

# 55 Years of Fabulous Fishing

By Laurie Prax

Adapted from a story written in 2002 for  
Valdez Gold Rush Days

When it comes to a fish story, everyone has a different tale. When the story begins more than 50 years ago, there are many colorful and varied details.

Old-timers have vivid stories of fishing in the old days, but most say their recollection of dates and names have faded after five decades.

A flyer that used to hang in the Chamber of Commerce office advertised the 15th Annual Valdez Silver Salmon Derby July 27 through September 4, 1967, so we know the Valdez derby is 55 years old.

The beautifully framed, but faded, poster boasted a \$1,000 first-place prize, weekly prizes, special additional prizes and a \$50 prize for the first salmon caught.

Derby records are hard to come by prior to the mid-1970s, but Bill Wyatt—current owner of Bear Paw RV Park and owner of a small hotel in the 1950s—recalls the prize for the first derby was \$500. The first winner of the Silver Derby was Loren St. Amond with an 18.8-pound fish. The prize was awarded in 500 silver dollars.

Wyatt says the prize money back then may not sound like much now, but he recalls a Valdez man brought in a fish loaded with lead weight to win the grand prize. The man's fish was disqualified.

Different people have been credited with starting the Silver Salmon Derby, but most agree it was started by local business people and later picked up and run under the auspices of the Chamber of Commerce.

The derby is now a nonprofit corporation run by seven volunteer committee members. The weigh-in is run by volunteers. The group operates solely on private funds generated from ticket and sponsorship sales.

With so many boats in Port



## Halibut Derby

May 26 to September 2

## Silver Derby

July 28 to September 2

## Women's Derby

August 11

[www.valdezfishderbies.com](http://www.valdezfishderbies.com)

Valdez and anglers on the shores of Allison Point today, it is hard to believe people were not always fishing for silver salmon.

"Nobody paid that much attention to the (silver) fishing back then, but then the derby was organized, people around town threw money into the pot for a prize and off it went," Valdezian Max Wells said in 2002.

Gloria Day echoed Wells' sentiments, saying people didn't really think about fishing for silvers recreationally.

"The first time I ever heard of a silver being caught on a hook and line was over at Dayville," she says. "My son Bobby and my father from Ohio put a hook and line in and I never saw anyone as thrilled at catching a fish in my life as that little kid."

Day won \$1,500 with an 18.05 pounder caught in 1981.

In the early days, anglers fished for wild stock coho salmon in the derby. The traditional return of wild stock cohos to Corbin Creek was about 9,000 fish annually, according to Dave Cobb of the Valdez Fisheries Development Association.



**Top**, Paula Groundwater and her \$15,000 silver salmon. Photo courtesy of Valdez Fish Derbies **Above**, another silver that could be a prize winner.

He says the first coho release in 1981 was 1 million smolt, and 10,000 to 15,000 fish returned to the hatchery the following year.

Cobb says the derby has grown exponentially with the silver return through the years.

The Silver Derby ran for 30 years before the inception of a Valdez Halibut Derby. The Halibut Derby was started in the mid-1980s by Darrell Shreve and Jim Heston.

"Valdez' untold secret was the halibut," Heston says. "At that time we were catching big halibut in Valdez. We have a great halibut fishery here, and people didn't know about



Fishermen enjoy the view of the bay while they fish. Photo courtesy of the Valdez CVB.

it. The fishing warranted a derby, so Darrell Shreve got everyone excited about it and worked with the Chamber to get it going.”

Heston recalls Bob Donald was the winner of the first Halibut Derby. Kevin Lincoln of North Pole holds the distinction of catching the largest halibut in the derby, with the 343.6-pound flatfish he reeled up in 2006.

In the late 1990s the halibut derby was changed from a large fish derby to a target weight derby. In 2002, the big fish derby returned with a \$10,000 prize for the largest fish caught.

Through the years, a Pink Salmon Derby, a Kids Derby and a Kids Pink Salmon Derby have been held.

Although the pinks are still plentiful, there is no longer a Pink Derby due to poor ticket sales.

The derby’s newest event is the Women’s Silver Salmon Derby. Known as the Silver Salmon Sisterhood, the event draws hundreds of female anglers to Valdez. They also enjoy a party and bachelor

## Fish Tales

There’s a story behind every fish. David Bruno of Glennallen had been coming to Valdez to fish halibut with Captain Dave Bruss of *No Excuses* for 15 years.

On their first trip together, Bruss says Bruno caught a 10-pound halibut and wanted to keep it.

“I told him to throw the fish back and we could catch it in 10 years when it got bigger,” Bruss says.

While Bruss doesn’t think the 325.4-pound halibut Bruno caught aboard his boat in 2005 was the same fish, at the time it was the biggest halibut on record to be brought into the Valdez Harbor.

Paula Groundwater’s story be-

gan when the avid fisherwoman, did not buy a derby ticket before boarding the *Marti Kay* for a day of fishing August 28, 2006.

“I had to talk her into buying a ticket,” Captain Stacey Mitchell says, recalling the fateful morning Groundwater reeled in an 18.42-pound silver that won her \$15,000 in the Valdez Silver Salmon Derby.

“That’s basically the whole story,” Groundwater says. “I had to be talked into buying that ticket—and I’m sure glad I did.”

Anglers never know when they will catch a big one, but there’s one thing for certain: There is only one way their story will end if they don’t buy a derby ticket. It will be a story about the one that got away. ■

auction that doubles as a fund-raiser for breast cancer awareness.

As the fish derbies have grown, so have the prizes. The fish derbies now give away a vehicle as a prize, and the community and business support is evident in the sponsor listings.

Even with \$80,000 in cash and prizes at stake, most anglers are fishing for the sport of it. Sure, the prizes make it more exciting, but it is one of the few contests where you get to spend a wonderful day on the water, win or lose. ■