

Leesa Cobb Oral History

Date of Interview: June 23, 2014

Location: POORT Office in Port Orford, OR

Length of Interview: Part 1 – 13:52 Part 2 – 16:00

Interviewer: SC – Sarah Calhoun

Part 1

SC: Okay, so, this is an interview for the Voices of the Fisheries Project. I'm here with Leesa Cobb. Leesa, would you mind stating your name and date for the record?

LC: My name is Leesa Cobb and today is June 23, 2014

SC: Thank you. So, I kind of want to start back at the beginning and just hear a little bit about how you first got involved in the fishery.

LC: Well, hmm. You know, of course I married a fisherman, which you know I could have just shot myself in the foot and put myself out of my misery, but um. The industry itself is fascinating, it's hard, I can't imagine marrying into the industry and then not, not being interested in all the small finer details that really are reflected in your business. Much of which are outside of your control like management decisions and things like that. My husband is a second-generation commercial fisherman, Darrell Cobb, and his dad, Bill Cobb, was a salmon fisherman. And my husband started fishing when he was very young. So in 1986 we bought our first boat and my husband had been fishing before that but. And I became what is, you know, called a fishing family. And it's really been an interesting and wonderful experience, but from the very beginning I realized that the culture of fishing that had people sitting at coffee shops and visiting about what was going on with fisheries management and 9 times out of 10 getting it wrong, didn't work for me at all. There was no way I could get my news about issues that were going to affect my business from the coffee shop. So, I really wanted to get involved and find out what the politics are behind fishing and the issues that everything from the price of fuel to you know what does it cost for a galvanized tub for a longline to the hooks and everything. And so while my husband absolutely is the guy in the water and I never tried to be that, well actually, to be honest, I did try and go fishing with him and he was just kind of like Captain Bligh. Kind of yelling and stuff and so I pretty much like figured that the marriage wasn't going to last me being on the boat, but I was happy to get off. Then I got involved in the politics of fishing and then in 1994, 93 and 94, when our Pacific Fishery Management Council really made its first move into catch share management or what we called then individual quota management. It was really obvious that our boat and our community was going to be entirely left out of it, that we weren't at the table to participate in the really finer details of the design of the program and so that's when I got involved. I thought, it's one thing to leave our boat out, but to have our whole community be marginalized out of fishing black cod when we're one of the first ports on the West Coast to be a blackcod fishermen, that didn't sit right with me and that made me want to get more involved in the politics of fishing. I am interested in the whole spectrum of fishing issues, mostly supporting the boat at my end with my husband, everything from doing the checks for the crew and buying groceries and cooking for the crew to writing letters to the management council and attending meetings there as well.

SC: So it sounds like there might be many highs and lows that go along with the fishing industry, can you describe some of those?

LC: Oh! Don't even get me started. When my husband and I, well when I first started living with my husband, he said I'm a fisherman and we're going to be rich! It's just because salmon was so such a powerful fishery and everything was going so great. And we've been through several salmon disasters, we've been through the collapse of the groundfish fishery, it's been a lot of up and downs. Not just in the financial economic part of fishing, but definitely in the management of fishing, things have changed dramatically. I can honestly tell you that going through the disasters was not the end of the world by any means. The hard part about the transition in fishing that happens all the time is the management decisions that are made that marginalize your small boat fishing family out of fishing because these are management decisions that are made somewhere else that don't reflect what our needs are. So there's

