



KETCHIKAN MUSEUMS, TONGASS HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTION

Men, Ships, and the Trees

The Alaska Ranger boats of the U.S. Forest Service

by Douglas Cole

It has been raining for days; typical for Southeast Alaska. Clouds hover just above the sea and smother the surrounding forest. Except for a lone eagle alighting in a nearby spruce, nothing moves. The only sound is of water lapping against the shoreline or the occasional buzz of a mosquito. The fragrance of muskeg hints at spring. On the shore, a rare shaft of early-evening sunlight pierces the clouds and illuminates a rocky outcropping. For now, the rain has stopped.

But a different sound soon intrudes—the tuuh, huh, huh, tuuh, huh, huh of an Atlas diesel. A vessel rounds the point and carves a lazy circle into the cove. As she slows, then drifts to a stop, a man on the foredeck lets the anchor go with a splash

and a rattle of chain. After a scan of his surroundings, he saunters back to the wheelhouse. The engine stops. Again, all is still.

The vessel exudes strength and confidence. Her bow is plumb, her square pilothouse's slight rake and visor giving her a serious air. Her sheer is gentle and pleasing. Her hull is white, her cabin bold crimson, her stack orange with a painted number "7," echoing the RANGER 7 painted on her fantail stern. Her sheer-strake carries a bronze shield—a badge of authority—several feet abaft the stem.

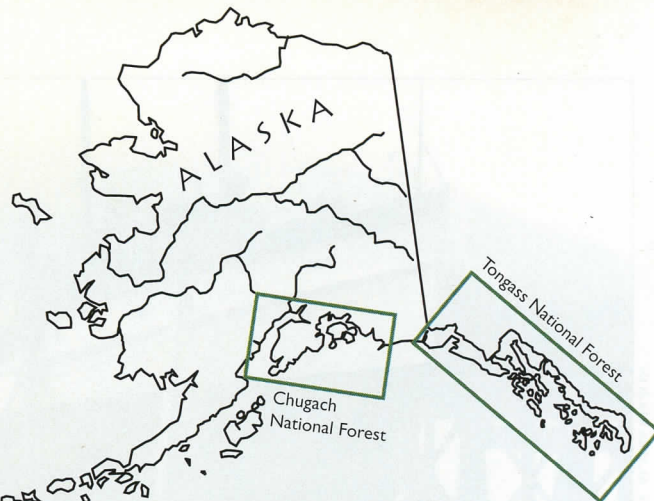
The rain resumes. Soon, fresh salmon is baking. Another work day has ended for the Tongass navy.

Above—The 50' RANGER 10 rides at anchor at Kasaan Bay, near Old Kasaan Village on Prince of Wales Island, in 1941, ten years after her launching at Gravina Island. The bronze shield of the U.S. Forest Service (inset) was a trademark for the Ranger boats. The one above is from RANGER 10.

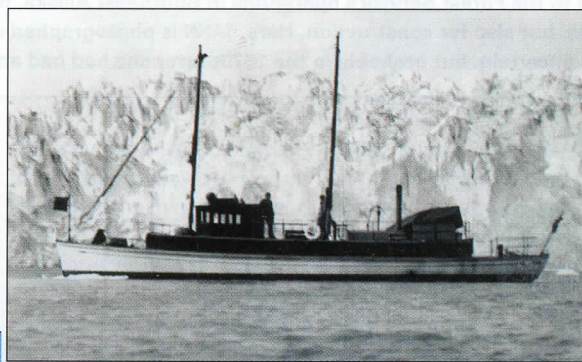
In the first half of the 20th century, a handful of rangers managed timber and mineral rights, fish and wildlife policies, and a litany of other chores in the Tongass and Chugach national forests in Southeast Alaska entirely by boat. Nicknamed “the Tongass navy” or “the Green Serge navy,” this unusual branch of the U.S. Forest Service had its inception in 1906. In that year, F.E. Olmsted inspected Alaska’s national forests and reported that the rangers’ mission in the territory was completely different from that of the states: “There are no roads, fire patrol, or fire fighting. Their chief duties here are to sell timber, scale logs, and report on mining claims, and they must be able to do these things well and without help.” To properly administer the forests, rangers had to have satisfactory boats. With Olmsted’s backing, they would get them.

