Recorded Interview with Joey Jones, Commercial Fisherman, Moss Landing, CA
DATE: November 19, 2007
INTERVIEWER: Melissa Stevens

MS: Okay Joey, so I know you've been in this industry for a long time. Can you tell me your background?

JJ: Well, as far as the ocean, the first time I saw the ocean I was 9 years old. My dad was in the military; he retired here at Fort Ord. When we came to Monterey, the first thing we did was go down to the wharf like everybody does. We took a cruise; George Oliviero was the owner, Sport Kingfishing. From that day on, I just loved the ocean. So because we lived here, as time went on, I used to hang out down there and fish off the wharf, and then I got a job at Randy's fishing trips when I was about 11 years old taking care of the skiffs they used to run. I would ride my bike down from seaside, work all day long - 11 hours – all summer. After school sometimes I would go down when the party boats would come in.
When I was 12-13 I started deckhanding for Randy II; Jay Graham was the skipper at the time. That's how I started fishing, with the sport boats.

MS: What years were those?

JJ: We moved here in 1961, so it was '62, before the marina was built, just a breakwater and wharf 2, wharf 1 the old Booth pier used to be there (which they've torn down). A lot of commercial fishermen around. Sportfishing back then was primarily weekends and summer time. After a while everything got tourist-oriented. Now the majority of commercial fishing is gone. It's mostly sport now.

MS: Back then, in the '60s that was maybe when trawling got going? Sardine had gone…

JJ: Yeah sardines were ending, where the aquarium is now there was one last cannery processing squid. We used to go out in a skiff, and the ones that didn't float we'd take and use as bait for party boats. Yeah, the sardines was gone, but squid starting to take off. Back then they canned 90% of it. Now it's a frozen market.

MS: At what point did you go from recreational/sport work to commercial work?

JJ: It all started part time, I bought a 16-ft skiff to fish sandabs and rockcod with hook and line. Wasn't a lot of money, if I fished all day I could make $25-30, pretty good back then. When I was in high school I'd get up, go fish till 7am, be at school by 7:45. I'd get Bonita or rockcod in the summer. I'd come in and sell the fish at little markets on the wharf there, make $15-20 and still be to school by 8am. My teachers would give me grief for smelling like fish.
It was fun.
I worked as deckhand for the party boats until I was 15. I started working the lampara boats when I was about 18. We used to pull 'capsan head' winches, pull them by hand, it was a lot of work.

Ms: and was that with the Sicilians?

JJ: Yeah, all the net fishermen back then were Sicilian primarily. A few guys were Portuguese, and I got used to hanging down there and watching them sew the net. Finally got on a boat and have been doing it ever since. They taught me a lot. It's a type of education you can't get anywhere else except by doing it. And the lampara are probably one of the most technical nets to make (even more than drag nets), cuz they would balloon out and wrap the fish. They had to be hung in strips, cut in tapers, and it doesn't sound too hard to do until you have to make one big enough to wrap your whole property.

MS: What material did they use?

JJ: They used cotton nets, and they would tar them. They would take the nets and every year or so (depending on how much use) they would dip them in these vats of tar, take them out and let them dry. That would help preserve them. Most of the net back then – you could buy bales of web- but most everything was all hand-sewn. It would take ungodly amount of hours/labor to build them. Today you just call someone up. You still have to put them together, but the materials are better. The nylon lasts forever. Even back when we first started gillnetting, we did with cotton net, then nylon, then monofilament towards the end, which was a lot more user friendly. Easy to hang, to deal with. Fewer hours of building and more time fishing.
Back when we used to do it was triple mesh – three layers of net. The one in the middle was ~5-6 inch mesh. Outside was 8-12 " mesh, depending on size of target fish.

MS: Is that what you call a trammel net?

JJ: Yeah, there are basically 3 layers. Some guys used to use 2 layers. We used both sides cuz fish coming from either way would get caught. Working with Sicilians, I learned all the components of a net in that language (Italian). I remember when we first started fishing herring in San Francisco and all the northern fishemen come down from Washington, that was the first time I learned the parts of the net in English…it never dawned on me there was a different name for them! They would say 'no, that's this name', and I'd give them the Italian name. You'd find that the 'apron' was the English name. It was pretty interesting.

