

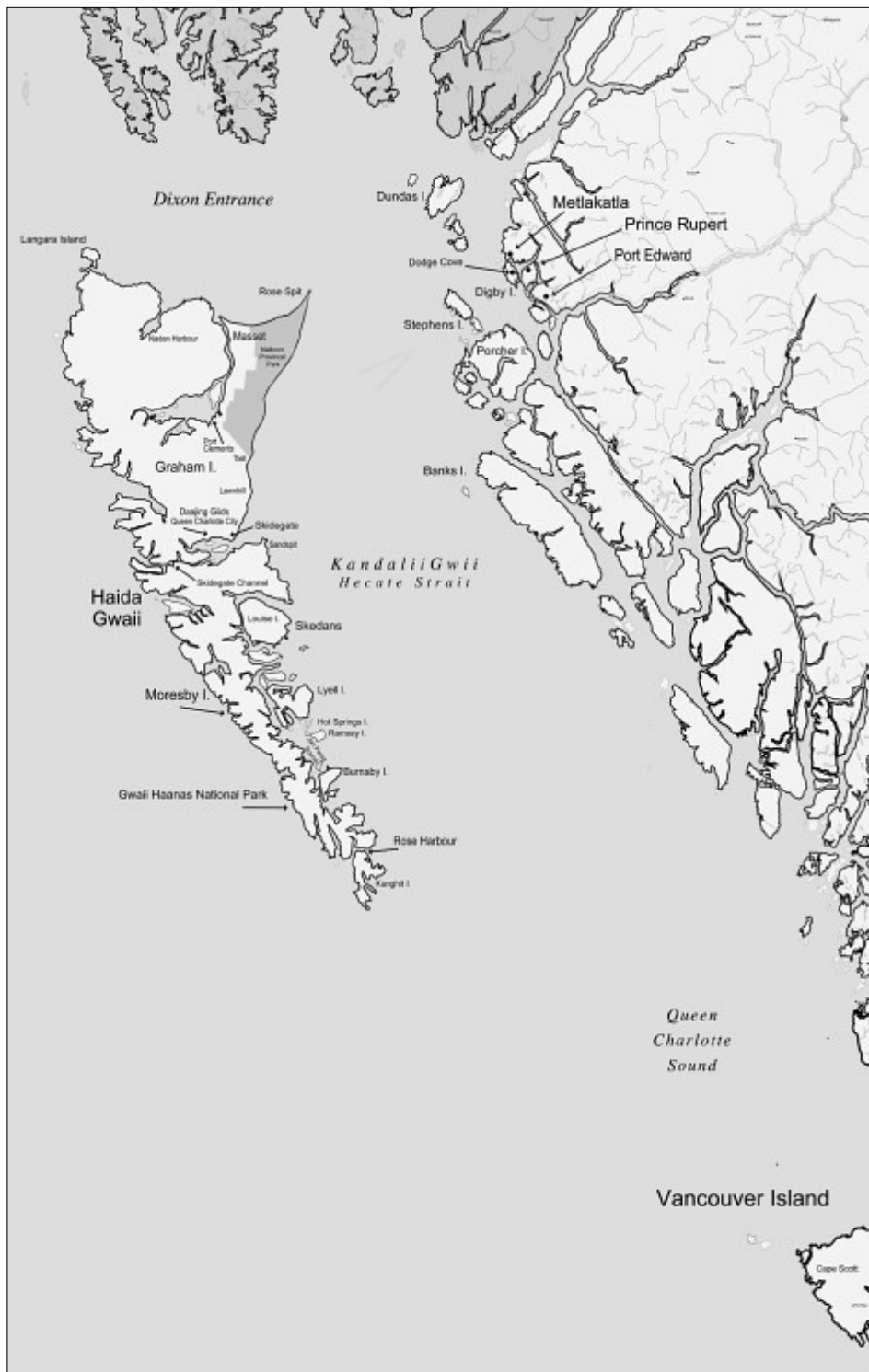
Nautical Adventures on
British Columbia's
North Coast

GUMBOOT GUYS



Edited by Lou Allison
with Jane Wilde

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Land Acknowledgement and a Note Regarding Place Names

The stories in *Gumboot Guys* take place on the land and waters of Haida Gwaii, occupied by the Haida People since time immemorial, on the unceded traditional territory of the Ts'msyen (Tsimshian), including the Lax Kw'alaams Band and the Metlakatla First Nation.

