Oral History
JudyJo Matson and Carla Harris
Naknek, Alaska
June 19, 2017: 2:00 PM
Interviewers: Kim Sparks (PSMFC, NOAA Fisheries AFSC) and Kitty Sopow (BBNA Project Intern).

Text in brackets [] signifies interviewer/s interpretations, and/or clarification of the narrative of the interviewee.
Text in parentheses () represent nonverbal sounds and activity during interview.

Kim Sparks: Alright this is Kim Sparks with Judy Matson at Carla's house on June 19th. And Judy is awesome and she's agreed to talk to us.

JudyJo Matson: I grew up here my whole life. I'm a part of the Naknek Native Village Council. I sit on our Council. I work here all winter long. I fish in the summers. Fishing used to sustain people all year long, but now you have to have another job to be able to support your families.

Kim Sparks: Well, how did you learn how to fish?

JudyJo Matson: Um, I grew up into fishing. My grandparents fished in Graveyard, which is on the Kvichak, its Graveyard Point. And I've been going up there every summer since I was little. My mom would send me up there with them. I learned to fish in my grandpa's boat. By the time I was fourteen, I was able to drive my own little skiff. I remember one summer we were fishing, we had this guy from Armenia fishing with us and he—did not like taking orders or listening to women. And I was a young woman, and he wouldn't listen to me (sighs) We had round hauled some fish into our boat, and we went and anchored up. And we had to pick through these nets, and I was trying to help him—and easier way to pick them out. And he didn't want to listen to me, and I'm like, Fine. Go ahead and take forever, I'll go pick this one myself and you go ahead and take forever on that one. But he eventually caught on and—so I think that was like the only time I've ever had anybody ever like not listen to me or make me feel funny because I was a girl in fishing. I've never once had anybody—make fun of or tell me I couldn't do something. Or treat me different. Or try to do something for me while we were fishing. I've had fishing partners that were young, strapping guys in their twenties, I'm well into my thirties, and when we're pulling the fish into the boat, and they couldn't do it and I'd make them move out of the way, and I mean, we'd all pull at once, but I'd—put my foot on the skiff, and you know, you have to pull your fish in and then you pick them and then you pull some more in. And its disheartening, some of these young guys now who grew up playing video games and inside, they don't have the muscles like did back then. Of some of the guys that, and they don't have the strength to pull all these fish in, and then here I am, this girl like, Move outta the way! And, but everybody else, there's so many girls up there who fish that it's just common.

Kim Sparks: So like, sounds like you learned from your grandparents, is that a common thing?

JudyJo Matson: Yeah a lot of the people who fish in the Kvichak where I am, who've been there for a long time, I have friends that are my age, couple years older/couple years younger, they grew up into it. Their grandparents started and it went down to their parents, then to

them. Kind of like how—how it has happened with me. My parents had bought my grandparents out, and I'm buying my mom out. And my dad, he'll eventually wanna sell out in about five years, my daughter will buy his. And so me and my daughter will be fishing up there in five years by ourselves. And my daughter, she's eleven, and she loves it. She doesn't mind crazy weather. She loves to pick fish. She's really tough. And so—It'll be pretty exciting just to see all that process.

Kim Sparks: Are you excited for her to—get into her own fishing operation?

JudyJo Matson: Yeah, it'll be pretty neat. It will be nice that she'll be—she'll be so young. And doing that herself. And, I took a couple years off when I was in my—when I was nineteen and twenty, I think maybe—18,19 and 20, I took three years off and I worked at the dock. And I was going to college, and I was making more money at the dock than I would be fishing, so that's why I didn't fish for a couple years. And I wish I wouldn't have—took those few years off, just because. And so I want her to just keep, keep it up. And keep on the tradition. And I think she could handle that on her own.

Kim Sparks: Very cool

JudyJo Matson: So I commercial fish for salmon in Bristol Bay. On the Kvichak River. We fish at the mouth of the River. It's the most Northern River in Bristol Bay region. We set net fish, so our nets our anchored to the beach at both ends, and we take—we drive our 24 foot skiff and we pick up our line and put it over our skiff and we pull ourselves under our net and we pick our fish and put them into brailers. And once we're done, we take our—shove our net off and then we go deliver our fish to a tender. A big, big boat and they deliver those fish to the canneries, where they're processed. And its a lot of fun. Its a lot of hard work. Its more hard work than it is drifting. Drifting is where you have a bigger 32 foot boat with a cabin on it, and you pull your net out and you drift with the tides and they have hydraulics that pull their nets in. And they pick em out and its faster, more efficient. You catch more fish, and it's a whole lot easier than it is set netting. And I think some mean men back in the day, said that women could stay on the beach and do all the hard work and we're going to go sit and drink our coffee and watch our nets fish and—we'll put them in with our cool little hydraulics that we invented and—(sighs) leave us to go through the mud and sweat and horribleness and—bastards.

