

## **SALMON BEFORE THE CITY - Dena'ina relationship to Salmon and Watersheds in Anchorage**

Salmon have sustained the Dena'ina, the original people of Anchorage, for countless generations. In the upper inlet Dena'ina Athabascan language, salmon are *liq'a*. Each species has its distinctive Dena'ina name: *liq'aka'a*, king salmon (literally "big salmon"); *q'uya*, sockeye salmon; *seyi*, chum salmon; *qughuna*, pink salmon (literally "humped"), and *nudleghi*, coho salmon.

Traditionally, the Dena'ina lived in villages in late fall, winter, and early spring. Several related families occupied houses made of wood and bark called *nichit*. Nearby were caches with supplies of dried fish, dried meat, and oil produced from fish, bears, and marine mammals. The numerous villages on the banks of *Nuti* ("Salt Water," the Dena'ina name for Knik Arm) and along its tributaries included *Nughay Bena* (at Knik Lake), *Łajat* (on Cottonwood Creek), *Benteh* (in the present-day Wasilla area), *Hutnaynut'i* (near Bodenbergt Butte), *Niteh* (on the lower Knik River), and *Idlughet* (Eklutna).

In spring, the *K'enaht'ana*, the Dena'ina of Knik Arm, left their villages for fish camps in what is now Anchorage, including Ship Creek, called *Dgheyaytnu*, "Needlefish Creek." Before the salmon returned, people harvested these boney fish with dipnets and boiled them for soup, to supplement dwindling food supplies.

But without a doubt, harvesting and preserving large quantities of salmon was most crucial to Dena'ina survival. June is *Łiq'aka'a N'u*, "King Salmon Month," and salmon fishing continued through the summer. Over the tidal flats, the Dena'ina built dipnetting platforms of poles, called "*tanik'edi*" (Figure 1). *Tak'at* (another name for dipnetting platform), near Cairn Point and today's Port of Anchorage, and *Nuch'ishtunt* ("Place Protected from Wind"; Pt. Woronzof) were traditional sites for *tanik'edi*. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dena'ina families from Knik and Eklutna fished with set gillnets at *Tak'at* and *Nuch'ishtunt* (Figure 2, Figure 3).

The Dena'ina also fished for salmon in streams, using fish traps (*tay'in*) and weirs (Figure 4), dipnets, and spears. *Chanshtnu* ("Grass Creek"; anglicized to "Chester Creek") was the site of several Dena'ina fish camps into the 1920s (Figure 5).

Fish camps contained tent frames, smokehouses, steambaths, and drying racks. Men, women, and children worked together to produce a variety of traditional foods, including *baba* (dried salmon), *balik* (smoked salmon

strips), *k'iytin* (smoked salmon backbones), *k'tsi duggen* (salmon heads), and *chuqilin* (salmon fermented in underground caches).

The Dena'ina celebrated the return of salmon each spring with the First Salmon Ceremony. The first king salmon was carefully cleaned, cooked, and laid on a bed of grass. After taking sweat baths and dressing in their best clothes, the people of the village or camp ate the salmon together. The traditional story about *Beł Dink'ughlaghen*, The Salmon Boy, explains the origin of this ceremony that highlights Dena'ina values of respect for fish and wildlife and the generous sharing of harvests within the community.

The development of Anchorage ended Dena'ina subsistence salmon fishing at most of the traditional locations around the city. Fish camp locations on Ship Creek and Chester Creek passed into private, non-Dena'ina ownership. The fish camp at *Tak'at* was destroyed when Fort Richardson's Elmendorf Field was developed around 1940. Federal fishery authorities closed Point Woronzof in the 1940s. Displaced Dena'ina families moved to other locations, such as Fire Island, Point Possession, and Montana Creek.

Salmon remain an important food for all Dena'ina communities today. The Eklutna Tribe and the Knik Tribe conduct educational fisheries in Knik Arm, where children are taught how to harvest and process salmon. Such activities maintain links with the traditional uses of the salmon runs of *Dena'ina Ełnena*, the Dena'ina Homeland.

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July 8, 2007