

Kelley Retherford Oral History

Date of Interview: October 15, 2014

Location: Toledo, OR

Length of Interview: 44:05

Interviewer: SC – Sarah Calhoun

SC: My name is Sarah Calhoun and I'm with Kelley Retherford in Toledo, OR. This is an interview or an oral history for the Voices from the West Coast Project. Kelley would you mind stating your name for the record, your name and date.

KR: My name is Kelley Retherford and its October 15th, 2014.

SC: Great, thank you. So, if we could just start off by talking about how you got involved in the fishing business, (KR: Mhm) how did it all begin?

KR: Well it all began when I was young; actually I grew up in Waldport [OR]. Anyway, if fact, even as a kid, I don't even really remember going, when we'd come to Newport, crossing the bridge and even really paying attention to the boats. I had a boyfriend in Waldport, in high school, sweetheart. Anyway, I ended up marrying him and he went fishing and he ended up going fishing with his cousin and that's where it all began. So there was no history, no family ties, or um. His cousin was the one that went fishing and encouraged him to go, but there was no background in fisheries or the fishing industry or the boats or the understanding of any of it. That's how we got started and we just jumped in there and this is where we are, so 32 years later and we're still going strong. So, an interesting start.

SC: Can you talk about what it was like at the beginning, maybe dating a fisherman?

KR: Well, we don't really know what to expect, I mean what it's going to entail. Being young like that you don't have a clue of what it means when they're gone, how long they're going to be gone and it's like oh you're going to be gone? But you don't really realize those days go into weeks and you might only see them for their offloads or when they pop in for the night or whatever. So it was nothing, what you understand, like family or what a relationship would be, because it just doesn't seem normal with them gone all the time. So anyway, so it was very, very difficult when we first started to even understand what it meant to have fishing. We started young with our children so we had babies right away so we had a new family, we had babies and we had fishing. And we tried to put those all together and make sense of it and it was really hard to make sense of what it's supposed to look like. Or you're dragging babies out at 8 or 9 at night, drag them to Astoria to see your husband because they're in offloading and you live down in this area. And so it was very... it was exciting, but it was very, very hard. So you'd go sit and watch them on the boat and watch them work and then it was time for them to leave again and the kids would cry and you'd wave goodbye and you'd head home. So, those beginning years, it is very, very challenging.

SC: And when the kids were young, did you guys spend a lot of time on the boat or around the boat on the docks?

KR: We did. We were very lucky. The people that Mike worked for allowed us to be on the boats with Mike and so the kids were able to be there and be a part. And watch their dad and kind of grow up running up and down the stairs of the wheelhouse and down into the engine rooms and so it was a neat experience for us being able, to at least be a part of his world. And some families don't get that so it doesn't always work that way. Depends on the boat or the owners, we're just very lucky to have that be part of our experience, so yeah, really fun stuff for the little kids anyway.

SC: So you mentioned being a part of his world (KR: Mhm) do you feel that you have created your own world back at home?

KR: Not yet. [Laughs] your own world doesn't really start until I think later, because you're so involved around them. At least until the kids start school and start into a bunch of activities. I think when they're really little and you're just starting in the fishing world, your kind of, everything focuses around when

they're coming in, how long they're going to be in, and what's going on in their world and then you try to project yourself into their world and especially if there's kids involved. I think it's easier when there aren't kids involved when you start into a relationship with a fisherman, but when there's kids involved it's like you have to, you have to put yourself into their world or you're going to miss a lot and so are the kids. Fishing is, being a fisherman's wife, for some, there husbands go away and are gone and the kids have no involvements on the boat and watching their father's interact with the crew or as a crewman or what's the unloading process, or what's any of that. So some don't have that experience and some do and you never, I think going into the fishing industry thinking okay this is going to be great, we're going to have a lot of family time and be a part of their world because a lot of wives don't have that. But we were lucky and we had that and the boys had that and so did my daughters so anyway.

SC: What kind of roles did you have during that time?

KR: You have all the roles [laughs] and so do they. It's like when you're young you have that role of just being mom and wife and trying to keep things going at home and being there for them when you can and so I think the role. It's so much different, depends on where you are in your life, on which role you're playing. I know now, the roles have switched and now all my kids are fishing or in working within the fishing, my daughter's working with Pacific Shrimp and learning the processing part of it and so they're all involved in the industry so it just depends on where you're at, whether they're little or big and which role you play and how far you're into it and I just. I know when they were little it was challenging, in fact I feel sorry for a lot of young women that have little babies at home and are trying to manage and in fact I have two daughter-in-laws that have done amazing. They each have three kids and they've done amazing jobs with them, being fishermen's wives and I'm very proud of them. So yeah, the roles they switch and swap and you learn as you go.