Kim Sparks: That's what we've been hearing is set netting is tough work.

JudyJo Matson: Um—hum

Kim Sparks: If you're a woman out there, you're a tough ass woman.

JudyJo Matson: Yep, yep. The men work like dogs and the women work harder than the men (laughs) Yeah, its hard work.

Kim Sparks: Can you talk to us about, what its like to walk through the mud?

JudyJo Matson: Um, we've been really lucky the last few years, where my sites our—on the Kvichak it used to be called the Cut Bank where my sites were, but the bank—there's no Cut Bank anymore, its all just a big mud flat now. And the mud was maybe ankle deep and it was pretty hard packed. And it made it really nice, so if net's kinda going dry, you could hop out of your skiff, pick your fish in the water and you know, a little bit—like if some of

them are in the mud, you'd take them out. Throw them in your boat and you go. But now this year, when we had set out our running lines—its totally changed. And its changed so much that now we're—walking in mud, you know, mid—calf. Almost, some parts, up to knee deep in mud. You're feet are getting sucked in and it makes it really difficult. And so, we'll just see how this season goes. I've never fished in mud like that.

Kim Sparks: Have there been other environmental changes that you've noticed?

JudyJo Matson: Um, the environmental changes are so dramatic from year to year. There's so much erosion of our banks. Of the creek, the formation of the creek. And—I guess the rest of the bank along—along the river that so much of it is gone. There's a little, I don't know—town or fish camp of Graveyard and houses have eroded away onto the beach and they're washed away. There used to be a whole actual graveyard, that's where Graveyard got its name—that there was a cemetery on the point of cannery workers or fishermen who couldn't be shipped out and they had to be buried there. And all the cemetery is all washed away pretty much now, and there's nothing really left. There used to be a long airstrip, a runway and cross strip and that's almost all the way gone. You can't even land a plane on the airstrip, you have to land your plane on the beach now, on the front beach. And there used to be a lot more buildings by the creek and from all the erosion and stuff it's just—its horrible. When you'd pull up into the creek, you'd have to go up two bends or two and a half bends to get into the creek where the dock is, where you park your skiffs and anchor them out while you're not fishing—and now, with the erosion and all the change, you just drive straight out so there's not a whole lot of protection like when the tides in and the wind is coming in, you know, you're just kind at the will of the wind, you're skiffs are anchoring. Was it last year or two years ago, I had one of my anchor lines snap on my skiff on a high tide on a wind and my skiff was blown back and it ended up on a bank in the grass. And it took my whole crew and another guy was helping us, we tied a couple ropes to another skiff—into my bow—and we had to yank it off. People were pushing my skiff from behind, while the other skiff was pulling it and we were able to get it. Get it off the bank and that was pretty crazy, cause if your skiff's stuck up there, and your nets are still out, you could get in a lot of trouble, or you lose out on money. You had to get that skiff off as fast as you can, and when it's really rough out and the tides in like that, it's so dangerous sometimes.

Kim Sparks: Wow. So what do you think that's caused by?

JudyJo Matson: Global warming.

Kim Sparks: If you had to guess (laughs)

JudyJo Matson: The global warming is affecting us big time. Our winters here are warmer. We have less snow. The water in our lakes are a lot lower. Our river is lower every spring. It makes me worry, everybody's all excited for warm winters, and saving on their heating oil in the winter. Saving on fuel bills. But it makes traveling between villages a lot harder, if it's not frozen all the way. And not enough snow, you can't take snow machines to other villages. If our river doesn't freeze, you can't drive back and forth to South Naknek. And what worries me is when it doesn't freeze right all the way, and the water's low, and we're not getting a whole lot of snow and melt and run off, like I'm worried about all the little smolt in the lakes and all the little creeks and stuff and how that's going to affect us

in like five or ten years down the road when these little smolt are trying to survive and go out to the ocean and come back, I don't know. Got a few more years to tell, I guess.

Kim Sparks: Okay. Going back to something you said earlier, you said its getting harder just fish. You have to have another job. When did that change?

