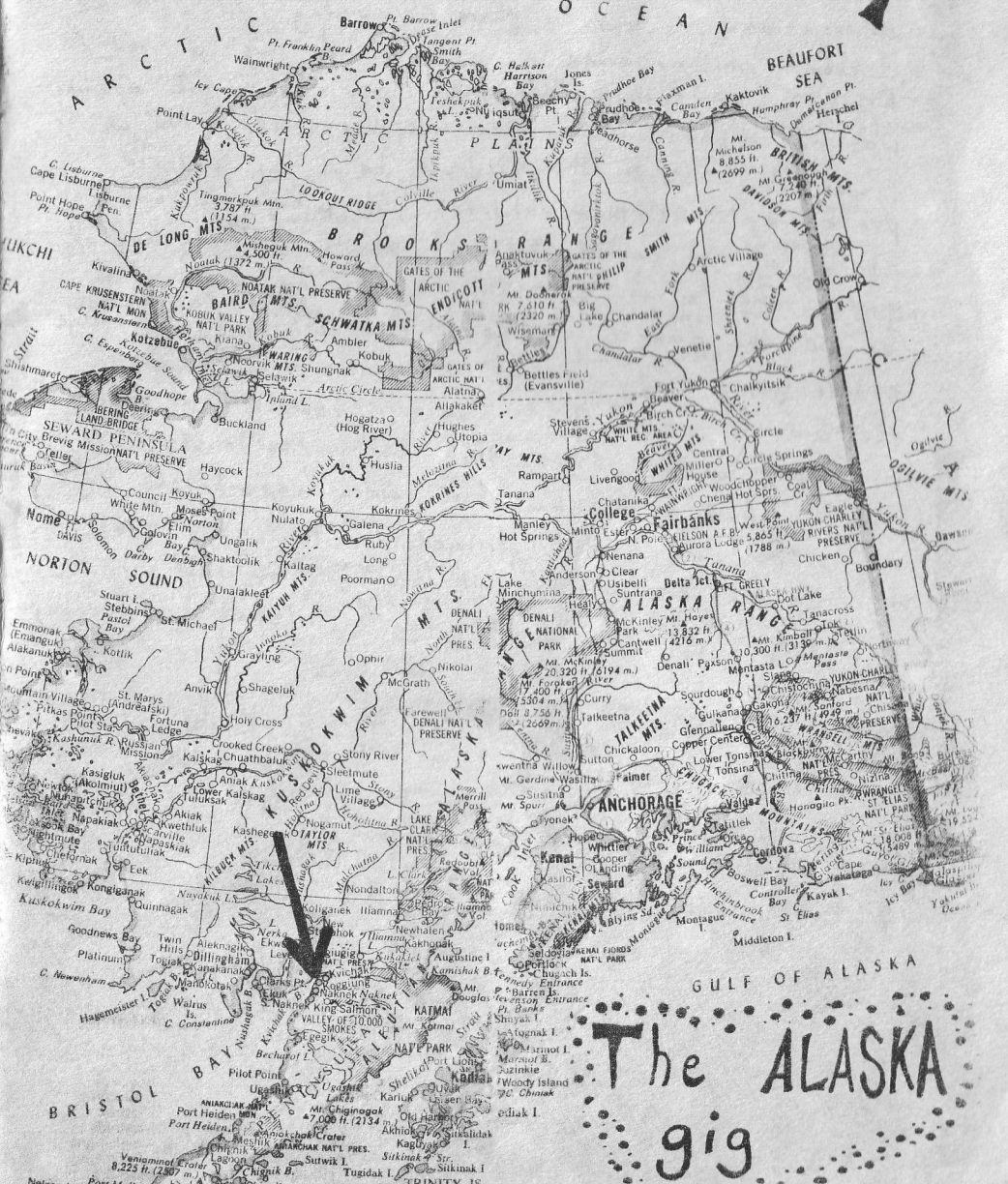


Dishwasher

7



Awhile ago, I spent two summers sliming fish in Alaskan canneries. Both stints were hellish experiences that I swore would never happen again. But then in May of 1990, I went back to Alaska with my old girlfriend. She's part Eskimo and part Aleut and commercially fished for salmon as her family had done for generations. I went up there figuring I'd do the dreaded shitty cannery work. When we arrived in Alaska, her family said they knew of a job opening - washing dishes in a cannery messhall. No way! I was blown away... it couldn't be... my beloved profession! At the canneries I'd previously worked at, I always envied the dishwashers. They had it made. They didn't eternally smell like fish guts (as did the cannery workers) and their hours were stable (whereas the cannery workers depended upon the amount of fish to be processed - no fish, no work). But those gigs seemed impossible to land.... And now I had the golden opportunity laid at my feet. I called, talked to the guy, was hired and flew out the following day not realizing I'd spend all or part of the next 3 summers working there.



