

# Fish, family, future

Salmon seiner continues family tradition out of Washington's Gig Harbor

By Lael Henterly

**L**ate in October, the 56-foot purse seiner *Memories* sails from Gig Harbor, Wash., at 5:30 a.m., heading to an area known as Point Robinson to wait for the 7 a.m. chum salmon opening. Birds swoop, a huge dark cloud pours rain over the nearby Point Defiance, and Vashon Island sleeps under a rolling blanket of fog. The Port of Tacoma twinkles in the distance.

"The most important thing is the dependability of the boat," says skipper and co-owner Chuck Horjes. "That everything works."

Most of the purse seiners that call Gig Harbor home head up to Alaska early in the summer, returning to fish the South Sound in the fall. Unfortunately for

Horjes and co-owner Mitch Clark, by the time they acquired the *Memories*, it had a laundry list of repairs, and its coveted Alaska licenses had been sold.

Horjes' uncle, George Ancich, acquired the *Memories* in 1960. When he retired, his son, Paul, took over as captain. Horjes and deckboss Clark bought the *Memories* in 2010 after Paul's passing.

Without Alaska permits, the *Memories* was set on fishing an area known as the salmon traps near Washington's San Juan Islands during the summer. The 2014 forecast was for millions of sockeye to pass in late August on their way home to the Fraser River in British Columbia.

Those predictions ended up being incorrect, with the fish avoiding U.S. waters as a result of what NOAA scientist Nick Bond describes as a blob of warm

water, leaving the crew of the *Memories* with a scant 3,400 pounds of Fraser River sockeye. Midway through those long days of water haul after water haul, Horjes got a call from his sister: Uncle George had died, peacefully in his favorite armchair. Horjes and the crew left the *Memories* in Friday Harbor, flying home to the harbor for the service then back to set some more.

Horjes sailed back to Gig Harbor early in September plagued with a list of short-term upgrades, the loss of his uncle and the nagging need to lease an Alaska license and head north next summer. With 400,000 chum salmon allotted to each the South Sound and the Hood Canal this fall, Horjes hoped he could bring in enough to motor up the coast to Prince William Sound in 2015.



The crew of the 56-foot seiner *Memories* hunting chum salmon in Puget Sound.



It's a worry that echoes through Puget Sound fishing communities every few years: Will there be enough fish to sustain future generations? The area's first inhabitants — storied native tribes like the Puyallup, Tulalip and Skykomish — were subsistence fishermen. Many of the later settlers who immigrated in the early 20th century from Croatia, Norway and Sweden also plied the waters up and down the coast as their livelihood.

In Gig Harbor, everyone is connected to fishing. They dine on fish for dinner, they talk fish in the evening at the Hy lu Hee Hee or the Tides Tavern. They live, love and breathe fish. Fishing runs in families here. Most of those families came from Croatia generations ago, settling in this sparkling gem of a harbor where the sky is a different shade every sunset.

At 7:15 a.m. it's still dark, but we can't set yet for fear of poisonous, bulbous ratfish tangling up in our net. Horjes says how happy he is with his crew this year. There's Darren Stutz, who's run his skiff for 28 years.

"Not hard to find a skiff man. It's hard to find one that's good, though," he says.

Then there's Clark the deckboss, Clark's son Kyle and the newest addition, Horjes' son Kris.

"Kris and Kyle are like a well-tuned machine," says Horjes, the pride visible on his face. "You don't usually find two people who click so well together. Kris should have done this years ago."

Horjes and Clark hope to see the next generation running the boat one day. With their mix of hard work, vigor and devil-may-care optimism, it's not hard to imagine that future.

"It's an addiction. Once you do it, you're hooked," Horjes tells me.

Lastly, though not in importance, there is dedicated cook Jake Bujacich, who has been fishing out of Gig Harbor for 72 years. He's also the go-to guy when there are doubts or questions, possessing an encyclopedic knowledge of local fishing.

"Let it go!" Horjes shouts, and Stutz powers the skiff in a masterful arc toward the shore.

