to start their own union, the NLRB held a hearing in Seattle on the 28th and 29th of March, 1951. The BSFU hired attorneys to represent them from the firm of Bassett and Geisness. The attorneys asserted at the hearing that there existed a state of growing incompatibility between the Alaska


126 “United States of America Before the National Labor Relations Board Region Nineteenth, In the Matter of the ASI and Bering Sea Fishermen’s Unions. Case No. 19-RC-746;” Record Group 111,
Fishermen’s Union headquarters and its Bristol Bay branch. The severity of the disagreement, it argued, necessitated a split. “One aspect of the history leading up to the present situation”, the lawyers stated “is that, from 1930 forward, growing numbers of non-residents have become residents. And this has led to more and more important local interest of the residents and also has led to a more and more pronounced division between the residents and non-residents as the residents become more independent and self-sufficient.” Indeed, by 1950, Bristol Bay fishermen lived in Bristol Bay year-round with only 5% of the resident Bristol Bay union members reported as leaving in the winter. The attorneys further went on to state that the residents felt their interests differed greatly from the non-residents and that the AFU did not take care of their interests. “...The residents got...rotten boats and rotten nets.”

Many supporters of the resident Bristol Bay union wrote to Governor Ernest Gruening urging his support for its formation. Representing the other side, the Ketchikan Chamber of Commerce wrote to Governor Gruening about their concern that the ILWU would tie up delivery of important cargo or would suspend steamship services, a fear not
totally unfounded considering the ILWU’s attempt the previous year to suspend all ships carrying cargo to Bristol Bay.

Governor Gruening took the side of the resident fishermen in the union debate. He felt that Alaskans must establish a stable work force for economic survival. He wrote to the NLRB examiner in Seattle during the course of the union hearings urging the development of a more stable labor supply that could attract more permanent residents. He believed this vital to improve the economy of Alaska and insisted that the government should make every effort to give job preferences to resident Alaskans in all phases of the fishing industry in Alaska and all other Alaskan industries. He wanted to encourage transient labor to settle in Alaska permanently.129

The counsel for the BSFU appreciated the support by the Governor and welcomed the participation of Governor Gruening’s aide at the NLRB hearing. The aide reiterated that the Governor wanted to establish a constant work opportunity in order to develop the resident population and to encourage industry through creation of a labor supply. The Counsel for the BSFU further argued that maintaining a strong, stable resident work force in Alaska was in the best interest of national defense.

One Alaskan resident fisherman described the split between the residents and nonresidents: "The nonresident fishermen are members of the Alaska Fishermen’s Union, with their main office at 49 Clay Street, San Francisco. We resident fishermen of Bristol

129 Letter from Governor Gruening to NLRB, Seattle, March 26, 1951, Record Group 111, Office of the Secretary of Alaska, Series 103 Fishermen’s Aid program, National Archives, Pacific Alaska Region, Anchorage Alaska.
Bay water were fellow-members of this same union but … were not accorded the protection nor given the right and privileges due us...Instead, were exploited and discriminated against by these nonresident brothers.”

Some residents in Alaska began to speculate that the canneries actually approved of the friction that developed between the residents and nonresidents in Bristol Bay. They reasoned that the canneries hoped the rift would weaken the labor unions’ potency and allow the industry to negotiate better prices for the fish, since salmon runs had begun to decline in recent years. The year before, Harry Bridges had predicted this strategy as way for the industry to dilute the union’s bargaining power.

In fact, as James Downey testified at the NLRB hearing, trouble between residents and non-residents had been brewing in the Bay since at least 1948. In that year, resident fishermen set up a Bristol Bay Promotional Fund. James Downey said, “….we could see trouble coming for two or three years.” This volunteer fund set up by residents assisted in financing resident representation at important meetings in places like Seattle.

Opposing the formation of a local resident union, the counsel for the salmon industry charged that the dispute had nothing to do with incompatibility between residents and non-residents. They insisted it was a jurisdictional dispute that began when the AFU


131 “United States of America Before the National Labor Relations Board Region Nineteenth, In the Matter of the ASI and Bering Sea Fishermen’s Unions. Case No. 19-RC-746,” Record Group 111, Office of the Secretary of Alaska, Series 103 Fishermen’s Aid Program, National Archives, Pacific Alaska Region, Anchorage, Alaska.
affiliated with Harry Bridge’s ILWU which the resident fishermen did not like because of supposed communist ties.

After hearing from both counsel for both the ASI and BSFU, the examiner for the NLRB ruled in favor of the BSFU. He said that under the law both the AFU and the BSFU could act as legitimate bargaining unions for the fishermen of Bristol Bay. This ruling required the Alaska Salmon Industry to negotiate with each union. The salmon industry representatives promised equal contracts with both the Alaska Fishermen’s Union and the local BSFU. Many residents saw this not only as a big victory for the resident fishermen but also for Alaska since they believed they had thwarted a potential takeover by communists.

