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The Story of the Baker Lake Fish Hatchery is Historic Lore

Artificial propagation of sockeye salmon began in 1896 when in that year the State of Washington originally established the hatchery at Baker Lake where existed the only natural spawning grounds of sockeye salmon in United States waters on Puget Sound. By that time there were already pack horse trails on both the east and west sides of the Baker River and a number of pioneers had located homesteads on both sides of the Baker River and on the shore of Baker Lake. Mrs. Richard Thompson (Emma Ruth) I believe is the only one of such pioneers now remaining in this locality. At that time and for several years after there was considerable prospecting for gold several miles up Noisy Creek. A cylinder containing about 200 pounds of mercury was left by one of the miners at his claim when he was starved out and in 1916 he returned and packed the mercury out since by that time such metal had greatly increased in value.

The original buildings constructed by the state consisted of a residence for the superintendent, a hatchery building, a small barn for saddle and pack horses and a combination mess and dormitory building for the crew. These buildings were all made of split cedar boards except that the door and window casings were ripped out with a whipsaw. For the first few years of operation of the hatchery the eggs were obtained by seizing the fish on the spawning grounds in the upper Baker River. In 1899 by Executive

Order Baker Lake and the land within one half mile of the lake shore line, except lands already patented, were withdrawn from the Washington Forest Reserve (Now Mount Baker National Forest) for fish cultural purposes. In July of that year the United States Government purchased the Baker Lake Hatchery project from the State of Washington for \$6,400 and the United States Fish Commission (later becoming the Bureau of Fisheries) conducted operations from then on. The first superintendent for the United States was a Mr. Buck from Bucksport Maine and Henry O'Malley was the first fish culturist. In about 1901 Mr. Buck resigned and Mr. O'Malley became the superintendent and from this position he continued to advance to the higher grades until in May 1922 he was appointed Commissioner of Fisheries by President Harding.

The first work of importance carried out after the federal government took over operation was the installation of a trap at the mouth of the lake in 70 feet of water for catching the salmon upon their arrival and the construction of holding pens at the upper end of the lake in a small stream which turned out to be the best holding water for salmon to remain and ripen in of any since found in the state. Such traps and holding pens were constructed about 1900 and 1901. The salmon when caught in the trap were transferred to live crates and towed across the lake to the

holding pens and released therein until ready for spawning. This assured the entire run of fish becoming available for artificial egg taking, except on those occasions when muskrats chewed holes in trap webbing holes in the holding pen fences by bears, or flood waters allowed the fish to escape into the lake. In order to drive the necessary piling for the trap at the lower end of the lake a pile driver was necessary. Gasoline engines had not come in to general use at that time and therefore steam for power was resorted to. Any equipment decided on must be constructed so that no one part would be in excess of a pack horse load or a one horse sled load for the 18 miles of trail from Baker to the hatchery.

Accordingly Mr. O'Malley arranged to have the hammer cast in sections of not to exceed 250 pounds per section and for the boiler the pipe type rather than the more common tubular type was obtained since the pipe type could be assembled at the hatchery. The boiler, engine, gin and hammer was then installed on a float made of logs and the piling driven for the trap. The piling were spaced about 12 to 18 feet apart and at 18 feet above low water there were sawed off and capped from shore to shore. The tarred webbing hung from the capping and to the bottom of the webbing was fastened one half inch chain for lead line so that the fish could not get under the webbing. At about mid distance from shore to shore a pot about 16 feet square by 20 feet deep, also of webbing was attached to the webbing and in this pot the fish were trapped. This trap webbing was each fall at the end of the fish run taken out of the water and the following spring was retarred and again hung, in place. Then a diver was obtained to inspect the webbing all along the bottom to see that the chain line was on the bottom and not hung up on any drift that might have lodged along the bottom during the winter. In all a total of four new sets of piling were driven throughout the years of operation, with only the first one in 70 feet of water since it was found that a

trap site further down stream in 40 feet of water caught the fish equally well and with the current not becoming too swift. In packing the divers equipment in each spring it was necessary that the air pump be packed in tandem on poles between two horses. In 1921 the Bureau purchased an air pump and thereafter moving the divers equipment in and out was greatly simplified.

Henry O'Malley married Annie Thompson (sister of Richard Thompson) of Birdsvie about July 15, 1903. Several weeks later he and his bride went to Baker-Lake and upon coming in sight of the hatchery they saw, of all things, the superintendent's residence going up in smoke. Several men had that day been cleaning up around the residence and their fire had gotten out of control. The hatchery office was also in the residence and therefore all of the early records were destroyed. A new superintendents residence was then built and this time of logs. Many persons will remember this building as being the mess house from 1912 to 1919. Henry O'Malley transferred to Clackamas, Oregon station in 1907 and was succeeded by Mr. A. H. Dinsmore of the New England states.

