

Rebuilding Alaska: Breathing New Life into Kake's Historic Cannery

Reconstruction project to incubate business and stimulate rural Alaska economy

BY BETHANY GOODRICH

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Greg Harrison and his construction crew at Kake's Historic Cannery. This hardworking team is inventive, fearless, and includes five Kake locals.

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It was approaching dusk in April when something out-of-the-ordinary, yet strangely familiar, caught Casimero Aceveda's eye. "It was like something being reborn," says Aceveda. The lights in the old cannery were on for the first time in almost forty years.

Aceveda is the tribal president for the community of Kake. A predominately Tlingit village of approximately 650 residents, Kake is located on Kupreanof Island in Southeast Alaska. Like many of its elder residents, Aceveda grew up in the days when the salmon cannery was thriving.

"People were happy they were working. Our sisters and aunties would babysit the younger ones. Our dads fished and our moms worked on the cannery. It was a central part of our life," remembers Aceveda.

At its peak, the Kake cannery was a force to be reckoned with. In 1930 it exported 615,000 full cases of salmon, more than double what its competitors produced.

"Everyone was working, everyone was doing things, and things were going well. The cannery was really the hub of employment and activity at the time," says Aceveda.

As the political, environmental, and economic atmosphere that stimulated the canning industry waned, Kake's cannery joined others across the region in collapse.

"When the cannery closed down around 1980, everybody had started putting away their fishing boots and were going into the woods to go logging, so it switched from one entity to the other and the cannery kind of fell to the wayside. The

community altogether changed," says Aceveda.

Breathing new life back into Kake's historic cannery buildings has been a dream for Aceveda and his community for decades. Although tinged with nostalgia for the past, the cannery restoration project has more to do with securing Kake's future.

"This is about all entities working together for the common cause of economic development and education for our kids. They need to step up and help themselves, but they can't do that unless we can offer a space for them to go and do it," says Aceveda.

Teetering on Catastrophe

In 1997, the US Department of the Interior and National Park Service recognized the Kake cannery as a National Historic Landmark. After two of the buildings later collapsed, the cannery was added to a less celebrated list: the "Eleven Most Endangered Historic Places" by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

The need for help was urgent. After years of working tirelessly with state and federal agencies, Kake's call was finally answered on Christmas Eve, 2014. Gary Williams, the executive director of the Organized Village of Kake (which is the tribal government for the Kake area), was contacted by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Funding had come through—it was a miracle.

"When they told us the amount, it truly and literally brought tears to my eyes because it gave us enough, along with other resources we had found, to do the stabilization that needed to be done. That was the Christmas Miracle; it was truly a blessing," says Williams.

Securing funding was only part of the struggle. The magnitude of the job that lay ahead was formidable. There were no blueprints and the remaining structures literally teetered on the verge of catastrophe. This contract would require a fearless, imaginative, and talented crew to complete. Kake's second miracle came this January.

"This is fun, you've got to use your imagination, and you've got to figure it out. New construction can get boring. This job does not bore me," says Greg Harrison.

Greg Harrison is the owner and operator behind Diversified Diving, a Ketchikan-based construction company. While working with the tribe, the project's engineer, Harrison, and his crew have risen to the challenge with grace and good humor.

"With a job like this, there is a lot of shimmying that happens. When you are doing a new construction you try and get everything plumb and level. These guys will be working on something here and be like, 'Well it's an inch and a half off Greg!' And it's like well, after almost a hundred years, I'd call that perfect!" laughs Harrison.

The team is innovative. They rely on the tides to help raise heavy wood pilings, salvage wood from the original structure whenever possible, and straighten the building with a series of counterbalances. The magnitude of the construction is impressive. There's something else notable happening here: local wood and local workers.

Adam Davis is the Community & Economic Development Specialist for the Tribe.

"The scale is impressive, the scale of the work being done with mostly local hands, local wood, and materials. It's very impressive to see and, now that the building is getting more work done on the outside, it's coming to more people's attention. People are taking note and more of the community is getting excited about what this all means for Kake's economy," says Davis.

A Community-Driven Economy

While the dream of rebuilding Kake's historic cannery has been lingering for decades, it was during a series of community economic meetings that the project was formally established as a priority. Currently, Kake is the only rural community in Southeast Alaska that regularly drafts an economic plan. The Kake Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy was established after the logging era met a similar fate as the canning industry.

"We lost half of our community because of lack of work in our community. The younger ones with families took off to the bigger cities to find work to survive," recalls Aceveda.