Caitlin Press respectfully acknowledges that it operates on the unceded traditional territory of the Qualicum First Nation and the traditional keepers of their land.

To set these stories in the time in which they took place, we chose to use the names that were in use at that time. However, we feel that it is important to recognize the changes that have taken place. Since the 1970s, many of the place names referred to in these stories have reverted to Indigenous names, and place names used in the seventies are no longer appropriate, except colloquially.

These are the current names of these places along with a very brief description.

Haida Gwaii: Queen Charlotte Islands was officially changed to Haida Gwaii, which means “Islands of the People,” in 2010.

Gwaii Haanas: The park that was established in the area of the Haida Gwaii, referred to in the stories variously as “South Moresby” and similar terms, is named the “Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, National Marine Conservation Area, and Haida Heritage Site,” or simply Gwaii Haanas, which means “Islands of Beauty.” The establishment of the Park (or Reserve) had an evolution over more than a decade, and came into being under the current shared management agreement in 1993.

Daajing Giids: Queen Charlotte City was officially changed to Daajing Giids in 2022. The name refers to wearing a hat and means “Cedar Dance Hat” or “The Hat of the Child of a Chief.”

Lax Kw'alaams: The name of the Tsimshian community of Port Simpson was officially changed to Lax Kw'alaams, which means “Place of the Wild Roses,” in 1986.

For anyone interested in the Indigenous names and their meanings, we encourage further research, particularly on the websites and sources maintained by the Nations.

Alp

Jim Horner

As soon as I finished grade twelve in the spring of 1973, I left Toronto. I moved in with a girlfriend in Vancouver and, as a skier, I was anxious to visit Whistler. A friend training for the national ski team had shared stories and pictures of his summer ski camps there. Unfortunately, things did not work out with the girlfriend and I quickly discovered there was no accommodation to be found at Whistler, so I moved on.

As fall approached, after a summer of adventures, I found myself literally at the end of the road. I was down and out, totally humbled, staying at the rowdy Friendship House in Prince Rupert. I was looking into applying for a TV arts course back at Toronto's Ryerson college when my luck changed and a gyppo logger from Port Clements hired and flew me over to the Misty Islands. Within a week, this teenager was making big money operating a log-hauling skidder until Coho Logging shut down for Christmas.



Originally from Toronto, Jim was introduced to commercial fishing by fellow ski bums who worked all summer to finance their winter skiing.

Finally, the snow season arrived and, flush with cash, I headed off island to discover new ski resorts. I ended up skiing in the Swiss Alps in January and February before returning to Canada in March. At both Whistler and Tod Mountain, I rode chairlifts with numerous fishermen ski bums who spoke about working hard commercial fishing all summer to ski every day all winter.

Hmmm... that sounded pretty good!

After walking the fishermen's wharves at Steveston and False Creek, I felt it was obvious that a displaced hippy teenager from Toronto was unlikely to ever get a foot in that door. After a couple of successful years of ski bumming and a very profitable summer job in the Yukon, I returned to the Islands. I caught the ferry in Skagway and returned to Queen Charlotte City [Daajing Giids] in the fall of 1975.

I was able to pay cash for a lot in QCC. I immersed myself in the pleasures of gathering food and enjoying the social scene that this vibrant community offered. There was so much to do and learn in the day, and at night, the potluck dinners, bars and dance halls made for a bustling social scene. It was an easy decision to sacrifice the 1976 ski season to pursue my commercial fishing dreams. I did some carpentry work in Skidegate but mostly worked handlogging out on the west coast with mentor not-so-little "Little Bill" Yahonavich on his boat the *Jessie Falls*.