JudyJo Matson: Um, probably when I was young. Like maybe in the 90s they boycotted, in the 90s when they wanted to give them, you know hardly pay them, you know, for fishing. And the prices has just been horrible, I mean, we're lucky if we get a dollar a pound. This year they're kind of predicting we're maybe a dollar and a quarter or a dollar and a half this year, which will be awesome. But your—like where we fish, there's only two different canneries that go up there. And so you're at mercy, at will of whatever they're giving you. You don't have a choice. If you fish here in Naknek on their River, there's more than a dozen canneries and small, small family canneries you could sell your fish to. So you have a lot of choice. And they pay a lot better if you're down here, but up there you're kind of stuck. You only get this one or this one. And you have to do what they say and so that's what makes it hard. The thing is, like (sighs) a lot of the people who fish there, they fish there year after year after year after year after year, and I just think that's what we're used to. And that's what we love, and that's why we go back.

Kim Sparks: That's awesome. Can you talk more about like, why you love fishing? What makes you do it?

JudyJo Matson: Umm, the excitement. The history. The hard work. Like this time of year it's so much fun getting ready. Going up there—setting up your stuff. And the excitement of going out, teaching your new guy how to fish the first opener. And you're just worried about catching the most fish. I've just been doing, going to Graveyard since I was—I don't even know how old I was the first time I was—the first summer I spent up there, I have to have been seven or eight? The first full summer. And when I was growing up, there was quite a big group of us kids that played and hung out—and they all go back there still. And—it's exciting to go back and see all your friends and I mean, now we all have kids and our kids are growing up into it. And my daughter loves it, and it's just fun to see when their kids like it and we all come back and—it's I guess it's just what you're used to doing. And you're in this routine and it's really hard to give it up. When I worked at PenAir, I couldn't fish for a couple years. They wouldn't give us summers off, because we were so busy. And that was—like some of the most hardest, depressing summers for me because I'd see all my friends coming in on the airplanes when I was working there, and then they're all leaving and they're all excited. And I was stuck working at PenAir sixteen hours a day, sometimes six or seven days a week. And they were out there fishing and having fun and it was sad. But I'm glad I quit. One year I said, I'm sick of it. Everybody was showing up. I said, That's it. I'm done. I put in my two weeks and I went up and it was just like I never left. It was fun.

Kim Sparks: Sweet. Is that—I know you guys are lucky to have permits in the family—is that a common thing to buy out your parents and grandparents and…

JudyJo Matson: I believe so. A lot of the locals who do fish—they like to keep it in the family and pass it on and—I like to think in our family—fishing is like a part of our tradition. Apart of our heritage. That's what we grew up doing, and a lot of families around here are kinda the same way. And over the years, a lot of people have even sold out. Sold out to like

outsiders. So, I mean, a lot of our fisheries is—people coming in from the lower 48 to fish here, make their big bucks and get out. Come in, get out, leave, make money. You know, and it just—it's sad I think when people sell out, and either don't sell locally or pass it on to their kids or to their family or nieces or nephews or whoever the hell—to keep it going. I think it's kind of sad.

Kim Sparks: How does that affect the local community? Aside from having all these outsiders come in.

JudyJo Matson: Like?

Kim Sparks: Like is it just a different vibe or like people move away or what happens when permits move?

JudyJo Matson: Why they sell out?

Kim Sparks: Or like someone sells out, and that happens over and over again. Do people just leave if they can't fish or what happens?

JudyJo Matson: They get permanent jobs. Or they need money, if they don't have a job, they'll sell it so they could support their family throughout the next year or two—and I think it's just sad when they have to do that.

Kim Sparks: Do you want to talk about who in your family started fishing? Like who was the first person you can remember who fished?

JudyJo Matson: Um, my grandma. I don't know if her mom really fished or not, my great grandma. My mom's over there off the camera shaking her head yes. So I don't know if she should sit by me. We already tried to tell her, but she won't. But my grandma started fishing—on the Kvichak and I don't know if it was in 1960s or early 1970s that she started fishing up there by herself. My mom's holding up her fingers like this (holding seven fingers up) so that's when she started. (laughter)

Kim Sparks: Seven. Alright, got it

JudyJo Matson: I don't know if it was when my mom was seven, 1907? Just kidding. 1970s. And she started fishing up there, the superintendent—gave her this nice house she could stay in with her kids, and it's the house we still stay in today. And the house is over a hundred years old. It was actually our house, was at another cannery that was closing down, and they put this house—which was that cannery's superintendent's house, so it was a really nice house, put on a barge. They floated it to Graveyard, and they had bulldozers drag it up. They—they cleared out this long strip which, after then was the airstrip, they drug it up onto this little hill where our house sits today, and it's still there. And it's just still—still really nice. We just gotta take care of it. It's getting old, but its home.

