

# Hoonah, Alaska



## Southeast community carves growing tourism niche

By **SAM DAPCEVICH**

**D**uring the Little Ice Age, Tlingits living in Glacier Bay were displaced from their village by a rapid glacial advance. Before the ice reached its peak around 1750, the villagers migrated to the northeastern shore of Port Frederick on Chichagof Island, about 35 miles west of what is now Juneau.

They called their new village *Xuniyaa*, or “Lee of the North Wind.” More than a century later, in 1901, the town’s first postmaster transcribed *Xuniyaa* into “Hoonah.”

The Tlingits who settled in Hoonah were conceivably the first Alaska Natives to have contact with Russian

explorers in 1741, as their seasonal camps stretched from Lituya Bay to Lynn Canal. But non-Natives didn’t settle in Hoonah until nearly a century later, when Christian missionaries arrived shortly after the explorer and conservationist John Muir visited in 1879 and 1880.

Today, the town has just under 800 residents and was 66 percent Alaska Native at the most recent census compared to 19 percent statewide, making it Southeast Alaska’s largest Tlingit community. Residents prefer the spelling “Huna,” both for the village corporation and the town itself.

### Fishing dominated early economy

Salmon fishing was the dominant economic force in

## 1 Commercial Fishing Plays a Significant Role in Hoonah

### HALIBUT AND SALMON EARNINGS AND POUNDAGE, 2011 TO 2015

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Permits fished	70	67	71	60	64
Total pounds landed	2,533,594	1,513,803	5,045,229	1,827,849	3,430,038
Salmon (all types)	2,343,165	1,330,391	4,810,746	1,683,413	3,270,314
Halibut (long line only, <60 ft)	49,420	55,851	78,173	54,959	58,491
Estimated gross earnings	\$2,695,176	\$2,021,900	\$3,636,701	\$2,005,470	\$1,833,816
Salmon (all types)	\$1,897,620	\$1,307,694	\$2,852,575	\$1,462,600	\$1,228,841
Halibut (long line only, <60 ft)	\$239,190	\$253,509	\$322,654	\$261,014	\$291,685

Source: Alaska Commercial Fishery Entry Commission (CFEC): *Vessel Characteristics and Statistics by Alaskan City, Permit Fishing Activity by City*



Above, this aerial view of Hoonah is courtesy of the City of Hoonah.

Hoonah for most of the 20th century. Seiners operated by Tlingit captains and their crews were well known for their ability to fish the resource-rich but turbulent tidewaters flowing past the nearby Inian Islands. In 1912, the first cannery opened on the northwestern shore of Port Frederick.

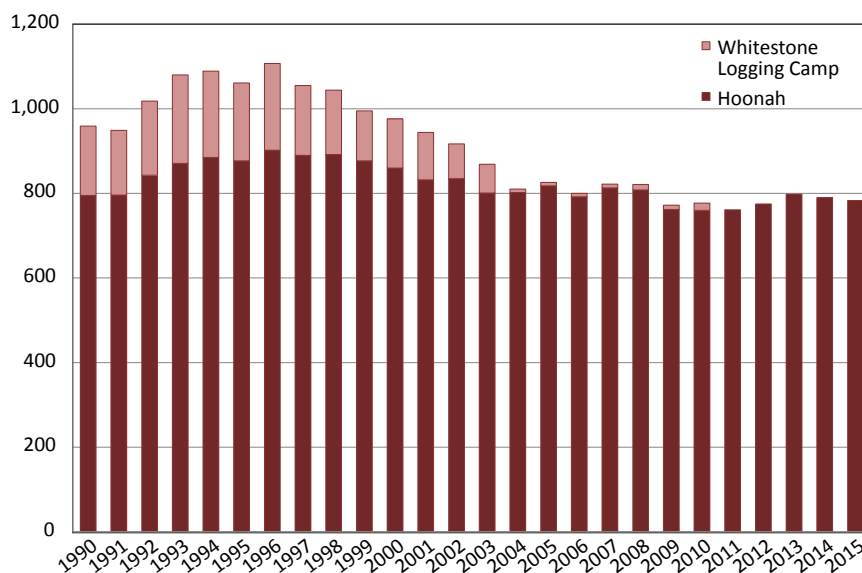
Eight seiners were based out of Hoonah in the 1920s, and the fleet peaked at about 20 boats in the 1930s. During that decade, Hoonah seiners had up to 10

crew members, when the typical crew was six. This allowed them to fish many more sets per day, which typically meant larger hauls.

In 1938, the federal government began granting economic development loans to chartered Native associations, and Hoonah Indian Association was federally recognized the following year. During the state's territorial days, HIA lent federal dollars to fishermen for purchasing vessels, gear, and upgrades.