SC: What do you enjoy most about being a fishing family?

KR: I think for us, it's being a family. I think that fishing has, the world of fishing has moved in and out of our lives, whether it has been mine or Mike's or our children, or our grandchildren. Like I said, I feel like we were the lucky ones because we've been able to make it a family-ran business and a family, just a family life the whole time. That was one thing as a wife and a mother, I decided early on that I knew that we needed, in order to make it work, we're going to have to really, for me, what the kids really pushed to stay involved with his world. Because even when they come home, they still have fishing on their mind: when they're going fishing again, where they're going to go fish, which way they're going, north or south, and they get with the other fishermen and they're trying to figure out the next season's and on and on and on. So you always have to put yourself in their world or try to stop their little world for a moment so that they can be part of the family. And it takes a lot to switch on and off. For both the man and the woman. [0:10:00] For the wife and the husband, so it's real challenging to know when you're in charge and when you're not in charge.

SC: So you mentioned that you're very fortunate that you guys made this a family-business, is that common here in the Oregon coast?

KR: I think it's pretty common, I mean it's very common. I do know that it's more challenging for those that are fishing up north because the boats aren't here. But for the ones that go north and then fish here works better because then they can involve their families and so um it's just for our family, we've just been really blessed with having been able to fish out of Newport. In the early years Mike didn't fish out of Newport and so it wasn't like we were able to just be a family here, we did a lot of traveling, sometimes a couple times a week just to see him. So it wasn't always that simple. You know, we're just a family, we get to watch the process of unloading or if they're at the gear sheds or whatever. And so I think it just depends on, like I said, where you're fishing. I have a best friend that is just amazing and her husband is an Alaska fisherman for all her life and her children's, and mine always fished down here so there was just such difference in how... I mean he comes home and he's home for a month and a half at a time. Mine would come home for a day or two. And so throughout life, but mine would be popping in and not missing all the events where he would miss a lot of the events and so there was just such differences in how it works for each individual family and whether you're far or close or whatever. But at least here, my kids have been

able to work at the gear sheds and ride around on the heisters; where the guys are moving stuff. So they start doing that when they're little and then they go down and help sew net or the web on the nets so the nets up. So they've experienced a lot of the fishing world, my children have as they've grown up, and they all love the ocean. So they've all ended up back on the ocean.

SC: Can you talk a little bit about what they're doing now?

KR: My oldest one is running a boat, the Winona-J, and the next one down is running the Excalibur, and the youngest son is on the back deck, he's been on the back deck of both of his older brothers' boats. And then I have a daughter and she actually does crab season with my second son Chris who runs Excalibur, so then crab she'll be on with her youngest brother or older brother, so anyway, they spend, I mean like I said, it's family-ran and they spend a lot of time at sea. It's a lot of work, it's hard work, in fact sometimes I think, as a mother, it's hard to see your children work that hard. Because it's not, fishing is not all, I mean there's money in it and there's just a lifestyle that comes with fishing and the big boats, there's just so much that goes with it. But there's a lot of sacrifice and a lot of hard work and sometimes the hard work seems endless. So there are a lot of years of really sacrificing and working really hard and so for me, as a mother, sometimes watching my kids grow up and now that they're older, I think oh! As much as it is a family business sometimes you think, would it be better for them to be in something else? And the answer is always, goes back to no, because it's part, it's just who we are and what we were created to do. So it has been a blessing. So it's a double-edged sword [laughs].

SC: Well we know that fishing is also a risky business, (KR: Mhm) are you... how do you feel when three of your kids are out on one fishing vessel?

