

THE INFLUENCE OF ECONOMIC CHANGE ON THE POPULATION OF SOUTHEASTERN ALASKA

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Southeastern Alaska is a narrow strip of mainland together with a chain of islands that lie along the Pacific Ocean just north of the state of Washington. Everywhere the region is mountainous and the only level land for towns is on the coastal plains (Fig. 1). The many channels, straits, canals, and passages that separate the islands from the mainland and from one another also drew men to the edge of the sea because of the presence of fish and fur-bearing sea animals, and the convenience of water transportation. Thus, in all periods of the region's history the people have clustered along the mainland coasts or along the coasts of the many islands.

Furthermore, the people of Southeastern Alaska have tended to cluster in urban places. There are thirty-eight communities and they account for more than eighty-seven per cent of the entire population of the region. Southeastern Alaska has virtually no rural population. The people, Indian and white alike, live exclusively in or around small towns and make their living in the industries peculiar to each. Although the United States Bureau of the Census considers as urban only communities of 2,500 or more, the classification is not applicable to Southeastern Alaska where even places much smaller than 2,500 must to be considered as urban because of their economies. Since Southeastern Alaska has a very sparse population, economic character rather than number of people determines whether a town is to be classified as urban or rural. Compared to the United States, all Southeastern Alaskan towns are very small. They are nevertheless almost entirely urban.

The prominence of particular towns has varied as the economies of the region have varied. There have been three outstanding periods that have affected the size, number, and location of communities. They were fur trapping, gold mining, and fish catching. Each period, in its turn, has its peculiar effect on the communities. The success of places depended on their having (1) a hinterland of fur-bearing animals, (2) being near valuable minerals or on a convenient route to them, or (3) being near good fishing grounds. Often the size and distribution of population is important if labor is a major criterion for the location of a subsidiary industry in a particular place. Such was the case for the white man's exploitation of furs in Southeastern Alaska. The white fur traders depended upon the Indian population for a reliable supply of furs and the established Indian population of Southeastern Alaska gave the traders that reliable supply. However, the culture of the Indians differed so greatly from that of white men that the effects of a commercial fur economy on each were not the same. The contrast was no less different in the ensuing economies of gold mining and fishing. Truly, significant population changes have occurred as a result of the different ways various economies have affected each race.

