

Oral History
Gayla Hoseth
Dillingham Alaska
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Interviewers: Kim Sparks with Anna Lavoie, Jean Lee, (PSMFC, NOAA Fisheries AFSC), Kitty Sopow (BBNA Project Intern) and Sean Day (Independent consultant).

Text in brackets [] signifies interviewer/s interpretations, and/or clarification of the narrative of the interviewee.

Text in parentheses () represent nonverbal sounds and activity during interview.

Kim Sparks: We're here today with Gayla, and this is Kim Sparks interviewing. We're at BBNA [Bristol Bay Native Association] and Gayla, thanks so much for being willing to do this and for sharing all your insight. So, I was wondering if you could start off talking a little bit about your family history. How did you start fishing? And who are the family members that you work with?

Gayla Hoseth: Okay, great. So, I am Gayla Hoseth. I was born into a fishing family on both sides. Both my father and mother family are lifelong fishermen. And my grandfather on my mom's side came from Greece and came here—I don't know exactly the year, but I believe it was either in the late 40s, came over. My dad's father came from Norway and came here and—but then you also have our Native Yup'ik side, that we've been here for thousands of years living off of our renewable resources that we have here in Bristol Bay. So being born into a fishing family, I grew up coming over here. Well, we were here—I was here for—my parents got married and then they got divorced and my mom moved to Anchorage but I spent all the summers of my life here in Bristol Bay harvesting and putting up fish with my grandmother. And my mom would go to Clark's Point and do set net fisheries for a while so I would go to Clark's and then come to Dillingham, and it's just been something that we grew up, I grew up doing.

And we all had our jobs of what our responsibilities were, whether it be—you know, you start off by carrying the fish. Washing the fish. When we were little kids we would, you know, be so intrigued by playing with the hearts of the fish and you know the guts. As you got older you got—different jobs or different roles that you were able to perform and do with Grandma. And so, I was, you know—was able to learn the master of doing a nice fillet, so, you know, it's like, everybody has a job and so—being able to do a nice fillet of a fish and do strips and, just working side by side with my grandma for years, she taught us how to put up fish, and that's something that I pass down onto my daughter and we pass that on to the next generations of our family. And we have a big family operation that we usually, all of my sisters and I, we usually do fish together. Even if it's just for a time, but we all congregate during the summertime and come together, get things ready. And we have different—our families are big, so—

(telephone rings)

(pause in recording)

Kim Sparks: Alright, so we were talking about how your grandma was really the one who—has taught you how to fish, and you said you start with particular jobs and as you get older you get more responsibility.

Gayla Hoseth: um-hm

Kim Sparks: Do you mind telling us how old you were when you started fishing?

Gayla Hoseth: Oh gee, I was a little girl. So, I've always been around the fishing splitting table. We would be playing outside. Since you know, probably three, four years old, walking around Grandma and we would be, you know, with the fish, watching her do her stuff. I would come over here to spend the summers with my Dad, but a lot of the times I was always at Grandma's house. So we were always with Grandma and because I had all my siblings and we always would play, but everything revolved around fishing. Everything revolved around putting up the fish, checking the net. We'd all pile in the cars and go check the net, bring the fish back and watch our Grandma for years until we started getting into that role to where we would help—help her. And she put up a really good fish product. And I'm just so thankful that she has passed that onto us, and we just cherish that. And we cherish the knowledge that she—taught us. For how long do we soak the fish in the brine, how long do we have, you know, do we have our fish in—my sisters and I, we still call each other up, and we're like, How long, how many minutes do we soak the, you know, the flatfish or the strips? Because there's different timed things that you have to—that we soak them for. And we have a lot of laughs and a lot of fun and we really are going to miss Grandma this year because she passed away in December, and so now we're the ones that—are carrying that. That we're the ones who have everything that she taught us, and then we have each other as a support group—to be like, Okay, what did Grandma say? or, What would Grandma do in this situation? Do we smoke the fish longer?—you know, so we always are reflecting back to the things our grandma taught us.

Kim Sparks: At what point did you and Jeweline your sister take over the set net?

