

NINILCHIK

The Great Clam Digging Expedition featuring
THE T-BONE HANDY STANDOFF

I had heard many stories about digging razor clams on Cook's Inlet and developed a strong desire to try the sport. Clams are dug there with a Clam Gun, which is a short handled shovel with a long narrow blade. Shortly after I went to Alaska I went with Dave Carlson on a trip from Seward to Cook's Inlet over the new highway. We stopped in Cooper's Landing at the bottom of Kenai Lake and talked with an old timer called "Clam Gun Moore". He was full of Alaska stories but was best known for his skill as a clam digger. I thought of going clam digging with him but it would be hard to arrange because I had no car. I realized I would have to get with someone in Seward who had a vehicle. An idea about a possible candidate came to me on the way home.

An old timer, Nels Hagen, operated a small salmon cannery near the Seward City Dock and occasionally worked as a longshoreman between salmon runs. Being fascinated by "old-timers" and Alaska history I often talked with him when we happened to be working on the same gang.

He spoke with a Norwegian accent and always wore a large patch on the right side of his nose. Cancer, I suppose, but he was a colorful character and I learned much about the early days in the territory. I made him an offer? if he would take me clam digging on Cook's Inlet with his pickup truck, I would pay all expenses and furnish a lunch. I agreed to drive, and also that a friend of his, Walter Johnston, could go with us. Nels assured me that we could stay with a dear old friend of his, T-Bone Handy, who had a cabin near Ninilchik, which had a beach famous for giant razor clams.

Nels said he had packboards and clam guns for himself and Walter but I would have to furnish my own. I borrowed a clam gun, packboard, and a square five gallon can with the top cut out. The can would be lashed to the packboard and filled with giant razor clams, many of which would be over 10 inches long.

We loaded our gear in the pickup and left town before daybreak. Nels insisted that we stop and rest every 50 miles. The pickup was old and traveled best on the rough gravel roads at 40 miles an hour so our progress was slow. At each stop we all got out and squatted on the ground, or a rock, log, or bridge railing. The trip took all day one way, the trip with Carlson lasted less than three hours.

As we traveled along the conversation between Nels and Walter began to focus on T-Bone Handy, an old timer of sterling character and a wonderful friend. He was always ready, they said, to even help strangers out. No need was too great



for him to cheerfully take care of. He sounded to me like a saint; exactly the sort of friend I would like to have waiting at the end of a long hard trip. The vehicle seats were hard and lumpy but not to worry, they agreed, we'd soon be drifting off to sleep with our stomachs full of moose meat, on wild-goose down-filled bunks in T-Bone's hospitable cabin. They both knew and admired him.

As the day wore on we crept slowly down the Kenai peninsula. My two companions so eloquently sang the praises of their waiting friend that the sole purpose of our arduous journey gradually became the delightful pleasures to be showered upon us in the luxurious cabin of T-Bone Handy. Clams were completely forgotten. Delicious two inch thick moose steaks would doubtless be pressed on us, no matter what time we arrived. I was assured that, though a stranger, I would be welcomed as a long lost brother. T-Bone would surely insist we stay with him a week and would no doubt take us to special places where no human foot had ever trod. The two of them were completely hypnotized by their persistent recitals of T-Bone's long history of hospitality to all wanderers, and succor for the destitute, no matter how desperate the situation. I realized I was watching a process of self brain-washing and even began to wonder if there really could be such a princely

human being as they described; he was hospitality personified; he wrote the book on hospitality.

We eventually reached the little village of Soldotna, a tiny village on the shore of Cook's Inlet. The graveled highway forked; right fork to Kenai, left fork Ninilchik, Anchor River, Homer and Seldovia. The day was over and we were tired and hungry after our wearisome travel. The sun set before we reached Soldotna, but not to worry, a hot meal and a warm soft bed awaited us at the good ole T-Bone Handy Emporium of Hospitality, and Friendship. I began to believe we were doing T-Bone a favor by dropping in on him and allowing him to take care of our needs.

The night was moonless and black before we rounded a curve and saw a random collection of weak lights. They were the kerosene lamps of Ninilchik, one of the oldest villages established by the Russians, before the U.S. practically won Alaska in a crap game. The village was primitive. Its people still lived without electricity.

