

# Adak

## A centuries-long transformation

By SARA WHITNEY

**A**dak has piqued public interest repeatedly over the past decade. The former naval station and now mostly empty town on Adak Island in the Aleutian chain has sparked renewed military interest, gone viral for some of its lore, and hosted a reality television show.

The island's mystique includes some unusual historical stories and features. The Netflix series "Pirate Gold of Adak" is centered on the tale of a pirate and fugitive seal poacher named Gregory Dwargstof who reportedly stashed gold coins now worth \$365 million on the island but died before he could return.

Workers found gold coins in tin cans on the island twice when it was an active military base. The first

find, in the 1940s, was worth thousands and the second, in the '50s, was estimated at \$2.5 million. In the series, an expedition team that included the mayor combed the island for the rest of the booty, unearthing other curiosities as they went.

The City of Adak has a warning for those drawn in by the prospects of wealth or exploration, however: Adak can be a dangerous place that's relatively difficult to reach.

The island has two four-hour flights a week from Anchorage and no ferry service. It has few amenities and extreme weather. Digging is forbidden because unexploded ordnance remains. And while the majority of the structures in Adak are empty and the photos would stoke the curiosity of any urban explorer, they aren't abandoned.



### The start of the boom years

*President Franklin D. Roosevelt visited Adak in 1944 during his tour of Pacific bases. At left is the Quonset Hut mess hall with the speaker's table in the background. Soldiers, sailors, and Marines were the only guests, in addition to the two commanding officers, at the head table with the president. (U.S. Navy photo, National Archives) Below is the U.S. Tennessee at Adak on Aug. 12, 1943, just before the Kiska Operation.*



Banner: An empty road in Adak, by Travis Shinabarger. All Flickr images in this article are licensed under [creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/).





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

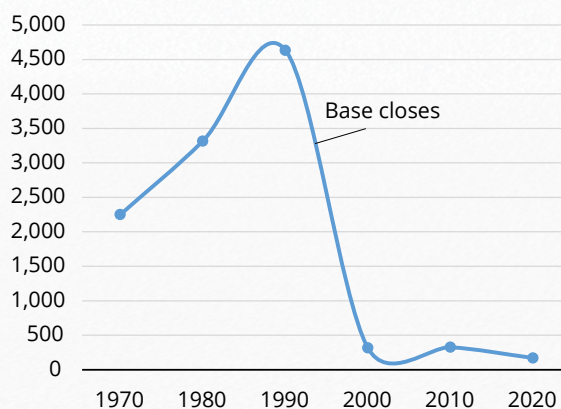
## Military buildup made Adak a powerhouse for decades

Despite the extreme climate, people have occupied or used the island for nearly 10,000 years. According to the Aleut Corporation, which was formed in 1972 under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, the area was home to only *Unangax* until fur hunters arrived in 1741. Foreigners called the indigenous population “Aleuts,” but the people are known as *Unangax* in their language, *Unangam Tunuu*. The *Unangax* lived on the island until the 1830s, when they abandoned permanent villages and used it mostly for subsistence.

Russian occupation in the 1800s devastated the *Unangax*, shrinking the population by 80 percent to just 2,500 people. By the end of Russian occupation in 1867, according to the Aleut Corporation, only 17 *Unangax* villages remained in the Aleutians.

Adak’s location halfway between the United States and Japan led the military to establish a defense against the Japanese forces occupying Attu and Kiska during World War II. (See the map above.) The first development was the Adak Army Airfield, which

## Population falls from thousands to a handful in just a few years



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, decennial censuses

was transferred in 1945 to the Alaskan Air Command and then to the U.S. Navy in 1950.

The island bustled for nearly 50 years, becoming one of the larger communities in Alaska. During the peak of the Cold War, the population reached nearly 6,000 military personnel and their families, according to the new book *Atomic Island* by Ben Huff. The publisher called Adak “the westernmost physical front in the defense of democracy from 1937 to 1997.”

During the military years, Adak gained many of the amenities you’d see in Lower 48 communities, including chain restaurants such as Pizza Hut and McDonald’s, a movie theater, and a ski area.

The base closed on March 31, 1997, and the military transferred ownership of all the island’s naval facilities to the Aleut Corporation in 2004. Only a handful of these buildings are occupied, however.

The city was incorporated in 2001, but after the military left, the population plummeted. Adak had 4,633 people at the 1990 Census and just 316 residents 10 years later. Between the 2010 and 2020 censuses, the population dropped even further.