been everything from transitioning from being a salmon boat. In our community, what that meant was we were a salmon port and our husbands painted their boats in March and left in April or May and were gone for months, and then came back. They followed the salmon and that's primarily what these boats were, were salmon boats. To the collapse of the salmon fishery where our husbands then stayed home and that was quite a transition because we kept thinking what is he doing here day after day and it turns out he lives there! And it was like he wasn't going anywhere at all! We've been through the social transition, the economic transition, the transition, you know, really of our business practices, which is more than economic, over the last 25-30 years. And I can honestly tell you this also: that fishing was fun. And part of that was because we were younger and we could role with the punches easier and not so many things mattered, but fishing isn't fun for us anymore. It's about regulations and it's about your vessel monitoring system (VMS) working so they can track you where you go and if it goes down, then they tell you to come in off the water and then of course once you're in off the water you get a call from them. It's about, you know, the complexities of fishing out of other ports and paying their taxes on their fish you go and land at Bandon and it's about balancing you know kind of a transient crew, who shows up or not. They're very independent people. And things, you know, in any business would not be fun. The fun part is definitely being out on the water, but fishing has changed from hunting, which is what it was when my husband and I got together, to just business. And it's the businessmen that are going to make it; it's not the best hunters. So it's, it's a big transition I think.

SC: Would you...

LC: Does that make sense?

SC: Yea, yea it really did. And do you think about, talking about these different transitions and changes that have happened over time, how it used to be more fun and now it's more about regulation, can you talk about maybe your roles behind the scene? Maybe, a day in the life of a fishermen's wife then and now?

LC: Mmhmm. Well, when we were a salmon boat, my husband also fished some crab and so on, but when we were in the salmon fishery and that was our primary fishery, there was, as a fisherman's wife there was supporting the business from being home and then being somewhere else. And so there was driving up to take, to get laundry, to take crew checks, pick up fish checks, you know, deliver groceries or home cooked meals or whatever you could do to support the boat. Versus now, when we stay home, clearly, we're... I still like to collect the checks and write the checks, that's because I'm a control freak mostly, but it's more just basics of supporting the business that's here in Port Orford. So, the crew takes care of themselves for the most part. I still do some cooking for the boat, I do the bookkeeping, but it's just minus the driving and transient part of it where people are out of town. And there's every reason for fishermen's wives to get more involved in politics when their husband's busy fishing. If you can have a voice, whether it's writing a letter or attending a council meeting, and I've certainly done more of that in the past ten years than I did in the first ten years my husband and I were together. But some of that comes with, you know you have to kind of have your chops; you have to be in fishing for a while to really understand the issues. And then as you understand them and they continually offend you, you have to really want to get involved in changing it. And I think it's always good to sit quietly in any new group, whether you're a new fisherman's wife, you know newly married or you're, you know, new to your church, or whatever it is, to sit quietly and listen for a while. And so I think my first role in fishing was more of that versus over time you really learn what is going on and then wanted to be more active in the politics of it as well as the support for the boat. So the things that I do for the boat, business, are the payroll, the support for the crew when their working on for example, crab gear for months at a time. I used to do a lot of cooking. I do less now, but then I just do less cooking as a rule as part of my whole life's change. I mean just you know, I hate the kitchen, I don't know why. I used to love to cook for the crew, one thing they were always so darn grateful. I don't think their girlfriends did much cooking [laughs]. I do the bookkeeping and um, you know, the tax prep. I make sure the permits are renewed. And when NOAA enforcement calls that there's something wrong with the VMS, I'm usually the one who gets the call and if my husband's busy and so I scurry around and check in with the crew to see what's going on. Just kind of basic things of a small business that I would imagine other women do if they're running a printing shop, or you know supporting their family-owned business as well. Or if they're running a gas station, or you know

there's the back up stuff that you do that you can hire out, which is costly or you can do it yourself. And when you do it yourself of course you have more control over the quality and also the product. But I've always worked too, you know. Fishermen's wives quite often have the job that has the steady income that sees you through some of the times that aren't, when fishing's slow. And we often are the ones who carry the health insurance and you know things like that and fill that role. I know with my mother-in-law she worked at the electric company and [0:10:00] had the health insurance and the steady job and for me I've had different jobs. This job I've had for 13 years at the Ocean Resources Team, but it plays that role as well of the stability and providing things that the business doesn't. For example, the health insurance.