Gayla Hoseth: Oh, I would say—I don't know if I could do it a specific age time—probably in our—we all did it together as a family, so my grandparents have a homestead or like a cabin, a house along the Wood River. So in the summertime we would go, we'd call it “up the land.” And we would go up the land and we would all do it as a family. Even when I was married, and would go and I would spend the summer with my grandma and my grandpa and help them do the fish and help them do whatever. When I started doing, when we started doing it on our own, I would have to say—when Grandma really couldn't do it anymore, which I—I don't know how many years that was when she's—you know she was always there with us, guiding us along and walking us through, or making sure we had it right. And we do put up a lot of fish so—I don't know if I have a—maybe in my—probably, well that would be in my 30s that we started doing it by our, you know, doing it on our own.

Kim Sparks: Okay. And you said your grandma taught you a lot of things, like when to put up the fish and how to brine them and how long. What other specific things did she teach you about set net?

Gayla Hoseth: Preparing. Planning ahead. You know, making sure that we have our—our strings tied. That we had a bag full of strings, because when you do the strips you have them in loops, and in the evening tie them, you know, we would tie our strings so that we—you're not tying your strings—at the time you have everything ready. She always taught us and was our motivator to—say, Don't forget to do this. Don't forget, we need to do that. Did you

put your—did you put your lines out yet? You know (laughs). Did you go get your subsistence, your subsistence permit? You know, just a good reminder and now—amongst our sisters we remind each other of the things that we do, because we all lead pretty busy lives, in our work life and our daily lives so it's good to have that—really good foundations and sense of family to—to be a support for each other.

Kim Sparks: Yeah. And is your permit passed down from your grandma?

Gayla Hoseth: No, it's just through the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, it's just a subsistence permit. It's different than a set net permit for commercial fishing or drift fishing. So anybody living here in the State of Alaska, if you're an Alaska resident for—you have to be here at least for a year, and then you can do the subsistence permit.

Kim Sparks: Okay, great. And then I'm wondering if you could talk more about—how you are going to maybe pass down this knowledge to your children—if you want your children to be—fishing the same set net permit area.

Gayla Hoseth: Okay. Yeah, my daughter—she's 19. She was working alongside by me since she was a little girl, kind of like—like I told you earlier what I used to do as a little girl. So she would—she would go check the net with me, and go—she's a really good filleter. So she does a beautiful fillet. She knows how to do fish. She actually commercial fished too with her aunt, down at Ekuk. And so she has a little bit of the history of the subsistence fishing and the commercial fishing. And I think that, you know, as kids grow up and they leave home they always come back. And those skills that you have learned, it doesn't go away. So, I'm sure that she will one day put up fish for her family, and make sure that she continues that tradition even if she's not here with us right now, and as she figures out what she wants to do in her life.

Kim Sparks: Very cool. And in your mind, is there—is there a difference between subsistence and commercial? Or are they—more or less entwined in just fishing?

Gayla Hoseth: I guess the difference is I mean, the subsistence fishing is that we're putting away the fish for our families, but then the commercial fishing side also provides for our families, so I guess it could be an equal balance of the two that, you know, you have the commercial fishing—which a lot of, you know, back in the day people were able to commercial fish and just commercial fish during the summertime and not necessarily have to work in the wintertime. Nowadays people are fishing in the summer and also having to, you know, work in the wintertime, but commercial fishing sustains families, but then also subsistence fishing is, it sustains us with our food for the winter.

Kim Sparks: So you need them both.

Gayla Hoseth: Yeah

Kim Sparks: Yeah. Okay. Switching directions just a little bit, do you mind telling us more about how women participate in fisheries in Bristol Bay? You talked a little bit about how your grandma was really responsible for teaching you, but if you could talk more about women and how you fish with your sister.

Gayla Hoseth: Okay. Well, how it was, is you know, the men are out commercial fishing. And the men are out commercial fishing, and the women are home. You know, how it was when we

were growing up, the women would be home, taking care of the kids, the grandkids and they were doing the subsistence portion while the men were out commercial fishing. Um—I guess we're a hard working family (laughs) so we just get it done. We get out there and we do it—you know—we're not lazy. We make sure that—we're going to do it our way and we're going to do it the way that our Grandma taught us how. And then my other grandma, my grandma Annie, she's from Clark's Point and when she was widowed she never remarried. But she still kept on with the set net permit. She commercial fished for years until she couldn't commercial fish anymore, and then she also did the subsistence side, and also put up a nice product of smoked salmon and made sure that, you know, my mom's side of the family—that fish was being provided to the family on my mom's side as well.