As three sea lions frolic around our cork line, a Fish and Game research boat powers up next to us. Brandon Phinnell, an observer with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, climbs aboard.

"How ya doin'?" Hope there's a few



LAEL HENTERLY PHOTOS

**After a successful haulback, skipper Chuck Horjes pushes the catch of chum salmon toward the hatch as deckhand Kris Horjes and co-owner Mitch Clark clear the deck.**

fish out there for you guys," says Phinnell, scrawling on a Puget Sound Purse Seine Monitoring form.

We're the third boat to haul today, he says. The others pulled up a total of 22 fish. Phinnell tells me it's hit or miss out here: Last week one boat had 14,000 pounds in one haul, and the boat next to them got 20 fish.

This fishery has an agreement with NOAA that allows observers to monitor catch to make sure they're not keeping kings or silvers.

Phinnell says there have been lawsuits

**“If we don't catch enough on this last set, we'll have to go down in the hatch and pitch fish to the tender.”**

— Kris Horjes, DECKHAND

between sport fishermen and commercial fishermen, and the data collected by the observers can really help the commercial fishermen prove their case.

"We're out here trying to keep it going, 'cause everybody wants to close it down," says Phinnell. "A lot of people are concerned [the fishermen are] killing all these kings and cohos. There are no kings. I haven't seen one since I was a kid."

The set comes up empty except for one sea cucumber. Phinnell marks a zero

on his clipboard and motors away. Horjes decides to try setting near Point Robinson one more time.

By 10 a.m. we're just finishing up the second set. A typical set takes about 45 minutes of instinct and anticipation.

"If you get pretty good activity back in the net, you close in sooner," says Horjes. "If you see some coming, you wait, open back up, make the door a little bigger."

The second set comes up empty.

"Anyone bring any bananas aboard?" shouts Stutz as he returns from the skiff. Suitcases, bananas and umbrellas are considered bad luck, the crew explains.

"Where they at Chuck? Where they at?" asks Clark, climbing the stairs to the tophouse, which was recently upgraded: Clark's brother installed a new camera system and computer navigation unit.

"They might already be by us," says Horjes, the worry in his voice palpable. "Usually it's not this early, but they were running pretty good the last two weeks."

Openings in this area are prescheduled, and there isn't a lot of rhyme and reason to it. If the fish are early, if they're late or if the tribal fishermen are slow bringing in their equal catch after the first commercial fishing day, fishermen like Horjes have no choice but to watch the finners and jumpers fly by.

"What do you think Larry?" asks Horjes.

"You just never know," says Larry Murray, a retired fisherman along for love of the lifestyle. "This guy, he'll always prove you wrong, and what he's teaching you is to never give up."

## Fall Puget Sound Chum Seining

### THE FACTS

**Number of participants:** The state has limited entry to 75 permits.

**Size of participating boats:** No limit

**Capital investment:** Permit — \$350,000 to buy, 10 percent of gross catch to lease; seiners — \$40,000 for a fixer, \$275,000 for a vintage wooden seiner, around \$3.5 million for a modern steel or fiberglass seiner; skiffs — \$20,000 used, \$150,000 new; net — \$55,000 to \$60,000

**Gear:** Nets are 3-1/2- to 4-inch mesh, up to 200 meshes deep and 1,800 feet long.

**Ex-vessel prices for chum salmon:** 80 cents from Trident, the processor; around \$3 per pound wholesale direct

**Management:** Catch limits are set at a series of public meetings each spring to divvy up the shares of the fishery between tribal, commercial and sport fishermen in the South Sound.

Horjes and Murray say fishing the South Sound in the fall these days is “gentleman fishing.” Boats take turns, and it isn’t so much a race as it was in the 1970s. They remember those days as the wild west of the South Sound.

We seem to be in a waltz of sorts with the New Oregon, the Mystic Lady and the Pacific Raider, other Gig Harbor purse seiners, all circling around looking for activity. There are about a dozen Gig Harbor boats out today.

The crew eats soup in the galley, upbeat, given two empty hauls. Horjes decides to leave Point Robinson for an area called Girl Scout Camp over by Camp Sealth. As we get situated, I hear a shout from the deck.

