

Danny Keeler Oral History

Date of Interview: July 18, 2014

Location: Port Orford, OR

Length of Interview: 25:22

Interviewer: SC – Sarah Calhoun

SC: This is an interview for the Voices of the West Coast project. Today is July 18, 2014, I'm in Port Orford, OR with Danny Keeler. Danny, can you state your name for the record?

DK: Danny L. Keeler

SC: Alright, so Danny I like to start these interviews by going back to the beginning and hearing a little bit about how you got started in the fishing industry?

DK: Well I graduated in '68, I started fishing in '69. So, I did a little logging prior to that and then I've done a little logging up until the first 2 or 3 years to survive and I've been fishing ever since.

SC: What was your first job in fishing? And how have they...

DK: (interrupts) Well I worked as a deckhand for my uncle for just a little while in crab season and then I leased a boat, and started fishing.

SC: So how many years have you been in the industry and have your jobs changed over time?

DK: No, I started in '69 and went fishing ever since. I'm retired now, or semi-retired. I still go out and help my brother crab.

SC: So, which fisheries have you worked in?

DK: Pardon?

SC: Which fisheries have you worked in?

DK: Which fisheries? (SC: Mhm) Crab, salmon, nearshore, blackcod, tuna, halibut.

SC: What would you say were the best or worst one's for you?

DK: Well the most profitable was in crabbing and used to be salmon. Now it's blackcod, blackcod and crab are the two primary fisheries now.

SC: Can you talk a little bit about how the market changes over time?

DK: Well when I first started all you had to do was get either a boat license or a boating license or commercial fishing license and you can fish for any fishery and there were no quotas. Now, everything, you have to have a permit and there's quotas on everything.

SC: Well what are your thoughts on the current fisheries management...

DK: (interrupts) Well the government used to figure it was an unlimited fishery, now they realized that it's a, it's not a real stable and it's not an unlimited fishery, it has to be controlled and regulated. And I'm in favor of it because we wouldn't have a fishery if it wasn't controlled and taken care of. I want to be able to see it in the future. I want the fishery to continue, and the way it was to start with was everybody went out and raped and pillaged and took everything, and that's why where we're at today, that's where the problem is. Because it was too much, there was no control.

SC: (coughs) Excuse me, and do you have younger people, perhaps kids or nephews that have a future in fishing?

DK: All my sons, they're not interested in fishing, they fished with me as they were growing up in the summer and then they went on to college and made their own careers, one's a game warden, state police, and the other's a, works for IBM in Iowa. And my daughter still lives at home.

SC: What would you think about your daughter becoming a fisherman?

DK: She's not interested. She wants to work for fish and game biologist, she's going to college for that.

SC: So she's still about protecting the fish?

DK: Well she doesn't really, she's not really interested in doing the fishing, she just wants to do the research and work in the fishery, I mean in the fish and game.

SC: So I was wondering if you could talk about any changes you've seen over time in the ocean, in the coasts, or in the fishing industry?

DK: Any changes? You mean... well there's less product. And the salmon, I don't really know what the problem with the salmon, but the crab, for some reason there's more crab than there's ever been. Traditionally it was a 7-9-year cycle for crab and for the last 6 or 7 years, 8 years, it's been a major fishery. There's been millions and millions of pounds, it used to be from 7-9 million pounds, now it's 18-30 million, and I don't know if it's from no predators or what, I don't know what the deal is. You know, but maybe it's the water conditions, warmer water or something like that. I don't know because there never was in California. I mean warmer water didn't affect the crab fishery. So I don't really know what's going on there, I never, nobody really figured that out. Or nobody has done research really to find out what's going on.

SC: Have there been any changes in the fishing community in general?

DK: Not that much, there's more fishermen because there's less industry going on. Port Orford doesn't have any industry hardly anymore, except for tourism and commercial fishing. Very little logging. That used to be the primary industry is logging. Now it's very limited and it's just mainly commercial fishing, like I said, and tourism. So, it's vital to the community, the fishing is, but it has to be like you say, or like I said, it has to be controlled and taken care of. I understand that. But we always wanted, we started our association here, or at least this is a port because we want to subsist, we want to keep going, but we want more control, local control. The state takes and makes regulations and they don't do anything for the local, it's all strictly for the state. You know, it's all, quotas and everything, it's all figured out state-wide. So, we've been trying to bill get it in so we can talk, and to get some research done here and uh we've always figured we was unique for most of the coast because we have more reefs and more bottom fish local. But we're gaining slowly. I'm surprised, we've advanced as much as we have. There's been a lot of gaining on that part, I mean for our local say-so, we've been recognized by the governor and everybody.