The village was located in a cove cut out of a hundred foot high bluff paralleling the ocean. The cove was formed by a creek providing the village with non-salty water. I was instructed to slow down (from 40 to 20 mph) so we could enjoy the view (?) after which we continued for another half mile to T-Bone Handy "s driveway. And a curious "driveway" it turned out to be.

The road was scarcely two lanes wide so it was with some anxiety that I had to park with two wheels beginning to slide off into bottomless glacial muck. Glowing with expectation Nels and Walter began a 150 yard hike up a swampy path to T-Bone's cabin. I was puzzled by the fact that such a grand benefactor would force all of his weary visitors and destitute travelers to struggle across what appeared (side-lit by our headlights) to be a hip-deep quagmire, to be succored. I had a premonition.

After they disappeared into the inky blackness I turned the headlights off and waited. I kept my window rolled down enough to enjoy the loud shouts of joy and happiness, occasioned by the reunion of old buddies. I was somewhat concerned, however, that in his enthusiastic welcome T-Bone might knock one of the bone-weary travelers down with an over vigorous back slap. But the inky blackness swallowed up more than just my companions. Something in it blasted away an illusion as delicate as an overripe raspberry: presumptuous expectations. Ten sticks of dynamite couldn't have done a more complete job. But let us return to our weary travelers going toward the cabin.

No traffic, or other source of light broke the monotony of the black void in which I waited. It was a long wait, and for shouts of happiness and joy, I waited in

vain. Eventually my aching eyes made out two dim figures staggering down the narrow path. They came up onto the road and stood there. I opened my door, waiting for some kind of explanation, but they just stood there. I climbed out, not knowing what they had planned for overnight parking off the very narrow road; but they simply stood there like bags of sawdust. I said; "Well?" Still they stood there. I began to sense disaster.

Finally they moved toward me and Nels mumbled; "He said, 'go away'." I then realized the "good old buddy" tape I had been hearing all day had been ripped off its spindles and scattered all over the Kenai peninsula. They climbed slowly back into the cab and though I waited for instructions, they sat there dumb.

I finally realized they were in deep shock, incapable of decision making because they had not previously discussed alternate ideas to work with. All day long they had praised and believed in a Santa Claus, never once thinking about what they would do if Santa rejected them. Their bubble of childish confidence had burst. Their minds were now like the night; pitch black, completely devoid of any spark of creativity.

Fortunately some car lights appeared in the distance. I took a chance, stood out and hailed them. It turned out to be a young couple in a jeep. I asked if they knew of anyone who might take in three travelers. I was surprised when they replied; "Sure. Mrs. Kvasnikoff takes in people now and then. Her cabin is the big two storied one, third cabin down on the left side of the road. There is only one road going through the village", and off they went into the night.

Hooray! Suddenly here was hope for our weary bodies. I crawled back in the truck with the good news but I might as well have tried to get two clams to jump up and down and clap their valves with glee. My companions were emotionally washed out, incapable of responding to any exterior stimulus. I realized I would have to be in charge of their bodies.

Worrying the truck back and forth several times I managed to turn it around and we rattled back to the dim lights. Coasting down a hill into the village I easily found the two storied log building. It was completely dark. Under a gabled end I saw a door and knocked loudly, not knowing what to expect. In a few minutes I heard the upstairs window above me open. Looking up I could faintly make out ahead in a night cap. "Yes?" it said.

"Sorry to disturb you Mam, but would it be possible for you to kindly take in three weary travelers for the night?" "Wait", in a woman's voice. In a short time the door opened to reveal a substantial woman in nightgown and cap, holding a kerosene lamp. "Come in". Her manner was warm and friendly. I didn't detect any

Russian accent. She fixed us a light supper and took us upstairs to three ample beds, the kind old T-Bone Handy was supposed to be tucking us into.

Throughout this coming-in and getting-settled experience my companions uttered not a single word. I was in charge of two bags of sawdust, which fortunately could undress themselves. Knowing there was only one reason for us to be in Ninilchik our hostess gave us some very important information before she went downstairs: "Low tide is at 10:AM. I'll get you up in time to have breakfast. Good night." I don't know about Nels and Walter but I fell into a joyous slumber. Everything had worked out well

I awoke in the morning to the smell of breakfast on the I stove and was glad to see my companions were still alive. Nels sat on the edge of his bed, looked around and even smiled briefly. Breakfast was very good and very ample. She charged each of us \$1.50 for board and breakfast. A great bargain even in those times.

