

The *John N. Cobb* Leaves a Rich Legacy

FOR OVER HALF A CENTURY, the NOAA ship *John N. Cobb* has plied Alaska waters as a Federal fisheries research vessel. This year of operation was scheduled to be her last, but the beloved boat's season sadly was cut short in June 2008 due to a catastrophic breakdown: a broken main crankshaft in her vintage Fairbanks-Morse 1931-design, 325 hp direct drive, locomotive engine. The cost and time to repower and ballast the vessel—estimated at \$245,000 and 4–6 months—was deemed unfeasible; consequently, the remainder of the vessel's scheduled research was curtailed.

Although home ported in Seattle, Washington, the *Cobb* spent much of her storied life working in Alaska waters. During the past several decades, the vessel primarily supported research projects in southeastern Alaska for the Alaska Fisheries Science Center's Auke Bay and National Marine Mammal Laboratories. Research projects have included juvenile salmon marine ecology and factors affecting year-class strength; marine mammal surveys; cetacean ecology and humpback whale prey investigations; harbor seal ecology near tidewater glaciers; coral and sponge benthic habitat studies; habitat mapping of near-shore estuaries; sablefish tagging and telemetry studies; juvenile rockfish habitat assessment; oceanographic sampling and long-term coastal monitoring; and support to remote field camps and the Little Port Walter Marine Station

The oldest wooden boat in the NOAA fleet, the *John N. Cobb* was built by the Western Boat Building Company in Tacoma, Washington, and delivered in February 1950. Her design is a West Coast purse-seiner with additional capabilities to allow trawling, long lining, gill netting, and oceanographic sampling. The *Cobb's* normal complement of command and crew is eight, with additional accommodations for four scientists. She is 93 ft in length, 26 ft in beam, and a gross tonnage of 185 tons. (Interestingly another historic wooden-hull vessel, the *Mayflower*, had a similar estimated size: 90–110 ft length, 25 ft beam, and a gross tonnage of 180 tons. However, the *Mayflower* was a little more crowded in 1620 with 130 persons onboard!)



The NOAA ship *John N. Cobb* during investigations of harbor seal ecology near tidewater glaciers. Tracy Arm fjord, Alaska, June 2007. Photo by Dave Withrow.

Immediately after commissioning in mid-February 1950, the *Cobb's* initial shakedown cruise was to search for commercial quantities of shrimp in Alaska waters. In June of that year the *Cobb* embarked on a 4-month cruise to “search for untapped resources of albacore tuna in waters off Oregon, Washington, and Alaska.” Note that these early surveys to Alaska were nearly a decade before statehood. In August 1959, the *Cobb* was involved in “Project Chariot” with the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission to assess the feasibility of using nuclear explosives off the northwest coast of Alaska to excavate harbors or canals. Fortunately this project never materialized. In the early 1980s, the *Cobb* collaborated on a coast-wide research project sampling juvenile salmon with small mesh purse seines off the coasts of Oregon, Washington, British Columbia, and Alaska. With the renewed focus on marine ecology of juvenile salmon and other epipelagic fishes, the *Cobb* helped pioneer the use of surface rope trawls from 1997 to 2007. Use of these trawls led to the Southeast Coastal Monitoring (SECM) Project and development of an important long-term data set on biophysical factors affecting fluctuations in interannual year-class strength of salmon populations.

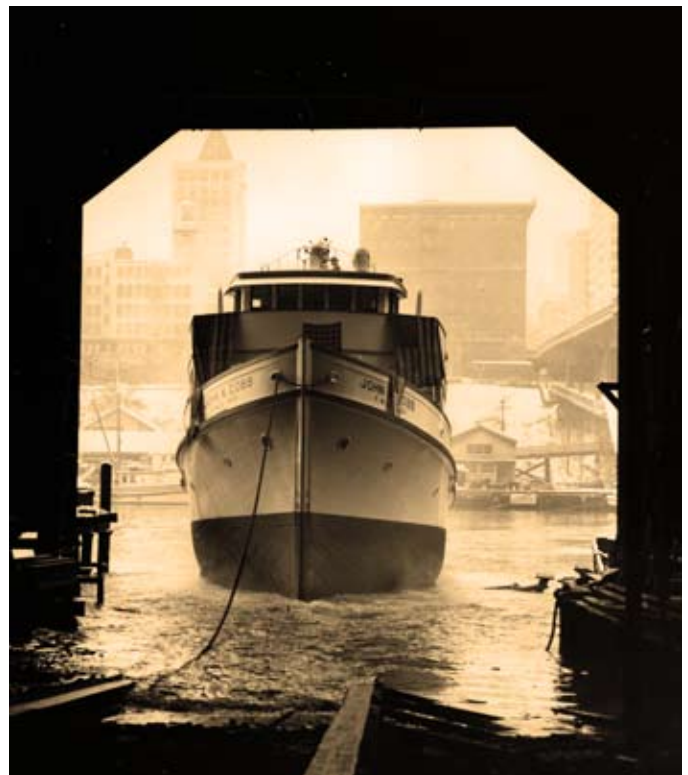
One of the most memorable times of the *Cobb's* remarkable career as a research vessel was after the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in Prince William Sound on 29 March 1989.