SC: Can you talk a little bit about your role in the association?

DK: Well I'm not, I'm just more or less a board member. I listen to what, we have meetings and discuss everything that goes on and if it, you know, but I don't make the major decisions. I just agree or disagree, you know.

SC: What do you think is or has been one of the biggest successes of the association?

DK: Pardon?

SC: What would you consider a big success of the fishing association?

DK: Stewardship and the marine reserve. We've done all of that and uh, like I said, communications with fish and game and with the state. We've never even, they didn't even know about us until we started this organization. And now, even nation-wide, people know about Port Orford, it's because of it. So we've gained a lot in the last 10 years, 9-10 years we've had the association.

SC: So I'm curious what fishing means to you? And what brings you the most joy, but also the most grief?

DK: The most joy? The independence (laughs); this here's a great community. It's a small community, but everybody knows everybody practically and uh, and it's real quiet. We have a real low crime-rate; I love the area. Yeah, I figure this is God's country here. And the grief is the politics. All you hear about going on all over the world is really depressing, but life goes on you know. There's nothing we can do about it really.

SC: So what are your greatest hopes for fishing?

DK: What?

SC: Your greatest hopes for fishing?

DK: That it will be sustainable so that it will be never-ending. It's got to be, like I say, it's got to be controlled, but we'd like to build and get the research stuff done so we know for sure what's out there. Instead of just a pencil and paper and people doing a bunch of figuring and saying, well this is what we got, this is what you're going to get. We'd like to have the actual research done, that's what we started this whole thing about was trying to get, the whole port was for getting research and a sustainable fishery. A lot of the locals understand, but a lot of them don't. Because they don't know what's going on, so.

SC: So I'm curious if you have an amazing or bizarre situation or person or something that happened out at sea that you'd like to share?

DK: Well there's not a lot of real bizarre, it's mainly just fishery, but we've, I've always been a fair-weather fisherman is what they call it. If it gets really rough, I go home and so I don't take the chance that a lot of people do. But I've had bad things happen, I've had the boat fill with water a few times and was afraid I was going to sink and you know, just stupid things I just didn't catch quick enough. But most of the time it's just, we just go out and try and make our living. And it's not, you know, [0:10:00] like I said I don't try to fish the bad weather. When it gets rough, I just pull our gear and go home (laughs).

SC: Well I'm sure your family's grateful for that.

DK: Well they always say, there's old fishermen and there's dead fishermen (laughs). You know, you got to be careful and a lot of people aren't, but there aren't a lot of people losing their lives here. It's usually pretty, not really safe, it's a very dangerous fishery, but most of the people, they keep their gear in good repair and they come back home. Which is rougher than most ports do, and smaller boats.

SC: Can you talk about what the Port Orford port is like? Why it might be unique?

DK: The rest of the port? Well, we're the only port that lifts our boats out and puts them on the dock, and we're the furthest west on the coast as you know. And we're actually, we don't have a bay or a port to go into, I mean we have a port, but we're in the open ocean. We just come in and put our boats out and hope for the best in the storms. And that's unique because most of them tie up to a dock and the river comes up and down, they have piling and they just, boats rise and lowers. But we're not in the water, so.

SC: So I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about the fishing family?

DK: Well I started in '69, yeah my uncle started just a few years before I did. But before then, our dads, my dad and my uncle, they were loggers and my uncle owned a saw shop here locally and when he quit logging, but my dad he lived with me until the '90's, '94 or something like that. And he's passed away now,

but that's you know, anyway, we never had many real fishermen. We started back in the early '60's is when most of the, when they started to turn to the fishery. After logging more or less went by the wayside, the big companies here logged out the areas or they, you know, or the (*unknown word*) were put out of business. There used to be saw mill all over the country, they had little saw mills all over and they hauled it, instead of logged, they hauled the lumber out of the woods and then it went to log trucks logging it out. And the big mills, and the big mills put the (*unknown word*) out because of it, because they could buy cheaper, and truck processes the product cheaper, and then they turned it around the other way. Now, it's mostly (*unknown word*) that do the small logging for the big companies, little outfits. It went 180 degrees. Because the big companies can't afford to hire the logging. But with fishing, the worst part about it is, the government wants it to be a big business and the small guys are left kind of in the wayside more or less, that's what I'm worried about. Is that, a lot of guys figure that within 25-30 years there won't be any small boats left. That they'll be put out of business and there will just be a few big catcher/processors on the ocean out there taking all the product. It'd be cheaper for the government; they'd make more money.