MS: So that type of net was also used in Washington?
JJ: Yeah, they used the lampara and gill nets – pretty much the same as we did here. There's a few Sicilians up there, but more Americans fishing up there, born in this country, English speaking I guess. A lot of the Italians fishing on the boat when I first started, about half of them didn't speak English. As we were fishing I had to learn all the – like when you pull up on the hoist it's 'eeza' instead of up, and 'mola' means let it go. You know, I could get in the boat and work with these guys side by side, but I couldn't stand and talk to them in conversation. But I knew everything that was going on, the net, and what they wanted you to do in Italian language. I didn't realize I had learned it that way, but that's the way I did. They liked having me on the boat. I was a big strong kid back then. It was all done by hand, now days it's all done by hydraulics.

MS: I remember you telling me about how navigation was so different back then…so how did you learn how to go out and come back and not get lost?

JJ: Well it took – back then – we did it with a watch and compass and some way of telling depth of water. Back when I started we had a 'flasher' – a light going around- it would send an echo off the bottom and tell you how deep it was. You had to learn to navigate for real back then. When you left, and you had to plot your course: you know your time and how fast your boat's going, would take you 'x' amount of time to run there. To verify your position, while you're traveling down, you know there's a canyon edge that drops off so you check your fathom meter, and you see the water get deeper, you know where you're supposed to be.
It would take 3.5 hours to go to Pt Sur, we'd fish there in the rock pile all day, which was something else, you know. Like the brail system, you'd watch the water, and when it got deep you'd know.
We'd leave Monterey at the breakwater. We'd fish all day and come back and never see land all day (because of fog). Just knowing where we were with fathom meter, watching edges of the canyon, how they dropped off, rockpiles vs. flat bottom, look at a chart and know where you are. We could get relatively close.

MS: Was there something of a 'fleet' at that time? A group that would go out together?

JJ: Most everybody's independent. It always made you a better person if you were a good navigator cuz you could find the fish. It was something you taught your kid but not anybody else. The Sicilians used to have a saying; 'you give a man a fish you feed him for a day, you teach a man to fish, and you feed him for life'. Well they always thought if I taught everyone to fish, competition would get stiff and take money out of their pocket, so it was pretty hard to get them to actually teach you anything until they got to know you and like you. Even when you fished in a boat with them, they really wouldn't teach you what they're doing. Without actually being there and listening to someone talk about it. The way the tide and currents, full vs. no moon, what you're looking at.
When we were fishing with the lampara, one guy stands on the bow, and we see the fish in the water. During full moon we couldn't fish cuz too much light to see. They would stand up there and tell you what kind of fish, how much in the school, and if we should set or not. To set with these nets was a lot of work, so making bad sets took a lot of time, you only have so much time to catch the fish, plus the crew would give you dirty looks too if you pull it in and you set them on the wrong thing ..

MS: So being a 'spotter' was pretty important job.

JJ: Yeah, the first boat I was on was the St. George, owned by the Gimona brothers – Joe and Babe – and Babe would be on top driving and Joe on the bow spotting schools. Gosh, when I got on the boat with them they were in their 60s and were just phenomenal fishermen. They took a liking to me and taught me a lot. And even after they retired and sold their boat, when I got my boat, they'd come fishing with me. I'd let them run the boat, primarily just to learn more, to get the knowledge they had stored between them ears. They were pretty sharp characters…

MS: So they must have spoken English.
JJ: Yeah they had been around a long time and spoke English well. Usually it was a lot of the crew that had come from the old country later in life that would work with these guys. Most all the owners of the boats spoke good enough English you could converse with them. But the crew,

or their fathers, just didn't want to learn English, but would fish every day. It was a time in life where hard work actually got you somewhere. Nowadays it's all computers and electronics. You take one of those guys and put them on today's boats, they would get dizzy. They'd say "what is all this?"

MS: So technology has changed?