KR: Well, I'm not. And this is just a..., I feel that um, I don't have a fear, I don't fear losing them, which has been a good thing. I've had fear, but thank god they're not that kind of fear. And I just have to believe that as a family, we pray together and we believe that God's in control and that we're just covered. And if something were to ever happen um, and we pray that it never does, that as a life, when you put yourself into this kind of lifestyle, you know there are no guarantees. So we just, I don't know, we just all stand together and believe that they're going to go out and come back in every time. Anyway, we've had some scary situations. We had, my youngest son has gotten, well one time he got his arm crushed between the doors, the shrimp doors and so the oldest son called, and I don't know who, when situations arise like that, I don't know who's more devastated, the one that's injured or that one that's... with being brothers, it's hard to know that you have injured crewmen, but that that crewman also is your brother. And so, then the long trip in and working through the motions of bringing your brother in and uh, dealing with the injuries. In fact, he just had another injury, he got caught and almost ripped his ear off just this last year. It was devastating to all of us because he got his head smashed and then... anyways you have real situations. And it's like any, I think any job that you carry, there's going to be danger in it. And so, like I said, we just pray that nothing happens and work through situations when they arise and then just be very thankful when they're not serious. Anyway, but it is very dangerous and like I said, having your kids out and having them work so hard and the conditions, a lot of people don't understand the conditions on the ocean and I think even fishermen's wives, or women married to a fisherman don't understand really what a man goes through on the ocean. And a lot of times as women, we think oh it's just their job. They go out, they catch fish and they come in. But the conditions out there on the ocean are always changing and even just to go fishing and the boats are always moving... I mean your feet don't, or your body doesn't stop moving till you get back to shore. You know, or back to the dock. And that's not always easy. I mean you're moving when you sleeping and you're moving when you're awake. And then the weather and the storms and... It's beautiful, but it's a serious place out there. So there's a lot to think about and a lot of responsibility whether you're on the deck or you're in the wheelhouse and it's a very high-maintenance, I mean they have to constantly be on the ball, unless they're in the bunk sleeping, but somebodies always on the ball. Somebody's always paying attention because of the dangers. So I think as a wife, I think every wife should go fishing at least once, so.

SC: And have you spent much time on the boat?

KR: I have been fishing; in fact, I got to go for Mike's birthday, on the 20th. We went up to Astoria and met him and he said, come out with me. And I'm thinking, oh it's been a while since I've been out and uh, because once again you're dealing with the movement, you've got the seasickness, you got the, just watching them bring the gear in and how, I mean it's amazing to watch the process at sea as they catch, whether it's shrimp or crab, or hake, or whatever they're doing, the process is amazing. And it's so fast, and everything is so, I mean the gear is so big and the wires and the ropes and it's just so [0:20:00] detailed and so it's a pretty amazing thing to watch and now in the industry, it's so... with all the bycatches and with quota shares and just all of the changes that has come to the industry, you have to be so careful with where you're towing and what you're catching and how you're catching... everything is so, I don't know, it's just, you have to be right on. Otherwise you can make a mistake and so there's a lot of pressure and these guys go through a lot of pressure and they go through a lot of, you know, they'll be doing something and they'll have an oil leak or they'll have something in the engine room that needs to be fixed. There's just always something out there and I just have a lot of respect for my husband and my boys and anyone that fishes. It's a very hard job and it's amazing what they do and so with all that being said, I guess there's so much that they deal with out there and they come home and they have to switch hats and be these wonderful fathers and loving husbands and meet the needs that haven't been met and so it's a challenging world, but it's very rewarding.

SC: I'm curious what the fishing community is like. In this kind of industry, I feel like the struggles and the challenges, the highs and the lows, maybe there's a support network of some sort.

KR: Well I think as a fisherman's, as a wife of a fisherman, you have to plug yourself into other wives of fishermen. Because if you don't, it's a lonely world. Because it's hard to keep up with friends or even individuals that have a normal married life where their husbands work a certain amount of hours and the wives work and everybody comes together at night and it's routine. And I think all walks of life have challenges, whether you work on the ocean or at a, for us here it's the mills, so there's a lot of, there's just a lot of differences. Because you'll see everybody else and their husbands off doing this and sometimes it's hard to put yourself into the middle of a family structure when your husband is gone. And so it's really important to plug yourself into relationships with other wives going through similar things that you are. And then getting involved with Fishermen's Wives, it's a great place to start; it's a great place to be, to meet those with the same kind of lifestyle. And there are a lot of women that work too that have husbands that work and so it just, every story is different and every scenario is different, but there's such a joy of being a fisherman's wife and I don't believe everybody can do it. Because it is hard, and it's only been the grace of God that we've all made it. Because on your own, I don't think you can figure out the best way to, and on our own we can't figure out how to make things work because there's so much changing and there's just so much going on all the time. It just seems like there's, where one's in charge and then the other one's in charge and the kids, they get confused, okay who's boss today? And then you've got, well since you're home are you going to do these chores or am I going to do them because I normally do them. You know, there's just a whole lot of back and forth and that's where having good support and a good understanding, and I think that's where other wives can bring in what they've learned that has worked for their relationships and it really takes a village to raise kids. Whether you're a fishing family or not and so I think it's the same with marriages in a fishing family and there's just a lot of things, there's always challenges to face. But it's exciting; it's an exciting world too.