Kim Sparks: So it sounds like women are strong and hard workers and really can fish for themselves.

Gayla Hoseth: Yeah, I mean and as—when we were down putting out the lines with my sister, you know, doing most of the work with the sledge hammer, pounding in the pegs, I mean we have to work like men. And—my grandma, and I'm talking a lot about my grandma Bertie, but she's a very fine woman that was a hard worker her whole entire life. She also commercial fished, you know, she worked hard. And she paid for it later in life with arthritis in her shoulders, you know, there's a lot of lifting. A lot of things that – our bodies aren't built for it, so she would always warn us, you know, Don't be lifting too heavy of things, you know, Don't be doing this because you'll end up like me and have bad arthritis, you know, things like that. So she would always tell us to not overwork too hard, and not to lift too much of heavy things so that we won't—have arthritis or have health problems later in life by working so hard. So—

Kim Sparks: Yeah. Well, if you want to talk a little bit about, you know, do you think there is—a different between men and women's roles in fishing, besides men go out and women do the set nets? Is there any other kind of—difference that you would say?

Gayla Hoseth: Yeah, I believe so because we fillet the fish. We process the fish, and you know, different cultures or different places that you go, a lot of time the men are the ones that fillet the fish or—prepare the fish. We prepare the fish (laughs), we're like, We're going to, we'll fillet the fish, because we want our fish to be, you know, as perfect as perfect could be on your presentation, how the fillet looks. So—I know a lot of women in different places, be like, I'm not touching a fish, or you know, They're slimy, or whatever, but no, our role is that we, we handle the—the men could catch the fish for us if they're out there catching 'em, but we want to be the ones that—have our hands in it and prepare them.

Kim Sparks: So it's almost like an art form then?

Gayla Hoseth: Yeah (laughs). It's an art form and then you know, we have—you're really proud when you make a—just a beautiful fillet. You know, so—we always, well in our family, we strive to always have, like, really nice, really nice looking fish.

Kim Sparks: And then how do you think women contribute to the community, this culture of women—going out and fishing and bringing in this beautiful product. How does that translate to the community and to your families?

- Gayla Hoseth: I think that it contributes in the sense that—you know, women could do anything that we set our mind to, but it also goes to show—the little girls growing up that whatever your dreams are, whatever you want to do, that we can do it. Contributing that way, encouraging one another, and showing that, you know, we can get things done.
- Kim Sparks: Yeah, definitely. And switching topics just a little bit, we want to talk about, since you have had just a lot of experience fishing here over the years, if you want to talk to any changes you've seen in the environment because of climate change or climate variability over the years?
- Gayla Hoseth: Okay. One of the things that we have noticed and—especially along the beaches and on the bluffs is the erosion. We have an erosion concern. Our bluff is receding back—and here at BBNA we have different projects of monitoring bank erosion and how does that affect—different, you know, we're trying to figure out how does that affect things today because—where we were at the beach, that bluff used to go, you know, farther out than it is today.
- Kim Sparks: And is that from wave erosion? Or why do think that—how is that changing?
- Gayla Hoseth: I'm not, I mean, it could be from you know, from the weather, from waves, from wind, from the tides. Another concern that we do have is that we're having warmer temperatures. So we have a lot of warmer weather. Um, I think it was a couple years ago with the fishing—usually the big king, the big sockeye salmon run is Fourth of July, that's when all the fish hit. That's the big Fourth of July fishing here, and—I think it was, like, two or three years ago, we had a really hot summer. The fish didn't hit at Fourth of July. They were later, because our water temperatures were warmer. And a lot of people, you know, they come here and they fish and they only have so much time off work from their regular day jobs that a lot people had to leave, and the fish came in later as the water temperature cooled down. So we are seeing warmer weather affecting our temperatures that affects—the whole ecosystem and how that affects the salmon—and the return of the salmon because the salmon just milled out farther out, before they came up.
- Kim Sparks: And any changes with, like, hunting or gathering with plants?
- Gayla Hoseth: Oh yeah. Hunting—this year was the first year that people were able to get out on snow machines—here we call them “snow-gos”—And because we haven't had freeze. We haven't had—the rivers haven't froze. We haven't had much snow. People weren't able to travel by snow machine to go and get moose and caribou in the wintertime. And that was for a good number of years, so this year was the first time that people were able to really have a good—a good harvest of moose and caribou this past winter—here in this area because of travel conditions. Because the travel conditions have been to where it was unsafe to travel, and some villages have, you know, you lose life because of poor travel conditions and it's not safe.
- Kim Sparks: Okay. Have there been any accidents?
- Gayla Hoseth: Oh, there's always accidents, I mean, and especially I mean, on Sunday they just had the Blessing of the Fleet here—and as you remember the people who have lost their lives to the sea and you have the Blessing of the Fleet and that's always the scary part is—you