JJ: Oh yeah, it's like night and day. Now you step on the boat and it's sonar and radars and GPS, radios, ADFs (automatic direction finders), everything you want to know. And the technology of satellite navigation vs. water temps, currents, edges off the satellites, yeah it's phenomenal.

MS: So you've already answered this question here and there, but before the technology, how did you know where to catch the fish?

JJ: Experience. Just being out there, getting the knowledge of people that's been out there for 30 years. Where they go, they had all the characteristics of the fish and different species in their heads. Every time one of those guys would pass away, it was like, God did we get all the experience and knowledge? Rockpiles and areas they fished on – everybody had their own secret spot. Some guys would get near retirement and a few showed me places that no one else knew. A lot of them would use just markers on the land. A lot of guys would use maybe just a house and some trees on the land as a marker. You line them up and run in and out until you crossed the pile, you knew it was about 2-3 miles off the beach. Sometimes if you could get two marks, and cross them a lot easier.
Basically the way GPS works, with lat/long, you get two marks off the beach and line 'em up and be right in the area. It had to be clear and close enough to the beach to do it.
I found a book…gosh I wish I had kept it, you would have loved it. A little Portuguese fishermen – John Gularte (lived in Monterey) – he had little pictures drawn of all his marks on the beach to memorize them. Where they were, how far off, just pages and pages… but the only thing about these, you might find some now, might not find again cuz the landscape changes. But that's how they did it.

MS: So a lot of the guys had their little book where they kept their observations, etc.

JJ: Right. When GPS first came out, we had 'C Loran', which would give you a 27 line and a 42 line and a 16 line. There would be a series of lines on a chart in different directions, 16 lines would go the same way…you get a number read-out, on the 16, draw it, then go to the 27, mark and 42 and wherever they all three cross was where you were. When that first came out we were amazed, we felt we could navigate the oceans. It's pretty much coastal, up down coast as long as the stations sending out the signals were working. But it wasn't good for offshore. But with satellite navigation, you can go anywhere in the world.
It made a lot of people ocean-going people. Sport guys with 20-ish ft skiffs could go albacore fishing. But I tell you what, you take anyone out there and turn that thing off, and they ain't coming home. It would take a real navigator. When I was teaching my son – we'd be going across the bay I'd reach up and shut everything off and say 'we just had a power failure, you gotta take us home.' I wanted him to learn to do it the old way, just so if anything happened, he

could do it. But fortunately he's back in school, he doesn't want to be a fishermen, which is a good thing cuz fishing's getting tough. He's going to be a history teacher.

MS: So back when you were getting started, could you go out and fish wherever, whenever?

JJ: Yeah, there was no permits. You bought a commercial license for the boat, and one for yourself. I think it was $10 for each person and $15 for the boat. And you fished anything you want. There were certain things in each season –crab, salmon, but you could fish whatever fishery was coming up. Rockcod, salmon, albacore, crab, gillnet halibut, drag, anything. It was a pretty good life. Most fishermen would change from season to season; they'd fish salmon, in winter sometimes we'd go gillnet for rockcod for something to do and to make money, in the summertime we'd fish squid or anchovies (there was no sardines around then)…
The last 2-3 months I've never seen so much fish (sardine/anchovy) in the bay in my life. Boats have been loading up every night, couple hours, 150-ton sets. When I say it's the most I've seen ever in my life, is right now. It's pretty incredible, and they still say there's no fish there, I don't get that one [laughs].
But yeah we fished everything, whether it was hook and line or traps, we fished spot prawns with traps, just anything that swims in the ocean, if there was a market for it, we'd go get it. There was always plenty of fish around. And if one season weren't so good, we'd go to the next one. It was easier to make a living back then because you could do that (do different fisheries). Nowadays you got permits for 1-2 things and if they don't produce, you're done, they won't let you go fish for something else. And to have a permit for everything is impossible. The cost is staggering, and add fuel prices. Everyone tries to squeeze and extra buck where they can, everyone's struggling to stay in business. And my opinion is there's no reason for it. Like I said I've been out there 40 years and there's just as much fish now (if not more in some cases) than ever. It's all about marketing.

MS: How did that work for you in your own business? Would you make sure you had a market before you went to fish it?