SC: And so your kids, all of them ended up being a part of the fishing industry, do you think their kids will also be a part of the fishing industry?

KR: Well, we have two grandsons and one of them right now, if he could, he'd probably quit school and go fishing because he loves to be on the ocean. Anyway, and he is only 11 [years old] and that's what's nice about being a fishing family with the boats. Our kids are able to take their kids fishing and so... we have little survival suits for the kids so that you know it's safe on the ocean, or if there's anything that arises, but the kids get to start very young going to sea. And my granddaughter has gone to sea, um my youngest grandson, he just turned 8, he's gone to sea. He had a little harder time this last time out there with seasickness, but even my older boys struggled with a little bit of seasickness and so I mean the ocean is ever-changing and it's a challenge out there, but they love it. And my daughter loves being out there with her brothers and it just works, so yeah.

SC: So I'm curious if we could talk a little bit about the fishing business itself and how it's maybe changed over time? I think you said you have 30+ years in the fishing industry?

KR: We've had, well Mike started right out of school, I think he was 18 when he started and so I think he's had like 34, it's been 34 all together for him. But for us, it's gone from Mike working on the ocean for somebody to being able to buy into the industry and buy our own boats and then have children that have helped be a part of that. Because the boys started actually being crewmen during the summer when they were in high school they started working at a very young age and um, just because they loved it just as much as they loved being out with their dad. Kind of the same with the grandkids and so anyway, but the industry, for us, it's gone from being, learning about the industry to being a part of the industry. And now enjoying the lifestyle of the industry with the businesses and even like me, being able to do the office work, I get to do the book work and which isn't always exciting, but it makes it so that I feel like I get to be a part of his world, or we've made this world together and this is the part I get to play in it. So for me it's been a real joy to be able to be a part and then with the kids, but it has changed by, like I said, just being able to go from beginning and not knowing anything about fishing or coming from a fishing family, we didn't. So now we have a legacy to leave on to our kids and our grandkids. So hopefully they will continue. And with all of the changes, there's been so many changes, we've watched happen since the time they started shrimping, I mean not shrimping, but fishing, that the changes have been many. And whether it has been observers on the boats, or quota shares, or they've had trip limits and all of the, where they put in areas where they can't fish anymore, or pot limits, or I mean we've gone through just tons of changes. And so within the structure of the industry [0:30:00], not within the family, but within the structure of the industry itself, the fisheries. And so keeping up with that has been real challenging and. because you have to keep changing to stay up with the changes and so yeah.

SC: And have you seen any effects on your business from the economic changes or from these changes in the industry?

KR: Well I think with the changes there's always change, but it seems like things kind of balance themselves back out and change can be good and some can be hard, but you just learn how to work within the changes. And so for us I think we've learned, that was one thing that Mike has done really well, is he's just learned how to work within the change and I think that within the business you've got to learn to work within the changes that come whether they're regulations or rules or new gear requirements or whatever. You just have to be willing to change and move into those new directions that, whether it's the state or the government, or whoever that's implementing them. And so sometimes it's like no! Not more! [Laughs] Like when you get a new fee, like this last year we got a new fee for the quota share management, it's a management fee for all the work they have to do to manage it... Anyway it's like not another fee! So you constantly, you want to complain, or you want to think oh! But it's like anything, there's always change and you've got to be willing to accept them and grow with the industry whether it's... It's even like buying quota share, and all the quota shares that having those vessel accounts and the quota shares and the work in... You can't just be, it used to be that a fisherman would go hop on their boat and then they'd go out and catch and then they'd come home and unload and then come home. Well not it really takes kind of a management structure to work within the industry because of all the rules and regulations and the quota shares and the management part. It's changed so much that way, where your concern was how much you could get on the boat, now it's how much, with the trip limits and well I keep going back to quota share, but anyway, you're allotted so much in this fishery or this fish and so you're constantly making sure you're not going over your quotas and that you're not catching bycatch... or even crab season, it used to be that you could run tons of crab pots, I think maybe it was a thousand, anyway they'd pile crab pots on the boat, now they're down to 500 and 300. Anyway, you just learn to work things within the rules, but for financially, it hasn't made, I mean I don't know what it would be like if there weren't any of those rules and we'd still be able to fish openly, wide-open, so like I said, everything seems to kind of balance itself out. I think if you run, if you understand that you have to work within the system and be willing to continue to change then I think there's always a way to make it.

