

Shearwater Bay — Siiwat'Rpiq; Aq'iraq

SIIWAT'RPIMEN AGKUTARTUA. – I AM GOING TO GO TO SHEARWATER BAY.



Photo: Jarvela and Cratty families at the Shearwater Cannery. Jarvela Collection, AM991

Shearwater Bay lies on the northeastern shore of Kodiak Island's Kiliuda Bay. This small waterway is one of three small bays in the area. It is just 5 km long and less than 2 km wide but has a sizeable stream emptying to its head. This stream meanders across a relatively flat valley floor providing excellent spawning habitat for salmon and a corridor into the interior. Follow this valley north and it leads to the south shore of Ugak Bay. It is about eight miles between the head of Shearwater and Eagle Harbor, the location of a historic Alutiiq village.

In 1926, Kodiak Fisheries built a cannery at Observation Point on the north shore of Shearwater Bay to process pink salmon. This enterprise became an important part of the Old Harbor economy. At the time Old Harbor was a small village, but the availability of seasonal wage labor attracted people from other Alutiiq communities. In the 1920s, Old Harbor was home to less than a hundred people. By 1970, the village population was more than 300.

Old Harbor people worked at the Shearwater cannery for two months each summer. In mid-June, a tender would arrive in the village to transport people to the bay. Most families participated, leaving few people in the village until the cannery closed in mid-August. Alutiiq workers lived in small, leaky tents until the cannery erected Quonset huts, which were dry and offered more space. They ate fish provided by the cannery or caught in nearby creeks. The cannery closed permanently in 1964 when its facilities were badly damaged by the Great Alaska Earthquake. This created hardship in Old Harbor, as there were few other opportunities to earn wages.