## The essentials in the 21st century

Adak’s 2020 Census count, taken before the seafood processing plant closed, was 171 — but the exact number is hard to pinpoint. Data for a community this small have large margins of error, especially in

## A few Adak stats, 2016-2020

Households	51
In the labor force	79%
Living in a multi-unit structure	94%
Born in Alaska	37%
Median age	34.5
Males per 100 females	147
Median household income	\$51,250

**Note:** Because Adak is so small, these numbers have large margins of error and should be taken as a broad look rather than precise counts.

**Source:** U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2016-2020

the recent census when the U.S. Census Bureau began inserting “noise” into small groups’ numbers to protect privacy. Estimates of the year-round population range from 50 to more than 100, depending on where you look, with as many as 200 or 300 in recent years’ seasonal peaks. Our July 2021 estimate put the population at 179.

For those who make the modern Adak home, remoteness and safety are some of the reasons to stay. COVID-19 provided a good example; Adak made it 18 months into the pandemic with only one COVID case. A handful of additional cases that came with the delta variant in the fall of 2021 raised alarm, as the town has only one health care provider.

Adak has a handful of other amenities, including

## Still waiting?

*At right, a hallway in the empty naval station still has a spot for a “quality of life” suggestion box. (Photo by Travis Shinabarger)*

*Below, if this patron had an appointment at the hospital or clinic, he’s very late. (Photo by Flickr user Kim F.)*







## Frozen in time

*Above, visitors pretend to wait at the drive-through of the defunct McDonald's in 2009, shortly before the building sold and was renovated for commercial kitchen use. The restaurant closed in the 1990s when the Navy left the island. (Photo by Flickr user Kim F.)*

*At right, most of the buildings in Adak, which were built for a population of thousands, now stand empty. (Photo by Sundseth Kent, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)*



places to eat and drink, a grocery store, a school (14 enrolled during the 2021-22 school year), and several rental and charter businesses. As of October, the town had 13 active business licenses.

Some local businesses rent rooms in the repurposed military housing and the vehicles necessary for backcountry exploration. As a host told one reporter, "In Adak, roads aren't always roads."

Hunting or hiking requires a permit from the Aleut Corporation, available at the airport. Other long-established draws to the area include views of the Great Sitkin Volcano, the bunkers built into the hills near Lake Bonnie Rose, and caribou hunting.

## It's an easy life for the island's herd of large, introduced caribou

Caribou hunting is big on Adak, and so are the caribou. They aren't native; they were introduced in the 1950s for base residents to hunt. The herd flourished on the island, reaching nearly 3,000 animals at the last count in 2012. That's because nothing controls herd size. Plants are abundant, and Adak has no predators or pests.

## The intrigue of a ghost town and an 'abandoned' McDonald's

The town also has plenty of empty buildings to look at, many in various states of disrepair after decades exposed to the elements. And the elements are intense — Adak is known as the birthplace of the winds. Hurricane-force winds are common, and just 3 percent of its days are calm. Seven percent are clear.

One empty building drew curiosity on social media: the old McDonald's (pictured above in 2009, shortly before the building was sold). Visitors were fascinated by how well-preserved it was — even the prices on the drive-through sign hadn't succumbed to decades of weathering. Former employees of the Adak McDonald's said in a related Facebook group that it opened in July 1986 and closed in the mid-'90s.

The building wasn't abandoned, though. The Adak Community Development Corporation purchased it in 2009 and turned it into a temporary halibut processing facility in 2011. After that, it became a gallery for the now-shuttered seafood processing plant. Since 2015, after an especially brutal storm, the building has remained boarded up to preserve it for future commercial kitchen use.





## Birthplace of the winds

*This sign on the airport used to read, "Welcome to Adak, Alaska, Birthplace of the winds," but the wind appears to have blown off half the sign. (Photo by Flickr user Kim F.)*

## The seafood processing plant was a pillar of the town

Adak's location and military facilities enabled the community to provide a fueling port and crew transfer facility for the large fishing fleets based in Seattle and elsewhere in Alaska, and the old naval airport allowed the seafood processing plant, which buoyed the local economy for years, to transfer massive amounts of product all over the globe.

Golden Harvest Alaska Seafoods owned the plant when it shut down in 2020. The plant processed Pacific cod, pollock, mackerel, halibut, snow crab, and king crab. Between 20 and 50 people worked there when it closed, but it has employed as many as 300 in the past.