The town was located in Southwestern Alaska, in a spot where the tundra met the river and the bay. Only 500 year-round residents populated the town but that figure swelled to 5,000 during the summer, becoming a boom-town with the migration of fishermen and cannery workers. The town had 3 bars, 2 restaurants, and 2 stores and not much else. The canneries had been operating in the region for over a hundred years. The salmon have always been everything to the economy (not to mention the culture). If there were no salmon, the town would probably disappear. The cannery I worked at was big. I first came to grips with how big an operation it was when I realized they paid over \$25,000 each summer to simply have 3 guys wash their dishes and pots. So there's a lot of money in those fish, especially since they sell the roe (salmon eggs) to Japan where they are a high-priced delicacy.

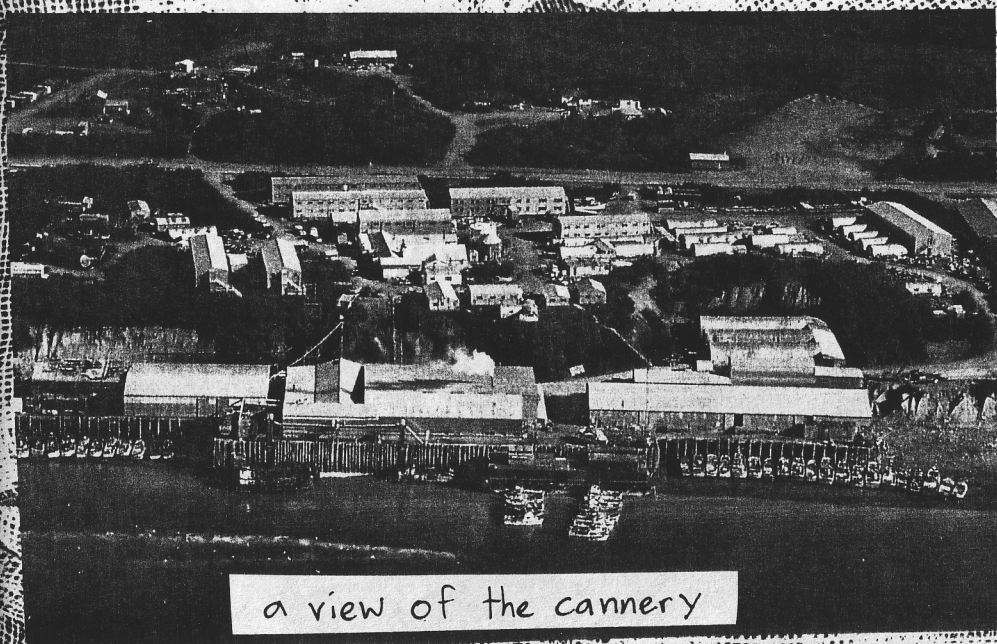
The cannery fed over 400 employees and fishermen in its messhall. Different sections of the building were built at different times which made it a neat junky old structure. It's divided into four separate rooms, which segregated the various groups of diners. The skilled laborers (electricians, carpenters, machinists, etc) and office workers and management types ate in one room, the 100 Filipino workers ate in another (complete with their own cook), the crew of college kids was in another, and the Native Eskimos and the Japanese shared the fourth one. The fishermen ate at a separate time and, though they shared the same room, the Italian fishermen entered thru one door and sat

at one end while the Native fishermen entered thru another door and ate at the opposite end. It's kind of a strange setting but it's no accident it's done that way. The various ethnic groups seemed to not get along too well. Among the various incidents is the time, a couple years ago, when a Filipino guy grabbed a bowl of rice from one of the Japanese tables. The Japanese weren't too happy and a major all-out brawl broke out between the two races. Leroy, with his imposing giant size and stature, came out from the kitchen banging a pot with a laddle and single-handedly broke up the fight.