As I walked out the front door I almost gasped in disbelief. A huge husky was tethered to an overhead wire running past the door. A ferocious looking beast, I couldn't believe the three of us had stumbled through the door without stepping on him. As a watchdog he was a true Christian, missing a good chance to polish his canines on three foreigners—which he was supposed to do. A great bluff ran parallel to a straight coastline. The creek emerged from the cove, and confronted by the great barrier bar, turned to the right, running a quarter of a mile along the base of the bluff before turning to the ocean to fan out onto the tideflats. The barrier bar was thrown high by storm tides, and capped by a deep layer of loose, shale-like shingle. I crossed a bridge and parked our front wheels on the loose shingle—which was impossible for a two-wheeled vehicle to cross. To attempt to do so would be very much like trying to ride a bicycle through a ten foot deep pile of grain.

Many clam diggers were already spread out along the wet sand. The beach looked like a vast tilting floor running a quarter of a mile out from the barrier bar. We shouldered our packs and hiked across the now shallow stream. Huge chunks of lignite coal lay randomly along high tide zone. The source was an eight foot thick vein of lignite about three fourths of the way up the bluff. This lignite was young, not yet completely coalified. As slabs of it were reduced by wave action, sections of freed tree limbs were still wood and soft enough to be carved with a knife.

We worked our way out into the area exposed only during the mean tides. I watched Nels select spots to dig. He hunted for a small hole marking the open end of the clams siphuncle, or breathing neck. Quietly placing the tip of his "clam gun"

beside the hole he would suddenly shove it deep into the sand and pulling the handle backward, scoop out a deep narrow hole very close to where he calculated the clam's neck went down. He was careful to miss the neck with his blade.

Throwing the shovel and its chunk of sand aside he quickly reached down with one hand and grabbed into the sand a few inches down from the surface to get a grip on the clam's neck. The trick was to squeeze the neck tight, shutting off the clam's ability to suck in air and push itself deeper into the sand. Nels then held on, squeezing the neck tightly and exerting a gentle pull. In a few moments the clam choked down (or something) and up it came.

The Alaskan razor clam is an elongate bivalve. The shells (valves) are not very thick and if one aims poorly the blade will easily chop the clam up, making a real mess. The Ninilchik beach at that time was producing clams nearly a foot long and four inches wide. Two of them are a good meal for four persons. Further up the coast at Clam Gulch the maximum size was barely half as large as those we were getting. The big clams would not go into the five gallon can, held level between opposite sides. It was necessary to hold them diagonally, that is from corner one to corner three, or corner two to corner four. Of course they could be put in endways. It didn't take long to fill a five gallon can with such monsters.

It was a beautiful sunny day. Also there was action and some excitement along the beach. Two small planes landed on the hard packed sand, and a large four wheel drive vehicle had bogged down while crossing the stream. While we were there it appeared to be abandoned. We saw no one worrying about it, or trying to get it out as the tide came back in. When we hoisted our packboards to leave, a third of the vehicle was under the incoming tide. On the whole, the day was a marvelous experience. I was well satisfied. However, a very interesting sequel to the T-Bone Handy thing developed as we rattled up the Kenai Peninsula on our way home. T-Bone was turned inside-out and pulverized with the cold, hard stones of truth and reality. No punches were pulled.

The tape of friendliness and loving good will was nowhere to be seen on the peninsula; gone, evaporated, it never did exist! T-Bone was, and always had been, according to them now, a son-uva-bitch of the first water. The kind of person who catches mice, cuts two legs off and turns them loose. When he was a baby he caught flies and pulled their legs off.

T-Bone was a barbarian and a first rate rascal. He was a fish thief. Once he raided a fishtrap owned by a widow with ten kids. He took every last fish leaving her deep in debt and penniless to face a cold Alaskan winter. He would follow an old trapper's lines in winter, taking all the choice pelts, leaving only sick and crippled

animals behind. He was worse than that devilish outlaw the Wolverine.