The magnitude of community out-migration has plateaued in recent years, but the community still faces formidable social and economic challenges. According to a community survey conducted in 2009, more than half of the working population between the ages of eighteen and sixty-four is unemployed with 61 percent of surveyed families reporting at least one household member actively searching for work.

"In 2004 was when our economy really took a downturn and that was when the charter members of the Kake Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy came together to put together the first edition of the current economic planning process," says Williams.

Fast forward one decade later to Kake's 2015 Economic Summit and the process is thriving. Representatives from the tribe, city, school, and village corporation joined business leaders and other residents at the school for dinner and discussion. On giant sheets of paper hung across the cafeteria, participants mapped Kake's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Participants voiced concerns and spoke passionately about building a sustainable and prosperous future for their home village.

Input from these meetings is regularly compiled into a formal plan that identifies priorities, fosters collaboration, and drives an informed, community-driven development process. Over fifty projects have resulted from this process since the first plan was published in 2005.

"Right now we are working on the fourth edition of this economic plan and throughout it all, the cannery has been recognized as an integral part and priority because so much economic opportunity can and does branch off of it," says Williams.

While Kake's historic cannery provided community employment while in operation, a series of out-of-state companies ran the show during the first half of the last century. The majority of profit was thus siphoned out of Kake. Today, the historic site is owned in trust by the tribe for the purpose of stimulating the local economy. With more than 70 percent of Kake's households headed by enrolled tribal members, the future of the cannery will remain a community owned asset.

Like many communities on the Inside Passage, Kake identifies tourism as an economic priority. Residents and leaders view the cannery as a unique asset that sets them and the type of tourism they want apart.

"Right from the beginning of the planning process, it was identified that in Kake we didn't want to go too large in scale with tourism. If you go too big it destroys the character of Kake for the community and the visitors," says Williams.

Building an authentic tourism experience for Kake's visitors, while at the same time ensuring it respects community residents, has been central to the planning process. While a few small tourist boats visit Kake, existing opportunities for locals to capitalize on tourism dollars are limited. Located next to the main dock, the cannery will act as an iconic gateway to Kake with spaces for artisans, vendors, and other service-industry entrepreneurs.

The space however, is not slated to be only a tourist attraction. The tribal transportation program will move in and light industrial options are being explored to help diversify the benefits. A section will be dedicated to Kake's Keex' Kwaan Dancers, room made for a community meeting space, and a cultural and historical museum will span across the central

floor. The idea is for Kake's cannery to become an incubator of entrepreneurial, social, and cultural ingenuity, a space for the community to gather and collaborate, share ideas, and face the many challenges that come with living in a remote community head on. Proponents of the project continually stress the desire for the cannery to be "a part of the community" rather than a playground for tourists.

The stabilization stage of the project is wrapping up. The tribe is well positioned to secure funding for the final process of bringing the rooms up to code while preserving the structures of this historic landmark. Some space may be used as soon as next year, and momentum in the community is building.

The Power of Collaboration

Returning the old cannery site to a community asset has taken dedication. This work is a promising example of economic innovation in a state replete with untapped opportunity. Alaska boasts a unique history, cultural identity, and natural assets that, with hard work, can be harnessed to build a more prosperous and sustainable future for our rural communities.

The Kake Cannery Restoration Project is made possible with the support of many local, regional, state, and federal partners. This includes the Organized Village of Kake, Kake Tribal Corporation, the City of Kake, Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Park Service, Alaska State Historic Preservation Office, OVK Tribal Historic Preservation Office, National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Office, Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, Environmental Protection Agency, US Department of Agriculture Economic Development Agency, University of Oregon, Sustainable Southeast Partnership, and former-Senator Mark Begich's office.

This story is about more than just a restored cannery. It is the story of a community coming together to persevere through economic hardship. The community of Kake has come together to ask: What makes our community unique? How can we develop these assets and opportunities in a way that maximizes benefits both locally and long-term? And, how can we keep our families and quality of life at the forefront of every step in the process?

For Kake, achieving a long-term prosperous community vision starts with revisiting its historic roots. These roots run particularly deep for Casimero Aceveda.

"My dad worked on the cannery and when I grew up my first paying job was working on that cannery. I was a carpenter. So now, third generation coming down I got my nephew working to remodel the place! So yeah, we have pride in that cannery. The whole community has pride in that cannery, that's where our families grew up—it's part of us."

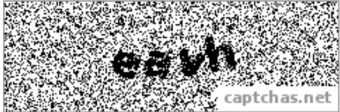
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