SC: Is there hope for the smaller fishermen?

DK: Well, you can always think there's hope. I think there is. I think that pretty soon people are going to realize that people have to work, everybody can't sit back and draw welfare or social security or whatever and have the country keep running. People are going to have to start working.

SC: So I'm wondering what maybe your wife or other women's roles have been in your family in the fishing?

DK: My wife, she's been a house wife. I always made a decent living and she stayed home and raised the kids.

SC: Does she spend much time on the boat?

DK: (phone ringing) Pardon?

SC: Did she spend much time on the boat?

DK: She'd get seasick (laughs). (phone ringing) She did work for a while, but, like a 'Circle K' in town, you know, small jobs, but most of the time just raising the children.

SC: What advice would you give to a younger man or woman thinking of becoming a fisherman?

DK: Well it's a real nice way of life, but it's, you can make big money, but you could lose a lot too. You know, it's all a gamble. But, it's been a great way of life for me. I've done fine, both my boys went to college, my daughter's going to college now. We've managed to survive so (laughs).

SC: So, do you have any highs or lows in your career that come to mind?

DK: It just, actually every year it gets better. The price, it's been easier to make a living with less work because the price of the product has run up so high. It started out like bottom fish was a nickel a pound, now it's up several dollars a pound. It's a limited market, but you're making, you can catch a lot less product and make more money. It's the same way on all of it. Crab, blackcod, bottom fish, it's all, it's worth a lot more money. So you have to, it's actually less labor intensive to make the same amount of money and more money. Of course it cost more to live.

SC: So what do you think is the main driver of these economic changes?

DK: The main driver? I don't know.

SC: Just the fluctuation of the market?

DK: It's just the way life is, yeah.

SC: So do you have a favorite at sea or on dock superstition?

DK: Superstition? (SC: Mhm) No. I'm not really superstitious about anything (laughs).

SC: So if you had one word, like an emotion or an idea, to describe fishing, what would it be?

DK: It's a, like I said, a great way of life, a great life. I mean it's a, you're independent, you don't have anybody looking over your shoulder except for your spouse or whatever and I've enjoyed it. I love to fish. So.

SC: Well I don't have any other questions, is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish up? Any stories or last remarks?

DK: What?

SC: Any stories or last words?

DK: Oh, there's lots of stories, there's always stories. Like I said, that's just a, I don't really, I don't think that happened to different fishermen over the years and it was really comical, but.

SC: Do you have a favorite story you want to share?

DK: Well, MaryLinda, you just interviewed her, she, her dad and her brother and a deck hand were out crabbing and they were going along and their dad, he ran the boat, he sat in the cabin and he ran the boat. And he yelled back, and he said: Son, I think we're taking on water. And the son says, you think so? And he said, yea. He said, I think it's getting up on the flywheel, it's starting to throw, water's starting to throw all over the engine, in the cabin here. So the son lifted up the hatch cover and looked in there, and there was probably about 3 or 4 feet of water in the bottom of the boat. And he said, yeah there's a lot of water coming in. Jim says, or the dad says, well the pump must have quit. He said, yea it probably did. He says, are you going to fix it? He said, nope. Jack said, well I'm not getting down either, so they just sat back, leaned back, took the boat out of gear and the deckhand says, what's going on? He says, we're sinking. And he says, aren't you going to fix it? He says, nope, we're not going to fix it. And, the deckhand says why? And he says, cause I'm not getting down in that water, it's too deep. And he says, well I'll go down there. So he goes down there, fixes the pump, pumped it out and they went about their business. And everybody they talked to couldn't believe it. Both of them was going to sit there and let the boat sink (laughs) they weren't going to go down there in that, they would end up in the water anyway and they would have probably drowned, but neither one of them was going to fix that thing (laughs). The deckhand didn't know about it or anything, but all it was, was a loose wire. That was a pretty good story I thought, never forgot it. (SC: (laughs)) They're both gone now. Her dad and her brother both are gone, but that happened a long time ago (laughs).