This revelation of the depths of depravity the wretched T- Bone had sank to began as our homeward trip began; a few turns of the wheels and we were on our way. Nels said; "funny thing about last night". "Who would have thought he was like that", was Walter's response, and they were off. By the time I had the old pickup wound up to 40 mph they had old T-Bone running over dogs and when I swung through the curve at Soldotna he had burned down two cabins and stole his best friend's moose. What a scoundrel. I was really glad, by that time, that T-Bone hadn't taken us in last night. He would doubtless have burned his cabin down with us asleep inside it and then run our truck off the Ninilchik bluff.

The farther I went, the more my companions got worked up into a full head of steam until they forgot about the 50 mile stops for resting. Nor did they notice I pushed the old pickup up to 55 miles an hour which made our return home much shorter. When we reached Seward their castigation had reached the state of a full blown wrath, and had we gone on out to Lowell Point they would have been ready to go back to Ninilchik and kill T-Bone.

What a pity. He was once their good buddy. But a man's point of view can change for the worse. Suppose he had maliciously taken us in, pretending to be what they first thought he was, and then trashed his cabin over our sleeping bodies. Whew!

When I got home I told my wife what a narrow escape we had, almost being done in by a fiend named T-Bone Handy.

Downtown Seward

In 1940-41, Seward had a busy downtown with businesses of all kinds, and men of all kinds. The place had far fewer women than men, which had certain



predictable consequences. This is from Mary Barry's book again, and she credits Jean Bogan in the photo. Those cars on the left side of the road are the vintage of the first car we owned in Alaska in 1951.

Somewhere along this street there was a bench that men sat on and fed pigeons. Dad took several shots of them. Nice photo.

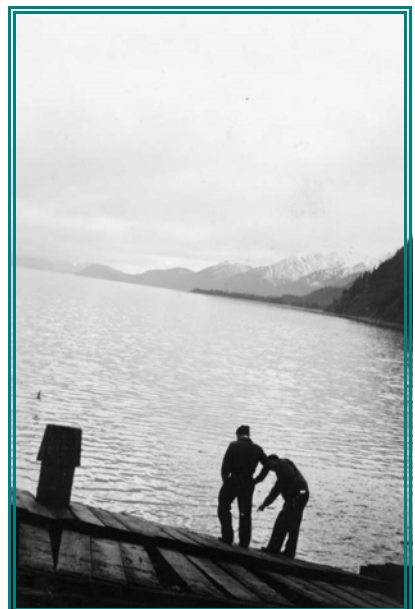


Dad was in Seward for Christmas in 1940. The town celebrated the occasion with a decorated Christmas Tree, something it didn't do when I lived there. One of dad's achievements in school in Leamington was learning calligraphy. He gave Julie the book that he used to learn this art. He excelled and won first prize in a competition. During the first years of his marriage, he would inscribe things for mom with this scrolled writing.



Docks

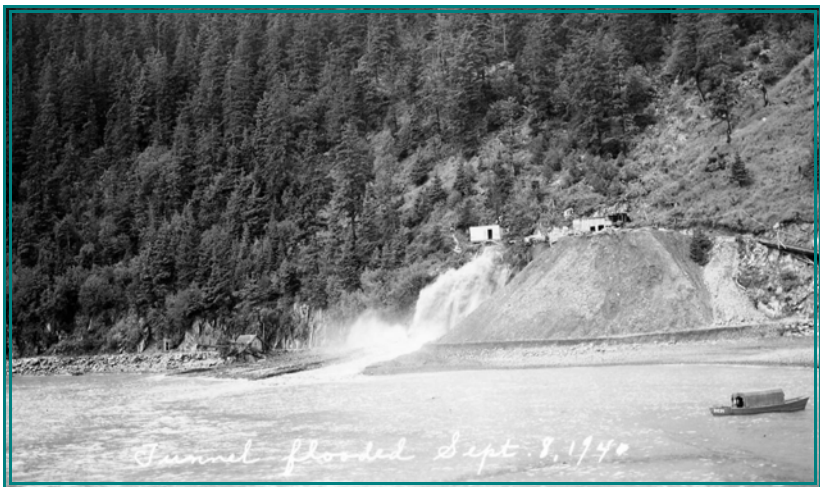
On account of some kind of severe weather in 1940, the warehouses on the City Dock were severely damaged. Dad took a shot of two men checking it out, but note that he did not compose a documentary photo recording the extent of the damage. He skillfully composed an image that took the background into account.



