

Harvesting spring—clamming at Ninilchik

by Mari Reeves

There will be some good minus tides for the next few mornings on Cook Inlet beaches. Here's an adventure story that should remind readers of the joys of pursuing the ever-vanishing razor clams.

Dusty spruce trees guard the edge of the newly-thawed Sterling highway. Dirt bikes and four-wheelers on roadside tracks race each other, leaving quarter-mile trails of dust in their wakes. The ice thaws off ponds in the mid-April sun. Moose have calves. The geese are back, and the greenery begins again to produce oxygen. It's the end of winter, the advent of spring and the beginning of new life, growth, and hope. After a particularly dreary and rainy winter, it's a relief to welcome back the sun.

We pull into the campsite in Ninilchik. It's a private deal owned by a middle-aged couple from Anchorage who flies down each weekend in their single-prop airplane to open the place up for overnight camping and halibut charters. We locate the spots we occupied last year in the campground, a large graveled area with an alder woods to the south and a bluff overlooking the ocean to the west and north, and find our friends who have come down this morning. More people are arriving this evening, so we claim several additional sites and stake out our area. We let the dogs loose to socialize with each other and roam from campfire to picnic table in their rambunctious dog pack.

As Friday slowly comes to an end, we nestle in by the campfire with cold bottles of beer and the friends who had been clamming since morning. We eat potatoes, onions, and carrots wrapped in aluminum foil and roasted slowly, buried in ash-covered coals. We sample the clams that the foraging friends harvested, sautéed in white wine and garlic butter. We spear bratwurst sausages on sticks and grill them, splitting them open in the slow-burning heat at the edge of the flames. We take in never-ending spring sunset views and tell stories embellished by beer until late in the evening, as the sun and the mercury slowly but certainly descend. Finally, we take refuge from the freezing night by curling into our warm down sacks and inviting our contented dogs to curl up in the tents and truckbeds beside us.

We awake between 7:30 and 8:00 the next morning to a crystal spring day. Only small white cumulus clouds clutter the expanse of sky beyond the ocean and above snowy Mount Redoubt. Jordan orchestrates the creation of a big breakfast of coffee and French toast, bacon, and scrambled eggs with cheese. We pile together four friends, rain gear, and Animal the dog into the truck and head down to the beach. The Russian Orthodox Church presides in green, white, and gold over the old Ninilchik village, atop the hill overlooking the ocean.

As we pile out of the car onto the dirt road, a couple of ten-year-old boys walk by us, covered from head to toe in fine, silty mud. Adequately warned of the conditions, we don rain gear and hip waders, then duct tape heavy-duty kitchen gloves to the sleeves of our slick plastic raincoats. We pull our hats down over our eyebrows to protect our pale faces from the newly-returned sun. We secure our sunglasses with retaining straps. We tromp happily over the rip-rapped edge of the road and onto the mudflats. Everyone's glad the sun is back in power in this land again, ushering in a new season with its associated freshness and growth.

The four of us slog out onto the clamming flats. We encounter boot sucking mud, silt, and clay layers covered by a thin sheen of water; all that is left behind as the ocean chases the new moon. I recall those stories of people who get stuck in the mudflats around Turnagain Arm and are lost to the Cook Inlet tides. I hurry to keep up, sticking a little closer to my friends in case any of us get stuck.

We work our way about 200 yards out beyond the high tide line. Rivulets of salt water dance toward the receding sea, glinting over slick waves of mud in the morning sun. Having never been clamming before, I solicit a lesson in technique. I'm told to look for a small dimple in the sand. This spot indicates that the clam is still moving seawater in and out through its siphon, and it leaves a small indentation about six inches above where it is hiding out. It's difficult to see the dimple, when the sand lays in ripples. If you get the sun to your face you can see the dimples more easily in the reflection of the sunlight off the sand. The silty areas are a tradeoff between easy dimple viewing and boot suck-

ing mud. I learn to dig with my ditch-witch on the ocean side of the dimple, or make use of the clam gun with criminal exactitude.

Fast, fast, those razors clams run! I didn't believe the tales of fleeing bivalves, but now I do. Sneak up on the dimple. Dig, Dig, drop the shovel, drop to hands and knees, and dig with hands. Feel the water seeping in around the duct tape, down the arms to the fingers. Feel the cool breeze in your hair and the sun on your back. Realize your hat is dropping into your eyes and messing up your technique. Put it in the muddy raincoat pocket; it is covered in mud anyway. Dig, Dig, Dig! Feel the rounded rocks, the crumbly sharp coal beds, then finally the pulsing touch of the clam, as it scurries away from your fingers left grasping at grains of quicksand. Grab it with thumb and two fingers, miss. Feel around in the hole frantically, as the collapsing sand settles around you. Dejectedly, realize your hands are now stuck, and the clam is gone. The priority at this point is to get your hands out of the hole before it fills in any more, and you get stuck in that hole along with your fingers.

Once standing, I hunt around for another dimple. Shovel, shovel, quicker this time, realizing the urgency of the clam's flight really does affect my ability to catch it. Dig, dig, scoop, scoop, grab: A solid grip this time. I have four fingers hooked underneath the foot of the organism, preventing its escape. My other hand scoops around the back of the clam. I am up to my triceps in the mud. Face in the hole, I pull with belly muscles, back muscles, thigh muscles. I wriggle hands and forearms, fingers gripped tight on the clam. With my nose to the sand, I realize the clean ocean mud smell (unless I have hooked a black dripping clam that is rotten, which this time I have not). Finally, with a tribal yell, I succeed and pull the clam out. I hold it up to my friends, a four-inch razor clam, and whoop and holler and dance before dropping it into the watery bucket. I see its siphon re-emerge in the cool water and the foot trying to dig itself out of the way. Nevertheless, that clam is now on the dinner menu, and I, with the fever,

begin the search for dimples more.

It's mid-afternoon when we arrive back at camp. I am coated from head to toe with mud. I visit the bathroom for a change of clothes, after which, Hamm's beer in hand, the process of shucking begins. Friends sit around the table and talk. Snippets of different conversations float on the spring air towards the bowls of warm cleaning water on the picnic table. We work with the glint of steel knives—cut the adductor muscles, open the belly, the siphons, remove the grit. I squeal embarrassingly, yet uncontrollably, when the siphon spits water or the foot moves when I go to clean it. New pots of hot water get easily grimed by the guts and dirt, and we have to change them often.

Once shucked, we dip the brand new clams in seasoned bread crumbs and sauté them in butter in iron skillets on the green Coleman cook-stove. We share the harvested meal together before heading out of camp, our separate ways.

Time has come to leave as the sunshine wanes. The light stretches again into the long tendrils of Alaskan summer dusk. Without the pressure of imminent dark or cold, track of time is too easily lost. We stash our booty in Ziploc bags in the cooler and tell everyone good-bye as we pack up for the drive home.

The four-wheelers still race back and forth on the dirt trails scattering their dust into the evening. The alpenglow on the snowy Chugach peaks lets our souls feel nothing but hope. I let it wash over me then, basking in the afterglow of the season's first sunburn, the glimmer of a returning spring sun. As I melt tired into the car seat for the drive home, I savor the peace and the joy of these friends and this experience. I welcome the promise of renewal that this season holds.

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