Kim Sparks: And so who's at Peterson Point? What is that house? (Shown to interviewers previously)

JudyJo Matson: My great grandma winter watched at Peterson Point and she worked in their washateria, and—off behind the cannery was a flat barge that they built a cabin on and she would stay in there and we'd go visit her, so when she was busy working—at the washateria, she would stay there all summer in this cute, little tiny cabin, and it was just so neat. You walk up on this little plank and—it was on a barge, but it was like in a marsh, so it wasn't

in water, but it wasn't on real dry land, and so it was just pretty cool going over there when I was little. And its still there, but they, the cannery boarded it all up.

Kim Sparks: What's a washateria?

JudyJo Matson: The washateria at the cannery is where the fishermen and cannery workers, they bring their clothes in bags and she washes them, puts them back in the bags and they come back and pick up their clean clothes.

Kim Sparks: Okay, okay sweet

JudyJo Matson: Yeah

Kim Sparks: And what was it like being a little kid at Graveyard?

JudyJo Matson: It was a lot of fun. There (pause) was lots of mischief to get into. They'd tell us we're not allowed to swim in the creek, cause the creek is steep and muddy and there's rusty pipes and whatever and—old cannery equipment that's, you know, over time and erosion is in the mud. We were young. We didn't listen. Thank God none of us got hurt or sliced open by any of that. But we'd walk in it with no shoes on. We would run and slide down the creek on our bellies while all of our parents and grandparents were out fishing. And then before everybody came back, we would run over to our friend's house and they had a hose. And we'd squirt each other off and hurry up and try and get as clean as we could before everybody came back so we wouldn't get in trouble. And then out on the front beach where it's a little rocky there would be like these little—mini tide pools. And they'd have little tiny shrimp and little tiny Irish Lord fish. I don't know what else but, we would go and we'd go play in there and we'd catch how many shrimp we could fit into a little bucket. Me and my cousin, we always had all the cool stuff. We were spoiled. So we had all the cool squirt guns and we'd bring extra squirt guns and let our friends use them and we'd have squirt gun fights and we had fireworks and—we'd had peddle bikes and roller blades up there. And then eventually when we got older, we had a four wheeler and a three wheeler and we'd go ride around and go down to the beach. Look for bears, get chased by a bear—we got chased by a bear one time. We'd go have so much fun, I probably couldn't say too many of the things because of my mom sitting over there, and I don't want to get in trouble. Just kidding. (laughs) She probably did worse stuff.

(laughter)

Kim Sparks: When was the first time you started doing fishing related chores or anything like that?

JudyJo Matson: When I started going up there all summer, I was seven or eight and I would go out on nice days. So nice days when the fishing wasn't too crazy—we'd get to go out on the skiff. And then we'd go to the tender. I'd get to climb onto to the tender or the scow with my grandpa and they'd give us little candies or whatever and you get to see—go in there and see the big—inside the big boat. And it was cool when you were little. And my daughter, I let her come up on there with me now. They have ice cream nowadays on the scows, so she gets excited when she goes to go get ice cream or soda. And I don't let her be afraid, I make her climb up by herself, because eventually this is what she's going to be doing. And that's the same way, how my grandpa raised me, was not to be scared and climb right on up and scoot on over and climb up the latter and—so yeah, I think—when I first started going out full time—I believe I was thirteen. And it was around the clock

and I remember it was really hard. And I was always tired. I think I cried to my grandma a couple times. And she would just get mad at me and say, You have all winter to sleep.

Kim Sparks: Buck up buttercup?

JudyJo Matson: Yep. And so—and ever since then, it's just been our—been all summer.

Kim Sparks: Okay, so that was when you started to crew?

JudyJo Matson: Well, I was fishing with my grandpa when I first started. And I fished with them until I was in my—when I was in my twenties I took a couple years off, then I went back in my twenties. And I fished for my grandma. So I grew up fishing in my grandpa's skiff and then when I came back, I fished in my grandma's skiff as her permit holder, so she didn't have to go out. So I was her permit holder, so it was her crew. She hired them, but they fished with me. So when we were out there and my grandma wasn't there, then I got to be the boss, but it was—it was my family who was fishing with us. It was my cousin from up—up the river a ways. And we knew each other, so it wasn't like I was bossing him or he was bossing me. We worked great together. And he had fished with me all up until last summer he quit right before fishing season. And it was really hard for me. We'd fished together since we were—you know—I think we even fished while I was, together while I was in my teens maybe. But definitely my early twenties up until I—up until last summer we'd fished together for over ten years. And when he called me and told me that—I was so heartbroken and so sad. I was at work. I started crying, and my coworker asked me what was wrong and I was like, My fishing partner quit, and we've been fishing together forever, and we don't even have to talk to each other because we already know how—how we work together. I said, This is horrible. I'd rather go through a divorce than to lose a fishing partner! And I think she almost started crying and she felt bad, but it worked out. And we had a crew, and we made it through last year, and it was fun and now this year it's all new again.

