

## RANGER BOATS

The two national forests in Alaska, the Chugach and the Tongass, have over 10,000 miles of rugged coastline. Large glaciers spilling into coastal waters, steep terrain, and numerous islands make extensive road building a difficult proposition at best. Reliable water transportation is a must. An early Tongass ranger proclaimed, "The Alaskan ranger is just as proud of his boat as the Bedouin horseman is of his steed, and the ranger boats in Alaska are the most distinctive craft sailing the waters."

Ranger boats historically served as traveling offices and as the primary work station for Forest Service personnel carrying out a variety of tasks, such as administering timber sales; monitoring special use permits for fox farms, logging camps, and trapping cabins; transporting Civilian Conservation Corps crews to work camps in the forest; and taking Forest Service officials on regular inspection tours.

William Weigle, Alaska Forest Supervisor from 1911-19, described the differences between Alaska forest rangers and rangers in the "lower 48" states who relied primarily on horses for transportation: "The motor boat took the place of the saddle and pack horse; hip boots and a rain slicker the place of chaps; and it was much more essential that a ranger knew how to adjust his spark plug than be able to throw a diamond hitch. His steed may do just as much pitching and bucking, but this is prompted not by a spirit of animal perversity but by the spirits of climatic adversity."

The first ranger boat, the 64-foot, 75 horsepower *Tahn* was built in 1908 to Forest Service specifications. *Tahn* was designed by Lee and Briton in Seattle, Washington and built by the Pacific Yacht and Engine Co. Powered by a gasoline engine, *Tahn* was equipped with electric lights, a galley, a head, seven bunks, a bookcase and a desk. *Tahn* arrived in Ketchikan on May 9, 1909, and provided service for 20 years in southeast Alaska before it burned in Ketchikan during 1931. By 1909 floating bunkhouses called wanigans were constructed as portable field quarters. The ranger boats towed the wanigans to remote islands where Forest Service personnel were working for extended periods of time.

Jay Williams, Forest Ranger in Craig, stated that "a 40 foot cabin cruiser, *Ranger 4*, was brought over from Ketchikan 9in January 1917) and tied up at the float in front of the station. There were no instructions, no coaching of any kind, just here she is, go to it. Owing to their weight and design there was a very definite speed limit of around seven miles an hour and these Ranger Boats were somewhat like the old farmer's fence, while not horse high, they were certainly hog tight and bull strong."

The ranger boat fleet slowly grew in numbers and became known as the Tongass Navy or the Green Serge Navy for the Forest Service uniforms of the time. In 1916 the Forest Service began operation of a marine station on Gravina Island, near Ketchikan, Alaska. The station provided maintenance and repair facilities for the entire ranger boat fleet. The fleet included a group of ranger boats numbered 1 through 10. Ranger 1 through 5 had wooden hulls that were painted with yellow decks and sides, and trimmed with red. They were strong boats, specially designed for strength and seaworthiness and the ability to respond to any emergency in southeastern Alaska. The Forest Service built Ranger 6 through 10 at the marine station. By 1928 the fleet size reached its peak of 11 vessels.

In 1924 the Gravina Island marine station consisted of a dwelling, boathouse, gridiron, and several other small buildings. On May 21, 1933, acting under the instructions of the Regional Forester in accordance with President Roosevelt's proclamation and the Act of Congress, the southern division of the Tongass National Forest established the first Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp at the marine station. By June 1933, 15 men were living and working out of the camp. By October 1936 the CCC crews had constructed a new warehouse and other facilities. The warehouse was stocked with all the boat supplies needed for ranger boats on both the Tongass and Chugach forests.

