

An Encounter With a Seagoing River Otter

(I don't really know where to make this story of dad's "fit" so I'm just dropping it in here. Dad)

Dear Joe [*Ed. Dad's best friend Joe O'Leary, naturally*]:

I received the two fine bows you sent today. That box was very obstinate. I was anxious to see what was within it but began with caution to pry it open. It wouldn't pry. In fact, it resisted everything in the mild language class and only after a vicious assault did it yield up its treasure. At present the room is strewn with wood splinters and fragments of cloth, but on the couch trimly poised are two bows with anxious muscles. I'm sure I will get great pleasure from their company and use. Thanks without end, for your generosity.

It is perhaps fortunate that they arrived no sooner than they did. Had one been in my possession a week ago I may have committed a crime against nature which, as it is, was attempted but not accomplished.

The ocean has a fascination for me I can't always resist. Proof of this is that the following incident occurred after 36 hours of activity and work, with no rest. I arose early the morning of the 25th and worked on an old salt water tackle, whose face I am lifting, until evening. I went to work and worked all night on the dock until noon the next day. Instead of relaxing as I should have done I followed my partner's deflated carcass home, ate, then hurried back down to the dock with some herring snagging gear. This consisted of some 20 fathoms of line, which is perpetually snarled up with a swarm of trident hooks. The herring were running!

Since I had learned from you that the way to enjoy one's self was not too long for bananas while lying under an apple tree, but instead to get up and eat apples, or, in short to enjoy what is available in your locality, I was determined I was going to snag herring. Herring snagging is a local sport, here in Seward, Alaska. However, fishing from the government owned dock is illegal, so I slyly took to the rat paths underneath it.

I quickly snagged piling, myself, old rotten lines, and an empty beer can. I did derive great pleasure, however, from the knowledge that I was defying the government as well as enjoying the act of doing something in secret—as we did when we dug up ancient human bones in an algeroba thicket in the Hawaiian Islands

during the last year of the great war. I was also pleased by visions of a crisp-fried pan full of herring which vision was replaced by thoughts of the undesirable characteristics of herring: scales; they were abundant and come off readily all over ones clothes and in your hair Then too, they are oily and generally have worms. I was beginning to lose some of my enthusiasm for the dubious delights of piling snagging when I became involved in something much more interesting.

As I impatiently unsnarled hooks and line I gradually became aware of another living presence nearby. I looked over my shoulder and there was one of the most marvelous, creatures I've ever seen; a large ocean-going river otter about 20 yards away. This fellow was cleaning his face on a soggy old float. This float, made of huge timbers, was about six by eighteen feet, and was once used by repairmen under the dock.

His sleek fur was a grey-smoke brown with a cream-colored area under his chin, running down his throat and across his chest. His stiff whiskers pointed back from his dainty nose like barbs on an arrow head.

After a bit he roused himself and standing, poised broadside to me on the end of the raft. His body consisted of three symmetrical arches: neck, body, and tail. In a moment, these arches flowed into one as he looped noiselessly into the water. I was thrilled.

After an interval of about ten seconds he reappeared and flopped an Irish Lord onto the float and effortlessly landed beside it. An Irish Lord is a small fish with a large bony head and an abundance of spines along its back and at its fin ends. The otter methodically placed the fish nose down, tail vertical, and proceeded to devour it. His powerful jaws and sharp teeth snipped off the bony fins and bit into the tail like fingernail clippers on tissue paper. I then noticed several bony



Figure 1 <http://www.unomaha.edu/~abls/images/Sea%20otter.jpg>

heads strewn around on the raft. Apparently it was one of his feeding stations..

The Irish Lord flipped about vigorously at first, but as he was clipped down his energy vanished. I could hear his bones being ground up like the sound of potato chips underfoot. His serpentine grace and power chilled me with delight. He was truly a magnificent creature being about four feet long and streamlined in every detail. When he exerted himself power swept over his body like a flipped coil traveling along a rope. As I watched him a diabolical plan germinated in my mind.

There on the float I saw a beautiful fur for my wife and a skull for Joe. One was, of course, still wrapped in the other and I was totally unarmed for any capture plan. I noted that a series of large beams, bolted to the piling, ran parallel to the caters surface and about four feet above it. I also saw that by some cautious maneuvering I could work my way around and end up alongside the float. I began a stalk. Barnacles occasionally crackled underfoot but the constant creaking and rustling common to an old dock covered up this noise. I managed to keep piling between us while I subtracted distance, pausing now and then to peer cautiously around a slimy pile to see if his radar had picked me up. Apparently he was totally unaware of my presence. He was a real glutton and was now lying on one side facing away from me, making my approach easier.