My next-door neighbour on Hippie Hill, Jane Kinegal, had recently married a fisherman known as KP who owned the salmon troller the *Child of the Moon*. One afternoon, KP pounded on my door, saying that he needed a deckhand and was in a hurry to get out of town. Finally: the break I had been pining for!

Within a few short hours, we were on our way over the Sandspit Bar, heading out to the edge that bisects the centre of Hecate Strait on the east side of Haida Gwaii. Hecate Strait is a nasty place to hang out. Thankfully, after that we mostly fished the traditional grounds off the west coast. I quickly realized that trolling for salmon was no longer just a job to support my ski habit. It was the best job in the world! I was hooked.

After a few more trips to Cape Saint James and the west side, we took a few days off. We needed to put the boat up on the tidal grid to do some bottom work. As I was walking down from Hippie Hill the next morning, with gear bag in hand, expecting to go back to sea, I saw the *Child of the Moon* smoking full speed across Bearskin Bay. It was west coast-bound without me, star deckhand and bringer of good luck. FUCK! I was so pissed in the moment, but as always, all bad things lead to good. Oh well, at least now I had some experience as a deckhand on a commercial



Jim restored the derelict fishing troller *Alp* to its former glory. The night before they were due to leave the dock, shore workers voted to strike.

salmon troller. Unfortunately, I was one short of being eligible for collecting unemployment insurance (UIC, as it was then called). Had I been eligible, I would have probably gone back to Whistler. Instead, thankfully, I remained another full year.

I kept busy feathering my new nest with homemade chainsaw lumber and handlogging or banging nails to get by. I was hoping to find another job on a salmon troller but by spring nothing had materialized.

At that time, a retired fisherman/boatbuilder named Ed Regnery, whom everyone called Rags, lived with his wife just up from the docks. Rags was working on a new boat and had got the government to sponsor a woman who was taking a boatbuilding course off island to come and help. Her name was Sue Wells and, as we enjoyed each other's company, I tended to hang at Rags's shed. One day, Rags told me about a derelict boat called the *Alp*, a double-ended salmon troller that had been pulled up on the beach across from the high school. He mentioned that the chances of me getting another deckhand job on a troller were slim and that the *Alp* could probably be bought for the price of the government fishing licence. He went on and on about how it was a famously good sea boat, had a nearly

new diesel engine and, most importantly, was very fishy. “Fishy” means being a good producer: in trolling, some boats repel salmon, some attract. My interest was now seriously piqued; I drove down to survey the old boat.

Although its cosmetics were a mess, like a face that only a mother could love, I was immediately smitten with its potential. The *Alp* had been my friends the Kuleshas’ first troller and they were now among the top highliners of the local fleet. They had installed a new diesel engine and told me that the boat “just caught too many fish for its size.” While crawling around inside, I was puzzled by some of the gizmos, levers, valves, gauges and meters. Being able to look right through the deck where it had been bashed apart on both sides didn’t intimidate me. If anything, as a wood butcher, I was just as stoked about learning how to refit the boat as I was about going fishing with it. The prospect of an opportunity to work with wood in a whole new way really turned my crank. Rags built up my confidence by offering his services. He suggested that I hire him to come by to oversee the project for an hour or so a day. I am so grateful to have been a pawn in his self-employment strategy!

Bill Valentine, the principal of the high school, owned the boat. When the school bell rang, I went over to meet him and make him my offer, the value of the fishing licence. He accepted without a moment’s thought and almost shook my arm off. He also offered me the use of the school’s well-tooled wood and metal shop after school hours.