During 1945 the Regional Forester inspected the marine station and found it to be in a general state of disrepair. In a letter of October 23, 1945, he stated, "This condition is by no means a reflection on the management of the place, but it does emphasize the fact that the major structures have reached that age where rapid deterioration is taking place, and will continue with accelerated speed if heavy maintenance is not resorted to. We are, therefore, faced with making a decision very soon as to whether to make heavy expenditures for maintenance of this site, or to build elsewhere at a more favorable location." The Forest Service repaired the marine station dock and buildings in October 1947. During 1953 the Forest Service leased the station and in 1954 the Regional Forester, C.M. Archibold, decided to declare the property surplus. After that date the Forest Service relied on private boat yards for ranger boat maintenance and repairs.

Forest Service dependence on ranger boats began to fade. To a greater extent field going personnel relied on air transportation to access remote locations. Float planes and helicopters allowed them to fly out for shorter durations, giving employees more time to spend with their families at home. The Forest Service replaced the aging wooden ranger boat fleet with two steel-hulled vessels, *Tongass Ranger* and *Sitka Ranger*, designed and constructed in 1958-59. These ranger boats have 61-foot steel hulls weighing 37 tons and averaging 12 knots in open water. Only Ranger Vessel *Chugach* remains in Federal service from the early era of wooden ranger boats.

The Forest Service listed *Chugach* on the National Register of Historic Places in 1992; only the second vessel from Alaska to be added to the list of the nation's most important heritage sites. L.H. Coolidge, a well known Seattle naval architect, designed *Chugach*. She was built in 1925 by the Lake Union Drydock and Machine Works, a Seattle firm which is still in business. After delivery in Seattle, the Forest Service towed *Chugach* to Ketchikan, Alaska and installed an Atlas diesel engine. Erland Jacobsen, her first skipper, sailed *Chugach* to Cordova, Alaska in August 1926.

Until 1953 *Chugach* operated out of Cordova, then headquarters for the Chugach National Forest. From Cordova, *Chugach* operated year round in Prince William Sound and the Gulf of Alaska. *Chugach*, often being the only Federal vessel on duty, performed frequent search and rescue missions and other public service. Her logs record: delivering mail; re-lighting lighthouses and navigation buoys; performing the Federal census of 1950; delivering doctors and medical supplies; transporting U.S. troops during World War II; carrying law enforcement officials and judges; and carrying game wardens to distribute hay to feed starving deer. *Chugach* also transported and supplied people working on various scientific and community projects, including the work of Frederica deLaguna, the first anthropologist to study the Native people of Prince William Sound and the Gulf of Alaska. In 1953 the Forest Service transferred *Chugach* to the Tongass as the timber industry began to expand. Since 1956 Petersburg,

Alaska has been her home port. Petersburg is also home to three of her last captains: Spencer Israelson, Erling Husvik and Art Rosvold.

*Chugach* underwent a major refurbishment in Port Townsend, Washington in 1993. The Forest Service decided to refurbish *Chugach* due to her historical significance and demonstrated effectiveness as a ranger boat. She has returned to full service, taking crews of foresters, soil scientists, biologists, and archaeologists to remote sections of the forest. During the seven decades of her service, *Chugach* has played a central role in the administration of Alaska's national forests. Her activities had an important influence upon the regional economy, the welfare and safety of isolated communities, and people and vessels in distress. *Chugach* provides an authentic link between the Forest Service as it served the people of Territorial Alaska in the first half of the twentieth century, and the agency today as it continues to serve the people of Alaska and the nation.

Since 1908 ranger boats have played a prominent role in the administration of the Tongass National Forest. The Tongass Navy provided the only reliable and efficient transportation available to Forest Service field personnel in the days before adequate aircraft services. The dense coastal forests were, and often remain, largely inaccessible to motorized land travel. The Forest Service has used over 70 different vessels in Alaska, including the *Taku*, *Langille*, *Forester*, *Hiawatha*, *Weepose* and *Maybeso*. *Rangers 1-10* have all been retired, but some are privately owned and still sailing. Although aircraft have in part replaced the ranger boat, the ranger boat still plays a significant role as floating office and camp for Forest Service personnel managing the nation's largest national forest.