SC: It sounds like there's a lot of adaption involved (KR: There is) I'm curious if some of these changes have a direct effect on your personal role in the industry or in the business?

KR: My personal role, actually I think it's more for me and Mike, we kind of learn how to team work. Even with like the quota shares and the accounts. Because with the extra expenses and then you have the observers coming on, I mean things have just... It seems like the paperwork is a lot more than it used to be, you know there's a lot more paperwork that you have to have done and there are economic reports that you have to do now if you want your accounts, your vessel accounts and your quota share, you have to have, everything has to line up and so we work hard together to maintain and keep the business running smoothly with all of the extra rules and regulations and areas that we've had to adapt. The boys are really good with keeping the gear and all the stuff on the boat in place and so, yeah; it has changed a lot even in my world. And that's even like with fishermen's wives, it's so hard, now that I'm older, I should say, I have the four kids and then I have six grandkids and then the business has gotten more complicated and it used to be just paid bills and did payroll and now everything, it seems so much more complicated within the office structure part of it. But we, like I said, me and Mike seem to teamwork it and it works really well. So anyway.

SC: Well if you had a piece of advice to give to a woman thinking of marrying a fisherman (KR: Mhm) what would it be?

KR: Um, I think that I would probably have to say that, never to have really any real expectations of what you think marriage is going to be or what a role as a husband's going to be or even what your role is, and to go into it willing to just explore the world of fishing, their world and let them explore your world. Because there's so much that has to come together and work in order to make it really work well and there's so many fishing families that don't make it, because there's so much diversity in the fishing, you know, in that world. So I think it would be, not to have any plans that it's going to be this perfect world where daddy's always home and the kids are always happy and you're never alone, because without sacrifice there's no benefit and so I think for the fishing family there's so much sacrifice. Whether it's the simple things or whether it's big things and for a lot of years it's... when you're raising kids it's, that's big, that's a big sacrifice because dad's not home to experience their first game, sometimes even their birthdays. And so you need to go into it not expecting that perfect world and everything to be that happy ever after story or whatever, so I think that would probably be pretty close.

SC: That sounds like a good piece of advice (KR: yeah). Is there anything that you'd like to speak about or is there anything that comes to mind that we haven't talked about?

KR: Um, let me think, think for a minute. Well I think, this is just a thought, but as I was thinking about the men at sea and the sacrifices and just the dangers that they face and all that they do out there. I have as much respect for the women that take on the role. Because they truly have to be more than most women should have to be. And they're asked things, they're required and asked things to do that are really way beyond the requirements of a wife or even just a mother and so I have such high respect for the women [0:40:00]. And for the industry. Anyway, there's a pride that comes with being a fisherman's wife and such an honor to, for all the men that do what they do out there, and so if you can learn to work within their worlds and them within yours then the success rate is, you will have that happily ever ending story. Because they are out there, but they sure don't look like they taught us what those stories are supposed to look like, but um, anyway. And I think what's exciting is when a wife is proud of what her husband does and stands behind all the sacrifices, which children learn to also be proud of their fathers and be proud of the work they do and have a love for them that can be lost during those years of sacrifice. And so, anyway, I just think, I love my role and I love being married to a fisherman, and I love and am very proud of my sons and my daughter and now daughter-in-laws and grandbabies, anyways for us it has just been a wonderful journey and to God be the glory for that.

SC: I have one more question, it's short (KR: okay), if you could use one word, emotion, or idea to describe fishing what would it be?

KR: Mhm, hmmm. Okay so to describe the industry, the? [Laughs] There's so many different aspects. Um, when I think of fishing, I just stand in awe of the ocean, of the men at sea, and the women that wait

and I just have such a passion for what we do and who we are, but I'm just moved by the industry itself... that wasn't one word [laughs] sorry, anyway, so yeah.

SC: Well it's great to hear, a lot of, love, it's really beautiful (KR: thank you) is there anything else you'd like to add?

KR: I was trying to think if there was anything else, let me look at my notes really quick, see if there's anything that I wanted to say... that's really important. (Some chatter...) I feel like I've just jabbered up a storm. I think we're good, we're probably good.

SC: Well if you think of anything, you can always email or call me.

KR: Okay, I will. It will be interesting to see how my jabber comes back [laughs]. I appreciate the effort on behalf of the families.

SC: Well thank you.

[End of interview 0:44:05]