Kim Sparks: How hard is it to find crew?

JudyJo Matson: It's really hard to find a good crew and to keep them. Because once they get the taste of fishing, and they get to know what set netting is, and the different sites and like, Hey, I wonder if it's better if I fish with those guys down there next year? And it's like, so you train this—this fishermen and now they want to go try that. And especially once they go try drifting from set netting, they never come back to set netting because it's so easy, its more money. And—and so that's how I lost my fishing partner last year, cause he wanted to try drifting. And so he loved it last year. He's drifting with a different guy this year and (sighs) so it's really hard. Every time I see him, it's like, Are you coming back? And he's like, Are you ever going to ask me anything different? Nope! (laughs)

Kim Sparks: Have you ever been tempted to try drifting?

JudyJo Matson: No. I think I'd get too seasick. And I think if I tried it, and I liked it, then I'd be pissed off going back up there [to Graveyard]. So I better not. Won't go there.

Kim Sparks: Don't do it.

JudyJo Matson: Nope. So, I've never tried it. My husband drifts. He'd asked me to go with him just for fun while he was fishing out here on the Naknek River, and—I never really wanted to.

One of my buddies who had fished with me his first year here—he also drifts out here, he's one of my best friends—and he's offered me many times, just like on a day off, to go fish with him out there and—I don't know. Just, it's never worked out. Maybe one day I might go try it, buttttt—I have no interest to like go and seek it out and wanna try it. My husband, he did quit drifting early one year, it was right—it was the year we were getting married. He had quit fishing a week early to come help me and my cousin—because we—I had my grandpa fire one of our crewmembers because he wouldn't wake up. So, we fished by ourselves for about a week until my husband came. And when he showed up—he said, This is bullshit! This is so hard!! I can't believe you guys are doing it like this. I'm like, Fuck you. We've been doing it like this for years, like it was just one big argument the whole time it was there, and I'm like, Ohh, should we even get married? I don't know if we should do this. But, it all worked out. And it was horrible weather when he was there that week. It was windy. It was rainy. Then if it wasn't windy and rainy, it was super buggy. You couldn't even breathe without having mosquitos in your mouth and your eyes. It was just like bug bite city. And it was like the most horrible week to be there. And so, he hates Graveyard to this day, and he doesn't ever want to go back. (laughs) He'll fly me up there, and fly me all around but he does not have no desire to ever go back up there. And it makes me kind of sad because I like it so much there.

Kim Sparks: So, do you think—is set net more like, women do it or is it just a family thing?

JudyJo Matson: I'm not sure. I think when it first started, I think they might have started it for the women to have something to do while the men were out fishing—I think they kind of created it for women and kids. And now—it think its—its run by a lot of men. The women are definitely a minority, but the women who are fishing I don't think they're treated or looked at any differently than a man fishing.

Kim Sparks: Okay

JudyJo Matson: And especially—the women who have grown into it—I don't think that yeah, there's any difference from them fishing than the guy next door.

Kitty Sopow: So you don't really subsist do you?

JudyJo Matson: No, I don't. I think I might help my mom wash off five fish a year so I could say that I help her do her subsistence fish. And I might help move one rack for her, so I could say I also helped her smoke her fish. And I might do a couple of ziplock bags and help her stuff some fish in the bags, so I could say I put up all that frozen fish by myself.

Carla Harris: That's true.

JudyJo Matson: And then I share with all my friends and I tell all my friends that I did all this really cool stuff. And it was such hard work. And I did all that and I had six full time job that I raised all my ten kids. But no, I don't subsist. That's my mom's thing. She loves to put out her subsistence net. And bring them back. She smokes fish. She—jars fish. She puts up frozen fish and she does it all.

Kitty Sopow: What's your smokehouse like?

JudyJo Matson: The coolest in Naknek.

Kitty Sopow: Well, how big is it?

Carla Harris: It is ten by ten.

Kitty Sopow: Who built it?

Carla Harris: My husband did. He built me one. I actually put up fish with my mom and my sisters. My whole life I could remember splitting fish when I was seven. And—I never did it by myself, I always helped. And when you help, that's how you learn and so I knew it all, but my mom spoiled me and she always put it up and would give it to me. And the only thing I would do is like—do the labor stuff like chop the wood. Get the wood, you know, stack the wood. Go dump the guts. Fill up the water barrels. That kind of stuff. And she did all the filleting and the salting, and I did all the hard stuff. But that's how you learn. And so when my mom was getting too old and too sick to put up fish, I was 48 years old. And this is embarrassing, I was 48 when I started putting up my own fish. So I asked my mom how to do it, and when I was ah—like 46 I told her, No. You're not too old, you're just lazy. You quit being selfish, because I need fish this year. (laughter) And she said, Carla I'm tired. And I said, No you're not. And you quit being lazy because I don't know how to do it, so you do it one more year. And she said ok. She really, really, that really—I really said that, and she really did.