## 2 Timber Industry, Population Declined

### HOONAH, 1990 TO 2015



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



A cruise ship is anchored near Icy Strait Point in Hoonah in 2013, before the cruise ship dock was built. Hoonah is the most recent Southeast cruise port to install a cruise ship dock. Hoonah's dock was completed in 2016. Photo by Flickr user Tom Brady

The Southeast Alaska salmon run collapsed in 1953, though, and the number of boats later stabilized between 12 and 14. The Icy Strait Salmon Co. shut down that year as a result of the crash, and the cannery was used for storage and boat repair until 1999, after Huna Totem purchased it in 1996 for conversion into a tourism facility.

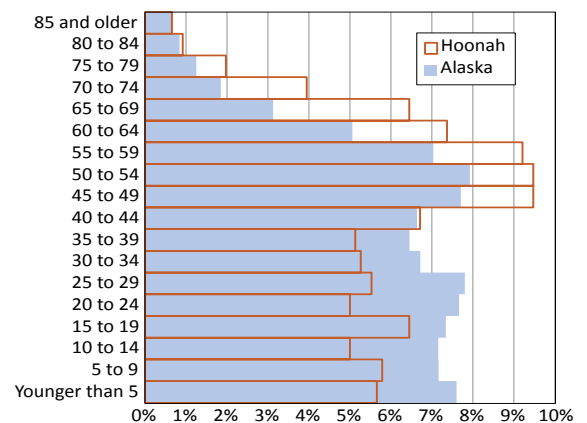
The Hoonah seine fleet continued to fish for other processors, including Petersburg Fisheries and Ward Cove Packing Company. According to the local harbor-master, about four seiners fish from Hoonah's port today.

The Thompson Fish Co., established in Hoonah around 1962, evolved into the present-day Hoonah Cold Storage, a major processor of halibut and Tanner crab from the Glacier Bay area.

### Harbor draws outside customers

Because Hoonah is known in Southeast for its quality harbor facilities, low moorage rates, and relatively easy access to flourishing fishing grounds, many vessel owners from other communities moor there.

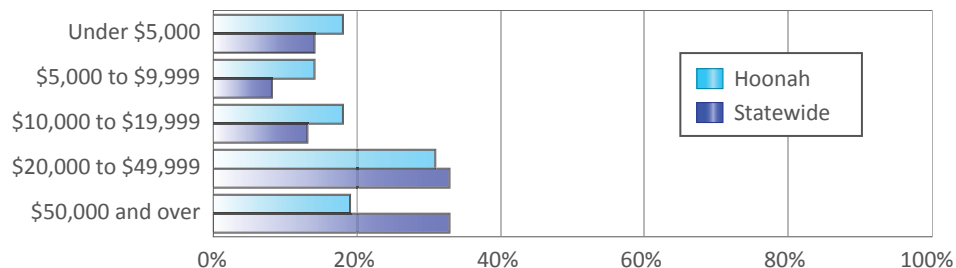
## 3 An Older Population HOONAH AND STATE, 2010 CENSUS



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

Hoonah's Marine Industrial Center features a 220-ton travel lift haul out. Its traffic has increased steadily over the last six years, and in 2015, over three-fourths of the vessels hauled out were out-of-town customers.

## 4 Wages Are Lower Than Average HOONAH AND STATEWIDE, 2015



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

## Population fell after logging ended

Like the rest of Southeast, Hoonah has a much older population than the state as a whole, with a median age of 44.6 versus 39.3 in Southeast and 33.8 state-wide at the most recent census.<sup>1</sup> (See Exhibit 3.) It also has a low birth rate.

Although the population goes up considerably during the busy summer, the resident population has been on a slow decline for the past 16 years, from a high of 860 in 2000 to 783 in 2015: a loss of 9 percent. But going back another 10 years and including the decline of Southeast's timber industry makes the decline even more dramatic. (See Exhibit 2.)

For a brief time, from the early 1980s to the early 2000s, logging was Hoonah's top employer. The nearby Whitestone Logging Camp, just a six-mile drive from downtown Hoonah, reached a peak of 209 residents in 1993, but that dropped to zero by 2011.

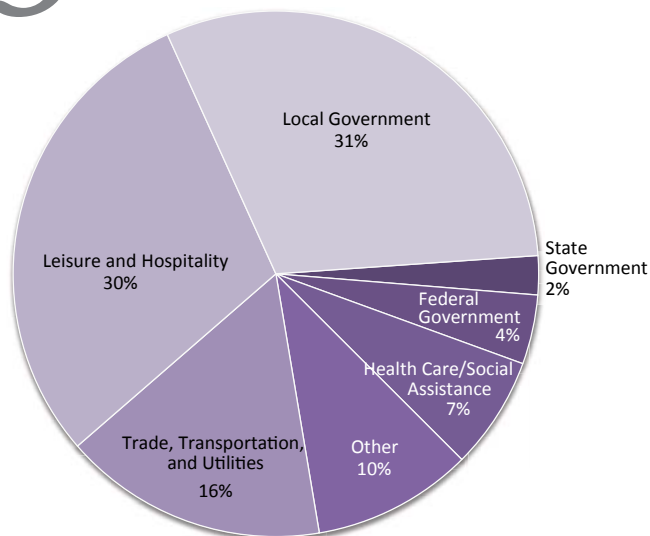
After the decline of the timber industry, only smaller operations remained. Hoonah currently has two commercial sawmills, which employ up to 25 people in the summer.