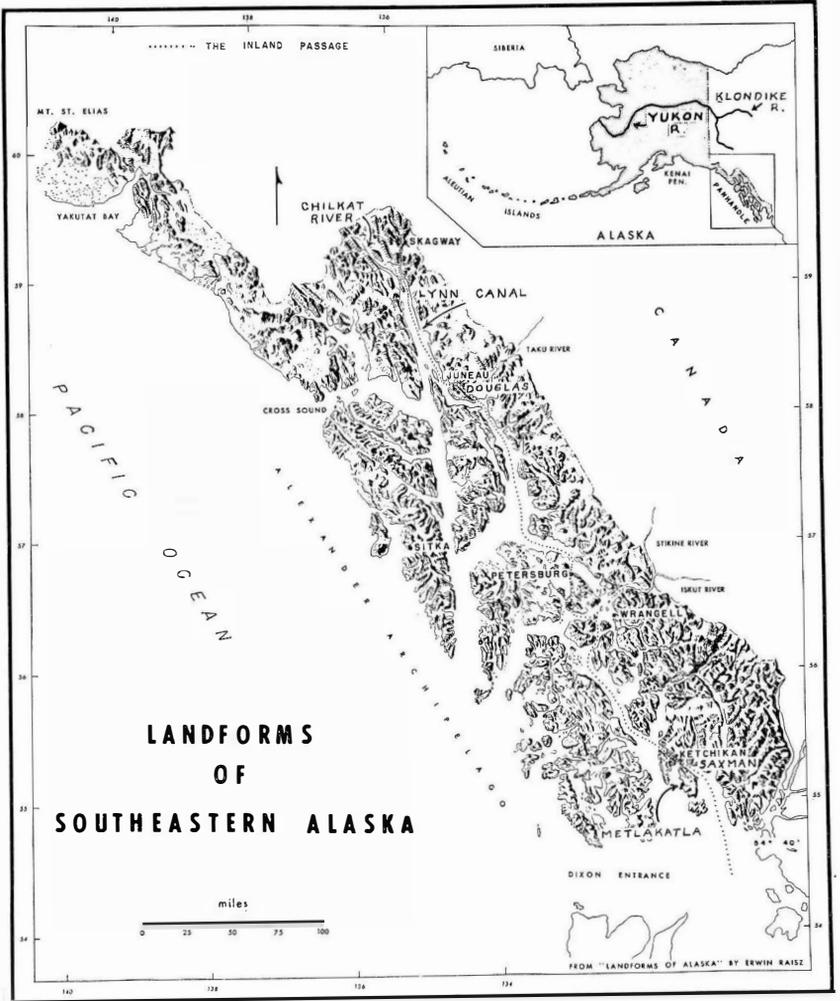


Figure 1

In the early history of contact between the two races, the Indian population greatly affected the white population; in more recent history, the relation has been reversed. Although the Indians were little changed by the coming of white men, the presence of the Indians in certain numbers and at particular places governed the initial distribution of white men. In 1800 the first trading posts of the white traders were necessarily located where Indians were most numerous. The large Indian villages, located along the coasts and housing a labor force for the gathering of furs, were especially ideal. The Indians knew the woods and waters of their region, and the haunts of fur-bearing sea animals, especially the sea-otter. Since the sea-otter was the most used fur of the Indians for clothing and was the most frequently caught, it became the major article of trade among the Indians and with white men.¹ So long as white men were primarily interested in furs, their distribution was determined by the location of the Indian population.

It is a decided advantage for an area to be on an established world trade route. Conversely, it is disadvantageous to be far from such a route and the detriment to trade increases with the increase of the distance from the route. To offset the added cost of transportation for outlying communities, a product must have high value per unit of weight. Prior to 1880, Southeastern Alaska was unable to produce such an item. The trade in furs, though important to an extremely small number of persons and places, was no match for the well-established fur trade of Southern Canada and Western United States. Fishing was still only for subsistence. The product needed by Southeastern Alaska to lift her from the level of an undeveloped outpost first came to her at Treadwell Mines near the present site of Juneau, where in 1880, gold was discovered.²

In 1880 Juneau was founded at the mouth of Gold Creek, just north of the mouth of the Taku River. By 1890 the population of the town had risen from almost nothing to 1,253, and Juneau became the largest town in Southeastern Alaska, indeed in all Alaska.³ Except for a short period just before 1900 when she was forced to relinquish the title to Skagway, Juneau has maintained the largest population of any town of Southeastern Alaska. However, the hundreds of people who came to Juneau between 1880 and 1890 found that the best claims had already been taken and that the quality of the ore was not as high as was at first thought. Thus, soon after 1890, gold mining in Juneau slowly began to decline. The reduction was so slight, however, that the reaction of the population to it was delayed. Though less gold was being mined between 1890 and 1900, the population of Juneau increased from 1,253 to 1,864. Many people still had dreams of quick wealth and the Inland Passage made ship travel from the Pacific Coast of the United States to Juneau comparatively easy and inexpensive.

¹ Miner Bruce, *Alaska: Its History and Resources, Gold Fields, Routes, and Scenery*. (New York and London: The Knickerbocker Press, 1899, p. 63.

² J. A. Hellenthal, *The Alaskan Melodrama*. (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1936), p. 165.

³ U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Census of the United States: 1900. Population*, Vol. I, p. 406.

DISCOVERY OF GOLD

In 1886, gold was also discovered at the Porcupine mines about one hundred miles to the north of Juneau near the town of Haines and the northern end of Lynn Canal. However, the Porcupine gold era was short lived because the gold was ill-placed, low in quality, and not very abundant. Comparatively few people ventured there. The town had been originally founded at a trading post for the Chilkat and Interior Indians and only the advantageous site of the town at the mouth of the Chilkat River allowed it to prosper during the rush for gold. The Inland Passage, in order to take people to the Porcupine gold mines, followed Lynn Canal from Juneau and now terminated at Haines.

The Juneau and Porcupine rushes were but minor introductions to the real gold era, for the gold mines that were to bring people to Southeastern Alaska by the tens of thousands were yet to be discovered. They were revealed in 1896 and 1897 in the interior of Yukon Territory. The place was near the confluence of the Klondike River and the Yukon.

