Ghosts of Christmases Past
by Suzanne Andersen

Life in Pelican, on Lisianski Inlet, was organized around fish. Everyone owned a boat, aspired to own a boat, or worked on a boat. Pelican combined two cultures of the sea: the Scandinavians who arrived as failed gold rushers, and the Tlingits who already lived in the neighborhood. Both were justly proud of their fishing skills, and had naturally discovered the same antiseptic abuses that preserve fish for winter: they smoked it, salted it, dried it, pickled it, and rendered oil from it. Of course they had different recipes and different abominations. I trust the Scandinavians never tried to sell the Tlingits on lutefisk.

In dark winter, when fishing was on hold and the hunting season was over, Pelican diverted itself by inventing new ways to pickle herring. By Christmas everyone had more herring than he could possibly eat, so he gave it to his friends for Christmas. His friends did the same thing.

One Christmas Lars showed up with a jar in which he had arranged the herring, onions and lemon in a spiral pattern circling around the jar. There were red florettes pressed against the inside, fashioned from chili peppers, which from the outside looked like poinsettas. He had made a calligraphy label, and a green ribbon was tied around the lid.

We were impressed. It was herring with ambition.

But could it prove itself on the palate? Lars waited nervously while my father Toivo took the first bite. Toivo rolled it around on his tongue like an unfamiliar wine, probing the texture and teasing out the spices. The suspense mounted.

Finally he effused over it, in his Scandinavian sort of way.

"It's fine herring," he said solemnly.

If this had actually been true, it would have joined our Christmas smorgasbord. Instead it joined the inventory of vintage pickled herring already in the larder -- the ghosts of Christmases past. That was the virtue of pickled herring: If you didn't want to eat it, you could save it for a special occasion in the next millenium.

But herring was mere amusement. The real business of Pelican was salmon. Even the children understood this. Instead of playing cops and robbers, we played fisherman and fish. The ceiling in our living room had a circulation vent through which one could pass a fishing line. My brother, the fisherman, would sit on the floor above, dangling some attractive object through the vent on a makeshift hook. I, the fish, would be in the living room below. If the lure didn't please me, I would become an irksome bass, gobbling up the bait and tangling his line on the rocky bottom.

My brother was always the fisherman, and I was always the fish. He assured me that both roles were equally noble.

Our father Toivo Andersen was a pillar of the salmon troll industry. It was said that he could catch a salmon by dragging a herring across a muskeg. His own specialties were kippered salmon and lox, which we also made at Christmas. When my brother and I outgrew childhood, the penalty was that we had to leave Pelican. There
was no high school. I went to high school in Sitka, and then to the University of Washington. The king salmon, with its remarkable homing instincts, followed. It was the turbulent sixties, and like all dislocated students, we checked our mailboxes regularly for reminders of home. Most kids got letters; many got checks; a few got cookies; I got kippered salmon.

The seventies found me roving around the United States, with the salmon in close pursuit. One Christmas, in Iowa, a shipment of lox arrived from Alaska. As we ate it, I explained to my friends that a side of salmon was more or less as big as a side of beef. I was lying, of course, but people in Iowa are too polite to say so.

The end of the seventies found me in Berkeley, which posed new challenges for the migrating salmon. It was likely to mold in the warm weather before they delivered it. Daddy started to mail it insured so the Post Office would treat it with proper respect. A box of kippered salmon arrived on the day I took my Ph.D. orals.

When I went to Harvard as an Assistant Professor, Daddy was sympathetic. "You mean you can't get a job in Alaska?" he asked. To help with the deprivations, he upped the frequency of delivery, and I became a regular at the Mt. Auburn Street Post Office. After seminars, my colleagues would go out for drinks or dinner. "Can't come," I would say. "Have to get to the Post Office before five."

The salmon's migration persisted into the late eighties, when I moved back to Berkeley. It always arrived at Christmas. The friends who shared it were the urban variety that populate academic communities: Most grew up in New York or Philadelphia or Berkeley or London, and if they knew that fish spawned at all, they thought they spawned in delicatessens. "You mean he caught it?" they would say. Along with the shipments of salmon, my father sometimes enclosed a letter telling me who had gone fishing with him, and how big the fish was. He would conspicuously not say where he had caught it or on what lure. I would phone him up to ask.

"Oh, I can't tell you that," he would say reproachfully. This was a spoof on the complex etiquette of the fishing community, where information is jealously guarded. Usually I would hold up my end by pressing him for details. Finally he would say, "Well, here's what you do to catch a king salmon. First, you find some salmon tracks. Then you follow the trail."

When he died, the salmon migration stopped. We had invited friends to a Christmas party, and as I began to prepare the food, I realized that we did not have salmon. We didn't even have vintage pickled herring. I opened a recipe book in panic, to see what other Americans eat at Christmas. It turns out they eat the same thing as at Thanksgiving. One can understand it at Thanksgiving: It was mandated by the Pilgrims, written into the Constitution, and possibly appears in the Bible. But what is the excuse at Christmas?

I took off for the delicatessen. It was full of deceptively alluring fish. They even had herring, although none with ambition. The salmon was remarkably cheap - it couldn't possibly have been Pacific wild chinook. Suspicious, I taxed the clerk for details. It turned out to be Atlantic salmon, farmed in Norway. I almost bought it on the strength of its Norwegian credentials, but in the end I decided not. It wasn't really the right stuff.

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