The 64’ TAHN, the first of the boats, was commissioned in 1908. Her arrival on station in 1909 doubled the ranger staff to six men in the Ketchikan district. They were responsible for the Tongass National Forest, which was created in 1907 and covered nearly seven million square miles, and the Chugach National Forest, created in 1909 and encompassing nearly five million square miles around Prince William Sound. (Later additions brought these holdings to 25 million acres and 12,000 miles of shoreline.) This territory was TAHN’s responsibility.

The need for more boats soon became apparent. In 1913, the Bremerton Navy Yard built three identical 36’



The shoreline of the Tongass and Chugach national forests, centered on the areas outlined above, reached a total of 12,000 miles. Rangers had to monitor the area by boat. TAHN, (below) was the first Ranger boat, launched in 1909 in Seattle and photographed eight years later in front of Taku Glacier.

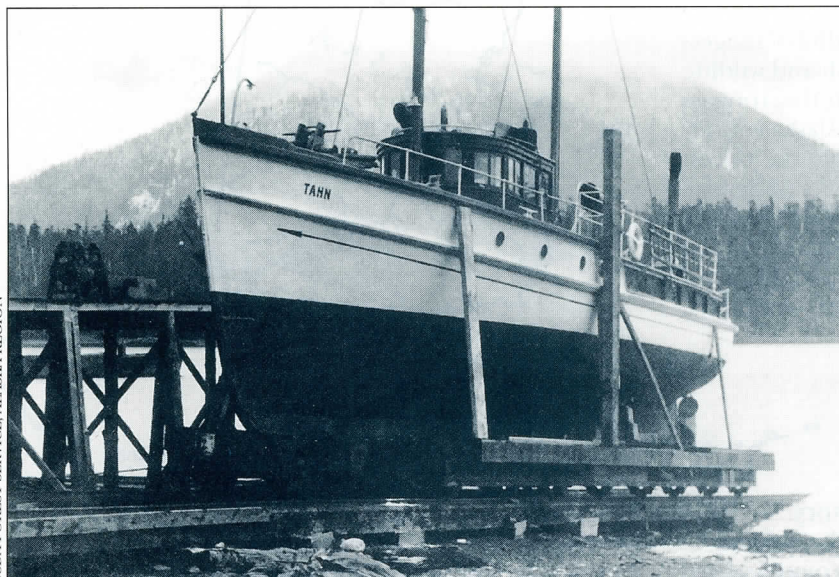


USDA FOREST SERVICE, ALASKA REGION



BRAD HUNTER, USDA FOREST SERVICE

Aboard CHUGACH, the last of the U.S. Forest Service Ranger boats still in active service and now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the skipper takes his morning coffee while the boat rides at anchor in a small bight in the Keku Islands.



The Gravina Island Marine Station, not far from Ketchikan, very early became central to the Forest Service's operations in Southeast Alaska, not only for maintenance, but also for construction. Here, TAHN is photographed on the ways; the year is uncertain, but probably in the 1920s after she had had an extensive refit.

vessels—RANGERS 1, 2, and 3—for the Forest Service for \$3,500 each. They were grossly underpowered with their 12-hp Union gas engines. They were known to go backwards in high winds, sometimes ending up on the beach. Eventually, 25-hp Standards replaced the earlier engines. With increasing demand on forest resources, the fleet was expanded again in 1916. The Forest Service, meanwhile, built a boat construction and maintenance facility called the Gravina Island Marine Station at Clam Cove near Ketchikan. Initially, the center consisted of a boathouse and marine ways, but it soon became the headquarters of Forest Service marine activity in Alaska. The first Marine Superintendent was Lyle Blodgett, whose son, Lyle Jr., would later skipper RANGER 10.

"Besides the mention of the important boats such as TAHN, we also have had a host of rowboats, skiffs, and canoes with and without Evinrudes," Blodgett reported in 1925. "If there is any kind of marine engine that we have not seen and tried, it is certainly not very well known, as at present we have 576 hp, good, bad, and indifferent."