know, making sure that people are safe and—it's really sad when we, when anybody loses anybody—in any industry that we have, whether it be fishing and hunting, flying.

Kim Sparks: And is that happening any more regularly because of climate change or variability?

Gayla Hoseth: I don't think so. I think it's just a—the cycle of life or just the—the risk involved.

Kim Sparks: The risk factor.

Gayla Hoseth: Yeah, with anything

Kim Sparks: Okay, okay. And then do you think—do you think women experience climate change or changes differently than men? Is there any cases of that happening?

Gayla Hoseth: Do we—well, I mean sometimes we have to—so, when we're berry picking—last year it was really different with our berry picking because all the berries came at one time. And usually you have the different berries that show up that you're picking the berries. This year all of our berries happened at the same time.

(pause in recording)

Kim Sparks: So this time I think you can just, if you want to cover some of those points again, or anything else you want to talk and it will just be your time to tell your story or testimony. I won't ask any more questions.

Gayla Hoseth: I guess I think one of the biggest things or the biggest issues I have on my heart to talk, you know, or to say or the message that I want to make clear is that you know, as women rise up in leadership and these different leadership positions that we do take, and the roles that we do take, weigh heavy on our shoulders as we be the voice for Bristol Bay or you be the voice for different issues that we're facing and that we're fighting, whether it be for the Board of Fish, the Board of Game, the Federal Subsistence Board, the Alaska Migratory Bird Co-Management Council that I serve on. So we have these different roles. I'm also the Second Chief to the Curying Tribal Council. We have a lot of—huge roles that we serve as women here in the area. A lot of that comes with the price of how do we find the perfect balance as we struggle with these things that we're faced with, on the decisions that we have to make.

You know, we have large scale mining that wants to come in here. We have Pebble Mine that wants to come here at the headwaters of our—of our rivers. It's a fight that's been going on for more than ten years. We're still fighting it. I mean, it's going to be a lifetime that we, as we fight this to protect what we have, to keep our culture, and to keep our—to sustain our way of life. We're always, seems like we're always fighting to have, to keep what we have. Always advocating and always explaining our way of life to people, whether it be a government agency. Whether it be, you know, as we give testimony—and what bothers me as somebody, as we do go through these different things—is (long pause) you know, I'm just the next generation coming up fighting this. I've had other leaders that have been fighting things, you know, for their lifetime. So it's always a struggle that I see. It's like why, why can't it be to where it's our rules? People abide by us and we don't have to abide by different government regulations. We live in a dual regulatory system here, so we have federal rules and we have state rules. A lot of people don't really know what rules that we have, what rules do we need to abide by now when

we have our own rules, and I have a friend who also travels around the state and she was talking to an elder, an elder gentlemen and, you know, it's like—understanding the unspoken rules is really important to—how do you, how do you—that really resonated with me because how do you explain our way of life to people, to where they could understand? People who aren't from here.

And one of the stories that I like to share and I shared it with you guys earlier is, as I become older and these different things you really—you really value where you are, and to really appreciate where you are and to know where you come from is very important, but what's even more important is that you never forget where you come from. It's really important (with strong emotion). And then to just be out there harvesting and picking berries on—on the same land that my ancestors have picked on is—it resonates with you. You go to any indigenous place and all the indigenous people throughout the world—have that same connection to their land. And that's what we fight for. To keep that. To keep our waters clean, to keep our air clean and to keep what we have here. And to not let—the outside world influence us.

