



**NOAA  
FISHERIES**

Auke Bay Laboratories/AFSC/NMFS/NOAA

## The *John N. Cobb*, Establishing a Rich Legacy

**Built in 1950, the *John N. Cobb*** provided valuable service in Alaskan waters for over half a century until her career came to an end in 2008. Based on a West Coast purse-seiner design by W. C. Nickum and sons, she was constructed for the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) at Tacoma, Washington. Funding was made available from the \$150,000 sale of the *Washington*, a FWS boat which failed to prove herself suitable for an exploratory fishing project in 1948.

The 93-foot vessel was named after John Nathan Cobb (1868-1930), an author, stenographer, clerk, magazine editor, conservationist, naturalist, canneryman, and founding director (1919-30) and later dean of the University of Washington's College of Fisheries. From 1895-1912, he had worked primarily as a field agent for both the Fish Commission and Bureau of Fisheries.

After her launch on 16 January 1950 and commissioning a month later on 18 February, the *Cobb* was ready for duty. Specifically designed for exploratory fishing and gear development, the vessel was capable of trawling, long lining, gill netting and oceanographic sampling. On

board was modern navigational equipment, which included radar, a LORAN navigation system, depth-finders, and an electro-mechanical steering system. The ship was initially assigned to her new home port at the FWS Exploratory Fishing & Gear Research (EF&GR) unit's Seattle base at the Montlake Laboratory.

The *Cobb's* first cruise in March and April of 1950 was to Alaska looking for commercial shellfish (shrimp) populations. During that summer, from June to September, the vessel was cruising in the ocean waters off Washington, Oregon and Alaska during a search for albacore tuna. In August she was approximately 270 miles off Washington's coast when her crew discovered the Cobb Seamount — an underwater mountain rising nearly 9600 feet from the ocean floor to within 132 feet of the surface

During the 1950s, the FWS took full advantage of their new boat. In 1953, the *Cobb* was at the Aleutian Islands being used for preliminary salmon explorations, primarily to develop fishing techniques with gill nets on the high seas. Later that year, exploratory herring fishing was conducted aboard the boat in Prince William Sound, Alaska, to

determine the availability of the species. In the spring of 1955, the vessel was in the eastern North Pacific Ocean conducting the first surveys of salmon distribution in that area. This work, involving the *Cobb* and other chartered halibut schooners, continued through 1961, at which time the general distribution of salmon in the North Pacific and Bering Sea was substantially established. Also that year, the boat was used to tag petrale sole in the submarine canyon "Esteban Deep" off the west coast of Vancouver Island, B.C.

In 1956, the new Bureau of Commercial Fisheries (BCF) was formed under the reorganized U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). The *Cobb* then became a part of the BCF fleet and at the end of her first decade she was being used by the EF&GR in 1959 when it obtained its first SCUBA dive team. "In August 1959, the *Cobb* was involved in 'Chariot Project' 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."



U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service



Dave Witthow/AFSC/NMFS/NOAA

## Vessel Details

Year built:	1950
Location built:	Tacoma, WA
Builder:	Western Boatbuilding Co.
Designer:	W. C. Nickum & Sons
Designations:	FWS 1601 (w/FWS), R552 (w/NOAA)
Length:	93.5 feet
Breadth:	26 feet
Draft:	11 feet
Tonnage:	185-250 gross tons
Engine:	345 hp, 6 cylinder, 2-cycle Fairbanks Morse diesel
Avg. speed:	9 knots
Cruising range:	4,800 miles
Known skippers:	Sheldon W. Johnson (1954-55) Jose Franco (1958) Robert P. (Pete) Larsen ('60, '63, '67, '72) John C. Bortniak (1990)
Fisheries service:	1950-2008
Disposition:	Decommissioned on 13 August 2008

These accounts of the *Cobb's* service in the 1950s help to illustrate her value to the Bureau. Of her first 41 trips, 11 focused on experimenting with fishing methods and equipment, 7 involved midwater trawling, 2 for bottom and shrimp trawling, and 2 were for testing a fish pump device. Her work in the 1960s included: refining exploratory techniques in combination with a high-resolution research model echo sounder used to locate dragging areas off Washington that contained commercial quantities of desired fish (1960); cooperation with the Atomic Energy Commission to study deepwater marine resources off Washington and Oregon (1961); and experimental trawling for salmon in Alaska with the BCF ship, *George B. Kelez* (1963).

While the BCF became the National Marine Fisheries Service (under NOAA) in 1970 the 20-year old boat endured. "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."

"The vessel primarily supported research projects in southeastern Alaska for the AFSC'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, 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 various remote field camps and the Little Port Walter Marine Station."

The *John N. Cobb* was slated to sail until mid-August 2008, but a broken main crankshaft in her original 1931-designed Fairbanks-Morse locomotive engine forced her to become idle in June, sooner than expected. With the estimated cost of \$245,000 and 4-6 months for repairs it was decided to end her lengthy service. She was decommissioned on 13 August 2008 at the Sand Point facility in Seattle as the oldest existing wooden boat in the (NOAA) fleet. She listed on the National Register of Historic Places and moved to Salmon Bay in Seattle. As of 2013 the *Cobb* was owned by the Seattle Maritime Academy, a branch of the Seattle Central Community College.

For more on the *Cobb* and other vessels please visit our Alaska Fisheries Science Center historical pages at: <http://www.afsc.noaa.gov/History/>

## Other Significant Events

"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" which had run aground on 10 May about 30 miles north of Sitka.



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