

Jeff Miles Oral History

Date of Interview: July 17, 2014

Location: Port Orford, OR

Length of Interview: 30:30

Interviewer: SC – Sarah Calhoun

SC: Okay, this is an interview for the Voices of the West Coast Project. I'm with Jeff Miles in Port Orford [OR], it's July 17, 2014. Jeff, would you mind stating your name for the record?

JM: Uh, Jeffrey N. Miles.

SC: Great, thank you. So I'm interested in going back to the beginning and hearing a little bit about how you got started in this fishing business.

JM: I got started... you know I grew up hunting and fishing sport-wise. That's something I've always done, my dad; he loved to hunt and fish. Man, he drug us down to the rivers, take us hunting. And then during the mill closures, during the timber crash, he ended up buying a boat; something he liked to do. And then once he started commercial fishing, I kind of hung around down there and I kind of got hooked on it. And just went from there I guess.

SC: So what was your first job in fishing and how have they or haven't they changed over the years?

JM: Basically, my first job, that I actually got paid for? (laughs) Yeah, well you know, going out with my dad: here, scrub these buoys; here do this while you're out there! I just wanted to go for a boat ride. Basically, I was gutting salmon that was my job. Uh, you know, that's still about the same old thing. The problem is now, back then, there was a line of people trying to get on boats. Every morning you would show up down there and there would be five people standing there going: is your deckhand there? I'll go. He missed a day, oh he's missed two days, I'll take his spot. And so it was hard to get on them and when you did, it was just really just basic ground-level stuff. So that's what I did. I started gutting salmon. You know, scrubbing up the boat, and then eventually I worked up to where I would run gear and gut salmon, and scrubbing, blah blah blah. Then, once I got out of high school, I started crabbing. Stuff like that. Worked at it full-time then. Because I started when I was a seventh-grader I think, actually working summers.

SC: So how many years have you been in the industry?

JM: It seems like forever now... about 40, that's my guess, give or take. I'm not exactly sure any more, my body is paying the price for, it's hard physically, hard physical work.

SC: So what fisheries have you worked in?

JM: Well let's see, salmon, Dungeness crab, sablefish, tuna, halibut. I do these live near-shore fish, rockfish, I do them. Pretty much any, almost all the hook and line stuff. I've never been on a trawler of any variety. I've had my opportunities, I just never did. I don't know why.

SC: So what were the best fisheries for you? What were the worst ones?

JM: The ones I liked the best? (SC: Sure) I liked crabbing. Partially because when you're done, you're just done and you go in. I kind of got burned out on salmon fishing years ago. It just drove me crazy that you could never go in, because they may start biting. So it would just drag on and on and on. So now I do some salmon fishing, but it isn't quite like I used to be. And in between, you know I like rockfishing. Heck, I love to get paid to take a fishing pole out and catch rockfish. You know, it's like the top of the food chain for that sort of thing. (laughs) You know, not like long-lining. But, I noticed it's more the stuff when you're done, you're done. Now that I've gotten older, I prefer that sort of thing, than just hanging out all day because they may bite.

SC: So what was the most amazing or bizarre situation, animal, or thing that you've seen out at sea?

JM: I was crewing on a boat, out of Port Orford here, and we were salmon fishing, it was on a 26-foot boat. And we were just tacking up the hill and I said hey look! Look at all those killer whales over there. So we're looking out and I go maybe we can turn and go by them a little closer. He goes okay. He makes this big turn and goes right through the middle of them. Now I'm not sure what possessed him to do that, but in the middle of this whole mess there was this giant sea lion they were after. And I remember the big male, came right up and he looked at us. I mean his eye was, looked as big as a saucer, it was really bizarre. He was five feet from the boat and he eyeballed us, trying to figure out you know... because basically we were intruding on his, on their food thing. And he slapped, he slapped the tail on the water real hard and I went, oh this isn't good. And we kept going and now these things are going, darting under the boat. And then we see the sea lion finally, and then the sea lion sees us and makes a beeline for the boat, jumps half way onto the boat, by this time I had crawled up on top of the house just to get a better view because you know, I thought this is going to be cool to watch. I always wished I had a video camera for it. So we walks back there, the skipper does, he gets the sea lion bomb, throws it where the sea lion was at, which was completely useless because he wasn't anywhere near there. He comes up the side of the boat, almost gets on, and the guy, skipper runs over with the ice shovel, whacks him on the head, knocks him off finally. And then he tried to get on the boat two or three more times, and he, every time he'd just whack him on the head and I realized, if he had jumped onto the boat, the killer whales would have jumped up and grabbed him, you know, and it would have just destroyed us. It's not a very big boat and when the sea lion and the killer whale were as big as we were, so that was quite a thing.