JudyJo Matson: For two years in a row

Carla Harris: The next year I said, baloney. (laughter) You do it one more time, and I won't tell you to do it anymore. And she goes, Carla I'm really tired. I don't think I could do it this year. I said, You're just being lazy. And if you don't do it, you're going to be bored and wish you did it, so you will thank me at the end when it's all over. And she said, Okay. And I did not feel guilty. And she did it. And, so I got fish one more year. And so the next year when I was 48, actually I was like 47 and she said no I really can't do it, and I said, 'Well, I'm too young. I can't do it by myself. And she said no, I really can't do it this year, and I said you're so lazy.

So I came over here, and I told my husband put me up a smokehouse. And he did and seriously four by four. I was like holy shit. Fat people can't turn around in thing. And so I did that for practice for—four years. So finally I—bitched like a motherfucker and said (laughter), You need to make me a big smokehouse. And he said, Ok I will. And so I went off somewhere, I think went to get wood for my smokehouse cause he was going to be done in a few days—and I went out there and he was doing it a six by seven. (laughter) (pause) I learned some colorful language that day. And I said that is not ten by ten. He goes, Well you don't need a ten by ten. And I said, Yes I do. I said, Don't do anything for me for the rest of my life. I don't want your help. Because when you ask me to do something, you say, Bring me some lunch. I just don't bring you juice.

(laughter)

Carla Harris: I bring you a sandwich. A snack, and a pastry and water! And juice

JudyJo Matson: Not a sandwich with four bites taken out of it.

(laughter)

Carla Harris: And I walked away. Holy shit, I didn't even turn around and the motherfucker was making ten by ten. I got my point across. And that's a true story. And so now its ten by ten and I love it. And he made me an awning how I wanted it. You don't…

JudyJo Matson: It has cement flooring

Carla Harris: You just have this vision—that—how you want it, and it's really hard for people to do what you want. You know, you have it in your mind, but they don't and it takes a long time to get there, but finally, you know, he realized after it was all done and built, yeah she does need room to turn around. Holy shit dick tracy. (laughs)

JudyJo Matson: Those fish gonna fucking smoke themselves?

Carla Harris: Fuck! They're going to stick together, and they'll all be sour.

Kitty Sopow: Okay, so tell us about the wood you use in your smokehouse.

Carla Harris: Well, I use alder. And dried alder and leaves from the alder. I use all alder. Lot of other people—there are a few people I know that use cottonwood and I—its okay, but I don't. I won't buy it. And a lot of people use birch.

JudyJo Matson: Off limits

Carla Harris: And I seriously don't like that. And some people use half birch and half alder, I still don't like that.

JudyJo Matson: Still gross.

Carla Harris: And only use alder.

JudyJo Matson: Some people use drift wood

Carla Harris: And some people use drift wood—a half and a half. Half drift wood and half alder or birch wood, whatever they prefer. Its all what you prefer, what you're doing when you do it. And my mom always told us girls, which my two sisters, other two sisters—just use alder. Nothing else. Just alder. And so that's what I've always used. And I learned, my mom, well she did try to tell me that—to use the leaves. And I kinda remember her telling me to use leaves a little bit to get the smoke going, cause that's what smoking—that's what it is. Smoked fish. It isn't *hot* fish, its smoke fish. And if you don't use leaves, its just a hot thing. And you don't want hot. You want that smoke. To get it to be—and a few people now are even putting their smoke barrels outside their smokehouse. And just letting the smoke go in through a pipe to do that, and I don't like that just for the simple reason, sometimes you need that heat to help, you know, almost like help cook your fish.

JudyJo Matson: Not cook it, but dry it out

Carla Harris: Dry it out more, not cook it, dry it out—to make it what it is. And you know, it all comes out pretty much the same thing you know? But everybody's taste different. And you almost could know who made it.

Kim Sparks: Really?

Carla Harris: Yeah

Kim Sparks: That's crazy

Carla Harris: Yeah

JudyJo Matson: And after you try my mom's you don't want to try nobody else's

Carla Harris: And she's lying! You know, you know what? I'm 54. So I've only been doing this eight years. And my sister's been doing it her whole, almost her life.

JudyJo Matson: And theirs is way grosser.