The day following the NLRB ruling, the Alaska Fishermen’s Union headquarters office in Seattle disqualified all ballots sent in by members of the BSFU to elect that year’s officers. Next, because it no longer had an obligation to the resident fishermen, once part of their union, it voted to cut off all funds to the virtually defunct Bristol Bay branch of the AFU.

James Downey and members of the newly formed Bering Sea Fishermen’s Union recognized that the Bristol Bay Promotional fund, set up in 1948 for just such an event, could not support a prolonged union dispute. The union simply did not have adequate money, staff or resources to face such opposition alone. But James Downey had anticipated this and had a plan. He bolstered the BSFU’s strength by affiliating with the Seafarer’s International Union headed by Harry Lundeberg of San Francisco. Harry Lundeberg considered Harry Bridges his enemy and welcomed the opportunity to oppose
him and the ILWU. Convert said that there was a “death struggle of Harry Lundeburg
against Harry Bridges.” 132

Harry Lundeburg welcomed any move against Harry Bridges. He wrote in a letter to
Governor Gruening, “…the fishermen and cannery workers who are residents of this area
have broken completely free from the left-wing Bridges led longshoremen’s union and
the Alaska Fishermen’s Union and set up an autonomous organization.” 133

Harry Lundeburg’s union, the Seafarers International Union, belonged to the AFL.
This posed a problem for James Downey because the cannery workers union, whom he
also represented, had affiliated with the CIO. Because of the vast philosophical and
political differences between the two national unions, the CIO and the AFL. James
Downey felt that he could not properly represent both unions, claiming that it would be
“like signing a petition both for and against liquor licenses in the same town.” 134

He discussed the problem with both Fathers Jules Convert and George Endal. The
three men decided that one of the priests should become local agent for the cannery
workers until someone else received training. James Downey offered to continue to act
as a negotiator if one of the priests agreed to handle the daily union affairs. The two

132 “Personal papers of Father George Endal S.J. and Father Jules Convert S.J., 1951-
1953.” (Fairbanks Catholic Diocese Archives).

133 Letter from Kenneth R. Bowman, Organizer AFL to Governor Gruening, June 10, 1951
Record Group 111 Office of the Secretary of Alaska, Series 103 Fishermen’s Aid program. National
Archives, Pacific Alaska Region, Anchorage Alaska.

134 The Beacon, Dillingham News, (Dillingham) June 8, 1950.
priests decided that Father Convert should continue as a priest worker and Endal should seek permission from his superiors to act as union agent for the cannery workers. 135

In a letter written on January 18, 1951, Father Endal explained the plan to Bishop Gleeson. He proposed to accept the agent job sometime in March. The Bishop did not like the proposal and felt a union agent was an inappropriate role for a priest. In the end, he reluctantly granted his permission responding, "As regards the job with the union I must say that I still do not like the idea. If however there is a real emergency and no other visible way of preserving the gains already made you may accept the work until the emergency is over." 136

Next, Downey put the second part of his plan into action. He sought and received the aid of the AFL, which in turn appealed to various locals throughout the country for assistance. Other American labor unions responded to the plea and donated $30,000 to help pay union expenses such as mail, wires and transportation. 137 He and other union organizers then set about the business of trying to improve wages and living conditions for the resident Bristol Bay fishermen.

Kenneth Bowman, an organizer for the AFL, complained in a letter to Alaska's territorial governor, "The wages and the fish prices paid to the resident workers in the

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137 Carroll Clifford S.J., Account of Bristol Bay Labor Troubles. (Spokane: Gonzaga University, Oregon Province Archives), 1.
Bay area are far, far below the standards in other areas of Alaska in the fishing industry.” 138 The previous year the Bristol Bay canneries had paid 32 cents a salmon. This did not compare favorably with prices offered in other areas of Alaska. The Cook Inlet, Kodiak and Haines fishermen had negotiated 66 2/3 cents, 64 cents and $1.08 that season respectively. 139 One of the reasons for the discrepancies, according to the ASI, had to do with the fact that, unlike the rest of the state, in Bristol Bay the canneries supplied the Bristol Bay fishermen with boats, fishing equipment, supplies and food. The Bristol Bay fishermen, while acknowledging the contribution by the canneries and need to account for that in the fish prices, did not think that warranted such a large difference between the regions. Both the newly formed Bering Sea Fishermen’s Union and the well established nonresident Alaska Fishermen’s Union wanted to increase the price for the Bristol Bay salmon to 60 cents.

With two unions now competing for control of the Bristol Bay fishing work force, the industry found themselves in an advantageous position. They could play one union off against the other until they got the deal they wanted. So, despite the NLRB ruling directing the canneries to negotiate with both unions, and despite their promise to do so, the canneries instead chose to bargain solely with the Seattle-based Alaska Fishermen’s Union. W.C. Arnold, the ASI spokesman, said that they preferred to deal with one union

138 Letter from Kenneth R. Bowman, Organizer AFL to Governor Gruening, June 10, 1951 Record Group 111 Office of the Secretary of Alaska, Series 103 Fishermen’s Aid program, National Archives, Pacific Alaska Region, Anchorage Alaska.
rather than two. He explained that it became too difficult to negotiate equal contracts with two unions. He did concede that the whole west coast was "under the shadow of communist domination." He said he also feared that the ILWU would punish the industry should it negotiate with the BSFU. Finally the Alaska Fishermen's Union reached an agreement with the ASI and reluctantly agreed to 40 cents per red salmon.

