

The 70s: Decade of Change in Homer
The Short Happy Life of the George F. Ferris
By Tom Kizzia
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Editor's Note [1980]: Tom Kizzia was managing editor of the *Homer Weekly News* (now simply the *Homer News*) when the George F. Ferris loomed as the focal point for oil development in Kachemak Bay. The ill-fated jack-up drilling rig almost single handedly provided the momentum needed by those in favor of buying back the Kachemak oil leases to prevail during that stormy debate in the state legislature. From 1975 to 1978, Kizzia reported on how oil development issues split the community in Homer and he shares his perspective in the following article.

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No matter who you were in those days, from the lowliest Spit Rat to the Most Exalted Ruler of the Elks, you had an opinion about the George F. Ferris. While Homer residents fought among themselves about whether to let it drill for oil in Kachemak Bay, the jack-up rig from Southern California stood on its legs for more than a year in the water off the Homer spit. It became a symbol of more than just that fight. Your opinion about the George Ferris was likely to indicate what kind of future you wanted for Homer.

From the day it arrived in January 1975, severed crab pot lines streaming gaily behind it, the Ferris was a fact interjected into a debate that had dealt mostly with hypotheses. Fishermen, who were already in Superior Court trying to keep the oil industry from muscling them out of the bay, thought they had arranged to have an observer on board that day. Thousands of dollars worth of gear loss claims against the Ferris were filed immediately. Even if oil and fish could coexist, hypothetically, could oil rigs and commercial fishermen?

But the Ferris was big and expensive and there were national needs and a heroic dimension to what it had set out to do here. To some, the industry that cut this \$25 million deal with the state in December 1973 was just a fast-buck outfit that would leave behind a town of trailers and tarballs on the beach. Yet there was also the tantalizing promise of jobs and a year round economy (at least as long as the oil lasted.) And there was the chance of an oil boom, which would raise the value of land in businesses in town. Anyone who didn't own property had no real stake in the matter and shouldn't be paid much mind on the oil question: that was an opinion expressed to me in the Sterling Cafe by several of Homer's leading citizens during my first weeks as managing editor of the *Homer Weekly News*. The fears about oil drilling, some said, were being stirred up among the superstitious by anti-growth subversives. The technology existed that could do the job safely.

I remember the day that Ralph Oxenrider invited me out for a one-man press tour of the George Ferris. The rig was lit up like a Christmas tree in the bay all winter, and was talked about

regularly in the Homer paper, which in those days consisted of 16 glued-together pages. Oxenrider was the operations manager on the Ferris, a friendly bear of a man who whiled away his days in Homer at Chamber of Commerce luncheons and Elks Club functions. He seemed pleased that day to have something to do.

Oxenrider showed me the jacks used to lower the 600-ton legs to the ocean floor and then lift the dripping barge out of the water. These jacks had been rebuilt and strengthened after the Ferris got to Homer. One of the jacks had broken just as the winter ice was piling up during its previous job off Kasilof. The jack had to be freed with dynamite. The charge blew away half the deck as well. For its first few months in Kachemak Bay, the Ferris provided lots of repair jobs for townsfolk.

The day I visited, a point about which I had long been curious was resolved: this engineering marvel was named after a partner in the company that built it in 1959, and not for the man who invented the Ferris Wheel for the Columbian Exposition of 1892, whose name was also George Ferris and who was one of the great engineers of the 19th century. The next week's *Homer Weekly News* cleared up that mystery for the public, and also reported, "The Ferris's legs are currently lowered 130 feet, and (according to the fathomether) only 50 feet of that is water. Oxenrider says he expects no problem when it comes time to jack the legs up out of the soft muck of Mud Bay."

It was March 1976, and the Ferris's owners were as tired as Oxenrider of waiting. The visit had been costing Shell Oil \$8,400 a day in standby fees. Oxenrider told me that they were thinking of taking a temporary job across the Inlet in Chinitna Bay until this legal thing was cleared up.

By now the legal thing had spread well beyond Homer: it was being fought out at meetings in Anchorage and hearings in Juneau, in board rooms in Houston, and at fundraising crab feeds in San Francisco. The *New York Times* had written about efforts to get the state to revoke the leases. Jay Hammond had used the Kachemak lease sale as an example of government insensitivity to local wishes, and it helped him get him elected Governor.

As spring came on and the Ferris prepared to leave, the fisherman's legal challenge of the 1973 lease sale was lingering in the Alaska Supreme Court, which seemed to be waiting for the legislature to make up its mind. The Hammond administration had gotten off to a bad start in his campaign to banish oil rigs from the bay, introducing a bill so restrictive that some felt it could have been used to outlaw rowboats as well. A second bill zeroed in on the leases themselves, and when Attorney General Avrum Gross chaired a town meeting in Homer in February and asked how many there wanted to see the leases revoked, the vote was 300-plus to 18. Gross was enjoying this populist campaign against big business and big government, and after the meeting, called the results "terrific." He urged everyone present to write the key legislators "so they don't think I'm crazy when I come back and tell them what happened."

Others weren't so pleased. That meeting marked a turning point for the business people, city officials and longtime residents who saw themselves as spokesmen for a silent majority. There

were some powerful local leaders among the 18 who voted for the leases – people like then Mayor Hazel Heath, city manager Larry Farnen, and freight terminal owners Jim and Barbara Manley, who testified that the Ferris had already poured \$2 million into the local economy. Now their power had been seriously challenged: was there really a silent majority who wanted to see the Ferris get a shot at that oil-bearing structure? There was never an areawide vote taken on the question, and the different opinion polls tended to cancel each other out. The newspaper, with me writing the news stories and publisher-owner Gary Williams writing the editorials, was a fascinated observer but a frightened participant, whose official position described the town's split as a tactful "50-50."