The operation went like this: there were 4 cooks, 1 baker, 2 dishwashers, 1 potwasher, and 11 waitresses (one of them being the head-waitress). The meals were served "family style" (as opposed to "cafeteria style") - being one of the last family styled messhalls in Alaskan canneries. The waitresses, each of whom oversaw 4 or 5 tables, brought the food out on large serving dishes which were then passed around the table. Refills of food and drinks and whatever else was all done by the waitress so the eaters never had to leave their seats. Then the waitresses brought the dirty dishes to the dishwashers. One disher rinsed the dishes by running them thru the sink and then placed 'em on the racks. The other dishwasher ran the rack's thru the machine, unloaded 'em, and put the dishes away. Exciting, eh?



Leroy was the boss. Being a huge black guy from Louisiana in a small Alaskan town, he looked out of place but that was not the case at all. He'd run the cannery messhall for 17 years and seemed to still enjoy doing it though the job could often be stressful for him. The greatest aspect about him was his persistence in letting his employees do their own thing. He had a total hands-off approach. You could come to work late and he wouldn't say anything. You could fuck up and he wouldn't murmur a word. It was cool to have mutual respect with a boss. He was also our attorney in defending us when the cannery management complained. The head-honchoes knew our dishwashers were slack and they'd get on Leroy's case but he'd fight back, insisting we were hard workers. Obviously, we weren't hard workers, but I think Leroy became so used to saying we were that he actually believed it.



a view of the cannery

My fellow dishwasher was Leroy's nephew Sam. Sam's from a slummy part of Louisiana and though the hours were long and the work was draining, he often referred to his time spent in Alaska as a vacation from the violent world he endured back home. At 21 years of age, he'd fathered 5 children by 4 different women, 2 other kids are possibly his, and his girlfriend is presently expecting yet another kid. Although all these children would appear to be a monstrous part of his life, he never seemed as if he was a father, he just seemed like a goofy dishwasher. We got along well and when it came to washing dishes or slacking off, we were in complete sync. I referred to him as the foreman of the dishroom since he'd been in action there two years longer than me. It was a title he deferred back to me. When a new pot washer arrived one summer, we were supposed to explain his job to him. But since Sam and I both didn't want to have to tell someone what to do, we spent a week arguing over who was the foreman and whose responsibility it was to do it. Meanwhile, the new guy spent the whole first week not knowing what to do before he finally figured it out himself.



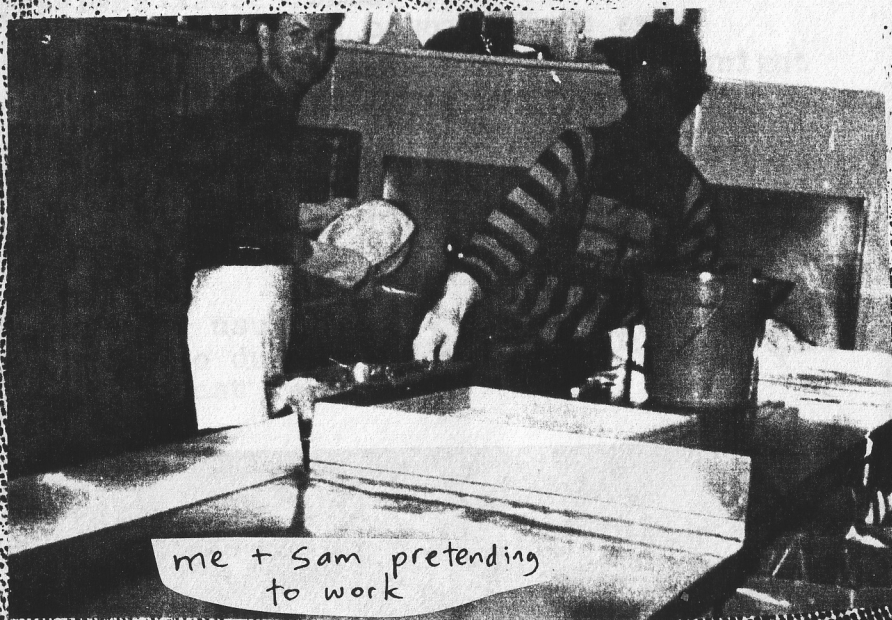
Stuff me + Sam would do to have fun:

- ~ have serious-looking mock fights
- ~ jump and touch the dishroom ceiling (something easy for him, difficult for me)
- ~ float plates atop the sink water and watch as the current causes them to ram into each other til one of them sinks
- ~ purposefully blast music that everyone else hated
(Sam with Rap music, me with Punk + Jazz)
- ~ shoot the spray hose at big metal mixing bowls and make 'em spin really fast
- ~ run the dish-machine without any dishes inside of it to make it sound like we're busy when actually we weren't
- ~ pull the plug outa the sink and be fascinated by the whirling funnel of water
- ~ play dominoes
- ~ take naps