The residents of the Bering Sea Fishermen's Union felt the nonresidents of the Alaska Fishermen's Union had given in to industry bullying. They did not want to accept 40 cents per salmon and demanded their own contract through their own union. The canneries refused to negotiate with them and said that the matter was a jurisdictional dispute between the non-resident Alaska Fishermen's Union and the BSFU. Cannery spokesman W.C. Arnold insisted that the dispute had nothing to do with the price of fish. "Pretense was also made that the question of wages and fish prices was involved. This contention has no basis of fact." As far as the industry was concerned they had completed their negotiations for the 1951 season. BSFU members disagreed.

139 Letter from Kenneth R. Bowman, Organizer AFL to Governor Gruening, June 10, 1951 Record Group 111 Office of the Secretary of Alaska, Series 103 Fishermen's Aid program, National Archives, Pacific Alaska Region, Anchorage Alaska.


141 Carroll Clifford S.J., Account of Bristol Bay Labor Troubles. (Spokane: Gonzaga University, Oregon Province Archives), 2.

On April 3, an attorney for the local fishermen registered an unfair labor practice complaint against the ASI. They asserted that it had ignored the NLRB’s demand for contracts with both the resident and non-resident unions. The ILWU immediately got into the act. They warned the ASI not to negotiate or sign a contract with the BSFU. They also threatened to set up blockades and prevent the shipment of supplies to Bristol Bay if the ASI negotiated a separate deal with the BSFU. The BSFU responded by saying that if the ASI ships entered the Bay before they had a contract they would block supplies from onshore transfer. The ASI ignored the warnings and refused to negotiate with the BSFU, and the ILWU allowed the ships to sail.
Bristol Bay Fishermen Strike

Back in Dillingham BSFU representatives met to discuss their options. They quickly organized a strike vote. On June 1, 1951, the Bristol Bay fishermen voted to strike in an attempt to force the canned salmon industry to negotiate with them.

Just as the BSFU had warned, when the ship, Naknek, came into Nushagak Bay a few days later carrying salmon industry supplies, the Bering Sea Fishermen and sympathetic Sailor Union members refused to off-load the cargo. Two Eskimos, anchored off the beach, carried a protest sign signaling that the strike had begun.143

Great uncertainty arose about the picket line. In the radio shack at one of the Nushagak Bay canneries, delegates from AFU and other unions working in the Bay squeezed in and tried to contact their union headquarters in Seattle and San Francisco to find out what they should do. Then, the cannery ordered members of the Alaska Fishermen's Union to unload any boats that entered. The Alaska Fishermen's Union members hesitated to cross the picket line until they had received word from their union headquarters about what to do. Meanwhile the ship Blackfish arrived. Members of the Alaska Fishermen's Union refused to unload it. The superintendent immediately invoked a clause in the Alaska Fishermen's Union contract and fined each member $10 a day. There followed days of confusion with nonresident Alaska Fishermen Union members

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receiving orders and counter-orders from union representatives and company officials.

Meanwhile, the food cache began to run low. Strikers and office workers began to eat old Chinese delicacy leftovers from the 1930's that they found in the warehouses. One graduate student from the University of Washington came to work in the cannery at Clark's Point along the Nushagak River during the summer of the strike. The cannery had hired him to work as a bookkeeper and years later, after he became a professor of Economics, he wrote about the strike and described how the workers ran out of food and resorted to eating can after can of water chestnuts and smoked cigarettes left over from World War II. 145

Opening day of salmon season, June 24th, came and went. Strikers and workers began to worry about food. On June 25th, the strikers allowed two young office workers to unload the food from the Blackfish. After six days, the ship left with the rest of its cannery supplies still onboard. Two other supply ships, the Sailor's Knot and Sailor's Splice, met with the same reception when they entered the bay. They anchored in the front of the cannery docks for several days with new nets, fishing gear, machinery and the rest of the supplies on board. The canneries and townspeople eventually got


desperate for their supplies and proceeded to unload the ships themselves. The inexperienced substitutes worked excruciatingly slowly.

*Bristol Bay Cannery Workers Strike*

The resident fishermen weren’t the only ones experiencing negotiating problems. In November 1950, the cannery workers of Local 46 still had no settlement of the 1949 PAF claims. They informed the ASI that they did not want to renew the contract they had signed for the 1950 season. With no contract in place, Local 46 representatives began renegotiating their contract in the spring for the upcoming 1951 season. They told the ASI they had become tired of inferior treatment. One report stated that “While non-resident employees have decent housing, fuel, lights and other advantages of civilization incidental to their employment, residents often have to live under conditions even worse than many farmers raise their livestock in the states...On the other hand, non-residents have bedding furnished, janitor service, adequate and proper meals...all conditions of employment residents do not now or have in the past enjoyed.”