The best route from Seattle to the gold was through the Inland Passage of Southeastern Alaska to the extreme northern end of Lynn Canal, seventeen miles beyond Haines. Here the Skagway valley penetrated the Coast Range and allowed convenient passage to the headwaters of the Yukon River and thence to the Klondike.

Skagway, which had been in existence only thirteen years before the Klondike discoveries, prospered as the major port of entry to the gold fields. In 1898 the population was estimated as being between 15,000 and 30,000; but in 1900, when the first official census was taken, the population was only 3,117.⁴ Skagway's gold rush era was no different from those of Haines or Juneau in its abrupt ending.

At the turn of the century the great gold rushes of the Klondike, Juneau, and Porcupine mines were completed. Large numbers of people had filled the towns of Skagway and Juneau, and even Haines accumulated quite a few people who had come for gold. If large populations did not last, the rushes at least brought to Southeastern Alaska, as well as to separate communities, their first world notoriety. There were very few communities born of the gold rush era, and they prospered greatly, especially Juneau and Skagway. But nearly all of the other communities of the region, most of which were small Indian villages, remained unchanged.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE INLAND PASSAGE

Perhaps the greatest benefit of the gold era, however, was the development of the Inland Passage. For, in the decades to come, the Passage was to extend prosperity to a great many other towns and villages.

In the regular ship travel that developed among the islands and along the coastal mainland of Southeastern Alaska, certain routes, passages, and channels became more frequently used than others. Their advantages were often the depth of the water, or the width, or even the shortness of the channel. For the most part the Inland Passage was the path of least resistance from the United States to and through Southeastern Alaska.

⁴ Edwin J. Foscue, "The Development and Decline of Skagway, Alaska," *Economic Geography*, Vol. X (1934), p. 425.

At first the Passage terminated at Juneau, then it reached as far north as Haines, and eventually it ended at Skagway. The Inland Passage was created during the gold rush era, but the greatest use of the Passage was to come on a later period when nearly all communities of Southeastern Alaska on or near it were to prosper.

The year 1900 is significant in the history of the development of Southeastern Alaska. It is from that date that the region shook from itself the unstable fluctuations of the number and distribution of people, caused by the erratic economy of gold rushes, and began to stabilize its economic development through the additions of fishing, lumbering, fur farming, trade and commerce.

Commercial fishing was of intermediate importance to fur and gold in that it helped establish a permanent white population that was not nearly so large as the population which existed during the gold rushes but was considerably larger than the population which had at one time venerated Southeastern Alaska in trading posts. Strategic location for commercial fishing towns was associated with existing Indian settlements. Fishing was basic in the life of the Indian, and his livelihood was more linked with that occupation than with any other. The pattern of Indian population throughout Southeastern Alaska showed an intense concentration along the shores of the mainland and of the islands. For once the desires of white men differed little from those of the Indian, namely, to be near waters that abound with fish. The white men's towns also had to be established at places that were near markets and on convenient routes of transportation. However, they were still largely guided by the best locations of fish and, therefore, closely tied to the pattern of Indian settlements.

Commercial fishing began slowly but was accelerated and became the principal base for the general economy of Southeastern Alaska. The discoveries of gold in the 1880's led to the use of the Inland Passage to supply the gold fields with people and mining material from the south. As a consequence of the added shipping, the commercial fish industry, scarcely started and flexible in its youth, quickly conformed to the Inland Passage. All commercial fishing centers established since the turn of the century have been intentionally located directly on the Inland Passage.

In 1900 the population of Southeastern Alaska tended to cluster along the mainland and on the leeward islands of the Alexander Archipelago. It was greater in the north than in the south as distribution was still determined by the events of the gold era. Though that era was at an end, it showed the importance it had once held by its continuing to be the major determinant of the distribution of population in Southeastern Alaska until nearly 1910. In 1900, Skagway contained more than 3,000 people and Juneau had nearly 2,000. Though both were declining, in 1900 the two communities alone accounted for more than one third of the entire population of Southeastern Alaska.⁵ But as these two communities of the northern part of the region clung to the last vestiges of their most prosperous era, communities to the south were discovering new occupations, and their success is indicated by the increases in their populations.