The benefits were plenty: foremost was the fact that I was able to sit around a lot. In the two weeks after I first arrived, I read 12 books. During the slower part of the season (before the fishing + canning actually happened), I averaged 5 hours of reading on the clock each day. The reason this was possible was simply because of Leroy. He's probably the coolest guy I'll ever work for. I could pretty much do anything on the clock and he wouldn't mind: read, write letters, nap, walk to the store, etc. And in addition to the free money we made while we were supposedly working, Sam + I had a scheme in which we added a phantom bonus hour onto our timebooks each day. At the end of the week, Leroy would sign our timebooks without any problem. When he did discover our scheme, he just shook his head and laughed. And thru union rules, we received even more free hours. Any time we served two lunches or two dinners (because the messhall couldn't fit all the workers in one setting), we received a premium of an hour and a half of pay. Midnight meals were guaranteed 3 hours of pay even if we only did an hour of work. The combination of all these schemes made it possible to mount huge hogers (and mucho mucho overtime) in a single day. My record was being paid for 23½ hours one day. I was shooting for 25 hours cause I thought it'd be neat to be paid for more hours than are even in a day!

Other benefits: Free room and board. Not only was there free food but I had access to all the food, all the times. And I usually had my own room, a luxury cannery workers can only fantasize about. And thanks to the union, the company paid for my airfare between Seattle + Alaska. Also, I had full year-round health insurance. Wow, it has been pretty cool to have been insured, but during these past 2 years, I haven't had to use the insurance at all. Now, the coverage is gonna expire and I hope to do something expensive before I become uninsured again - something big like a root canal.

The Eskimo waitresses I worked with were pretty neat. They came from the small Native village of Kipuk as did nearly all of the cannery's Native workers. Kipuk is an isolated "dry" village so these folks are sober all year long except for the weeks they spend at the cannery. Working becomes secondary to their drinking. These waitresses (Shirley, Charlene, + Carol - all sisters) were normally so soft spoken that when they talked amongst each other in their Native language, often you could see their lips move but hear no voice. And when they spoke to me with their slow speech, I'd have to concentrate hard to hear them. Add to this their shyness and you get a pretty good picture of how quiet they were. But when they drank, they burst into loud active women. And their drinking was amazing. They could finish work at 1:00 a.m., go to the bars, stay there til dawn, and come into work at 6:30 a.m. completely drunk but totally willing (though not necessarily able) to work. And these traits seemed to apply to most of the other Natives. While they all ate together in the messhall, the room would be silent, but then in the middle of the night, their bunkhouse would be rockin with noise. But maybe I'm giving you the wrong impression about them - they're all pretty cool people with a fascinating culture.



me + Sam pretending
to work

SCHEDULE

- 6:21 - alarm goes off
- 6:28 - get up, get dressed
- 6:30 - go to the messhall, grumpily nod in response to everyone's "good morning," turn on the dish machine, drink orange juice
- 6:35 - 7:30 - sit on my ass in my hiding place and read books
- 7:30 - 8:00 - wash the breakfast dishes
- 8:00 - 8:30 - eat breakfast
- 8:30 - 11:00 - morning chores, do whatever Leroy needs us to do: stock shelves, move stuff around between various freezers or move stuff around in the warehouse, but usually there's nothing to do so we screw around in the warehouse where no one can see us
- 11:00 - 11:30 - make the coffee for lunch, hang out
- 11:30 - 12:00 - eat lunch

12:00 - 12:30 - hang out, read
12:30 - 2:30 - wash the lunch dishes
2:30 - 4:00 - BREAK
4:00 - 4:30 - back to the messhall, read
4:30 - 5:00 - eat dinner (mail arrives at
4:45!!)
5:00 - 5:30 - hang out
5:30 - 7:30 - wash the dinner dishes
7:30 - 9:00 - do night-time chores, take
out garbage, sweep + mop, haul in
the meat from the freezers for the
following day's meals
9:00 - 11:00 - BREAK
11:00 - 12:00 - hang out for the midnight
meal, read
12:00 - 1:00 - wash the midnight meal dishes
1:00 - 6:28 - SLEEP

Note: I usually only ate one meal a day
so during my other meal times, I
just read.



