

Combat fishing on the Russian River hasn't always been so civil

by Gary Titus

A shot broke the silence of a clear, warm day on the banks of Russian River, and a 30-40 rifle bullet sliced through Bill's right forearm, cut hair off Barney's neck, and slammed into a log in a fishing cabin. Otto had pulled the trigger, and he thought he had good reason to do so. The day had started like any other day; the river was full of sockeye salmon, more than enough to keep the men busy. The smokehouse fire was smoking and ready for a new load of bright red fillets.

Three fishermen, Otto Glatz, Bill Abbott and Barney Flaherty, were catching salmon for the fall and winter commercial market. They were staying at a camp called Kelly Olsen's which was located at the junction of the Kenai and Russian rivers. The camp consisted of four tents, a high cache for keeping salmon and a log house for smoking the fish. The camp was neither tidy nor clean. So, what made Otto cut loose on his fishing partners on that beautiful summer day? Well, fishing on the Russian was tough on the nerves, even in 1912. Bill Abbott was very particular about how to fillet a salmon and was watching Otto like a hawk. Otto just couldn't fillet by "the book" according to Bill. Bill had had enough, and just couldn't resist making a snide remark about Otto's ability to carve fish. Otto responded in German with a remark that had to do with the ancestry of Bill. Otto was so angry, he put down his knife and retired to his tent, hoping to calm down.

At noon, when the partners knocked off for lunch, the conversation heated back up regarding the proper method of cleaning fish. That's when Otto had all he could take, picked up his 30-40 rifle and fired the shot. Barney begged and begged Otto to put down the gun before someone became seriously injured. That provided a diversion for Bill, and he ran upstream to the Kenai Dredging Company to get his arm bandaged. Otto soon realized that Bill was gone, and he figured Bill had headed to Seward to get the marshall. Otto decided to turn himself in and immediately set out for Seward to turn himself in and to tell his side of the story before Bill could.

Only a few years after Otto, Bill, and Barney

worked at commercial salmon harvesting, the Russian River fishery had changed to a sport fishery. By 1915 the Russian River had the reputation as the "greatest fishing stream on the North American continent," according to the Seward Weekly Newspaper. Not all came to fish or shoot at their partners. Mrs. J. H. Sears visited the stream in August of 1915. Not wanting to fish, she decided to jump in for a swim. There was only one problem; Mrs. Sears immediately became part of a huge school of salmon. The salmon had no trouble swimming upstream, but Mrs. Sears was making no headway. Finally, she gave up and swam and crawled through the wiggling mass of salmon to reach the shore.

The Russian River continued to grow in popularity, and a road was extended from the town of Cooper's Landing to the Forest Service Boundary near the confluence in the late 1920s. That didn't mean that accessing the Russian was easy. Fisherman had to first take the train to Kenai Lake, and then catch a boat 20 miles down Kenai Lake to Cooper's Landing. Finally, if they could find Charles Lien, they were in luck. You see, Charles owned the first automobile on this seven-mile road, a Model-T Ford, and for fifty cents he would rent it and let you drive it to the Schooner's Bend bridge. From there, it was a short walk to the Russian River.

Later, the road was extended to the Chugach Forest boundary, and the first Russian River "ferry" was established in the 1930s by Henry "Hank" Lucas, a well-known hunting guide. Hank extended his guiding season by ferrying fisherman across the river and landing them below the confluence using a 25-horsepower outboard motor on a 16-foot riverboat. He charged a buck a head. Hank set up a tent near the present day ferry parking lot that he used as a base camp. Fishing and filleting are not only frustrating for fishermen; bears also have their bad days. Unfortunately for Hank, these bears would take out their frustration by ripping up Hank's tents.

The land area around the Russian River confluence has not really changed much over the passing years. It can still be frustrating for fishermen and bears, with

four months of intense fishing activity. So please remember to clean your salmon in the proper manner and enjoy your fishing trip to the Russian River. Be courteous to other fishermen and the bears. And, oh yes, leave your 30-40 at home.

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