JJ: You always made sure you had a buyer, always. The only time you'd go out fishing without a buyer was for something you knew you could sell, like salmon. There's salmon buyers up/down the coast. Albacore, back then there were canneries (their out of biz now too – I think the EPA's put them all out, processing and cost). It's so cheap for foreign countries to process fish now that it's like anything else, if you produce something in US it's going to cost you 10x more that any place else. Some of these guys were buying squid, shipping to China for cleaning, then ship back and it was cheaper than doing it all in US. That just boggles my mind.

MS: Yeah pretty amazing. You mentioned the tuna canneries down southern California that moved offshore?

JJ: Yeah there were so many regulations they said 'forget it', they didn't have to stay there, and a lot of jobs were lost. Everything's that way now. This country's got to really re-think their method of operation because it's not getting any better.

MS: I agree. Things are challenging right now. Um, so…it sounds like you've been involved with so many different fishing methods?

JJ: I can't think of one I haven't done.

MS: What is your favorite fishing method or fish to catch?

JJ: I don't know. They all have pros/cons. I like to fish, for fun… commercial albacore. Sometimes there are a lot of hours that's boring, but when you get into them, it's all about the faster you work the more money you make. You would pull them in by hand, and they still do that, actually. By the end of the day – you'd pull from sun up to sun down – then 3-4 hours after dark putting the fish away in the hatch. Then get at the wheel and start running cuz the current would push you 50-60 miles away from the grounds. Sometimes you wouldn't sleep at night, next morning come daylight you're doing it again.
When the fish are there, you gotta catch them while they're there. Can't just work your 8 hours and go to sleep. So we fished until the hatch was full, it was 24/7. Once boat was full, you could go take a nap.
I truly enjoyed albacore fishing, and salmon too. Salmon fishing was a lot of fun when you got at 'em. It's the same thing – when they're coming – you gotta just fish until they stop, or until the boats full. It was a lot of work, salmon you have to clean each and every one of them. Some days you'd get 200-300 salmon, back when we fished silvers, we'd get 500-600. Hands used to be like rocks, they were so hard.
Some of the old fishermen that worked with nets, people would shake your hand and say 'my gosh, it's like shaking a tree stump'! [laughs]
But I'd rather do that than sit behind a desk any day of the year.

MS: Have you ever had an experience out in the ocean where you thought you were going to die?

JJ: Yeah, a few. Been overboard a couple times. Once down at Pt Sur I went rockcod fishing, about 10-12 miles off the island (where lighthouse is). I had a big box of weights rolling around on the deck, and went out to secure them, 3 or 4 am, and the boat took a roll – you couldn't see swell coming because of fog/dark – I went over the side. As I rolled down, I reached up and grabbed the rail and literally threw myself back in the boat. That's when you thank God you're strong enough to do that. I'm standing there thinking, gee, if I hadn't caught that rail…

MS: You were alone?

JJ: I had one crewmember but he was down below sleeping. But if I hadn't grabbed that rail I might have been trying to swim 10 miles to the beach and that probably wouldn't have happened.
One time in SF bay we were gillnetting herring, and it was blowing so hard – gusting 80-90 knots - and the wind picked me up and dropped me in the water. The guys were only 7 feet away but they couldn't hear me. When I finally got their attention – I wasn't too concerned cuz we were close to the beach – they got one hand and pull me high enough to catch the rail and pull myself back in. Those were the two times I was overboard.

One time I was seining, the fish took a dive, which pulled the skiff down and put me in there with 60 ton of squid. It wasn't too bad, a little smelly but… [Laughs]

There's time – you look back- anything could have gone wrong. I've had booms snap, almost hit me. It's one of the most dangerous jobs to have. Your odds of getting hurt are probably greater, even fatally. Still, I've had boats catch fire, fill full of water. When you're out there and something happens, you don't even think about it. Just jump in there and fix the problem as best you can.

MS: And when you're out there, do fishermen help each other out?