There was a different head waitress during each of the summers I worked. Unlike my friendships with the Native waitresses, I didn't get along with any of the head waitresses. The first was Lana who looked like a parrot and wore hideous wigs. It took only a week for me to conclude she was psychotic. On the day I arrived, she told me not to listen to anything Sam said because he was a lazy asshole. I figured: Geez, if she's saying this about my co-dishwasher, then I can't imagine what she'll soon be saying about me. A couple weeks later, she called Sam into the dishroom and sternly told him (with me standing right there) - "Sam, you've got to tell that other dishwasher to clean this counter... look at it, it's absolutely filthy!!" She marched passed me and out of the room. Sam and I bewilderedly look at some slight smudges on the counter which were no big deal. I couldn't believe she was serious but she was. And the fact she had to tell Sam to tell me to clean it was even more amazing. Instead of despising this monster, I cherished her. Even though I didn't pretend to get along with her, I'd secretly relish each little incident because she was a classic psychotic freak. She (along with her Okie waitress cronies) wreaked hell upon the other waitresses. It was so weird because the operation was simple - we'd do the same routine every day yet she'd be prepared to find fault everywhere. She wasn't so much a stickler for perfection, she was more of a bloodhound in pursuit for a reason to bitch. One of her many peeves was the obsession with apron strings. She'd want everyone to tie their apron strings before they put the aprons in the wash (so they wouldn't get tangled together). If untied apron strings were removed from the dryer, she'd ask everyone, "Did you tie your apron string? - Yes? Well, somebody didn't!" So then I purposefully started tossing

untied aprons into the wash just so I could hear her explode: "WHO DIDN'T TIE THEIR APRON STRINGS?!" I never even wore an apron so I appeared innocent. Eventually she did what she always did in times of crisis - she made a sign. The huge sign was tacked above the washer + dryer reading "SOMEONE IS STILL NOT TYING THEIR APRON STRINGS!!!" Well, there were plenty other incidents concerning her but I suppose you get the idea. She was the exact opposite of Leroy's laid back, do-yer-own-thing attitude. Finally, after giving her too many second chances, he fired her. She was crushed since she'd been a waitress with the company for 12 years and it had become her whole life. After she was gone, the messhall was much more peaceful, especially after I tore down all her oppressive signs.



The following year, Juanita became head waitress. Leroy hired people for weird reasons and his decision to have her in that position baffled even him. She wasn't as evil as Lana but she was just as bitchy. There's one story worth telling about her: One day, while the messhall crew was eating lunch, she discussed how her mother had scolded her as a little girl about the horrors of farting. So she then tried to not fart and was so successful she became incapable of farting. Now I can be pretty crude a lot of the time and I have no problems eating while others are being crude - but listening to a 60 year old discuss how she hadn't farted since she was 8 years old, how it was impossible for her to fart - that was one time I did lose my appetite.

Leroy didn't rehire Juanita the next year. Instead, longtime waitress Roxanne had the title - uh, I mean the job. The first thing anyone noticed about Roxanne is her speed, she's fast. Everything she did was done in a hurry. She'd speedwalk wherever she went whether or not there was a rush. And she was constantly busy busy busy. The problem was other waitresses felt they were supposed to move as fast as her. They'd develop anxieties because she'd move quicker, and had more energy, than any two humans put together.

I found myself often wondering "Why isn't Roxanne married?" I've never wondered that question about anyone else ever, yet not only did I ask it, but I heard numerous other people ask it. She just seemed like she should be married. She's 30 years old, a devout born-again christian, and a devout Mary Kay cosmetics saleswoman. I never understood how pushing make-up tied in with being a christian. When I finally asked her, she gave me so many bible quotes, I soon lost interest in the dilemma.

A lesson I learned with the help of Roxanne: one morning, while I was bent over the sink washing the dishes, she kept throwing pancakes at me. She thought this was a great way to lighten up the mood in the messhall. I viewed it as a series of cheap-shots upon the back of a defenseless dishwasher. One of the pancakes missed me but splashed into the sink. I let it soak for awhile and then took a shot with it, nailing her in the back of her hair. What I learned: pancakes soaked in soapy water make great ammo cause they splatter and leave a mushy mess upon one's body or hair.

This year, Sam brought his enthusiasm for dominoes with him to Alaska. He and Leroy had some very heated battles which matched not only their skills as players but also their verbal skills. The talking and put-downs were a large part of their games. I had never played before but I soon learned how. Me and Sam became so involved that we spent hours and hours on the clock everyday playing game after game. In the morning we'd hide out, playing in the back of the warehouse (where all the dry goods were stored). If someone walked in, we'd lay a sheet of cardboard over the game and pretend we were busy moving boxes around. Usually Leroy would come in to play a game or two. I suppose he liked it when we used our slackness in constructive way such as dominoes. In the past, he'd come into the warehouse to find us asleep on the sacks of rice. But then, at least, he'd turn out the lights as a courtesy to us.