“A jumper!”

We set immediately, right by the Camp Sealth. Kyle and Kris take turns pushing an aluminum plunger into the water, again and again. The plunger produces bubbles that simulate a whale, tricking the salmon into staying in the bag until the purse line traps them.

After 20 minutes, Horjes radios Stutz. “Bring it in!”

Stutz turns the skiff toward the Memories and circles around, handing off the net to Kris. Kris and Kyle grab the purse line, and begin bringing in the 1,800-foot net.

And we have fish! At least 100, flopping all over the deck, their scales glinting in the noon sunlight.

Horjes spots finners, fish swimming on the surface so their backs break the surface of the water. We set again, immediately, in the same spot, as close to shore as we can get by Camp Sealth.

We begin to pull in the fourth set. The net is dripping with starfish, jellyfish and twigs. The set is almost in, and the deckhands are peering frantically over the edge into the bag, straining their eyes.

“We’ve got fish,” Kyle shouts. “Lots of fish!”

“Brail, dude!” calls Kris, excited. By the time we get them onboard there are easily 300, huge ones.

“They’re about five pounds bigger than normal per fish,” says Horjes.

Our next set is ruined by sea lions, who cause the salmon to dive and scatter.

Just before 3 p.m., we head for low water. The New Oregon is nearby, also headed to an area known as Half Cabin.

A porpoise intercepts our boat, jumping and diving right next to us over and over.

At 5 p.m. we start to see other seiners blaze by, headed home. The Trident tender flips its lights on, sparkling between our boat and the mouth of the harbor.

Horjes isn’t ready to call it a day. He owes it to the younger generation to keep plying the waters until last call. He lays out the seventh set and almost immediately spots finners, lots of them headed into it.

The deckhands are highly motivated.

“If we don’t catch enough on this last set, we’ll have to go down in the hatch and pitch fish to the tender,” says Kris.

With eight minutes left until close, the crew is madly piling cork and bringing the net in as if on fast forward. The sun is disappearing now, and lights are coming on in the distance across the water everywhere.

The last haul is solid, at least 50 fish. Stutz thinks we probably have 4,000 pounds, enough to pump. No fish pitching today.

“We scratched a day out of it,” says Horjes, in a jovial mood and happy with the day’s haul. “Dark to dark!”

Seawater is added to the tank so the tender can suck out the fish. They shoot out along a conveyer belt. When all is said and done, Horjes walks into the galley holding a receipt from the tender: 4,700 pounds.

“The tender says they caught some in the Hood Canal today,” says Horjes. “Might venture up there next week. The bridge creates a bottleneck.”

Bujacich readies supper as we head back into the harbor. Commercial fishing has changed a lot since he was 16, he tells me. These days the rules are set for escapement, and the way they do it in Washington isn’t ideal.

“Not near as well as Alaska,” says Bujacich. “Some of the things they do are just unrealistic. They’ll give the guys 10 to 2, not a match with the tides.”

A decade ago, salmon fishing in this area had been all but relegated to a hobbyist endeavor. Farmed fish had devastated the market for chum salmon in the Pacific Northwest, driving prices down to as low as 40 cents a pound in 2004.

The state limited entry in 1974 and began to buy back purse seine and gill-net licenses in the early 1990s, bringing the number of Puget Sound purse seine salmon licenses down to the current 75.

Prices have climbed back up since 2004 thanks to the Japanese market for salmon roe. Our catch on Oct. 28, 2014, fetches 80 cents a pound.

We sail past the Pacific Raider, and it looks abandoned. Bujacich laughs when I comment on this.

“A lot of crews don’t eat onboard anymore. They have sandwiches and hot dogs, maybe,” he says. “I don’t believe in that. If you’re going to work, eat!”

And that is a big part of what makes life aboard the Memories feel less like work and more like family. We pull into the dock just before 7:30 p.m. and feast on an amazing pork roast Bujacich has been working on since noon. The crew is in this together, not just for the money, but to carry on the tradition of fishing that they know and love.

It’s in their blood.

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