Before the spill the *Cobb* was in an inactive status but was quickly mobilized to play a key role in this major research response. In subsequent years the *Cobb* supported numerous studies evaluating lingering effects of this damaging oil spill to the Prince William Sound ecosystem. The *Cobb's* career also included at least two high-profile rescue operations and one burial at sea. She came to the assistance of the purse seine vessel *Karen Rae* in Icy Strait in the mid-1990s and the Alaska State Ferry *Le Conte* in 2004. The ashes of Dr. Richard Carlson, a long-time ABL researcher and renowned diver, were spread in the waters of Auke Bay from the *Cobb* in 1999.

The *John N. Cobb* was named after John Nathan Cobb (1868-1930), an author, naturalist, and conservationist. Cobb began his career as a newspaper reporter and editor in the late 1880s, then later authored various publications for the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries from 1895 to 1904. He subsequently served with distinction as Assistant Agent of the Salmon Fisheries of Alaska, Editor of *Pacific Fisherman*, Assistant General Superintendent of the Alaska Packers Association, and President of the Pacific Fisheries Society. John Cobb was also the founding Director of the University of Washington's College of Fisheries—the first fisheries school in the United States—from 1919 to 1930. As Dean of the College of Fisheries in 1924, Cobb later became instru-

John N. Cobb Specifications

Length Overall	93ft
Breadth	26ft
Draft	11ft
Hull	wood
Displacement	250 tons
Power	325 shp
Cruising Speed	10 knots
Range	2,850 nmi
Endurance	13 days



The *John N. Cobb*: designed by W.C. Nickum and Sons; keel laid July 1949; built by Western Boat Building Company, Tacoma, Washington; launched 16 January 1950; acceptance by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 13 February 1950; commissioned 18 February 1950; transferred to NOAA 1 July 1972. Pictured above, upper left: keel laid; middle left: near completion; bottom left: stern view before launching; bottom right: launching; top right: launched, Commencement Bay, Washington. Photos courtesy of NOAA Office of Marine and Aviation Operations.



Upper left: the *John N. Cobb* at decommissioning ceremonies on 13 August 2008 at NOAA's Sand Point campus on Lake Washington in Seattle. Above: the ship's flag is officially retired. Left: William Lamoureux, the ship's chief steward, receives the ship's bell. Photos by Dave Withow and Sally Mizroch.



mental during a major battle in the salmon vs. dams debate over the Priest Rapids hydroelectric dam proposed on the mainstem of the Columbia River. He spoke in opposition to this dam at a time that predated “environmentalists” and tried to implement creative solutions such as fish hoists and passage baskets in order to enable salmon to overcome modern barriers.

The *John N. Cobb* leaves a rich legacy. Decommissioned at Sand Point in Seattle on 13 August 2008 (prior to this publication going to press), her final resting place is still to be determined. Preliminary plans are under way by a broad group of maritime heritage interests to have the *Cobb* saved as

a historic representation of wooden hull research vessels of the U.S. Federal Fisheries programs for public viewing and use in educational and outreach programs.

By Joe Orsi and Bill Heard

Dick Wilmot Retires

Richard (Dick) Wilmot, head of the Auke Bay Laboratories (ABL) Genetics Program, retired on 2 May 2008 after 37 years of Federal service.

Dick came to the Auke Bay Laboratory in Juneau, Alaska, in 1992, where he over-

saw development of pink, chum, sockeye, and Chinook salmon genetic baselines for the U.S./Canada Salmon treaty. During that time, he hosted Russian scientists in order to expand the baselines to include the entire North Pacific Rim. Numerous other studies ensued: chum bycatch issues in western Alaska circa 1994–96, extension of the sockeye and Chinook baseline using Single Nucleotide Polymorphism (SNP) markers, hosting Korean scientists to assist in development of chum SNP markers, and utilization of microsatellite markers for pilot studies on forage fish. Dick also served as the National Marine Fisheries Service representative on the Yukon River Joint Technical Committee, an advisor to the North Pacific Anadromous Fish Commission, and was an adjunct professor of University of Alaska Fairbanks, advising graduate students.