When lipstick stain remains on cup after washing, worker unloading dishmachine should reject cup.

A dream I had:

Sam was condemned to be executed and I was allowed to visit him at the prison during his final moments. He was somber but Leroy was also there, consoling him. I freaked out. How could they execute a guy like Sam? What had he done? Actually, it didn't matter he'd done cause we had to focus on preventing the execution. But we were deep in the prison - how could we possibly escape? Fuck, we needed to do something but I was the only one who thought this since Sam + Leroy already accepted the execution as inevitable. I couldn't let it happen. Then I saw the instrument that was to be used to implement Sam's death. It sat quietly in the middle of the gloomy cell. - a dish washing machine. How could society do this to a man? I couldn't bear the thought of Sam being shoved inside, the door slamming shut, the boiling water sprayed from all directions at his body, scorching it til the flesh melted - NO! I leaped at the machine. I had to destroy it. I ripped at the cold steel but frustratingly failed to dismantle it. It was no use - Sam would die. I woke up - I was late for work...

Last year's pot washer was a no-show this year (he was a hesher who was endlessly tuned into his walkman though he only owned 2 tapes - Metallica and Slayer), so Leroy hired a guy who wandered into the messhall one day. His name was Gib and was about 60 years old. I thought it was cool such an old guy would want to scrub pots + pans and not give a fuck what others thought about it. Some people actually did not like him because he was a 60 year old pot washer. I liked him because he'd annoy the crap outta everyone with his constant rambling. He had a way of talking in which it was impossible to follow what he was saying. It was as if he purposefully left out key words or phrases. Usually as soon as the listener would catch on to what he was babbling about, he'd change the topic. It was kinda fascinating.



The job could be pretty brutal. The most demanding part of it was having to do it every single day without a day off. At the end of each summer I'd be so exhausted all I could do was lay around for a couple weeks (that is = lay around more than usual). Bending over the low sink was a killer on the back and carrying load after load of stacked dishes caused my hands to be calloused and stiff and constantly sore. One strange effect through all this was the surprising growth of actual (temporary) muscle on my boney arms - quite a novelty.

Quotes

"I guess what they say is true:
white men can't jump."

- Sam commenting on my leaping
abilities before I was able to
touch the dishroom ceiling

"You two are gonna still be
washing dishes after everyone else
here is dead."

- Dave the cook predicting me +
Sam's futures

"I've washed enough dishes to cover
300,000 miles of territory..."

- old man Gib the pot washer
reflecting on his past

"It's time to git down with the git down."

- what Sam would say when he
was ready to start washing

"Eruurivik"

- the Yup'ik Eskimo word for
"dishwasher" according to the
Native waitresses I worked with

In 1990, I worked 60 days straight and in 1991, I worked 84 days straight. After each summer, I had enough dough to last me thru the year. This summer I was to work 100 days solid and bring down enough cash (including the ever-popular unemployment benefits) to keep me away from working for at least 2 years. Yeah, it was a lofty prize, but 100 days was just too long. After 40 days, exhausted of the work and completely drained of the whole scene, I quit. It was hard to tell Leroy since he provided me with a lot of free cash. And since the company had flown me up there and I hadn't stayed for the full season, the management would get on his case about it. But he was cool about me leaving. I just needed to do something different, spend a summer having fun. And of course a huge reason was - (here comes the mushy part) - I missed my girlfriend too much to let a pursuit of riches interfere with our relationship.

Sam talked a lot about quitting. He was also sick of the routine and missed his girlfriend too. But he couldn't leave because of his commitment to his Uncle Leroy. One day, after I decided to quit, Sam and I were leisurely washing the dishes. I hadn't told him yet that I was quitting but I was fantasizing about being away from Alaska and writing him letters while he was still stuck at the job. He caught me daydreaming and said, "Hey, don't you go quitting on me and leaving me behind and sending me

letters from wherever you go - cause if you quit, I'm going with you." - I was floored and speechless. He always had a remarkable ability, like no one I've ever met before, to know what I was thinking. - Well, I did quit and leave him behind, but I didn't torture him by sending him mail from the outside.

→ About the address thing:
Arcata, San Francisco, Alaska, or Boulder sent to
addresses should get to me.
in the meantime, mail sent to
the

(Does this sound like a way to optimistic Post/Street about things?)