SC: Well at least they've got their stories to last in their memory.

DK: Well he had lots of pumps in the boat and they, cause Jim, Jack's son, years ago was a 28-foot boat, and he took a chainsaw and cut into it behind the cabin and stretched it out 6 feet and put it back together and put an inch slab along the steel plate and welded little short ribs onto it and they bolted the ribs on they put that, brought it out to 34 feet or something like that and that boat was still, until they decided to get rid of it, it was still that way. I mean, it was really weird the way they bolted it together, had bolts sticking out about 3 or 4 inches off the keel, they were about every 6-8 inches where he bolted it [0:20:00], that steel plate onto the keel. But most people can't do something like that. They used to have a chain saw cut into it to, right behind the cabin (laughs).

SC: Is that pretty common here, for people to build their own boats?

DK: No. It's not, there were boat builders here, there were two different boat builders here, building boats for the port. Most of them built them, used plywood though. And there was another one that came for a while and built one or two out of plank, but in Port Orford, lifting them out of water every day, it's so much stress that a boat with a lot of, a plank boat, it starts leaking because it stretches everything. Every time, that's a lot, you have to think about all the pressure taking up on that boat and uh, so a plywood boat, or an aluminum boat, or a fiberglass boat, is great because they don't stretch, more evenly stretches, opens up. And the steel boat's too heavy because you can only lift so many pounds. You know it's a, I guess 35,000 pounds is all they'll lift with the hoist. So it used to be 42x13.5 and it was 25,000 pounds. Then they put the new hoist and the new dock in and they raised it, it was supposed to be 45,000 pounds, but they dropped it to 35,000 because they were worried about the stress on the hoist. And it's 44ftx14ft, I think is what it is now. But there's not room on the dock for any bigger boats anyway, there's not enough room. A big boat takes up twice the space you know, the average boat down there down at the dock is about 34-36 feet, so.

SC: And that's a small boat right?

DK: Right. Well there's lots of boats that are nearshore that are sport boats that they just converted to commercial, they're 18-20 feet. From 16 feet up to about 24 feet. That's a nearshore fishery.

SC: It's hard to picture or imagine having to lift the boat out of the water every time you come in or go out.

DK: Well the only, the port dropped and destroyed one of my boats and when it was brand new, and they put the new dock in, it was faulty machinery, the new hoist was faulty, but uh, the thing is, you don't want to spend a lot of time picking it out of the water, you want to pick it up as quick as possible and get it on the trailer because it's just, I've seen, I don't know 4 or 5 boats that have been dropped. My uncle's boat, his boat the straps pulled out, he didn't install them properly, they lasted for a long time, but it wasn't installed properly and one side pulled out and when they pulled out, the other side pulled out and the boat flipped over upside down and from the dock went all the way down and landed upside down in the water and it destroyed the boat. Luckily no one got hurt, there was one guy on the boat, it threw him off and he flew, landed in the water, and when he came up, he swam away from the boat. He saw it coming down and he swam away and luckily he got away from it before it landed on him. It would have killed him otherwise. But, uh, my boat, they dropped it, the hoist gave way, they said it guaranteed it couldn't happen, but it did and it dropped from the dock all the way, just before it hit the water the hoist operator in a panic pulled back on the lever and stopped it from [?] and so the boat kept on going after the, because you don't drop 30,000 pounds and then stop it all the sudden, it doesn't stop, something has to give. And they jerked the straps and the ribs and everything right off my boat.

SC: Did your boat survive?

DK: My boat, it didn't leak, I got it in the water and I took it, it broke the engine loose. It pulled the engine, the mouth off the front of the engine and, but anyway I managed to take it to Yaquina Bay and that was the last time it ever went in the water. Because it was over \$30,000 dollars' worth of damage to it. And the insurance companies all said, everybody said they weren't liable for it.

SC: So you say you're semi-retired, what are you doing these days?

DK: Well I just, I work on crab pots and build crab pots and then when Lyle needs me I go out and help him fish. But most of the time he does the fishing. I help him crab, run the boat crabbing and then blackcod sometimes. I keep busy (laughs).

SC: It's good to keep busy.

DK: Yeah, well you can't just sit around. Not all the time.

SC: Alright, well that's all I have for you Danny.

DK: Okay.

SC: Thank you so much for your stories.

DK: (laughs) Well you can talk all day about stories, I mean, you know.

[End 0:25:22]