SC: I know you can't speak for other fishermen's wives, but maybe you could talk a little bit about that, the fishermen's wives' community. Maybe, I don't know if the first ten years when you were more sitting back and kind of learning the management and what was going on the fishery if there were other women that were involved that you could learn from? Or is that common?

LC: Well it was kind of interesting. I'm not sure why it isn't more common here to have that social interaction, but it's not. I think it's different community-by-community. I travel all over the US on fishing issues and so see it vary community by community and it's definitely rooted in the culture in that place. But I certainly have my mother-in-law to look to, um for advice about fishing and she was not happy about fishing. She thought it had not been the easiest, best life because of the issues around crew, you know, the transient nature, the difficulty of finding crew and then needing draws and all the different kind of problems that come with fishing that aren't about being on the water and catching fish. So I didn't get a ton of advice, I did kind of figure it out as I went, but I have to say the things that need to be done are really completely intuitive. You know, the check comes in, you pay the crew, the crew wants a draw, you figure out how to try and get them to not have a draw every week. You know, there's just the basic things you do. But in different situations, in different communities, there's very tight-knit fishermen's wives' groups and I think that would be very, very much an asset for the fishing community to have that culture of the tight-knit, information sharing, nurturing, advice-giving, that type of thing. But I can't say that that's how it was here.

SC: Can you describe the local fishing community, Port Orford?

LC: Well I think it's changed a lot over the years. Um, it used to be, when my husband got into fishing, it was a group of young guys that have now all become, overnight it feels like, in their fifties and sixties. I don't even know how that crept up on us. Not as many new people going into fishing so kind of an aging fleet. People try to figure out the complexities of fishing versus just it was just go and fill up your boat and go. So I sense, or I see, a lot of dissatisfaction and the feeling of being marginalized, and feeling like fishing is out of your control by folks that don't get involved in it. So you kind of, that kind of plays across a spectrum of the fishing community. Overall, I think the fishing community in this town is the, it really is the core, it is the single industry that's here. It supports, in our small town of 1200, it supports about 100 families. And when the chips are down, when something goes wrong, if your boat breaks down and you're on the water, all of that, then it's a very tight-knit community, but outside of that I think the guys kind of like to go their own way for the most part.

SC: Do you find that to be representative of the Oregon Coast community?

End of Part 1: 0:13:52

Part 2 0:00:00

LC: Remind me where we are. Am I answering your questions okay?

SC: Yea, absolutely. Thank you so much. So I'm curious, you just described the community here in Port Orford, and I wonder maybe not if it's representative of the Oregon coast community, but if you could describe it in relation to the Oregon coast community, how you see it.

LC: Well, I think, in Port Orford's case, because we're all small boat fishermen, we're really a unique little spot in terms of the social attributes of our fishing port. In other ports they self select themselves out, right, so they segregate into trawl, fixed gear, salmon, and that's more their social regime also their running partners when they fish and so on. But here, we're all fixed gear so... someone once told me we were homogeneous. And quite frankly, I had to look that word up, but it turns out, it's okay. That we are all very similar in how we fish, which creates a culture that's tighter in that respect. For example, when we go out and break down, anybody here can come pick us up and it's expected that they would. Versus, I would imagine, it takes a trawl boat to tow in a trawl boat, you know that kind of thing. But in terms of just the social nature, I think our community is probably very much like the other fishing communities on the Oregon coast. The men work hard, the women generally have jobs too, your family keeps you busy, you grouse a little bit about fisheries management and policy and hope to have some influence on it and I don't think that there's a huge difference in the ports in Oregon. We have small ports and large ports, you know, and they're still all working on the water so it's the same kind of business.

SC: So you mentioned that the family keeps you busy; can you talk a little more about your fishing family? And maybe what you enjoy about that? What's that like?