SC: Yeah, that's quite an exciting story.

JM: Yeah, I wished we could have videoed it, it would have been, it was really interesting at the time.

SC: Yeah, that's something that I could never imagine seeing or being around. Especially giant marine creatures.

JM: Well, it amazed me how unafraid they were, you know, how jumping on a boat with people; because that was back in the day where, back in the salmon days where sea lions were, uh, nobody's friend. So I found it amazing that he would choose to jump up on that boat rather than stay in the water with you know, the other ones.

SC: So what kind of changes have you seen in the ocean or the coast, fishing, over time?

JM: Fishing-wise? (SC: Yeah) There's been a lot of changes. You know, when I first got there, it was fun. You just put your head down and you went fishing. Season opened and you just go fishing. And that worked out pretty good, and then we got into that groundfish disaster thing. And that changed the face of fishing completely. Fishing stocks and fishing. Because I saw where, the stocks declined, declined big time. I saw it go down and down and down, and you know, once you start long-lining and stuff like that, you get a pretty good sense of what's there. You know, you don't catch everything in the ocean. You know you only get whatever's going to bite. So you get a pretty good sense of what's there. And I saw it just decline like crazy. Then we went through the groundfish disaster thing and it has been coming up slowly since then. The stocks are definitely increasing; you know I see more and more of them. But the process has gotten so crazy. I mean, just because the season opens doesn't mean you can go fishing. It doesn't mean you know, it used to be I could go fishing anywhere I wanted to. Now, you only have these little postage-stamp areas to work in. Which is causing spot shortages now. Because when you put, you know, it always used to work because 100% of the fishermen fished in 100% of the ocean. Everybody spread out. But when you put them all in one little place, you're going to wipe out little spots. Just because they can't handle that much pressure. You know you can't cut all the trees on one acre thing, you know, it works okay when there's one taken here and one taken there, you know they're going to last a long time. But if you go in there, if everybody goes in there after the same trees, they're all gone. [0:10:00] It takes a long time for them to be replaced. So, I see a lot of that. And then law suits started happening and now management is so bogged down that, they're so afraid of law suits, management's so bogged down it just doesn't go anywhere. And so the whole thing has just gotten very frustrating, it's very, very frustrating

anymore. Some fisheries are starting to overcapitalize now, again. At some point they're going to crash I'm pretty sure. So I don't know, we'll see how it all goes.

SC: Any fisheries in particular?

JM: I'm afraid crabbing's going to. If people are really, they're building giant boats and they just keep making them bigger and bigger and bigger. And I'm afraid that crabbing's going to be the next one that's going to crash for me.

SC: And what are your thoughts on the current fisheries management system?

JM: (Sigh) Uh, that's a good question. Right now, they... the system is broken. They're so afraid of lawsuits, they've been sued so many times, and they don't manage fish anymore. All they do is build cases so when they get sued, they can go in front of a judge and maybe get it done a little quicker. They don't really manage anymore, they build cases for lawsuits and why they have to do something. And that's the problem I have with fisheries management now. Nothing gets done, nothing changes, they're afraid to see what's actually there. Like in canaries and yellow-eyes, we'll say is a good example. They don't actually sample in places where they actually live. So they just assume they aren't there, which makes the other groups real happy that no ones harvesting them, because unless they can cross the water on them, they don't think they exist so. It's turned into quite a, process.

SC: What do you see in your role, or in general the fisherman's role in fisheries management? Is there one?

JM: Most fishermen, basically when I grew up through here, you know in my years, you had fishermen, and you had managers and the environmental groups. None of the groups communicated with each other, everybody was suspicious of everybody. And so basically, not much ever got done because of the lack of trust amongst all the groups, that's gotten better now. But that's the biggest problem, as a fisherman, you just don't believe that you can complain to somebody all you want and nothing ever changes, that that's the biggest, that's what fishermen see. They're used to doing stuff, getting results, getting production. In the world of management, it takes years to get anything done and fishermen just don't live in that world so that's where; and then they all get frustrated and they say well what's the use, what's the point?

SC: So what brings you the most joy and the most grief in the industry?