JJ: Yeah if somebody's in distress, you stop whatever you're doing and go to them. The odds of you getting there – especially if there's high seas – the odds of you helping anybody is slim to none. You can try to get a line overboard, but the wind and water is so strong that if you get someone to pull in, they may loose their strength and you can't go in to get them (without killing yourself). It doesn't take long for the cold to get you. Twenty or thirty minutes tops. You can go through all kinds of training, but even those skills take a lot of strength, and you can freak out. You know, a lot of fishermen don't swim too well, but some swim like a fish. I did surfing and SCUBA when I was young so being in the water didn't bother me. If you panic, suck one bit of water in your lungs, you're done. I have friends that were lost at sea.

MS: Well I guess it means that if you choose to be a fisherman you accept that risk, and you have to know how to fix/maintain your boat?

JJ: Yeah, you take the best care of your boat that you can. It's not about neglect, it's more about what you can afford…if you don't have the money to put into it, you have to go out and fish to make the money. You have to pick and choose what you do. Hopefully you keep it together long enough to make some money and fix it up right.

MS: The last area that I want to ask you about, we've talked about this a lot, I know you have a lot of opinions about management and regulations. Was there ever a time where you felt there was a good balance between management and fisheries?

JJ: Back when I first started [fishing commercially] and some years after that. Things pretty much got managed without really having to manage. Because marketing dictated how much fish we caught. Back in the heyday when sardines were really big, then disappeared. Recently some studies indicated from core samples that sardine populations go in cycles, so it wasn't really about overfishing, but their natural cycles.
A lot of scientists, when they study, they are learning from books, not from the ocean or fishermen. I would say 75% of the information I hear is wrong. If I were managing it, I would try to put limits on fisheries, but quotas. So you can go out and catch your 30 tons, and when it's caught, it's done. Or like they do with us with blackcod now, they give you 350 pounds a day or 'x' amount per week. If there's a 200 ton quota for blackcod, just fish until you catch it. Cuz what happens, the net has no eyes, if the net has 25 tons in it, you have to shovel 20 tons overboard. It would save fish, save fuel, and time. It's just really poorly managed in my opinion.

MS: I know that you don't have the most positive outlook, but if you could find a silver lining in anything…in 10-20 years, are we going to be able to eat fresh local seafood?

JJ: Well the fish will be there. Whether you can eat it or not, depends on if they'll let people catch it. But I tell you, the knowledge of harvesting these fish is dying off with all these old guys. As time goes along, you may think you can put anybody on the boat to go fishing – it takes years to learn. If you ask any fisherman around here, they've all been doing it for 30-40 years, and their families did it. You won't find hardly any young guys out here, and they're probably starving. It's just dying away with the old fishermen. The way it's going, I'd say in 30 years, it's all going to be gone. Then they'll start bringing in foreign vessels to harvest and there goes another fishery.
I've been told that over 70% of the fish in this country is brought in from foreign countries, and a lot of it is really not edible by our standards.
If you want to depend on other countries to supply your food, keep going with the way it is. All the stuff I hear in the news, all the imports from China, I would rather eat food processed in the US.
I would say in the last 15 years it's been regulated to death. Permits are making CDFG a lot of money, so they keep making more permits. Once they do that, they'll get a lot of income. But for a person trying to make a living fishing…you know the fish don't come every year, some years are good for some species. If you don't have options to fish for different stuff (or income from somewhere else), you're not going to make it.

MS: So it's important to have the diversity of fisheries available?

JJ: Absolutely. I've never seen a fisherman that fished one thing, survive. Sooner or later you'll hit some bad years. You need to know how to operate a lot of fisheries, so the newer guys who only do a couple (because of permit costs), they have it harder. It's even harder to get crew, because there isn't money there. When I was young, there were plenty of people around wanting to crew and learn fisheries. That's not how it is anymore.

MS: It's all such a change, that's why I think it's so important talk with people like you so we know what it used to look like.

JJ: I guess we're the last of the hunter/gatherers, making this country great, making a living off the land. Everything else has been regulated to the point where we're it. Everything is corralled up and raised, and when they start raising fish in the pen, it won't be natural.

MS: Thank you, Joey.

JJ: You're welcome.

[A copy of the transcript was provided to Joey in January 2008 for his review. I was not able to receive his comments, so this is my interpretation of the interview as recorded.]