LC: Well, my husband and I don't have kids so we're kept busy with our broader family, my parents, his parents, my niece lives with us with her two small kids. I love it that my little nieces that live with us say 'well we're from a fishing family'. Because they very much identify with it. They go down to the dock and look at the boat and know what season it is and they're 7 and 3 years old. So fishing kids are very integrated into what their folks do. I don't know if it's the same as with an accountant, but I imagine their kids know when it's tax time, probably that's because it's so stressful around the house. But it's the, you know, the fishing family business is where you have a family that's integrated into the operation of the business, not in being on the boat, all the family members, but being engaged. When we cook, Kayla goes and takes the sandwiches out to the shop and you know everybody plays a role in what needs to get done. It's a really nice way to bring up a family and also as a family to get really closely connected. Fishing takes a lot of different skill sets and attributes that can trickle throughout the whole family to contribute. So I think it can be a very positive experience and a great way to raise a family. I know with my in-laws, being a fisherman, his dad, my husband's father was always at the dock when my husband needed something and to support our business. And he was a great mechanic and had all the tools and I've had other fishermen say, gosh I really envy your husband because he has his dad to back him up and support him and that's what's nice about being multi-generational in any business. Whether it's a cranberry grower or a rancher, or a fisherman. To have that experiential knowledge that can be shared generation to generation, but also to have, just the literally somebody waiting there to help you when you get in kind of thing.

SC: Do you see some of these kids, your nieces or nephews or this younger generation becoming fishermen?

LC: Well to be honest, I don't really see much hope for that. Uh, not because they wouldn't be interested because there's a whole segment of people that are highly drawn to the outdoors and being on the water that I think that fishing, you know when the fishing policies in the United States are driven by policies that support consolidation it doesn't seem like there's going to be a future of fishing in how we fish, which is small boat. All of our boats are under 40 feet. And I wouldn't recommend it and the fishermen I know that are on my board that I work for don't recommend it for their kids. But to be honest with you, it's a great way to make a living in a little town where there aren't other industries to be able to stay here when you're multi-generational here and you have your folks and your grandparents and your sisters or brothers that live here and you want to stay. It's definitely a good living, it can be a fair living for you in terms of economics, but in the future I would say it would be very problematic to encourage your kids to stay in fishing.

SC: What are some of your hopes for the future of the fishing industry? You can talk about Port Orford specifically or the global fishing industry as a whole...

LC: Well, you know I used to be really super hopeful and think we could change things and I was always kind of like well it doesn't make a bit of sense. Surely if you just tell them, the management council or NOAA or the decision makers why that doesn't work then they'll understand. It's just that they're too far removed from people on the ground. But it turns out that really isn't how it is. That fisheries, just like any business in the US, is driven by policies that don't feel the need to reflect what the needs are on the ground for the working man so I am not very hopeful about the future of small boat fishing. And the movement to aquaculture and NOAA's enormous funding for aquaculture as a way to feed the nation, which I think is very admirable, but will impact the market for wild fish. Certainly the policies for individual quotas or catch shares or privatized fisheries will change this all up and make it something that is business and not easy for people to get into or even desirable for them to participate in. What I've seen worldwide is the movement towards efficiency, consolidation... that just becomes corporate interests owning fishing and so I believe that's where we're headed and I'm not a corporation so I don't think I would be one of them that's left standing. What we hope is we can transition out in our 60's and have something for our retirement and leave the industry to what it seems destined to be, which is some type of corporate model similar to New Zealand or other places in Europe. I would love it if Port Orford was unique enough and quirky enough because we're such a little unique spot in the world where we lift our boats into the water, where we're all under 40 feet, where we don't drag nets, that there'd be some value in Oregon wanting to retain that culture and story and history that might leave some policy space for these small boat fishing families so they don't get marginalized out with policies that favor big boats, but I don't really even see that happening. To be honest, I mean that's not the trend I see and I don't see the opportunity there either. So I would say, and you might just be catching me on a bad day, but I'd say there isn't a ton of hope for the future of fishing, but there's definitely hope for being able to eat wonderful seafood, it will just be produced more in a corporate model. And there are a lot of people that say there's nothing wrong with that. But you know, I remember when Governor Colinosky said, during the salmon disaster one time, trying to defend why he was giving some money from the state to the salmon disaster, that he supported the coastal communities having a diverse economic base. So, you know, yee haw about tourism. Port Orford isn't a tourist place whatsoever, but many other coastal communities are tourism-based. And there's certainly a strong science community in Newport, but that commercial fishing adds yet another dimension that makes the community more resilient when the price of gas is super high and tourism drops, you have some economic base like fishing that's picking up the slack. So it would be really nice if the state of Oregon, or even the federal government, looked at those issues around resilience for coastal communities and try and figure out how to keep all segments of fishing in the business of fishing so that they have that diverse economy.