Eventually, Olmsted's vision for the management of Alaska forests was achieved. Forest Supervisor William Weigle observed that in the territory, "the motor boat takes the place of the saddle and pack horse, hip boots and a rain slicker the place of chaps, and it is much more essential that a ranger know how to adjust his spark plug than be able to throw a diamond hitch. He guides his steed by means of a wheel instead of reins, feeds it fuel instead of oats, and tethers it at night by means of an anchor in some sheltered cove instead of a picket rope in a mountain meadow."

"An Alaskan ranger is just as proud of his boat as the Bedouin horseman is of his steed," a supervisor wrote in 1921, "and the Ranger boats in Alaska are the most distinctive craft sailing in Alaskan waters.... They are staunch boats, strong and seaworthy, with a special ability for the particular service expected of them. In case of any trou-

ble or disaster in Southeastern Alaska, shipwrecks, sickness, or sorrow, the public appeals to the nearest Ranger boat. If the request is a proper or a reasonable one, the appeal is never in vain."

Five more Ranger vessels were built at the marine station, Nos. 6 and 7 in 1926, No. 8 in 1929, No. 9 in 1930, and No. 10 in 1931, the same year that TAHN burned near Ketchikan. RANGER 6 had a gas engine, but each subsequent boat was powered by an Atlas Imperial diesel. The Atlas was chosen for reliability and parts availability. "The '6' wasn't all that great of boat," recalls Andy Anderson, one of the few surviving original ranger skippers. "She was about 40' and a little soft in spots. The '7' was a good sea boat. Stout as hell. She was a big chunk of wood." He could not remember who designed No. 7—perhaps Leigh Coolidge or H.C. Hanson—but he believes Nos. 8, 9, and 10 were modifications of 7. "Except for CHUGACH, none behaved as well as RANGER 7," said Anderson, also a former supervi-

sor of the Chugach National Forest. "I was the first skipper other than Erland Jacobson to take CHUGACH away from the dock," he said. "I was also one of the few supervisors who was also a skipper. It was too much responsibility to do both, so we found a good Norwegian fisherman, Spencer Israelson from Petersburg, to run the boat. I ran RANGER 7 all over Southeast in 1947 before I was supervisor."

In the course of their duties, the boats helped to break down the isolation of scattered villages, settlements, and cabins. A ranger might arrive in port with a shopping list "as long as a peace treaty, and involving about six months' pay," wrote one ranger, noting that rangers would often advance the payment. Rescue, too, was part of the job, but in these remote areas not all were lucky: Ranger J.M. Wycoff once found a man who had starved to death while awaiting help after his foot was pinned by a log. In some remote areas, establishments linking "women of easy virtue" with their clients had to be curtailed, as well as the occasional bootlegging scheme. During the Depression, Ranger boats often towed "wanigans," or scows, that housed Civilian Conservation Corps workers. During World War II, the boats were painted gray for military service, often ferrying U.S. troops to outlying posts.

CHUGACH, which served the rangers in Prince William Sound almost alone from 1926 to 1950, was built by Lake Union Dry Dock in Seattle in 1925. Started as a yacht, she was acquired through a trade with the Forest Service, which had her finished out for ranger service. Her designer was Leigh H. Coolidge, who went on to design the famous World War II-era Miki-Miki-class tugs. She was 62' overall, had a 14½' beam, a draft of 6', and displaced approximately 40 tons. Construction was typical of the time: oak backbone and framing, fir planking, galvanized fastenings, and ironbark sheathing for ice protection.

Her original engine was a 75-hp, three-cylinder Atlas

weighing 10,660 lbs, including a 1,840-lb flywheel. At 325 rpm, it would push CHUGACH along at 8–9 knots. An auxiliary gas engine was required to recharge the two compressed-air tanks used for starting. Erland Jacobson, a native Dane, her first skipper, remained with her for 25 years.