Unfortunately, I was pretty naive at the time about banks and how to secure a loan. I wasted precious days that turned into weeks waiting for my local credit union’s board to make its negative decision almost a month later. Although at the time the loan was guaranteed by the government, I guess now that they knew how little experience the long-haired kid from Toronto had. After the rejection, I remember sitting, dejected, in Margaret’s Café. I shared a table with a mild-mannered gentleman by the name of Andy Whitmore, Charlotte’s notary public. When I told him my tale of woe, he trash talked me.

“You really want that rotten derelict? Then get off your ass and get a haircut and a shirt that has a collar, fly over to Prince Rupert, visit the banks, tell the bankers what you need and tell them you need it now! And be sure to let them know that the credit union strung you along wasting a month of your precious time.”

I flew over to Rupert the next day and crashed at Orlan Ralph’s new place that had previously been a morgue. I slept in a room that used to store dead people. I got a haircut and a collared shirt from the Sally Ann. With Andy’s confidence, Rags’s handwritten survey of the boat, the

licence papers, the blue book and the deed to my land, in case I needed it, I went banking. By noon, with nothing down, I had secured my loan, my estimate of enough money to rebuild the *Alp* and purchase a new radar.

By that point, pretty much a month had passed since I first fell in love with the *Alp*. The long delay cost me dearly as there was so much work to get it seaworthy, let alone fishing. A few boats were already heading out to the grounds. To start off, Rags and I drove my green work truck, dubbed *Celery*, up coast and ordered a load of specialty lumber from Bill McKay's mill by Tlell. Rags wanted fire-killed, seasoned, quarter-sawn, edge-grain, clear western red cedar for planking material that matched the thickness of the *Alp*'s old planking. Also an order of clear yellow cedar for ribs, beams and bulkheads. I had to order Honduras gumwood for rail caps and a new shoe the length of the keel to be shipped up on the *Northland Prince* from Vancouver. Gumwood planks weigh almost as much and are almost as tough as steel. Bill Valentine graciously provided a new stainless drive shaft that he had ordered earlier. While waiting for all that to arrive, I built a plastic roof over the whole boat and, on both sides, scaffolding that even Rags (with his Dutch-wooden-shoed, bedroom-slippered, swollen and arthritic feet) could navigate.

Once the materials arrived, I finally started rebuilding, but only after the painful job of removing rotten wood. It was like opening a can of worms as I had to keep removing more and more until I finally got down to sound wood. The scope of the project had grown and I could see how immense my job really was. I ordered more lumber and strung up more light bulbs.

I would get in a decently productive morning shift before picking up Rags at ten. He would usually be there for an hour each day unless we were steaming planks and he would stay until after lunch. His routine was to first inspect what I had accomplished and then go on about how in his day he could do at least twice as much. Then he would give me the advice and direction I so desperately needed. He would always discreetly give me a little pep talk each time I would drive him home. He helped keep my head on straight and focussed each step of the way.

Finally, the *Alp*'s hull was all closed in and watertight, so it was time to hire the Dingwall brothers, Bill and Ben, with their D8 Cat to push it out on its log-grid cradle onto the beach at low tide. The rising tide would set it afloat. We christened it well and the re-corked seams hardly leaked a drop.

The next day, May 14, was my birthday. Marg put together a full-house, surprise birthday dinner party for me at the café, a smorgasbord

of seafood and venison. After dinner, we all walked down to the Charlotte Recreation Centre to see Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee play live. Good times!