In 1905 a No. 2 size sawmill was purchased and installed and several years later a planner was added. This equipment was all also packed in from Baker. Power for the sawmill was by a Peleton water wheel, a nozzle pressure of 150 lbs, being provided through 1,200 feet of 12 inch wood pipe which had been made up in 4 foot joints for packing in. Also in 1905 the launch "Bittern", 27 foot in length, was build at the station and was powered by a 5 h.p. N and S gas engine. In 1910 congress provided funds for building two new hatcheries on Hoods Canal and for extensive enlargement of the Birdsvie hatchery. Construction of these three projects was completed in 1911 and since the Baker Lake superintendent was to have charge of these additional stations the office of the superintendent was moved from Baker Lake

to the Birdsvie hatchery and thereafter a foreman had immediate charge of Baker Lake hatchery, a five room cottage for a foreman having been built at Baker Lake in 1907.

In 1911 and 1912 a new hatchery building, a new barn, and a new bunk house or dormitory building for the crew were built and the and the superintendent's residence became the messhouse. Then the original hatchery building, barn and combination mess and dormitory building were torn down. About this time the telephone line was extended from the Ranger Station to the hatchery and a direct current generator was installed and electric lights furnished to all the buildings. The generator was installed in the sawmill where the water wheel could be used for the necessary power. In 1914 a fire originating in the hatchery building destroyed both the hatchery and barn. They were rebuilt in 1915.

On the afternoon of July 20, 1919 a spark from the messhouse kitchen stove ignited the roof of the building and fanned by a strong breeze it was but a short while before the messhouse, the foremans house, the hatchery and the sawmill buildings were completely destroyed along with most of the stations equipment and tools, leaving only the barn and bunkhouse buildings standing and while these two buildings became ignited it was possible for the employees to save them.

At the time the fire started only the cook was on the premises and by the time the crew was able to arrive from across the lake the fire had gained such headway that only the two buildings mentioned were saved. The cook got out of the kitchen with only a cake he had just baked. At that time I was the foreman but was absent on a special assignment at the Birdsvie office and I lost everything I had in the foremans house.

The first fish of the annual sockeye salmon runs always arrived at Baker Lake within a day or two of the first of July and at the time of the fire on July 20, prospects for a greater number of sockeyes that had been

caught in the previous ten years appeared very favorable and at least ten million eggs were assured. Therefore the replacing of the destroyed buildings was warranted.

Accordingly a special appropriation of fifty thousand dollars was granted by congress for reconstruction work. Immediately needed was a cook stove, several tents, and some groceries and tools, followed by a sawmill in order that temporary troughs and a temporary building could be erected for the 11,150,000 sockeye salmon eggs which were obtained that year.

Again everything had to be packed in on horses, but by October 15th the sawmill was erected as was the temporary hatchery building, which was the following year remodeled into a workshop, was completed prior to severe winter weather. Then during 1920 and 1921 all reconstruction work was completed, and generally on a large scale than had been previous to the fire. During 1920, 1921, 1922 and 1923 the egg collection each year exceeded ten million sockeye eggs.

Then in 1924 a total of 14,558 sockeye salmon were caught and from these a total of 22,000,000 eggs were obtained. However in 1924 the construction of the Baker River Dam at Concrete begun and in 1925 only 40 sockeyes got through to Baker Lake and only 51,490 eggs taken therefrom. However, there were thousands of sockeyes in the Baker River canyon that were unable to get beyond the dam site. In 1926 a total of 2,823 sockeyes arrived at Baker Lake and 3,921,000 eggs obtained therefrom. From then on the annual runs gradually decreased until by 1933 only 493 sockeyes got to Baker Lake and only 356,000 eggs were obtained. This did not warrant operation further on a year around basis for sockeyes and the hatchery was eventually discontinued entirely.

All buildings and fixed equipment reverted to the Forest Service since by the Executive order of May 10, 1890, the hatchery project and lands involved were to do so if and

when use for fish cultural purposes were ever discontinued. For a number of years after 1933 the hatchery was operated during the summer months for the rearing of trout for waters of the Mount Baker Forest.

After over 35 years of operation and during this time the 18 miles of pack horse trail being the only means of transferring supplies and equipment to the hatchery, it certainly was the irony of fate that further operation was not justified on a normal basis just at the time when the road to Baker Lake was completed.

After the summer season of 1934 the hatchery was closed for the winter and the small crew assigned to other hatcheries. The following February 22 the building collapsed due to several hundred tons of heavy snow on the roof which did not slide off as it always had when there was heat in the building.

In the summer of 1935 a small C. C. C. Camp was established on the hatchery grounds and the lumber was salvaged and with this salvaged lumber the small sawmill building was converted into a hatchery for the rearing of trout.

Shortly after this the handling of fish was discontinued entirely and the hatchery ground is now used only by the Forest Service.