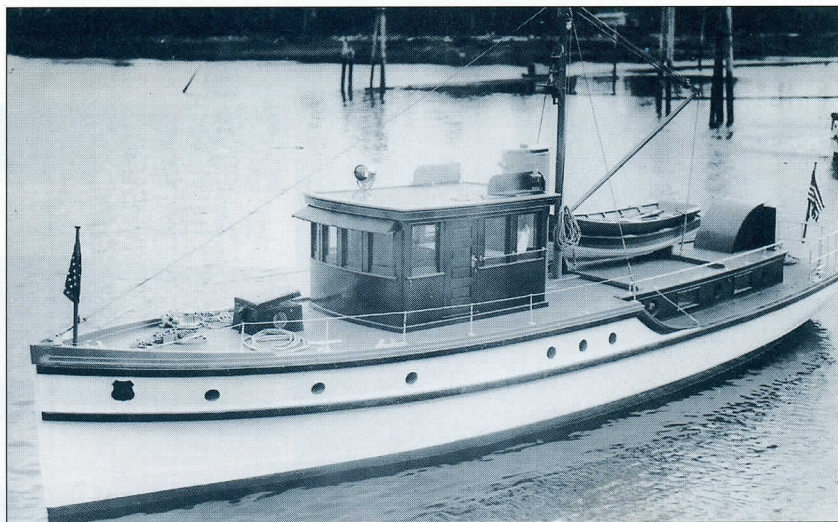
CHUGACH was based in Cordova, the headquarters of the Chugach National Forest. Cordova was the terminus of the Copper River and Northwestern Railway, which hauled ore from the huge copper mines near Kennicott. It was also the focal point for a growing commercial fishing industry. Canneries, fish traps, fur farms, and homesteads in the national forest all came under Forest Service administration. CHUGACH completed her rounds every month of the year, even crossing the stormy Gulf of Alaska in the dead of winter. In 1928,

L.E. Geary of Seattle (see WB No. 137) designed an auxiliary sailing rig for her with an additional mast and three sails. This was an insurance policy in the days before two-way radio, which wasn't installed until her first major overhaul in 1934, by which time she had covered 43,493 miles.

For routine work, CHUGACH (and the other Ranger boats) occasionally carried a deckhand or a cook, but often Jacobson served as captain and crew. He usually remained aboard while rangers carried out forest work ashore. Once, in 1948, he went ashore to help in log scal-

ing and CHUGACH drifted onto the rocks, but Jacobson's efforts spared her serious damage.

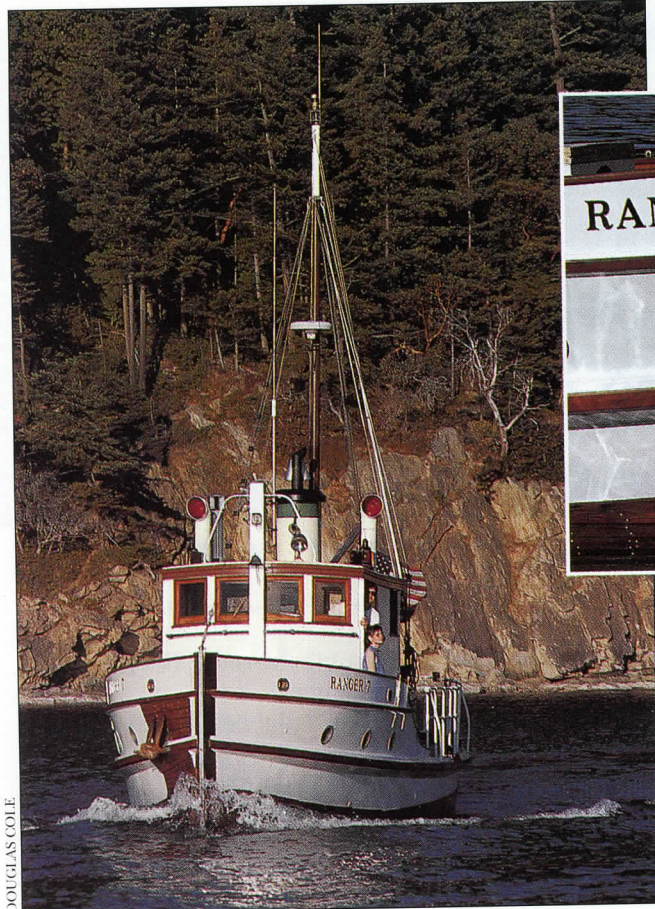
Most considered CHUGACH the best-handling, most seaworthy, and most comfortable oceangoing vessel in the entire Ranger fleet. Before a permanent Coast Guard base was established in Cordova, CHUGACH was often the only year-round vessel available in Prince William Sound. She was called for numerous search-and-rescue operations, including a dramatic four-day rescue of three fishermen stranded at the mouth of the Copper River in