Finally my scratched and flushed face drifted from behind the last piling and there he was! I could now see his face as he relished every bite with his eyes closed. Not content I edged nearer and out on the last beam until I was at his side, but four feet above him. I struggled with two opposing feelings: I wanted him to be frightened away before he was harmed; I selfishly wanted to get him if at all possible. I watched him for sometime trying to decide the issue. One thing was certain; he really liked fish and closed his eyes during the passage of every savored mouthful down the arches. He was now nearing the end (or head) of his fish so I must act soon or risk discovery. I made some calculations.

I weighed over 200 pounds; I had on heavy logger boots so the force of my weight down from a height of four feet should be sufficient to stun a small ox, at least. I carefully prepared myself as I decided to leap on him cowboy style with one heavy, sharp heel between his shoulders and the other at the base of his skull.

I swallowed my heart for the last time and plummeted down like a burnt out rocket. I didn't mean to get my hands near him as I expected the dive to disable him. After falling a thousand feet in a split second I connected—ka-whump. All hell broke loose. Although he was totally unaware of my presence his magnificent faculties snapped his body into a great dynamo of vicious energy in a millisecond. It

was like I had jumped onto a moving cannon ball. His head flicked back and his razor teeth laid open my boot heel. He was larger than I had thought. I had the distinct impression that I had encountered a terrifically spinning rocket full of steel springs. The damage I inflicted was all on myself. The float listed heavily, green water slopped on board. Everything seemed to spin around but I managed to stay on board. Picture this :

A big clumsy oaf draped over an old water-logged float like a collapsed parachute while alongside is a big exclamation mark in the water with ever widening circles dedicating the watery exit of one of nature's most magnificent creatures. I'm glad I lost.

As ever. Your Alaska correspondent, from Seward, Alaska
James A. Jensen

Steam Engines

This was the era of steam engines. Diesels existed but didn't arrive in Seward until after I went there in 1951. It was a momentous occasion when a ship off-loaded the first diesel locomotive. Meantime, the City Dock was serviced by steam locomotives. The dock was also known as the Railroad Dock.



Two sets of rails ran out to the dock and were serviced by engines that pulled box cars, flat cars or reefers [refrigerator cars]. Freight was generally being off-

loaded to be hauled to the interior of the territory. There were two unions, one that worked inside ships and one that worked on the docks. Dad worked "dockside". The wind is blowing so hard that the plume of smoke is ahead of the engine - OR - the engine is going backwards?

Seward Draft Board

I don't know the particulars behind this fact, but dad had to register with his "local draft board". Since he lived in Seward when he decided it was time to get registered, he had to go to the Seward Draft Board. It remained his Draft Board for the

remainder of his life, just like a Boston Draft Board has been my own. On January 22, 1941 dad was registered.

Registrant must sign here

REGISTRATION CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that in accordance with the
Selective Service Proclamation of the President of the United States

James Alvin Jensen
 (First name) (Middle name) (Last name)

Seward Alaska
 (No. and street or R. F. D. No.; city or town, county and State)

has been duly registered this 22 day of January, 1941

Brian M. Mallow
 (Signature of registrar)

Registrar for Seward Alaska
 (Precinct) (Ward) (City or county) (State)

BE ALERT { Keep in touch with your Local Board.
 Notify Local Board immediately of change of address.
CARRY THIS CARD WITH YOU AT ALL TIMES

D. S. S. Form 2 16-17105

Fishing

In the days they got married, the Cannery Dock was still a functioning place at the south end of town just beyond the end of the rails. So the dock was sound. It looks in better repair than when Dick and I fished there 10 years later. The day was overcast and apparently cool or she wouldn't have been wearing a coat. This is the precise spot that Dick and I fished 8 years later. The ocean wasn't tilted then. Mom used a hand line, like we did, to land this cod, the kind that grew abundantly and large in the bay. We caught many of the smaller cod, always trying to catch the big ones like this one. We never succeeded. The distance from the edge of the dock to the surface of the water was about 15-20 feet so the line had to be long just to get into the water. Pulling up a fish this size as it struggled would have been hard. Notice how she bears the weight of that flopping fish on her thumb?! She was a strong woman.

Her beanie with feathers and nice clothes were her hallmark. Neatness and tidiness were critical things in her inventory of "what's important for Marie?"

She is wearing a long skirt, not jeans or slacks, even though she's fishing.



Figure 4 Cod on Cannery Dock