Dick earned his bachelor's degree in 1961 from Colorado State University. He served as a military intelligence officer in the U.S. Army from 1961 to 1964 and returned to Colorado State University in 1964 to obtain his master's degree. In 1972 Dick received his Ph.D. in genetics from Oregon State University.

For several years following his post graduate studies, Dick worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) on the Upper Columbia River in a regulatory capacity. But in 1977 Alaska called. Dick responded by moving his wife and two sons (the youngest 2 weeks old) to Anchorage to start the Alaska field station of the USFWS Western Fish Disease Laboratory. Dick supervised the program for 15 years, overseeing genetic studies in North Slope Arctic char, Kenai River Chinook, Katmai steelhead trout, declining sockeye stocks in the Karluk River/Lake system, and Yukon River chum and Chinook. He also was involved in the first radio telemetry projects on Kenai Chinook and Copper River steelhead and the first habitat study of juvenile chinook and coho on the Kenai River.

When asked about the most challenging moments of his career (other than trying to comprehend the NOAA budget software), Dick paused and then spoke of his fruitless attempts to rescue wildlife when the Snake River was flooded for hydroelectric power. When asked about his most memorable moments, he responded without hesitation about the beautiful wilderness of Karluk Lake. His proudest accomplishment was completion of the Yukon River salmon stock identification work.

Dick's retirement plans call for traveling the States to visit relatives. His wife Barbara, of Norse descent, will most certainly be dragging him to the Sons of Norway celebration in Minot, North Dakota, in the fall. Lots and lots of fishing is planned, a trip to Greece, and a long train ride across southern Canada, turning south in pursuit of the fall colors. A large "honey-do" list is waiting, as is time with his two sons Ronnie and Michael. And with a twinkle



Dick Wilmot, head of the Auke Bay Laboratories Genetics Program. Photo by Jack Helle.

in his eye, more time with his granddaughter.

When his colleagues were asked what they would miss most about Dick, their overwhelming response was "his patience, humility, and kindness." Richard Wilmot will be deeply missed.

By Sharon Wildes

Jerry Taylor Retires

Sidney (Jerry) Taylor retired from Federal service on 31 May 2008 after 37 years as a research fishery biologist at ABL.

Jerry, born and raised in Juneau, began his fisheries career working on sockeye salmon at Brooks Lake in Bristol Bay. He received his B.S. and M.S. degrees from the University of Alaska and became a critically important part of the Marine Salmon Interactions Program at ABL.

For most of his career Jerry has been the authority on all aspects of ABL's Auke Creek Station. The research station, located at the mouth of Auke Creek, maintains and operates a two-way fish counting weir and a small experimental hatchery on an inter-agency cooperative basis with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the University of Alaska School of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences. Much of the cooperative research at Auke Creek is centered on maintaining accurate daily counts of all upstream migrating adult and downstream migrating juvenile salmonids as they pass through the weir. One of Jerry's hallmark achievements has been maintaining this long-term (40+ years) series of data for six species of anadromous fishes. This involved a vigilant 240-day annual commitment on a 24/7 basis by Jerry to make sure Auke Creek weir was running effectively with minimal impediments to migrating fishes. Fish counting weirs are notoriously difficult during freshets and flash flood conditions. This important legacy data set on migrating salmonids from Auke Creek is unparalleled around the Pacific Rim and provides a unique record of both freshwater and marine survival values for these fishes over more than four decades. Thanks in part to Jerry's dedication, these data have also pro-



Jerry Taylor with grade school students at the Auke Creek research station. Photo by Bill Heard.

vided research opportunities for more than 30 university graduate students and have led to numerous publications in peer reviewed journals.

One of Jerry's most recent contributions to science was a publication in the journal *Global Change Biology* on how climate warming is causing phenological shifts in pink salmon behavior. The paper illustrates the importance of long-term data series, like those from Auke Creek, for evaluating how climatic changes to the environment can impact population dynamics and behavior of fishes and other biota.

We wish Jerry the best in retirement and hope to continue maintaining his legacy and valuable long-term data series.

By Bill Heard