One afternoon, shortly after my article on the town meeting came out, three different people stopped by the office to ask if it was true that I had been fired for being such an anti-oil scamp. It was news to me. I was glad to learn that it was also news to my boss, who agreed with me that a near-unanimous vote at a well publicized "town meeting" was big news. But he admitted he was feeling a lot of pressure from pro-oil elements, who in their hour of need saw his noncommittal stance as a defection (though only one regular advertiser went so far as to yank his ad). Many of his younger friends were meanwhile badgering him to stand up to the big bad oil companies. This was a truly uncomfortable position for a publisher to find himself in. Like a squid, Williams the editorialist reacted to the attacks by further obscuring his personal position in a spray of ink. Fortunately, as publisher he was able to point to advertisers on either side of the issue; and as both sides talked of boycotts, the biggest advertisers in town took their cue from the paper and kept their opinions pretty much to themselves. The center held. That fall, Hazel Heath lost her first election in eight years, and Gary Williams was elected mayor.

The 1976 mayor's race made clear to everyone what seemed apparent at the February town meeting: the old-line leaders of the so-called silent majority had underestimated the extent of growth and change in Homer. The usual exertion of quiet power was failing, and the "opposition" was now speaking publicly for the town as a whole.

The old-timers got cracking with polls of their own and press releases and a charter flight to Juneau. It helped to have Homer's only state representative, Leo Rhode, argue their side before the legislature. He told a House committee that Homer suffered from an "Appalachian economy." Of the state leases sold in 1973 (with no local hearings) he declared, "A deal's a deal." And of course, the pro-oil side had powerful friends in the oil company lobbyists, who shrewdly kept their distance from Homer, but were hard at work in the state capitol.

Together, these forces managed to win hesitant legislators to a "compromise bill" which deleted the critical provision of the Hammond bill: the right to condemn the leases if the oil companies refused to negotiate a sale. Without that hammer, the administration felt that oil companies would ask such a high buyback price that the legislature would never agree to appropriate the money: your basic spike-the-capital-move approach. As the legislature drew to a close in May 1976, it looked like the controversy was about to be resolved by passage of the weaker bill.

Enter the George Ferris.

Back in 1971, while waiting on standby in southern California, the oil rig had a starring role in the James Bond movie “Diamonds Are Forever,” as the offshore lair of an international crime syndicate. But not even Agent 007 could have devised a finish for the Ferris as resounding as the one it met that gray Wednesday in Kachemak Bay. The Ferris turned out to be stuck in the mud. Not only that, the realization that it was stuck came too late. The barge had been jacked down at low water, and the incoming tide meant to pop the legs free put so much strain on the jacks that they would probably have cracked again had they not just been strengthened. As it was, the jacks snapped two of the legs, locking the barge into a position that was partially submerged at high tide. With the crew abandoning the swamped ship, and a sheen of diesel oil on Kachemak Bay, escaping the ineffective containment efforts (the later overkill of the Glacier Queen oil spill response was yet another legacy of the Ferris), legislators passed a tougher bill, including condemnation powers, guaranteeing no oil rigs would ever again goof up in Kachemak Bay.

Though that was the end of the George F. Ferris, the story continues today with drill rigs at work on federal oil leases a few miles further out from Kachemak Bay. If, as it looks so far, Cook Inlet turns out to be a dud in the 1980s, it seems possible that the oil companies will ask for another chance at Kachemak Bay before closing up shop in the area. Trust our new technology, they'll say.

At the same time, Homer has been experiencing a boom of fishing and tourism, unrelated to and in some ways (increasing traffic on the bay, crowding available land on the Spit) undoubtedly conflicting with any future oil development. The Ferris is gone, and with it probably went the oil industry's chance at Kachemak Bay, but the bright lights and fast food of the outside world – the world of economic growth and change – have been arriving at the end of the road anyway. So the future has turned out to be a good deal more complicated than it seemed when our growth/no growth hopes were pinned on the George Ferris.

Ralph Oxenrider, after his long wait in Homer, got to leave in style. He drove south in a brand new Jeep, the grand prize in a \$100-a-ticket raffle held by the Elks.

Alas, the poor Ferris. “We’ve had trouble with that damn thing ever since Sean Connery blew it up,” Oxenrider had said two days after the debacle. When the rig finally left Homer after a drawn-out rescue operation, it was a broken amputee. For the rest of the decade, the once-proud rig bummed its way from oil port to oil port in the Gulf of Mexico, picking up an occasional lowly job as a service barge. But several phone calls made recently to Texas tracked it down, and apparently its down and out days are coming to an end. The Ferris finally found a new owner willing to forget the past, JFP Drilling of Houston. It is now being completely overhauled in Ingleside, Texas, with new legs replacing the ones left behind in the mud of Kachemak Bay. “The barge is too valuable to just be scrapped,” said its owner. Next year it will be back to work as a jack-up rig in the Gulf of Mexico, with a new name: JFP #5.

Today, I think, the drill rig's former supporters must remember their fierce loyalty, and even its opponents look back on the old Ferris with a fondness not entirely due to the spectacular and timely nature of its demise. It was something we all had in common. A symbol in its glory, a symbol in its fall, it has today become the symbol of a simpler time. An artifact of nostalgia from Homer's coming of age. You can't see 'em, Homer, but the four iron legs of the George Ferris are still out there, lopped off below the mud. One of these days, some back-to-nature purists are going to come along who will want to have the legs removed from Kachemak Bay. So now is the time, as the decade of Homer's adolescence ends, for somebody to propose that those legs be declared a state historical landmark.

Remember the George Ferris.