Snow cover always drew dad's attention. The beauty of black and white images attracted his eye and he used his camera to record what impressed him. A steamship is obviously getting up a head of steam to depart. The man walking toward the camera carries a snow shovel for some reason. He's on the railroad access to the City Dock, a much smaller City Dock prior to WW II than it was when I went to Seward. There are four box cars waiting to be loaded with cargo from ships. The mountain in the background is Big Bear.



In the bottom, right corner of the picture is a white spot. That's where the Diversion Tunnel exited Little Bear Mountain. Lowell Creek ran through the center of town but caused havoc every spring so the Army Corps of Engineers constructed a diversion tunnel to make the river bypass town. This tunnel was opened on Sept. 8, 1940.



Tharyel's Investigation

Mom's parents finally agreed to let her go to Alaska. I don't think their initial reaction was positive. Grandma Merrell was as unhappy about this match as she was about anything in mom's life. July, 2002 mom revealed things I had never heard. My problem, which is more academic than real, is trying to figure out how much of this candor results from her brain damage and how much results from a new maturity wherein she regards me as a human being worthy of her confidence, as an adult who won't be somehow critical of her if I hear the "truth", the facts. My inner child, poor needy little smiling kid that he is, would like to believe he had finally entered Valhalla. But he knows better.

Whatever, I am pleased with her revelations that sort of rock my foundation sometimes, e.g. "That's when you dad kicked me out of the house!" Man alive, I had no clue. "Kicked" out? I wanted to do that a time or to but I had no rank. Nor do I understand today what some of these revelations even means. But somehow they enrich my understanding of them, and endear her and him to me. They are human, after all, as troubled and confused and frustrated and tentative and frightened as I am. Good for them. I'll give them license to screw up if they'll reciprocate.

Back to grandma Merrell. You've heard how mild she was? Mom says to this day that her mother never, n-e-v-e-r, hear raised her voice for anything That sort of puts her in the ranks of Saint Augustine, or perhaps Paul. But listen, my hearties, to the rest of the tale. When good ol' peaceful quiet grandma discovered that her 16 year old Marie had been sparking with this James Alvin from foreign territory, i.e. Leamington, and that they two of them, in 5 or 6 weeks decided they would get married, something snapped. She hatched a plan to figure out for herself whether or not this rascal was worthy of her Marie. So get this. As you know, Marie was living with sister Pearl, who was having a baby. Pearl was married to a man named Tharyel, the most god-awful male name I've ever heard. [He ticked -that's the nice word- mom off mightily until he died. Every time he visited her in Provo, the first thing he did, according to her, was head straight for the kitchen whereupon he rifled the cupboards and refrigerator and satisfied his hunger. Repeatedly. No asking for permission, or other politenesses, just pure gluttony, with intermittent burps and sighs and grins, and other signs of happiness and satisfaction. She wanted to slap the beggar, but didn't.]

What grandma did was find her self a telephone there in Naples and she did the extraordinary thing -you kids simply can't grasp how momentous this event was

- of making a long distance telephone call to Mercur. Mom suggested that this phone call was mediated in some manner by her brother Ross' wife Nelma who had been a telephone operator for the Uintah Railroad being based in Watson. That's where Ross met Nelma. Pearl and Tharyel lived in their little store and apparently had the luxury of a telephone for business reasons or some arrangement was made by mail or messenger such that this portentous phone call could take place at such-and-such time. Whereupon, grandma, over the scratchy, hard-to-understand noise, asked for Tharyel.

"Tharyel," she said, "Marie has lost her mind. She says she wants to marry this guy named Alvin Jensen. Do you by any chance know the bouncer?" Tharyel, the honest man he was, said, "Yeah, mom, I know him. Why, he hangs out 'round my store most every night. Ya' see, he comes over here and gives ol' Mable rides on his motorsicle." Grandma didn't know whether or not to be relieved about that information, the motorsicle not having too good of a reputation in them parts. "Would," asked the gentle woman, "you please do some discreet inquiries in the environs about the bonafides of this Alvin and call me back? Specifically, ask if is he a good man, a reliable man, a man worthy of Marie, a man who can be trusted, one who is true to the faith?" Well, ol' Tharyel was cornered like a cat up a tree. What could he say except, "Yeah," which he said, whereupon he did in fact query Alvin's co-workers and friends.