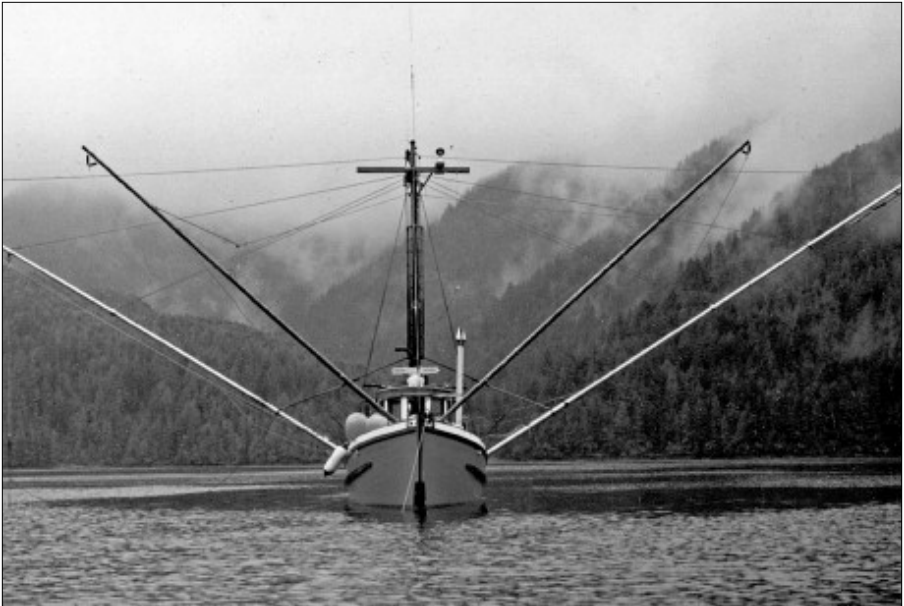
In the following days, a parade of fishermen would stop by at the dock to inspect the *Alp* and offer advice. Rags didn't like the look of the bottom of the mast, so I cut it back inch by inch until the rot was gone. We then fashioned a very tall mast base from a well-seasoned piece of yellow cedar.

At long last, the *Alp* was all fuelled, iced and grubbed up; miraculously, we were finally ready to go. One last night in town with my new-found girlfriend/deckhand and we could finally cast off in the morning.

After dinner, I heard a lot of commotion coming down the ramp. It was a group of wives of gillnet fishermen shouting that the union had voted to strike: "Tie her up! Tie her up!"

I naively thought to myself, *Right, sure thing. After all this, I'm going to cancel my plans to catch the tide out to the west side in the morning because a bunch of shore workers or net fishers are not happy. What the fuck?*

I went up to the bar, fishers all greeting me with, "Too bad about the strike, hope it's not a long one." I spoke with a troller who said he had sat out lots of strikes even though most of the troll fleet are not union members. He said, "The shore workers we sell to are unionized and if you



Jim owned and fished the *Alp* for twelve years, and much of that time was spent in the misty waters of Haida Gwaii.

go out, they will put you on the scab list and then you can't sell to them anymore." Rags once again calmed me down.

The strike only lasted three or four days and I really did still have lots to keep me busy on the boat. The whole fleet had to come into town to tie up, so I had a lot of experienced talent helping me fine tune my new lean, mean, fishing machine.

My first trip out to the west coast was unforgettable. I was lucky I had the new radar and a gal on the wheel as it was so foggy it felt like we were inside a ping-pong ball. My lures were all old and tarnished and I even had some of the hooks on backwards. Nevertheless, they worked and caught as many large red spring salmon as I could possibly keep up with. We ended up bringing in a decent load.

My new deckhand/girlfriend didn't care to go back out to the cold, foggy west side and carried on with her summer travels across Canada. Now that the *Alp* and I had proven ourselves, I was able to hire Herb Hughan, who had once owned his own troller. Herb came out with me for two trips before he had to head up to the Nass. He, too, taught me a lot.

I owned and fished the *Alp* for the next twelve years, eight of which I was accompanied by Anne-Marie and then Fran. Some of my fondest memories were fishing with these two amazing women. Anything I could do, they could do better. Sadly, in 1988 the *Alp* sank in the deepest hole of the Salish Sea with a deck load of spring salmon. I owned two more salmon trollers over the next twelve years. For a quarter of a century, I never worked a single winter.

These were the glory years of working hard, fishing the west side of Haida Gwaii for four months a summer and filling my passport and skiing the other eight.

Hmmm... that was pretty good!

Excerpted from Jim's unpublished memoir Eighteen Lives.