Carla Harris: And my sister who lives in Anchorage now, doesn't have all of this—to do that out there. And I don't know if you could get away with doing that in a city anyway, having a smokehouse. They'd complain. And you wouldn't be able to do it.

JudyJo Matson: You could have little smokers on your porch.

Carla Harris: Yeah, little smokers. Those little white man smokers. And then she tells me—a few years ago that—she cried when she tried my smokefish because it brought back memories when my grandma made smokefish, and she loved my grandma's smokefish, and she said my smokefish is better than my other two sisters who have been doing it their whole lives. And I said—I just don't believe that, because I think my sisters put up good smokefish. But my son and my daughter swear mine, and my sister, other sisters—swears mine is better, and I just can't see that. And I've only been canning for like four years.

JudyJo Matson: Her whole life

Kim Sparks: Really?

Carla Harris: Yes! I was so scared of canning. I don't like canning.

JudyJo Matson: She's been canning since she was six.

Carla Harris: I heard stories about those blowing up, and blah blah blah and if you don't cook it right and long enough, its going to go sour. You could salmonella and you could kill people. Holy shucks, that scares the shit out of me! And so I've only been canning for about four years. And holy shnikies, its awesome! I love it. And my sister said, one of her nieces on her husband's side, uses brown sugar in it, and I said, Oh really? Why? She said, Well to make it sweet, nice and yummy. And I said, Oh my gosh. Cause I've tried jalapenos and garlic, which I love. And when you put them in there fresh and whole, and I didn't like it. They're just like 'bluuh,' that's just yuck. So I made up my own.

Kitty Sopow: How many pints did you can?

Carla Harris: Twenty seven cases.

Kim Sparks: Woah!

Carla Harris: And I didn't have any by Christmas time. This last year it was slow year, I only put up seventeen cases. And I have one case left.

Kitty Sopow: Its sounds like you're very proud of your salmon.

Carla Harris: Totally. I truly am. And I don't know…

JudyJo Matson: She doesn't get her hair in it or boogers it or spit on it

Carla Harris: Nothing

JudyJo Matson: She washes her hands.

Carla Harris: I don't even fart when I'm splitting fish. That's how much I'm so into this, but I just—you know, and I commercial fish. Cause my husband forced me to. And, so I bought my mom's permit. And I did it—literally—kicking and screaming and crying for 5 years. He made me fish and two years ago it was of my toughest times because I had to commercial fish and subsistence. That's thirteen miles away in the River. That means I gotta come thirteen miles down here to light up my smokehouse. And I have to go back for fishing. And I did that sometimes twice a day. And—so I just had to have a nervous breakdown. And then my daughter finally said she'd buy me out, so she's buying me out. And my last year was my first summer I was in heaven. I was nice. I was actually nice I think. I enjoyed every lickity spliz of it. I just would—I was so happy. I never complained. I did it all by myself. And I just love every bit of it, and I look forward to it. I'm going to start next week I think, and I love it! I'm happy. I never have to go commercial fishing ever again (laughs).

Kitty Sopow: Tell us about your net.

Carla Harris: Oh, my cute little net! You're allowed ten fathoms. And the older I get, the less (pause) net I have. So a couple years ago I was doing it by myself, and I told my husband, Please cut my net in half. He goes, No. That's ten fathoms. I go, Well I only want 5 fathom. He goes, What the hell, why? You'll catch more fish! I said, Exactly! (laughs) I don't want more fish. I want to only catch forty at a time, I don't want to catch one hundred at a time! That's just too much work for me. You know, in my good old days, I could do one hundred fish in four hours—from picking them out of the net to having them in my smokehouse.

JudyJo Matson: The good old days, that was four years ago

(laughter)

Carla Harris: The good old days. And now—I get scared when I get forty! (laughs) Cause that will take me four hours! It takes me the same, its like wow! Where did I slow down?

JudyJo Matson: You wash em up too much now.

Carla Harris: Probably. I scrub them so much, scales came off. And now, I figured out last year — whether you go like this or you do this (scrubbing motion) for five minutes on each side, it all tastes the same. Weird.

Kim Sparks: Weird.

Carla Harris: So guess what? (noise) done. Lets just carry on. Yeah, tastes the same. Holy shnikies I tell you, it made me so happy when I realized you don't have to do all that. You don't have to be anal—you just seriously just get the mud off, and I have a knife for sliming. A knife for filleting, and knife for cutting the head off and the backbone and stuff like that. I have four knifes and I use all of them, all four knifes on one fish. Because I slime. Then I

cut the head off and I fillet it out and I take the backbone out and then I have a nice fillet knife.

Kitty Sopow: How long do you smoke them?

Carla Harris: Two weeks. And you smoke them twice a day for two weeks. And (pause) yeah—two weeks.