The union representatives proposed that the industry settle the 1949 claims against the PAF ($5,000), provide the cannery workers with a 25% wage increase (later amended to 15%), some bedding while staying at the cannery bunkhouse, and set aside 10 cents a case for a fund set up to aid cannery workers in the off-season. The members wanted

146 Letter from Kenneth Bowman, AFL Organizer to Governor Gruening, June 10, 1951, Series 103 Fisherman’s Aid Program. Record Group 111, National Archives, Pacific Alaska Region, Anchorage Alaska.
Fathers Jules Convert and George Endal and several other missionaries and lay people to administer the fund that they expected would reach about $50,000 a year. They heard back from the Alaska Salmon Industry but none of the offers included settlement of the 1949 PAF claims. The Local 46 representatives rejected these offers.

After several months of unproductive negotiations, Local 46 members got fed up with the lack of action by their affiliate, the CIO. They wanted the CIO to push to get the 1949 PAF claims settled. Another complication that still concerned them had to do with union affiliation. The BSFU had affiliated with the AFL while the cannery workers Local 46 had affiliated with the IFAWA/CIO. Many believed the local unions, both fishermen and cannery workers, should share AFL affiliation. They thought this would make things less complicated, and they also wanted to rid themselves of any possible communist domination by the CIO. On June 18, 1951, the cannery workers, led by Father Jules Convert, denounced the CIO and joined the AFL, which had several representatives in Bristol Bay including James Downey, who could now fully support both Local 46 as well as their sister union in the Bay, the BSFU.

In the middle of June, cannery workers began to fly into Bristol Bay from up and down the coast to begin that season’s work. They arrived among uncertainties about the upcoming season: they had no contract and they encountered the BSFU picket line. The ASI, sensing a potentially disastrous season without the cannery workers, began to yield. They agreed to settle the pre-season 1949 PAF claims. They limited the fund to “the
amount due, but not exceeding $5,000.00.” With that resolved, Convert and the others concentrated on other aspects of the new contract.

No doubt bowing to pressure as the season drew closer, the ASI reluctantly approved the conditions in the proposed Local 46 contract with one significant change. They wanted a contingency clause that stated that “this proposal is contingent on the immediate resumption of work and the commencement of fishing when the season opens by all parties of the present dispute, including the members of the Bering Sea Fishermen’s Union.”

Local 46 members found the additional language unacceptable. They knew they had no control over whether the BSFU resumed work or not. They also objected to the change from the previous 1950/1951 contract that stated that members “were not required to go through a picket line which is officially recognized by Local 46 and approved by the Agent.” Father Jules Convert believed that if they signed the contract as written, they sided with the industry against the local fishermen. Yet without a contract, Father Jules Convert knew that the workers might lose their sole chance for cash income that year. Clearly the ASI hoped this tactic could force the members of the BSFU into


abandoning their strike. They reasoned that the local fishermen would not want to cause the resident cannery workers to lose that season’s wages.

On June 23, 1951, the day after members of Local 46 received the counter-proposal from the industry, the leaders of Local 46 in Dillingham took a vote. By a unanimous decision they voted down the offer as long as it contained the offensive contingency clause that would require them to cross the BSFU picket line. James Downey informed the ASI that Local 46 embraced all of the provisions of the new contract except the contingency clause. The ASI thereupon withdrew its offer.

Local 46 representatives acted fast. On June 28, 1951, they circulated a resolution calling for a strike to all members of Local 46 they could reach. These included workers in Dillingham and other canneries around the Bay and those at the King Salmon Camp who had been flown in from other parts of Alaska and still waited for the canneries to dispatch them. The resolution was adopted unanimously, and the cannery workers formally joined the Bristol Bay Fishermen in their strike against the salmon industry. Together, they reasoned, they could get results, and help each other achieve their goals.

The next day in a final, desperate attempt to appeal to local Natives to work that season, the Industry wrote a letter in which they offered to negotiate separate deals with individual workers at each cannery. Their offer included a 15% raise over the 1950 contract and the stipulation that the worker must commence work immediately and
continue to work without further interruption or stoppages of work for any reason whatsoever. 151

At the local union cannery headquarters in Dillingham and other canneries around the Bay, cannery workers and union representatives contemplated what to do next. The workers worried about the grim consequences of not earning any money that year should they refuse to sign the contract. At the Libby cannery in Koggiung, Father Jules Convert, as union delegate, met with the cannery workers to discuss the issue. He felt he could not advise them to sacrifice their principles to their jobs and, that as a priest, to advise them in this way would be against his calling. He said, “you know the real issue: tear your Union card and don’t worry about the coming winter, or go home with empty pockets, but still free and with all your self-respect as that of any man.” 152

After much discussion among themselves, one Native cannery worker from Unalakleet spoke to the local union members at Koggiung about the need to unite and not to sell out the union by accepting individual proposals. He said, “…to accept an


individual contract would be selling our Union and would not be fair to the other boys who were not brought down here. We'll go home together, and stick together.”