The plant hit hard times when Adak lost its 5,000

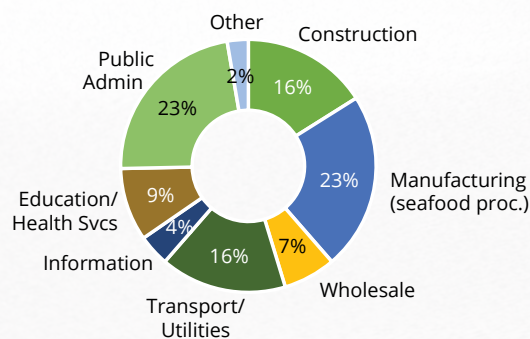
Adak is the westernmost town in the United States and the southernmost town in Alaska.

metric ton federal allocation of Pacific cod, leading to several years of lawsuits and regulatory battles. Golden Alaska Harvest Seafoods had invested millions based on that anticipated cod allocation. While the plant purchased several species, it was the cod catch that made the venture economically viable.

In 2019, a federal court overturned that allocation amid a dispute with the large trawl industry. The North Pacific Fisheries Management Council rejected Adak's appeals to restore it, and in 2021, a large seafood company working with the city to revive the plant suspended their efforts.

The closure and job loss were devastating. However, the Adak Community Development Corporation hired a consultant to secure a new plant operator and reopen by fall 2023. In October, the consultant reported progress to the Alaska Board of Fisheries and said details would come later this year.

## Where Adak residents worked from 2016 through 2020



**Notes:** Excludes seafood harvesters, who are self-employed. In Alaska, manufacturing is mostly seafood processing. Adak's seafood processing plant closed in 2020.

**Source:** U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2016-2020

## Commercial fishing and other industries for Adak workers

Adak residents work in a handful of other industries, mostly those that provide essential services. Right before the seafood plant closed, the most common jobs were in manufacturing (seafood processing), followed by public administration, construction, transportation and utilities, education and health services, wholesale trade, and information. (See the chart on this page.)

This breakdown doesn't include seafood harvesters, who are mainly self-employed. According to the Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission, Adak had five permit holders and 11 total permits in 2020 for halibut, sablefish, and other groundfish. Four people fished, landing 193,081 total pounds with \$511,777 in estimated gross earnings.





## The living's easy for some

*The island's introduced caribou herd, shown here in early June as they lose their winter fur and sprout antlers, face no predators or threats on the island, aside from the occasional hunter. Food is plentiful.*  
(Photo by Travis Shinabarger)

## Marine shipping lane potential and renewed military interest

Federal infrastructure funds for the Port of Adak and a few other economic prospects are on the horizon.

The military hasn't committed to reviving the island's military assets or resuming operations, but the Navy conducted a joint exercise with the Marines and Coast Guard on Adak in 2019 and is focused on a stronger Arctic presence as melting sea ice continues to open marine shipping lanes.

Adak has the farthest-west deep water port in the U.S. and a fuel terminal. The Aleut Corporation — which manages both — envisions Adak as a cargo shipping hub.

At the end of October, U.S. Sens. Lisa Murkowski and Dan Sullivan announced that Adak will receive \$10.1 million in infrastructure funding this year for repairs and upgrades to the Port of Adak.

Sullivan and the Aleut Corporation are also pushing for a renewed military partnership. "When you look at where Adak is on the Aleutian chain, it is enormously strategic in terms of, really, the Gateway to the Asia-Pacific and the Gateway to the Arctic," Sullivan told KTUU.

## Area shows mariculture promise

Seaweed farming is another small but notable possibility, and a proposal filed early this year for an aquatic farm is under review.

Seaweed is a growing industry globally, as it's used in multiple foods, personal care products, and

medications. Kelp forests support the fishing and recreation industries by providing biologically productive habitats for other marine species.

Alaska represents just one-hundredth of 1 percent of the world's seaweed market, with eight seaweed farms in 2022. Production began just four years ago, though, amid high hopes that Alaska can become a major player.

Early this year, an Alaska Fisheries Development Foundation report assessed the feasibility of six Alaska communities for new seaweed facilities, and Adak was one.

The report noted the Aleutians will be a "prime seaweed growing and processing location in the future" because of the significant Bering Sea seafood processing infrastructure and an existing seafood supply chain that sends large volumes of seafood products to Asia. The region also has large swaths of undeveloped coastline. The listed downside is the relative scarcity of protected bays, given the region's notorious wind and waves.

One of the three farms proposed for the Aleutians was near Adak. Golden Harvest Alaska applied for a permit in 2020, then withdrew it in 2021 when the company shuttered. However, a new proposal is under state review.

Adak Community Seafoods, LLC, applied for an aquatic farm lease in February. The application, which is moving through the Department of Natural Resources permitting process, is for three parcels on 20 acres within Kagalaska Strait, which separates Adak Island and Kagalaska Island in the Andreanoffs. Species include Pacific geoduck, ribbon kelp, bull kelp, dragon kelp, and sugar kelp.

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