It doesn't necessarily have to be in development. We have a real drug problem here. So you have drugs that come in through here that affect our people, changes—changes things. People get—and I could see how people could—turn to alcohol and drugs on the past hurts that our people have endured or things that we have fought for, or people who have given up that can't take it anymore. It impacts people. But having a healthy balance, making healthy choices, living a healthy lifestyle is what people need to grasp onto and never forget where they come from. Never forget our grandmas and our grandpas that taught us. Because they want us to continue to be—to pass things on and you have to be healthy in order to pass that—that stuff down. As we, you know, as we go through this journey and this thing called life, I just feel that everybody has different experiences that we experience and we go through, but the main thing that's important is each other and family.

Kim Sparks: Thank you.

Gayla Hoseth: Um-hm. And I hate to get emotional (laughs). I *always* cry. I'm, like, the crier, but it's – you know, it means *so* much—because—how—I don't want to see anything change here that would change us for who we are. And—but you know, one thing that—one thing that I do hear as a part of my job, and also just for who I am and how I was raised is encouraging people. Get your voice out there. Let your voice be heard. You know, traditionally Yup'ik people here are quiet, don't speak up. It's time that we speak up. It's time that we speak up and we—we tell our stories. And people can relate to our stories. They could, and we could keep what we have and make a positive change. So—

Kim Sparks: What would be on story you would like to share about fishing that would convey the importance of fishing to your family, and to your people?

Gayla Hoseth: I think that the important thing is the family bond. The bond that you have with being with your family as you're gathering. Having, having your mentor, having your teacher whether, you know, it was my grandma teaching me how to do it, but you have that bond. And that bond is something that you hold onto, and that's what I'm going to pass down to my nieces and nephews, to my children. And, you know, as you go through life—you never think that you're that person (laughs) until you're there. You know, in our heads I

think that we think that we're still the younger person, until you're the older person and now I'm, like, the old, I'm the oldest sister of my family, so—I always tease them and say I'm like the old auntie of the family, but I don't feel old. But to my nieces and nephews, they look up, you know, as a teacher, and I need to—that bond that I felt with my Grandma as teaching me, I need to be that bond to my family. To keep everybody, you know, that we always have that.

Kim Sparks: So fishing is not just providing food and income, it's more about social bonds and family bonds and just—keeping those connections over the years, it sounds like.

Gayla Hoseth: Oh yeah. And it's something that you look forward to every year. It's something that, you know, fishing comes around and—so when we're down at the beach, it's like, it's a beach life. We don't—the people that have their set net, their subsistence sites on the beach—we might not, you know, you pass them on the road through the winter and you wave, but it's those conversations and the summer connections that you have in the summertime along the beach that are really important. You know, How are you doing? How was your winter? How is your family doing? Those kind of conversations.

Kim Sparks: And would you be willing to share one fishing tradition that you have associated with fishing with your Grandma or fishing with your sister?

Gayla Hoseth: A fishing tradition? Um—hm. Let's see, I would have to think of—you know (long pause) I guess—for me it would have to be going up the land. Going up the land would be a tradition that we have had for, it's kind of like our, our getaway place. It's been a tradition that we do go up there and my grandma used to call it, "I'm going for R and R." Rest and relaxation, you know, up the land. That's a good family tradition that I want to continue, you know, getting up there and making sure that you make the time to go. With our grandparents not there anymore, makes it hard to go, but we still need to go because that's what it is there for. That's something that's going to be in our family for—you know—for generations to come.

Kim Sparks: Hm. Very cool. Anything else you'd like to share with us about what it means to be a set net fisherwoman?

Gayla Hoseth: Mmm (long pause). I guess—you know, it's who we are (laughs). I don't—I don't know how to, to really say it cause growing up with it, it's not nothing—it's not something that I just learned. It's something that's always been with me. Um—so it's a part of who I am. I don't—

Kim Sparks: Yeah (laughs).

Gayla Hoseth: (laughs) You know, I feel always feel like I'm the (laughs) the emotional person, but it is emotional, it is emotional as we talk about these things—because there's a lot of—you know we have a lot of—a lot of victories but we have a lot of—heartaches as well. So, I think everybody does though.

end of interview