SC: Being able to adapt to these changes...

LC: Absolutely, yea.

SC: So then what advice would you give to a young woman thinking of marrying a fishermen or becoming involved in the fishing industry? What would you tell her?

LC: I think I would say that it can be a really wonderful life. That, I would remind her that we've changed, as I've said, from hunting and the excitement of being hunters [0:10:00], on kind of the last frontier to be a hunter to business. And to encourage her to treat it like it's a business from the very beginning. I would say, give her advice to get your QuickBooks system setup, track your fuel expense, track your crew expense, figure out where you can make this work because the devils in the details anymore of how to have a successful fishing business. And that it won't be because your husband's a good fisherman, that isn't what matters so much anymore, you have to be a good fisherman and a good businessman as well. And encourage a young woman who's marrying into a fishing family to get involved in the politics of fishing and figure out what it is so that you can make business decisions that are based on facts and not what your husband hears at the coffee shop. I guess I'd probably encourage her to make sure she has her own career. It's always nice to have a steady job. And to try and find the things in fishing that you love and enjoy those and don't let the other ones get you down because there's plenty of minutia in management, policy, permits, and all that that isn't the fun part. But there's absolutely an incredible joy of owning your own business and working hard and producing food that people love to eat. That fish is such a sought after product, and so healthy, and it should really, you know, remember when things get tough

that that there's super good things about it... Being a fisherman's wife and being involved in fishing that are very positive and it can be a good, good life. And I'd also say, don't forget your retirement plan. Because it's hard to say what that'll be in the future or how people will transition from fishing to retirement. We're at the age now where we think about it a lot, but it's something you should definitely think about as soon as possible. I would tell her to cook a lot of fish because it's healthy for your family and you have easy access to it. And it's just about the best thing you can get to eat. Get rid of the pork and the beef, it's not good for you.

SC: Okay, so my last, quick question for you, is if you could use one word to describe the fishing industry, what would it be?

LC: I guess I think the word volatile. Because of the ups and the downs and that doesn't have any connotation of necessarily bad or good. But just ever-changing and that it requires such adaptability and that it's evolved. You know the salmon are here or they're not here, it's a bad crab season or it's a good crab season, uh, the price is down, the price is up, it's just oh my gosh, fuel just went, you know, there's a war in Iraq and fuel's sky high. All these things that are out of your hands, so I think it's uh... It's never boring, but that's two words.

SC: Is there anything we haven't talked about that you'd like to say?

LC: Well, I guess I do just want to emphasize that fishing is a great way to be in business and be your own boss and that, there's a certain type of man that that really appeals to. Certainly my husband is one of them. Um, and that it's been, fishing has been very good to us. But we're fishing on a public resource, the cost of fishing is very minimal to be able to fish on a public resource, it's the cost of the permit for your boat and yourself and you know, I mean it's very minimal. We're first generation permit owners so our crab permit was free, our salmon permit was free, and I think we've been very very fortunate to fish when we did. Um, when we started, my husband started in the 70's, but through the 80's and 90's were great years. It's an honest job, which is something, when you can do something that you love and make money at it, and not get bogged down in the challenges, but enjoy the being on the water part of it, it's a really good life.

SC: Thank you.

LC: Mmhmm, your welcome. I wonder, I'm gonna guess that my answers are probably similar to what you hear from other people.

STOP AT 14:55

**Brief chatter to follow interview