RANGER 8, launched in 1929, was built at Gravina Island, possibly to an L.E. "Ted" Geary design.



Ranger boats were an active part of life in Southeast Alaska. Here, **RANGER 9** manages barges for an annual community picnic cruise. The 50-footer was launched in 1930. Her U.S. Forest Service shield is visible just above the starboard anchor.



DOUGLAS COLE



DOUGLAS COLE

Jim and Jill Thompson found RANGER 7 in 1980, after she had been renamed EDNA D. They spent six years restoring her before moving aboard. They sold the boat last year.

December 1938. She rescued ten men stranded near Cape St. Elias when the cannery tender TAKU sank in October 1942.

In the early 1950s, CHUGACH was transferred to the Tongass National Forest, where logging dramatically increased after World War II. Pulp mills opened, and clear cutting began on a massive scale. In September 1953, when Spencer Israelson was taking her to Petersburg, a fierce autumn storm often buried her under huge seas. CHUGACH took 12 days to reach Juneau, normally a three-day run. She spent the rest of her career in the Tongass region tending to routine ranger duties, including towing wanigans, supplying outlying camps, and conveying the occasional dignitary.

By the 1950s, the original Ranger vessels were showing their age. Upkeep was costly. Reliability was questionable, especially after the Gravina Island Marine Station closed in 1952. The use of aircraft, meanwhile, diminished their importance, and in the late 1950s two steel Ranger boats were built, both still in service. By 1961, the original wooden Ranger boats—the one exception being CHUGACH—were either worn out or sold. Today, at least four of the boats are still afloat, and of those only CHUGACH is still in the Forest Service's hands.

RANGER 7

Jim and Jill Thompson of Bellingham, Washington, were wedded to their boat, RANGER 7, for as long as they have been wedded to each other: since 1980. They sold the boat in 2000 to Jim Compton of Seattle. "We were looking for a boat with liveaboard possibilities," Jim said.

"Since our price range was limited, we encountered some pretty bleak-looking vessels." Jim was interested in several, saying they would only take a little work. Jill, on the other hand, was becoming concerned with the possibilities of what might be her new home.

On one scouting trip to Port Townsend, Washington, they came across a "for sale" sign on EDNA D. Severely neglected after the owner's death, she was covered with junk. "Grim" stated it mildly. But the price was right, and Jim was excited. Jill was less than enthusiastic: "There was food, filth, and trash everywhere." The engine, though, was in good shape. They bought the former RANGER 7 and headed for Bellingham. Jim assured Jill they would be living aboard within a few months.

Her first civilian owner bought her as surplus in 1961 and used her for hunting, fishing, and film expeditions in Southeast Alaska. In 1966, he replaced the original three-cylinder 50-hp Atlas with a Caterpillar D-320 110-hp turbocharged diesel. He also extended the pilot-house aft and added three pipe berths forward. The next owner, Charles White, used her for log salvage around Port Townsend. Jim and Jill are the fourth owners.

Jill served as a university speech pathologist during the week and a boat grunt on weekends. Jim kept up his full-time marine repair business and fished in Alaska for six weeks each summer. For five years, almost all of their free time went into restoring RANGER 7.

After initially cleaning up and gutting the interior, they began rebuilding the cabin. Jim and shipwright Dick Baila then did the interior joinery. What wood remained was stripped. Jill, who describes herself as an "obsessive perfectionist," did the finishing.