⁵ U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1900, *loc. cit.*

Of the twelve communities of Southeastern Alaska that have a continuous record of population from 1900, four are oriented toward the ocean and eight toward the Inland Passage. Four of the eight, Skagway, Haines, Juneau, and Douglas, are in the north, and the other four, Wrangell, Ketchikan, Saxman, and Matlakatla, are in the south. The population of the four northern towns declined in the decade from 1900 to 1910 more than twenty per cent. In the same period the total population of the four southern towns increased nearly one hundred per cent. The redistribution of the population was a sign of the changing economy of the area.

Fish were abundant and they could be found nearly everywhere along the coast and among the islands. The criterion for their exploitation was not their specific location or amounts, but the availability of a market for their sale. Where formerly only a few communities profited from the discovery of gold, now many prospered from fish. Those on the Inland Passage prospered the most.

The communities in the southeastern part of Southeastern Alaska were in an ideal position. The nearness of the southern towns to the markets of the United States allowed them to capture the fishing trade better than communities farther north. Also, as a result of their location at the southern end of the Inland Passage, they influenced in some form or other all trade going to or coming from the United States. The nature of the development of the southern end of Southeastern Alaska is exemplified in the rise of Ketchikan to prominence.

The location of Ketchikan at the Alaskan entrance of the Inland Passage and at a focus of a myriad of channels and straits, and islands with many bays and inlets that abound with halibut, and salmon, lured industry and trade. In addition, the city's proximity to the United States was an ever-present advantage in the town's development. In the census of 1960 Ketchikan was almost the largest city of Southeastern Alaska, exceeded only by Juneau. Although Ketchikan's location is commercially superior to that of Juneau's, Juneau gains additional advantage as the political capital of the state of Alaska as a whole.

THE FISHING INDUSTRY

The development of the fishing industry of Southeastern Alaska has been slow. The small population of the region allowed only a few communities to develop as major centers of commercial fishing. With only one exception, every community of the region now has fishing as a major part of its economy. Most of the smaller communities catch fish for subsistence, while others may do a little commercial fishing too. The small communities that engage in commercial fishing in any way are all located in the immediate vicinity of the five major commercial fishing centers. Thus, the urban pattern of Southeastern Alaska, based on commercial fishing, has four kinds of towns: (1) The master centers of Juneau and Ketchikan with populations of more than 6,000 which, through advantage of geographic location, govern the commercial fishing industry, (2) the centers of Sitka, Wrangell and Petersburg, with populations between 1,000 and 6,000, which have limited self-sufficiency in commercial fishing and, though dependent in part on Juneau and Ketchikan for commerce and trade, act as

centers for many small fishing communities in their immediate areas, (3) the minor fishing towns with populations of 500 to 1,000 that have commercial fishing on a small scale and are completely dependent upon the major centers for marketing, and (4) the small fishing villages with populations generally less than five hundred that exist only for subsistence fishing, but on occasion use fish for trade to obtain essential goods. Thus, commercial fishing, the third significant stage in the economic development of Southeastern Alaska, is the single greatest factor in creating the distribution of population that exists today.

SUMMARY

The towns of Southeastern Alaska were born of various eras based on furs, gold, or fish. Some prospered, some did not and died with the economic eras that created them. Sitka, on the Pacific, thrived on furs; Juneau and Skagway, in the north, profited from gold; and Ketchikan, in the south, prospered from commercial fishing. The population trends of those cities and many of the towns and villages associated with them were irregular, but there was purpose for their being. How they were to develop depended upon the advantages they possessed for fur trapping, mining, or fishing. However, the resource and market bases for each of these were constantly changing and thus the economy and occupancy of the towns changed.

A new and different economy that is conducive to the support of reasonably large numbers of people could be developed in Southeastern Alaska, namely an economy based on water power. The topography and climate are nearly the same throughout the region, and thus, the advantages for water power are found in many communities. Skagway is one such community. Other outstanding power sites are near Juneau, Wrangell, and Sitka. The power is there, but whether or not its over-all advantages are great enough for industry to seek it out is not known. A new era, whatever it be, cannot help but be influenced by the present pattern of occupancy of the region, and that pattern will, in its turn, help condition the new trend of population.