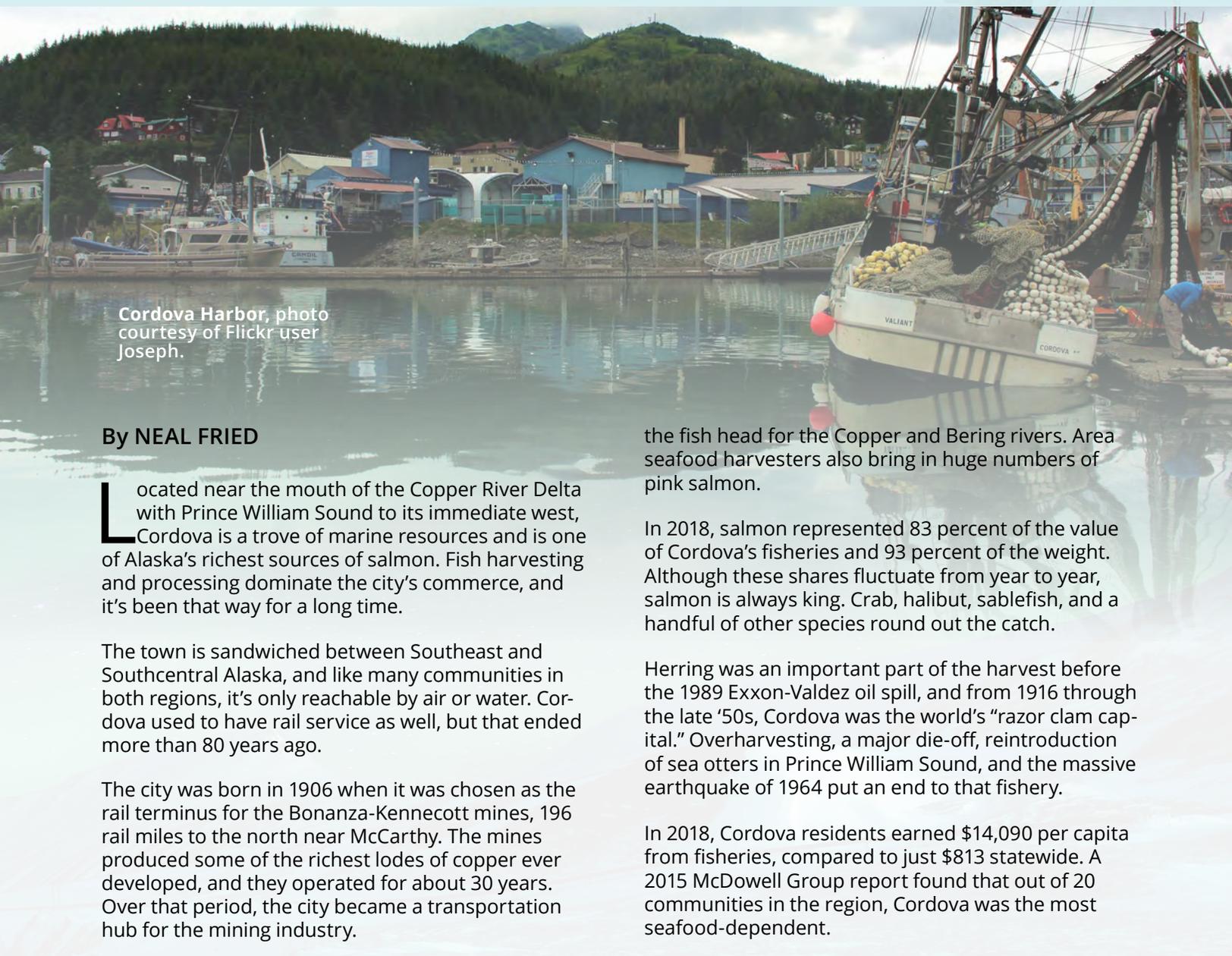


Cordova, the fishing mainstay



Cordova Harbor, photo courtesy of Flickr user Joseph.

By NEAL FRIED

Located near the mouth of the Copper River Delta with Prince William Sound to its immediate west, Cordova is a trove of marine resources and is one of Alaska's richest sources of salmon. Fish harvesting and processing dominate the city's commerce, and it's been that way for a long time.

The town is sandwiched between Southeast and Southcentral Alaska, and like many communities in both regions, it's only reachable by air or water. Cordova used to have rail service as well, but that ended more than 80 years ago.

The city was born in 1906 when it was chosen as the rail terminus for the Bonanza-Kennecott mines, 196 rail miles to the north near McCarthy. The mines produced some of the richest lodes of copper ever developed, and they operated for about 30 years. Over that period, the city became a transportation hub for the mining industry.

Because of Cordova's ideal location, commercial fishing developed at the same time, and that nascent industry eventually saved the town from extinction and fueled its second wind. In 1938, the mines closed and the railroad shut down with them. It was a blow to Cordova's economy, but fisheries continued to grow and shape the town into what it is today.