Kitty Sopow: So you fillet them where?

Carla Harris: On a nice table.

Kitty Sopow: Tell us about your table.

Carla Harris: Well I have a nice table, it is four by eight. And I have a nice little railing that goes around so it won't fly, slip off. And it's just awesome, I just love it. It's old as heck. I think its—it was my husband's work table for a job he did, and I—and when I started—putting up fish eight years ago—it had to have been eight years, ten years old—and he goes, Let me build you a new one. I said, No I don't like new. I like old and rustic and shabby chic. (laughter) And that's my table is shabby chic. And I love it. And he cut a—he took his skill saw and cut hole in my table

JudyJo Matson: A long slit

Carla Harris: Like just as wide as a the blade, and its about this long, so two feet-ish. And that's how I make my strips. You put your fish on there, and you poke down into the blade—your blade into the hole, and you do it, like here's a piece of fish (gestures) you cut it in half, and then you cut it in half. But you leave a little piece on the top of your fish. You don't cut, so you start from there (gestures) here's the top of the fish, you start here and you just cut down. And then you just have your strips. And everybody cuts them like strips like this. And they go tie them with string, to go put them in [the smokehouse]. And my mom taught me that, twenty—twenty five years ago—don't cut it off like that, because you're just going to tie—save yourself four hours that day from just tying. So, you'll have—it just looks like this and you just go hang it up, its like, Mom, you're a genius! You are Albert Einstein's great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great niece. Or he could be you're whatever, fuck, I don't know, great, great, great, great, great, great, great uncle because you were smart. Who figured that shit out? My mom.

Kitty Sopow: So when you cut the fillet, it's for strips?

JudyJo Matson: If you're doing strips

Carla Harris: Yeah, well it could be—when you're making a fillet its all three. A smokefish, strips and freezer fish. And freezer—when I put my frozen fish away, I cut the tail off and you know, you just have this fillet. And I cut my bellies off on that slit in my table, and I smoke the bellies. And that's where you have to tie, because when you split the fish in the middle, you know, here's your belly. And when you cut this belly in half and you cut the bellies off of the fish, you have two pieces of belly, so you have to tie those, and I hate that! But, that's just the way it has to be. But that's your goldmine. Everybody likes it because they're oily and tasty. They are the caviar of the fish, except the head. Everybody likes smoked heads now. And I don't, so I give them to my sister.

JudyJo Matson: I don't either, so not everybody likes them. And I'm everybody.

Carla Harris: I'm not into smoked heads or anything, but—and so, yeah, I do that. And then I fillet them out for a smoked fish where you keep the tail on. You take everything else off but just the tail, you leave the tail on so you have two sides, and you slit—make nice slits—you shave them down first. You don't want it thick, you want it thinner.

JudyJo Matson: Oh you should go get one!

Carla Harris: Thinner because, if you have it—its to each, his own, whoever does it, but I don't like it thick because it will go sour fast, faster. If you make it thinner, it gets done faster, and it won't sour on you.

JudyJo Matson: And it will taste better and last longer in your freezer.

Carla Harris: Yeah, and then you have—ok, oh and then your strips. And then you fillet out your fish and then you make strips out of that fillet. So you do a lot with fillets.

Kitty Sopow: Tell us about the fish head, what part do you eat if you were to eat it?

Carla Harris: Pretty much the whole thing, except the bone in there. You take out, of course you take out…

JudyJo Matson: You cut the teeth off.

Carla Harris: You cut the teeth off, and you cut all the gills out. And you—when you cut the gills out—say you're, hey!

(Carla goes to her freezer and pulls out a frozen fish head)

JudyJo Matson: Uh oh, you guys are going to get a lesson, we got a fresh one.

Kitty Sopow: She's going to the freezer. Coming back with a bag

Carla Harris: You see?

Kim Sparks: Oh yeah

Carla Harris: Its upside down. See. And you slit it open, and this falls this way, and this goes this way. You cut off your teeth, and you get all the gills out. And then this part, you from here to the tip of the nose to go to the back—its like this. And you cut, cut, cut, cut and it falls open, but you don't cut it out all the way. You leave that skin there. So, you're like this—its open, it's like a book. You go like this. Then you punch a hole in the gill right here, and you put a string there and you salt it, and you smoke it for two days. And that's called gumchok. And that's what I make—a fillet of a fish and keep the tail on, and then I don't cut off any meat, and its thick—then you make these slits in them. And then you brine that, and you only smoke that for two days, that's gumchok. And that's delicious.

JudyJo Matson: And that has to be cooked

Carla Harris: Yeah, you have to cook that, yeah.