The hull is planked with 1½" Douglas-fir fastened with galvanized iron boat nails over 2½" × 2⅝" steam-bent oak frames on 10" centers. In way of the engine room, the frames are on 5" centers. A layer of ¾" ironbark extends 1' above and below the waterline to prevent ice damage. The fir sponsons are capped with ironbark. Unlike the

subsequent Ranger boats, which had transom sterns, RANGER 7 has a lovely fantail.

Most of the planking, framing, and cabin structure were in good shape. The stem, fir decks, and timbered stern, however, all needed replacement. During a six-week haulout, Jim and Dick shaped a new stem from a 10" × 16" × 22' piece of Australian gumwood weighing a ton. The original massive stem iron was regalvanized and reinstalled.

Originally, RANGER 7 had one bunk forward for the skipper, two aft in the galley area, and one in the wheelhouse. Now she has a double sea berth forward and two singles aft that double as settee seats. The head remains forward, but a shower was added. "It was originally painted lime green, and there was a porta-potti. Overhead there was this big, ugly, rusty thing on the ceiling. I didn't know what it was, but I wanted it out of there. It was just gross," said Jill. What she was referring to was the electric motor for the anchor windlass. It, too, was rebuilt.

The Cat diesel required little attention. At 1,650 rpm it moves the vessel at 8 knots, burning about two gallons an hour and turning a 32" × 22" three-bladed propeller through a 4.5:1 reduction gear. There are two 250-gallon iron fuel tanks amidships. Jim also installed a Yanmar 5-kW genset to aid in self-sufficient cruising.

Water capacity is 184 gallons in two new aluminum tanks under the aft deck. These tanks were meticulously designed so they could be brought down the aft companionway for installation. A few months after they were in place, Jim discovered rot in the deck, which required total disassembly. Installing the tanks with the deck removed would have been utterly simple.

"She's really good in a head- or quartering-sea," Jim commented. "Like all long, skinny boats, she rolls a bit. I think she must have been a bit more stable with the old Atlas in her. After all, she weighed a few tons more. There's

an iron plate on the bottom of the keel to check rolling, but she still can be lively in swells."

They moved aboard, finally, in 1986 and cruised local and Canadian waters until they sold the boat. The completed restoration reflects Jim's methodical attention to detail in the structural and mechanical department and Jill's perfectionism in the finish, blending traditional design with practicality. At the Victoria Classic Boat Festival, RANGER 7 has won one award as best restored powerboat and two for best workboat. "For an ex-workboat over 70 years old, she's in excellent shape," Jim said.

RANGER 10

In 1995, Guy Ervin of Renton, Washington, was prowling Puget Sound for a new boat. In Port Townsend he came across CHUGACH during a total rebuild. He wanted that boat, but she wasn't for sale. He soon came across RANGER 10. A survey showed her hull below the waterline to be in perfect condition, but almost everything else needed attention. Undaunted, he made an offer. In short order he found himself immersed in wiring, plumbing, mechanical, and carpentry projects. RANGER 10 now has modern and reliable electronics, including sonar, closed-circuit TV, and a 7.5-kW generator. An original Forest Service bronze shield is displayed proudly in the wheelhouse.

Guy recently sold RANGER 10 to Marty Opsahl and Lisa Strueby, who keep her near Cathlamet, Washington, on the Columbia River. RANGER 10 first caught their interest because it combined workboat and pleasure-boat designs, and they liked her Alaska connection. After restoring the boat, Marty says, "One of our main goals is to cruise to Alaska and visit the areas where RANGER 10 worked for the Forest Service in her early years." He's also considering using her for light towing jobs. When cruise ready, RANGER 10 displaces 24 tons. The Detroit 6-71 diesel pushes her along at 11-12 knots.



In 1995, Guy Ervin bought RANGER 10, pictured here in the San Juan Islands in 1997, and did extensive work on her before selling her last year.

GUY ERVIN



SEA BEAR is the former FORESTER, a 50-footer built in 1932 in Tacoma, Washington. Bill Clapp bought her in 1969 and cruises extensively to British Columbia and Alaska locations, like Glacier Bay, where she was photographed in 1998.