JM: (sigh) geez. I don't know. The joy, you know I like the lifestyle, I do enjoy going out when the weather's nice and catching some fish. It's a really nice lifestyle, being my own boss, setting my own hours, blah-blah-blah. But by the same thing, you become a slave to it also. Because there's so many hours of work when you're not fishing, there's actually more hours on the beach than there is fishing anymore. Getting gear ready for the next season and whatever. And for me, personally, since I am on the groundfish advisory subpanel for the Pacific Fisheries Management Council, anymore I do get some happiness out of helping. You know, helping people in the fisheries, you know, achieving something. Hey we got a winner lingcod season for the first time in 12 years, yay I helped do that. It makes me feel good, you know I could help people. But by the same token, dealing with these same people brings me so much grief, I wonder why I do it (laughs) so I don't know on this one.

SC: Sounds like a bit of a conundrum.

JF: It is.

SC: Well can you elaborate, talk a little bit about your role with the Pacific Fisheries Management Council?

JM: Well I'm an industry rep on the groundfish advisory subpanel, my technical thing is 'open access north of Cape Mendocino'. I've been on it about three years now, going on four, something like that. And

what I discovered is, I actually represent all the fishermen in this area. Salmon guys, longliners, it doesn't matter. The only ones I don't actually have much say in representation is in the trawl guys. You know, they have, you know, they have so many paid lobbyists there are people paid to be there that they're very well taken care of there. Guys like, like in our group, there's four or five of us, maybe half-dozen if you want to count the charter boat guys that aren't paid to be there, doing it out of their own, you know, just trying to be involved so they can have some say in their own future. So that's kind of what I do, is I just kind of watch out and make sure that there isn't food grabs, you know, trying to take care of the industry, you know that I represent.

SC: So do you represent the Port Orford fishing community?

JM: Well I guess that's like the center of my representation, technically, I represent everybody north of Mendocino to the Washington border. So I have been in contact with some of the guys as far north as Pacific City, I've talked to some guys down near Fort Bragg and Crescent City a little bit. I mean, I've done a few of these things, but this is more the center of my universe I guess because it's where I am.

SC: Can you describe the center of your universe, the Port Orford fishing community?

JM: A very dysfunctional family. That's how I describe them, you know, it's small. You know in our realm of the world this is really a small fishing fleet. And since we all fish about the same for the same things, almost everybody fishes crab during crab season, almost everybody fishes, you know this for this you know. It becomes more of a dysfunctional family thing I guess. That's the best way I describe it here. You know, you have, it's just like any dysfunctional family, you'll have some that get along pretty good and some that are just out there (laughs).

SC: And how would you describe Port Orford in comparison to other fishing communities that you've seen?

JM: Well, you know, basically they're the same as all the other communities that I've seen. They're just, in other communities, bigger ports, they're more of the same sorts of people. You have more of the radicals, you have more of the level-minded guys. I mean you just expand, it's the same basic thing, although in a small thing like this, you can get a little more done if you're trying to change things a little bit because it's easier to reach a small group versus a big group. But they're basically the same, there's just more of them. Whatever 'them' is, there's just more of them.

SC: (laughs) That makes sense. Um, so what role has your family played in the fishing business?

JM: For me, not too much actually. None of the kids wanted to continue on as fishermen. So they kind of go, yeah dad, you go do that, you know, I used to be I could get them on the boat once a year, now I can't hardly even do that anymore. Of course they didn't want to be seasick all day, which I get that one. [0:20:00] Who wants to be seasick? But I mean, they're supportive of what I do, they just don't want to go out and do it.

SC: Is there any reason why you think?

JM: You know, at least for me and with the boys, if they weren't getting seasick, I think they may have stayed with it more. But you know times are quite a bit different now, than when I grew up. You know, we didn't have computers or that sort of thing. Now, times are different. So I'm thinking, you know the people are different now, they have more opportunities, different opportunities. Maybe when I was that age, if I had all the opportunities that kids now have, I may not have ever done this. So, that's what I'm, that's my theory.

SC: That's an interesting way to look at it, definitely. And what about your wife? Can you describe any roles that she played in the fishery?

JM: Not too much actually. I don't know if she just didn't get it or what. I mean, she kind of helped me a little bit with the books, but basically that was about as far as it went for me. There was some other groups that their families were all very involved in, I always wished I could have been that way, but for me it didn't work out that way.

SC: Okay, so if you could give any advice to a young person, man or woman, thinking of becoming a fisherman, what would you say?