After much discussion the Eskimo cannery workers agreed not to cross the BSFU picket lines and refused to sign individual contracts. They chose instead to reaffirm their commitment to join the striking local fishermen. When it became clear to the industry that the resident cannery workers would not work as long as the BSFU remained on strike, they began to send home the Natives who lived in other areas of the state, some from as far away as Kotzebue above the Arctic Circle.

Word of the strike and the departing cannery workers spread quickly around the Bay in part due to articles published by Father George Endal and James Downey in a Dillingham newsletter called *The Beacon*. The newsletter, published about every two weeks, contained general interest articles about people and events in the Dillingham area. In the summer of 1951, during the time of the strike, *The Beacon* devoted several pages of its four-page newsletter to informing readers about the strike and events surrounding the layoffs and briefly chronicled the history of the unions. The newsletter also put out special issues to announce news of the strike. In this way, Endal, Downey and others could write about the strike from their perspective and get the word out to many in the Bay. The *Anchorage Times* also published several articles during the course of the strike, generally favoring the local resident workers. Other papers that reported on the strike included the *Forty Ninth Star* (Anchorage), the *Seattle Times*, and even the *New York*

A headline on the front page of the *Forty Ninth Star*, published in Anchorage said, "Reds Aim at Eskimo Workers in Bay Area Warns Missionary." 154

Several letters in the Catholic Diocese of Fairbanks Archives, Fairbanks indicate that Convert and Endhal also corresponded regularly with each other and with priests in Alaska and Seattle about the strike. They also contacted a freelance reporter, Louis Huber. Huber visited Bristol Bay in the summer of 1951 to learn more about the strike and wrote about the efforts of the local union to thwart communism. 155

ASI officials advertised their viewpoint through other sources. According to Father Jules Convert, the industry hired a professional public relations advisor from Seattle who visited the Bay to promote the industry. The advisor distributed radio and newspaper ads, provided leaflets to workers being sent back to their villages and posted information in many towns in the territory. 156

The industry also issued stern letters and reports that denounced both the resident fishermen, the cannery strikers and Fathers George Endal and Jules Convert. They inferred that the BSFU had manipulated members of the resident cannery workers. They said Local 46 members participated in the strike to put additional pressure on the Salmon Industry officials to settle with the resident BSFU fishermen. While this was true, the


priests felt that the ASI’s inferior treatment of the cannery workers and the need to improve working conditions at the canneries was really at the heart of the strike.

The industry also had harsh words to say about the involvement of the priests in the strike. Fathers Jules Convert and George Endhal defended their involvement. Endal explained that he and Convert were concerned for the economic, social and spiritual welfare of the Eskimos. Endal and Convert also felt strongly that it was their duty to get involved in the labor issues in Bristol Bay. In one letter from Endal to Father James Conwell, he cited heavily from the Catholic Social Principles by John F. Cornin in regards to strikes. He quoted Cronin, “In any strike, the public might well remember that the workers are not necessarily the real cause of the inconvenience it may suffer. If the strike is just, the employer is morally wrong.”

Endal also let it be known that he would not stand idly by and see the Eskimos brought under domination by suspected Communists. His anti-communism, generally supported by the Catholic Church, was a key factor in his support for the cannery workers. Endal felt that communists had invaded both the labor movement and the society as a whole and that he had a duty to do what he could do prevent communism’s spread.

A series of statements flew back and forth between Seattle and Bristol Bay concerning the strike. The industry claimed in a statement titled “The Real Story Behind the Bristol Bay Story” that as a result of union meddling the Natives would probably go
hungry that winter. Father Convert answered back on behalf of Local 46. He quoted one of the men from Quinhagak, who said “For years, we have managed show how to live thru many winters without Cannery payrolls: we figure that somehow we might find other jobs, and our fishing and hunting will see us through the coming winter.”158

Some fishermen from the Alaska Fishermen’s Union worked through the strike. With no trained workers to process the fish, the cannery bosses and office and kitchen workers began to process the fish and lighter the boats. As soon as they could, the canneries brought in Filipino and California migrant workers to replace the estimated 200-500 Eskimo workers whom they had sent back to their villages.159

The strike continued for eight days at the height of the Bristol Bay salmon season. Finally, on July 4, 1951, both the Bristol Bay fishermen and cannery union reached an agreement with the ASI. The BSFU members, motivated at least in part by the selfless participation of the resident cannery workers, agreed to lower their demands and accept the 40 cent price if the cannery owners gave members of resident cannery workers a 15 percent raise, bedding and 20 cents on each case of salmon to set up a welfare fund for workers in the off-season. The canneries also promised that the workers sent home from the canneries in the 1951 season would get their jobs back the following season.