Cordova is a seafood powerhouse

Cordova's Copper River red salmon make up the United States' first wild salmon harvest each year as

the fish head for the Copper and Bering rivers. Area seafood harvesters also bring in huge numbers of pink salmon.

In 2018, salmon represented 83 percent of the value of Cordova's fisheries and 93 percent of the weight. Although these shares fluctuate from year to year, salmon is always king. Crab, halibut, sablefish, and a handful of other species round out the catch.

Herring was an important part of the harvest before the 1989 Exxon-Valdez oil spill, and from 1916 through the late '50s, Cordova was the world's "razor clam capital." Overharvesting, a major die-off, reintroduction of sea otters in Prince William Sound, and the massive earthquake of 1964 put an end to that fishery.

In 2018, Cordova residents earned \$14,090 per capita from fisheries, compared to just \$813 statewide. A 2015 McDowell Group report found that out of 20 communities in the region, Cordova was the most seafood-dependent.

Fisheries dominates employment

Half the city's households have someone working directly in commercial fishing, according to research by the University of Alaska Anchorage.

While commercial fishermen aren't included in regular employment data because they're considered self-employed, permits suggest their numbers. In 2018, 288 permit holders from Cordova fished, representing 88 percent of all permit holders in Valdez and Cordova. Adding their crew members would likely double the number of harvesters.

Cordova is home to five major seafood processors, and seafood processing represented 255 of the city's 1,220 total wage and salary jobs in 2018. A range of other workers support fishing, including fuel and equipment sellers, net and boat repairers, and freight haulers. Another example of related employment is the Prince William Sound Aquaculture Corporation, headquartered in Cordova, which runs five salmon hatcheries and employs 50 full-time staff and 75 to 100 seasonal workers.

Salmon's prominence makes Cordova's employment highly seasonal. For example, seafood processing hit a low of 27 jobs in January of 2018 and a high of 861 in July. For context, the city's total January employment that year was 801.

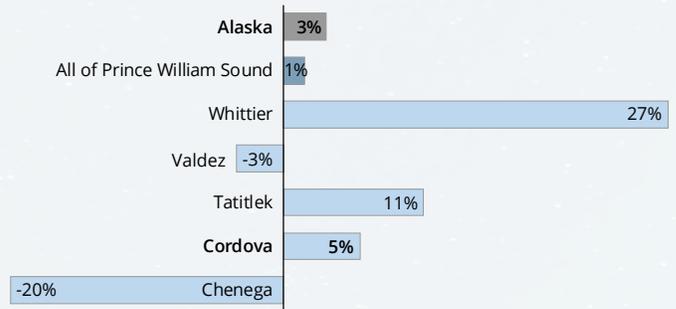
Government is another significant part of the city's employment, representing about a third (350 jobs in 2018). Most is local government, which includes the city, the school district, the Native Village of Eyak, and the Cordova Community Medical Center. Cordova also has a small number of state government jobs in the departments of Fish and Game and Transportation.

Retail and leisure and hospitality employment play a smaller but important role in Cordova's economy, beneficiaries of its growing visitor industry.

Population, jobs have long been stable

Cordova's employment remained steady over the past decade, even through the recent statewide recession. In fact, it grew slightly during that period, from 1,176 jobs in 2016 to 1,220 in 2018. Cordova

Cordova's population growth relatively strong from 2010-19



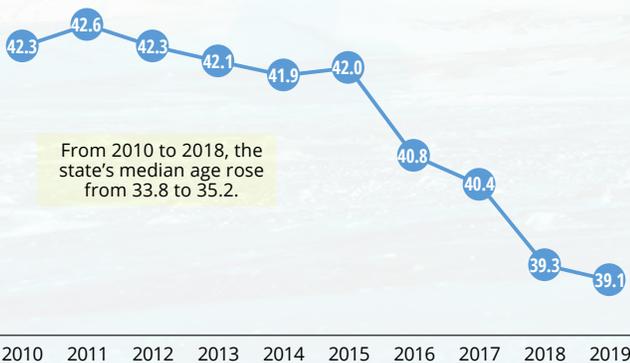
Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

lacks economic ties to the oil industry or a large state government presence, which were hit hard during the downturn.

The population has followed a similar path, changing little over the past 20 years. Cordova had an estimated 2,343 people in 2019, and the population hit a decade low of 2,239 in 2010, but since then it's grown faster than the state and most other Prince William Sound communities, as the chart above shows.

Another divergence from the rest of the state is Cordova's age trend. While the city's median age remains older than the state's, it has trended younger in recent years while the state has gotten older. More young people have been moving to Cordova than leaving, and younger adults often bring children as well.

Counter to statewide trend, Cordova is getting younger



From 2010 to 2018, the state's median age rose from 33.8 to 35.2.

Loss of ferry service a blow for 2020

While Cordova has seen years of stability, the town faces new uncertainty after the blow to its ferry service last year. Due to budget constraints, the state ended the town's two to three weekly sailings in September 2019, and service won't resume until May.

The full economic effect of the loss isn't yet clear, but with no road link and a dependence on water transportation to move people and freight, Cordova could face significant consequences from the loss of its ferry service as the year progresses.

Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

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