JM: If you wanted to be a fisherman, to be a boat owner now, there's things... back then it was easy. Boats were cheap, no permits, it was easy just to jump in, buy a junker and just go fishing. Now it's all limited entry, so now you have to have some ability to have money. Or, you have to work for somebody for a long time, establish you know a character to where other people know, yeah he's not going to rip me off, and they'll work with you sort of thing. That's really important. And the work ethic, you've got to have the work ethic. You can't just go out, fish a day here and there, and expect a, you know to make it easy. Even though you see old-timers doing that now, before they got to that point, you know they fished 7 days a week, 200 hours a week, all year round to get to that point. So just to think that you can jump into that, doesn't work that way. But, it's a good opportunity, it's a good lifestyle. You just have to keep your ducks in a row and don't stray off. It's easy to do.

SC: And what are your greatest hopes for fishing?

JM: That they continue like they are. Anymore at the council level, that's what I tell people. That I want to at least continue to fish like we are for now, I don't want it to be any less. I don't know if it would be anymore, but I don't want it to be any less so that's what I hope for. So some kids, if they want to start, they have something to fish for also.

SC: If you had to use one word, it could be an emotion, an idea, anything, to describe fishing, what would it be?

JM: Now, one word, the first thing that popped into my mind is 'hard'. (Pause) It's just, I don't know, maybe I've been it for so long that it's gotten harder for me. I don't know, and I'm just tired. But it's not really hard, but that's how I kind of view things now. It's just not; I guess I got in in the good 'ol days when you just put your head down and went fishing. That was before permits and restrictions and all this sort of thing so maybe I just got spoiled, but that would be my opinion. It's just gotten hard.

SC: And what are your thoughts on the regulations and restrictions, do you think they're good for the fishery or do you think... what do you think?

JM: I know most, I know most regulations are well-meaning, some of them have missed the mark, some of them have been very good. The worst part about regulations that I don't like is the fact that there's no way of changing them. They just seem incapable of changing anything. IF they mess up something or see; the world we live in is a complete world of change, it's moving, it's flexible, it's dynamic, it does stuff. Management: very stringent, very narrow-lined. They seem, you know, they don't seem capable of change or flexibility or anything else. They can't react to things quickly, they're just not capable of it. And it's just the system, it's not so much the people involved, but it's just the system that's been set up.

SC: Can you think of any solutions to the system? Anything that comes to mind?

JM: You know there's a basic problem with lawsuits in general, because they impact us at all levels of life, medically and everything. If you can figure out how to curb lawsuits, I think the systems would become more flexible and would flow easier. They're so afraid of being sued that... and I'm not saying that lawsuits are all bad, some of them are very good and I'm glad they're there, but I think they're too easy to abuse. And I think that, that alone, if they could do that, that would make the life a lot easier.

SC: Well, that sounds like a, I feel like that's something that can be done for many different industries, or just the system in general.

JM: Yeah, it's all driven now by, you know, fear of lawsuits, stupid lawsuits and whatever.

SC: So now, here you are, and you have nearly 40 years of fishing. What do you see for your future? Another 40 years of fishing?

JM: Just in general? Yeah, I do. I do think it will be here, I really believe that. Maybe better, maybe a little bit worse, but I think they've all hit the bottom of the barrel and they've learned some, they've learned. I don't think we'll see the big crashes anymore like we did in this groundfish disaster thing. I think they've learned some big lessons here now. So I think it will be, instead of the boom and bust type of thing, where we're going, look at all these fish, let's raise the limits! Now, that's part of the frustration, but then again that's what will protect the fishery.

SC: Well Jeff, is there anything else you'd like to add? Before we finish up today, is there anything I haven't hit on that you'd like to talk about?

JM: Um, I don't know. I guess just in general, things aren't as bad out there as they seem, but there's environmental stuff going on that's going to throw wrenches into the whole system. And sometimes I worry that people are always the first ones blamed for it, when it's not really. I don't know, I see a lot of, with all the volcanic activity, I think acid levels are starting to raise in the oceans, it's changing fish patterns and... because it's a funny deal, if you don't catch the fish they don't think they're there. If you catch a fish and you think you're catching too many and you're wiping them out. Nobody knows what this medium, perfect level is. And that's hard to deal with sometimes. But overall, I think the fishery's going in the right direction. [0:30:00] As slow and frustrating as it is, what they're doing now will keep it around.

SC: Good, that's optimistic.

JM: Got to be, if you're a fisherman. You gotta believe the next time you're out you're going to get 'em! (laughs) So yeah, I guess that's about it.

SC: Okay, well that's all I have. Thank you Jeff.

JM: Oh, you're welcome.

[End 0:30:30]