The 1951 salmon season throughout Alaska had poor results due to steadily decreasing runs during that period. In Bristol Bay the strike exacerbated this. 160

The aftermath of the strike brought further accusations on both sides. Judge W.C. Arnold, the ASI lobbyist, wielded a lot of power with the Seattle fishing industry and used his influence to try and discredit Father Jules Convert. He wrote in a letter to Bishop Gleeson, "it is regrettable that he [Father Jules Convert] did not confine his activities to the field for which he is fitted." 161

Father George Endal wrote a harsh ten-point criticism of W.C. Arnold’s letter saying that Mr. Arnold was "raving mad when he wrote." He also described Arnold as dishonest and said that he had sided with the communists of the ILWU in the dispute. 162 In fact, Arnold’s actions appear to have been motivated more by profit than either politics or insanity.

Other priests within Alaska also harshly scolded Fathers Jules Convert and Endal for their negative views against the canneries and accused them of wanting to "win at any cost." 163 The severe censure from the other priests particularly concerned Father Jules Convert, who turned to Bishop Gleeson and asked him what he had done to deserve such


harsh criticism. Gleeson, who tended to let his priests sort out their own problems, pondered the question, then finally answered that, "prudence is a gift of the spirit, sure, but so is fortitude."

Bishop Gleeson also heard complaints about Convert's role in the strike from "good Catholics" involved in the industry. He heard from the president of the Catholic Seattle University. The Seattle University leader worried that future donations to the institution from Seattle-based cannery owners might vanish due to the priest's actions in supporting the strike.

The Archbishops of Seattle and San Francisco even received complaints that eventually ended up at the Vatican in Rome. To try and stem the flow of criticism, Convert asked Bishop Gleeson to send an impartial observer to investigate his activities. Bishop Gleeson, sensitive to the complaints, complied with this request and sent for Father Clifford A. Carroll, S.J.

Father Clifford Carroll, a socio-economics professor from Gonzaga University in eastern Washington state, held a doctorate in economics from St. Louis University. He also had considerable experience in labor relations and labor conciliation. Carroll visited


the Bristol Bay area, conducted thorough interviews, read all available accounts of the strike and wrote a report.167

His report concluded that Convert’s personal conduct was above reproach. He described Convert as a “Frenchman with an agile, well-trained mind.”168 He suggested that those who tried to argue with Father Jules Convert probably regretted it because of the adept way he handled himself. The report also stated that Bishop Gleeson supported the stand of his priests wholeheartedly. The document eventually made its way to Rome and into the hands of the Father General, John Baptist Janssens. The Father General wrote personally to Father Jules Convert and encouraged him to continue his good works.169

Historical documentation indicates that the Jesuit priests played a critical role in the strike. Both Convert and Endal felt it their moral duty to keep the suspected communist backed unions out of Bristol Bay. They did this through extensive letter writing campaigns to union leaders. Senator Bob Bartlett and Territorial Governor Ernest Gruening, by backing the development of the BSFU and by getting articles published in the Dillingham Beacon newsletter. Both priests also worked hard to get the local Natives assimilated into the western culture though acceptance and participation in the wage


For Convert, his background working on the docks in Marseilles, France, and his academic training reinforced his views and probably influenced him to take an active role as a union representative. As a union leader, Convert had access to current information about union politics and other labor disputes and as a priest used his influence with the local Natives. This is supported by the fact that the settlement of the 1949 PAF dispute included an appointment of Convert, Endal and other clergy to administer a relief fund set up to aid cannery workers in the off-season.

Further evidence of Covert's influence among the strikers comes through his writings. He wrote a document after the strike titled "History of the Bristol Bay Resident Cannery worker's Strike." In it, he calls himself the priest-worker of cannery worker's Local 46 AFL, and describes many letters he wrote prior to the strike, on behalf of the local Native cannery workers. He also describes how he acted as an interpreter for the Natives in events outside of the Bay. 170 His writings generally lack the zeal of anti-communism exhibited in the letters and articles written by Father George Endal, but he appears instead to have been motivated by the sincere desire to improve the lot of the Native congregation he served by assisting them in getting fair wages and improving working conditions in the salmon canning industry. In his historical account, Father Jules Convert describes how he explained the circumstances of the strike to the local cannery workers and suggests that he ultimately left it up to them. After the cannery workers

voted to strike he wrote, "This last week has made men out of our 'boys' and I am proud of the stand they freely adopted." 171

While the priests clearly played an important role in the strike, the Natives who worked in Southeast Alaska, British Columbia and Washington had a long history of participating willingly in labor strikes against cannery owners. Rolf Knight writes of several strikes by the Cowichan Indians of British Columbia as early as the mid 1800s. 172 The Chilkat Indians of Southeast Alaska also participated in strikes in the 1890s. At regular intervals, the navy was summoned to intimidate the Chilkat Indians into working for whatever wages absentee cannery owners decided to pay. 173 In the Bulletin of the United States Fish Commission, Jefferson Moser writes that in the early 1900s the Natives in southeast struck successfully to increase the men's daily wage from 1.50/day to $2.00/day. 174 It appears that like other Native cannery workers along the west coast, the Natives in Bristol Bay also recognized the power of the labor strike.