Today, over half of Hoonah's year-round residents work in local government and in leisure and hospitality. (See Exhibit 5.) Leisure and hospitality is mainly tourism, and because many of these jobs are seasonal and part-time, residents' average yearly wages are

<sup>1</sup>Median age for places as small as Hoonah is estimated less frequently, so the 2010 Census has the most recent reliable data.

## 5 Hoonah's Industries

PERCENT OF TOTAL JOBS, 2015



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

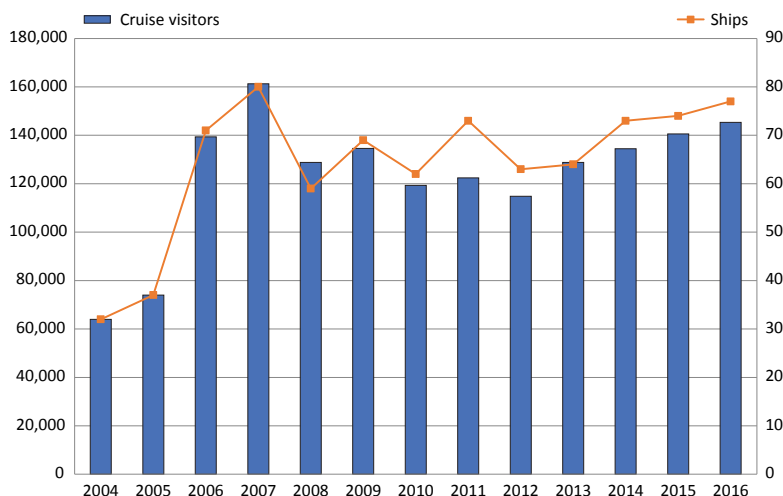
considerably less than the statewide average. (See Exhibit 4.)

## First cruise ship arrived in 2004

By the time John Muir arrived in 1879, icy Glacier Bay had opened back up. The glacier that displaced villagers and which Captain Vancouver's 1794 expedition

## 6 More Cruise Ships Visiting Hoonah

2004 TO 2016



Source: Icy Strait Point

*The controversial reality television show "The Alaskan Bush People" has been produced in and around Hoonah for the last four years. The film crew rents local housing and vehicles for four to seven months of the year.*

witnessed as a wall of ice had retreated an astonishing 46 miles.

In 1883, the Pacific Coast Steamship Company's ship Idaho brought the first batch of adventure-tourists to Glacier Bay, but for Hoonah, tourism didn't take root. For the next 120 years, most ships bound for Glacier Bay paid no attention to the fishing and timber town across Icy Strait.

In 1996, Huna Totem, Hoonah's village corporation, bought the Icy Strait cannery and began construction of the Icy Strait Point tourism facility on the site in 2001. Large-scale cruise ships began to visit the community a few summers later, with the 866-foot Celebrity Cruise Lines ship Mercury, carrying 1,800 tourists, being the first to arrive in May 2004.

Hoonah didn't get a cruise ship dock until 2016, making it the most recent Southeast cruise port to build one. Initially, cruise ships anchored or moored to a buoy near Icy Strait Point, which required ships to use lightering boats to transport passengers to shore and limited the number who would disembark.

Construction of the 400-foot dock began in early 2015, with more than half the \$23.7 million price tag funded by a state development grant and the rest by Huna Totem. The dock became operational in May 2016, drawing more ships and increasing by 15 to 20 percent the passengers likely to disembark.

Although Hoonah's cruise ship passenger numbers were up and down between 2004 and 2012, they've increased steadily since. (See Exhibit 6.) An adventure center and restaurant were completed in 2016 in addition to the new dock, and 77 ships arrived that summer bringing 145,344 passengers, with even more expected in 2017. This year, Disney Cruise Lines will visit Icy Strait Point for the first time, as will Seabourn and Carnival Cruise Lines.

Tlingit culture and the local Native corporation have been strong contributors to tourism's recent growth in Hoonah. Nine of the 15 businesses associated with Icy Strait Point are owned by locals. According to Huna Totem, 87 percent of Icy Strait Point's employees were local in 2016 and 83 percent were Alaska Native.

Sam Dapceвич is webmaster for the Department of Labor and Workforce Development in Juneau. Reach him at (907) 465-2054 or [sam.dapceвич@alaska.gov](mailto:sam.dapceвич@alaska.gov).