That investigation must have been interesting from Alvin's perspective. Some of the guys who talked to Tharyel doubtless commented about it to Alvin. After completing this FBI background check -of course, I'm assuming her did it without a shred of evidence either way- Tharyel called grandma back and gave his report. He said that no one had any reservations about this Alvin, other than that he rode motorcycles. This allayed grandma's anxieties. She had a pow-wow with Fuller and shared the report. They decided, on the basis of Tharyel's report, to allow Marie to marry Alvin, sight unseen. Remember that part: they never met Alvin until 2 years later.

But anxiety persisted. When the time came for Little Marie to make her virginal trip up to Seward, Alaska, which was on the edge of the map in those days where sea monsters were drawn in next to vacant, vaguely drawn continents, good ol' grandma allowed as how it was ok for Marie to make that trip with one little proviso. Mabel had to accompany her as a chaperone. Well, now we see the truth. Grandma didn't really trust Alvin in spite of Tharyel's heroic investigation of the character of the man. So Mabel, to her eternal delight, since she met her husband there, journeyed to Seward, on Alvin's nickel. More of this later.

The most telling fact I've heard the reveals the extent of grandma Merrell's anxiety about allowing her last daughter to venture alone up to Seward is this: Mom told me this summer that her mom cried more about this than she cried in the rest of her life. When you understand that more than one of grandma's sons found himself afoul of the law, and in jail, etc., you get some perspective on this admission. Poor grandma. But Marie was absolutely determined to follow this vagabond on her own adventure, which she did for the remainder of her life. Will you let your 17 year old kids leave home for good on an adventure to no-man's land?

Mom arrives on SS Alaska

I found this negative in dad's hodge-podge of photos from Alaska. I like to think it is the SS Alaska. Probably isn't, but don't let the truth deflect you from appreciating what her arrival looked to this guy who hung out in Seward for a year working and waiting for his wife-to-be to arrive:



Interestingly, there are no other photos in dad's collection of ships steaming quietly up the bay. This was mom's ship, both of them at their wit's end in anticipation, her steaming up the bay, snow in April still on the tier of mountains lining the bay. What a day.

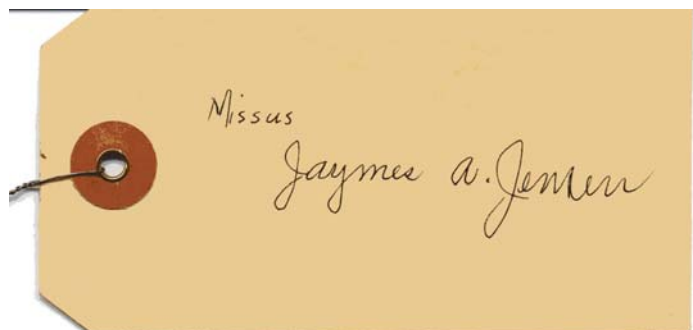
The fact that Seward was a tiny town without much in the way of entertainment meant that anything unusual was a reason for people to show up to watch. When mom arrived in Seward there was doubtless a cluster of people like

these who stood around, some searching for someone they were waiting to meet, others just observing and enjoying the entertainment. I loved watching these events when mom let us go watch, which wasn't as often as I wanted. When the ship arrived, everyone the ship and the dock waited anxiously for the gang plank to be placed so people could debark. It was doubtless this way when mom arrived for dad. (This is from Mary Barry)



Passengers debarking at Seward dock. Alaska Railroad Collection, Anchorage Historical and Fine Arts Museum.

Amongst the oddities squirreled away by dad was this tag that seems to relate to this trip. It looks to me to be a luggage tag that was attached to mom's trunk that she took with her when she shipped to Seward. I love the spellings.



Wedding at Rachel's Place

Rachel is really the reason that Jim's and Marie's plans to get married were fulfilled. After she had forced dad to save the money to get mom to Seward, she also took the wedding plans in hand. She planned the whole thing and had it in her front room. Mom and Mabel even stayed in Rachel's house for the week or so before the wedding. On May 17, 1941, Jim and Marie were married by Judge Bryant, US Commissioner.