Regardless of whether it was Father Convert who ultimately convinced the local Natives to strike or not, it appears clear that the priest's authority and role in the


community and in the union assisted and influenced local understanding of the strike and its implications.

Father Jules Convert also believed that his and Father Endal’s work in the strike changed the way the Catholic Church in Alaska viewed socioeconomic involvement in the lives of those to whom it sought to minister. Father Jules Convert wrote, “I rather believe that what I did then with Father Endal of Dillingham marked the beginning of the Mission’s concern in the human condition of the Natives and activity in socio-economic affairs.”

Many people and organizations both within and outside Alaska supported the Bering Sea Fishermen and the cannery workers strike. Supporters included the Hoisting Engineers, machinists, carpenters, Sailor’s Union of the Pacific, Seafarer’s International of North America, Alaska Territorial Governor Ernest Gruening, Alaska’s Delegate to Congress Bob Bartlett, the Alaska Fisheries Board, the Alaska Native Brotherhood, and the Anchorage Central Labor Council.

The work by residents in Alaska to gain an equal footing with non-residents in the fishing industry contributed greatly to the growing political climate that eventually made the control of the fisheries a key issue in the statehood debate. Not surprisingly the Seattle-based salmon canneries and steamship companies became the biggest opponents of the statehood movement. W.C. Arnold, as industry spokesman, attended hearings and fought hard against all measures to enable Alaska to become a state. The canneries
feared stricter regulation and the abolishment of fish traps, which had allowed them to limit the number of fishermen and catch vast quantities of salmon with relative ease. They obviously had a lot to lose if Alaska became a state.

The struggle between the residents and the outside interests in the salmon industry did not end with the 1951 strike. The tension continued to mount as the fishing runs declined in Bristol Bay and other parts of Alaska. In 1953, the President declared Bristol Bay and other fishing areas in Alaska to be major disaster areas. The Governor of Alaska in cooperation with federal agencies initiated emergency assistance programs. Under these programs, nine villages in the Dillingham area, seven in the Illiamna area and eight in the Naknek area received 100,057 pounds of emergency food rations. The Red Cross distributed another $9,264.07 worth of supplemental foodstuffs including $2,297.90 worth of supplies to Naknek residents. Under a fishermen’s public works program two prefabricated schools were erected at Pile Bay and Pedro Bay costing about $23,000. On November 10, 1954, the President again came to the rescue of hard hit fishing areas by declaring another “major disaster.” Approximately the same program for distribution of food took place in the winter of 1954-1955. 176


176 “Survey by Miss Uttech, February, 1954.” Record Group 111, Office of the Secretary of Alaska, Series 103, Fisherman’s Aid Program Folder Title: Survey, Bristol Bay, National Archives, Pacific Alaska Region, Anchorage Alaska.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

An examination of the history of the Bristol Bay salmon strike and the events that led up to the strike illustrates that the belief that Alaska was isolated and independent from the rest of the world was an illusion. Evidence shows that despite its geographical remoteness, even early Native inhabitants in Bristol Bay had exposure to other cultures. They regularly traded their coastal products like dried fish, seal and beluga oil and sea mammal skins for inland products like furs and wood wares. Coastal arctic Natives also traveled to Siberia and traded with Siberians who introduced them to iron, tea, tobacco and other European goods. In turn, these Natives traded these goods for products from Bristol Bay. This thriving trade continued in Bristol Bay when the Russians arrived. The Natives traded beads and European goods for furs and assisted the Russians in traveling to other regions for trade. The Russian influence along the coastal regions of Alaska is evident in language and place names that still exist today. The Natives constantly showed an ability to adapt their culture to meet the challenges of a changing world.

The history of early trading and exposure to other cultures amongst the Natives of Alaska clearly contradicts the frontier notion of the 'pure savage' encountered by the first settlers as described by Turner. While certainly not all Natives had seen non-Natives first-hand, newcomers to Alaska did not confront a land of ignorant Natives who had no concept of a world outside their own boundaries. Newcomers to the land quickly learned
that many of the Native inhabitants knew not only how to trade but were ruthless negotiators.

Other evidence besides the abundance of early trade routes and encounters with other cultures shows that despite its geographical distance Alaska was not as isolated as might be suggested by the frontier theory. The labor force in the salmon industry is a good illustration of this. Drawing a seasonal labor force from outside of Alaska began as a necessity. Residents in Bristol Bay, primarily Yup’iks, were few and far-flung with only minimal interest in spending their valuable subsistence time earning cash wages that would not carry them through the winter. Most of the people who worked in the fishing industry came by ship from Seattle and San Francisco and originally hailed from far away places like China and Europe.

As the salmon industry grew, it exposed the Natives to many other cultures – Americans, Chinese, Japanese, Mexican, Afro-Americans, Filipinos, Norwegians, Swedes, Italians and other Europeans. The local inhabitants of Alaska became even more accustomed to different goods of non-Native origin and from different parts of the world. Some of the foreign trade goods, like the Chinese Gin introduced by the Chinese cannery workers, also brought many social changes.

