

Cordova's long wait for justice

By Mark Whitaker
BBC News, Alaska

In Washington the Supreme Court is due to give the final verdict any time now in one of the longest-running legal battles in US history. It is a contest which has pitted the people of a small Alaskan town against the might of the largest commercial corporation on Earth.

It has been a long time since the Alaskan fishing town of Cordova could claim to be the "Razor Clam Capital of the World".

Mind you it took the second biggest earthquake ever recorded - 9.2 on the Richter Scale - to knock it off its seafood pedestal, heaving its revered clam beds out of the sea and depositing them on dry land.

That was Good Friday 1964.

But Good Friday 1989 was not much better for folks in Cordova.

Out at sea, a super-tanker miles off course after dodging icebergs in the night, hit a reef.

Holed, the fully-loaded tanker began to gush 11 million gallons of North Slope Alaskan crude from her side.

The tanker was - of course - the Exxon Valdez and what followed was the daddy of all tanker disasters.

Exxon Valdez became a rallying cry for environmentalists; a distillation of all the most obnoxious excesses which fallible, culpable, insatiable human beings can inflict on innocent nature.

Record award

And for many of the people in Cordova it became an unwanted obsession.

Five years after the disaster a court in Anchorage found in favour of more than 32,000 plaintiffs - many of them from places like Cordova - who had brought a joint action for punitive damages against the tanker's owners Exxon Mobil.

In a nutshell, the plaintiffs had argued that the oil spill had wrecked the fishing industry which underpinned the entire local economy and had effectively destroyed their livelihoods.

The award was a record \$5bn.

Payout halted

But none of the plaintiffs has received a cent because for the past 14 years Exxon Mobil has been appealing.

Over the course of those appeals \$5bn has been whittled down to \$2.5bn.

Inflation has eaten into the value of what is left and around 20% of the original plaintiffs have died.

Now it is the turn of the Supreme Court in Washington to have the final say. Will it be \$2.5bn or will it

be nothing?

There are many people in Cordova hoping and praying right now.

Cash in hand

In 1989 there were eager young families anticipating good times who had invested in fishing boats, nets and trailers, only to see them mothballed after the spill.

Young families no longer, their eagerness has gone. Nineteen years is a long time to be kept waiting while lawyers make their arguments and take their cuts.

As one old salt told me: " I'd rather have had a few dollars in my pocket all my life, than have a heap of money just as I'm about to check into the old folks' home."

People in Cordova have grown disillusioned with the system and they are sceptical now that the long wait will have been worth it.

For many, the past 19 years has been a rollercoaster of expectations raised then dashed.

Centenary celebrations

They have been strapped in for the ride - unable to get off, but now it is making them sick. They want it to end.

It would be easy to characterise a place like Cordova as somewhere just waiting for its pay cheque.

But this is not a place full of people with fingers crossed - like lottery obsessives. Nor is it a town of victims.

Cordovans are - for the most part - open, hospitable, good-humoured and above all, fiercely self-reliant.

The town - which calls itself a city, but is really only a village in an area about as close to the middle of nowhere as you can get - celebrates its centenary this year.

American beauty

It is not getting carried away.

The official blurb from the chamber of commerce warns would-be visitors: "Cordova may not be for everyone."

Indeed the security man who checked my ticket at the airport in Anchorage, Alaska's main city, looked me over incredulously and yelled: "Cordova - why?"

Well one reason why is that Cordova, tucked away on its fjord and hemmed in by saw-toothed, snow-clad mountains is jaw-droppingly beautiful.

On the town's main street stands a building which is also celebrating its 100th birthday this year.

The Alaskan Bar and Hotel looks and feels like something from the pioneer days.

For many people who come here - and for all its not so good Fridays - Cordova is a place which feels like home

Its sign is upside down - reputedly as an easy-reading aid for customers who may have fallen over outside having consumed too much while inside.

Behind the long rough wooden bar which seems to drift off into infinity a young lady with a southern drawl that is maybe Alabama but certainly is not Alaska tells me she came to Cordova following the man of her dreams.

Either the dreams or the man did not work out, but she stayed nonetheless. Why?

"I guess I'm scared of flying," she said.

For many people who come here - and for all its not so good Fridays - Cordova is a place which feels like home.

And a place which wants to get on with its life.

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