FORESTER

H.C. Hanson is believed to have designed FORESTER, which was built in Tacoma in 1932. Her original Atlas diesel was replaced with a Cummins in 1946. Sold as surplus in the late '60s she was used by a bear hunting guide in Juneau under the name SEA BEAR. Bill Clapp spotted her in 1969 in Ketchikan, where Terry Wills was using her to salvage logs. This work inflicted extensive damage aft, and after Bill bought her and took her to Seattle, he completed the repairs that Terry had started. He also rewired, added a flying bridge, and lengthened the galley by 2'.

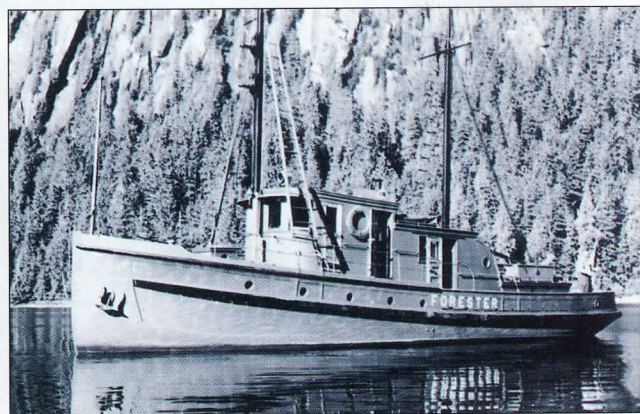
Now, with a modern 220-hp Cummins diesel, her third engine, Bill cruises annually in British Columbia and Alaska. "It's kind of like a love affair with a coast and a boat that is such a part of the coast," he says. "The two seem to go together. SEA BEAR has so much history and so much style. She is solid, steady, warm, and perfect for

what we like to do, which is to explore, to fish, and to enjoy wonderful camaraderie. SEA BEAR is like a part of nature and has her own wonderful rhythm to which everyone on board succumbs."

CHUGACH

With decommissioning imminent in 1973, CHUGACH's maintenance budget was cut to the minimum. Her skipper, Petersburg native Arthur Rosvold, did what he could to keep her seaworthy. Ultimately, however, the Forest Service decided to save the historic vessel, and U.S. Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska helped by obtaining a congressional appropriation of \$208,000 toward the \$600,000 refit.

The 18-month overhaul was completed by Port Townsend Boat Works in early 1995; in May, about 60 people—including several former skippers and Mike



FORESTER on duty in the Tongass National Forest, date uncertain. She was launched in 1932. The second photograph shows her in her wartime colors during World War II.

CHUGACH had been slated for decommissioning, but Alaskans rallied to have her saved. After an 18-month restoration in Port Townsend, she returned in 1995 to Ketchikan, where she is a proud reminder of the importance of the Ranger boats of the past.

Barton, who was instrumental in saving her—rallied at the Forest Service dock in Petersburg to welcome CHUGACH back to active service.

CHUGACH keeps a busy schedule, especially during summer. The 74-year-old boat typically takes 10-day voyages to remote portions of the Tongass National Forest that have no land-based camps and facilities. Foresters, biologists, soil scientists, geologists, and archaeologists are among those who use her as a portable field office and bunkhouse.

CHUGACH is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, so the Forest Service's restoration and maintenance have preserved as much of her original construction as feasible. Kinville sums it up by saying, "It's very challenging to keep a wooden boat working. It's a never-ending job."



Douglas Cole sails a Concordia yawl out of Bellingham, Washington. A lifelong sailor, he is an airline pilot by profession and a marine historian by avocation. The author would like to thank the following for assistance in researching this article: Mark McCallum, John Autrey, and Neil Hagadorn of the USFS, Richard Van Cleave of the Tongass Historical Museum, Harold "Andy" Anderson, John Brillhart, Jim and Jill Thompson, Guy Ervin, Bill Clapp, and Harold Lawson.

The U.S. Forest Service is also researching the history of Ranger boats. Anyone with pertinent information can contact Paul McIntosh, Box 6412, Ketchikan, AK 99901; e-mail <pjmac@ptialaska.net>.



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The 60' CHUGACH is flanked to starboard by RANGER 7 and to port by STIKINE in a June 1958 photograph in the Tongass National Forest.