The Natives even became exposed to other cultures’ foods. When the fishermen and cannery workers arrived, the canneries did not feed them Native Alaskan foods but rather food from their Native countries such as Scandinavia or Greece. This also shows a land not so separate from the outside. Later, as transportation improved and aviation became
possible, local airstrips allowed more direct travel between Bristol Bay and the rest of the world, further facilitating trade.

Regulations from outside Alaska also influenced how the Alaska fishing industry developed. Alaskans were connected to the outside the territory by the application of numerous federal laws and regulations. The federal Chinese Exclusionary Act that resulted in the abolition of hiring Chinese in the salmon industry is one such example. Prior to the Act and its renewal, Chinese workers dominated the canneries. The law allowed Chinese laborers to remain but permitted no new immigration to take place. This resulted in an aging work force and importation of other workers, Asian and non-Asian.

Others laws enacted by Congress affected the salmon industry in Alaska. Fishing regulations dictated who caught the fish, methods used to catch fish, and to varying degrees regulated the size of the catch. Alaskans had little control over regulating the salmon industry. Rather, at the time of the strike, small and large conglomerates from San Francisco and Seattle owned the canneries and joined together to form the ASI. The ASI, with headquarters in Seattle, lobbied hard to get legislation that favored the canneries and fought with any Alaskans who supported regulations that might cost the salmon packers’ profits. Lawmakers and lobbyists from outside Alaska, particularly from the state of Washington, formulated and helped to pass the laws that regulated the fishing industry in Alaska and Bristol Bay. Alaska was greatly influenced by these actions that took place outside.

During the development of the fishing industry, Alaskans did not play a role in formulating or resolving any of the issues that arose as the industry’s labor force took
form. Rather, the canneries from the west coast set the prices and contracted with the
west coast fishermen and Asian contractors to catch and process the salmon in Bristol
Bay. Later, in the 1930's, with the passage of the NLRA, more and more unions formed
across the United States. As the Non-Native population in Bristol Bay increased, this
trend affected Bristol Bay, where dozens of craft unions soon formed to replace the
former contract system.

The politics of unions and union affiliation nationally also greatly affected the
salmon industry in Bristol Bay. Like the rest of the United States, squabbles over craft
versus industrial unionism began to take place in Bristol Bay. Industrial unions affiliated
with the CIO wanted to replace the AFL-affiliated craft unions that represented workers
in Bristol Bay. This battle became further complicated by a growing fear in America that
communists wanted to disrupt the American way of life and that industrial unions were a
vehicle with which to do this.

As workers from outside Alaska became scarce during World War II, fishermen and
cannery workers from Alaska began to take over the work force. The Jesuits, who
ministered to many of the Yup'iks in Bristol Bay, also began to get involved. Some of
the Jesuits, like Fathers Jules Covert, George Endal, John Fox and Paul C. O'Connor, felt
it was time for the Natives to take a more active role in working and having a say in the
development of the fishing industry. They observed that the Natives did not live isolated
lifestyles and needed cash to pay for modern conveniences like electricity and store
bought items that they had grown accustomed to.
Alaska was not immune to the national fear of Communism in the middle of last century. In the 1950's, Congress sent a committee to Alaska to investigate the communist infiltration of maritime and fisheries unions. The Catholic Church in other parts of the United States took a stand against communism, and church leaders in Alaska did too. The Catholic Church got involved in the fracas by allowing Father Jules Convert to become a worker in the canneries and a union leader. Convert encouraged the Eskimos to stand up to the ASI to fight for better wages and working conditions and to reject any offers to join unions affiliated with the ILWU, a union suspected of having been infiltrated by communists. Father George Endal’s vehement zeal regarding the perceived threat of communists reflected the views held at that time by the many Americans who believed that someone must stop the “communist-led” unions. His articles in the Dillingham Beacon clearly illustrate his perception of a communist threat in Alaska, and no doubt the attitude within the national Catholic Church at the time also motivated him in his stand against outside unions suspected of communism.

Father Convert appeared to have a different motivation. His background and knowledge of economics and labor issues had a lot to do with his involvement during the 1951 labor strike. His many letters to Governor Ernest Gruening, Senator Bob Bartlett and leaders in the Catholic Church showed that he followed the issues closely and was committed to improve the working conditions of the Bristol Bay Native cannery workers. His role as union agent was unique and probably made a difference in the willingness of the cannery workers to join in the strike. Still, the Natives of Bristol Bay would have heard of other strikes by Natives in the salmon industry along the west coast. This also
would have influenced their decision to strike and further shows that Alaska was not isolated.

The Bristol Bay Controversy and the events leading up to it clearly illustrates that Alaska did not fit into the stereotype suggested by Turner. Alaska’s salmon industry relied heavily on outsiders and outside events and was not independent or isolated from the rest of the United States. The 1951 strike in Bristol Bay demonstrates the strong connection to the west coast and to absentee cannery owners. It also shows that the Natives of Alaska were important in the development of the salmon industry in Alaska and were willing to stand up to the outside interests in an attempt to become more independent.
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