

## Oral History

**Betty Bonin, Rhonda Wayner, Harmony Wayner**

**Naknek Alaska,**

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**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.*

Rhonda Wanyer: Well, my name is Rhonda Wanyer, R-H-O-N-D-A the last name is W-A-Y-N-E-R

Harmony Wanyer: Yeah, and I'm Harmony Wanyer, Rhonda's daughter, and Harmony's spelled H-A-R-M-O-N-Y and Wayner's spelled the same.

Betty Bonin: And I'm the grandma, I'm Betty Bonin, B-E-T-T-Y, B-O-N-I-N

Rhonda Wanyer: But everybody calls her Betz

Kitty Sopow: So how did everyone get started fishing?

Betty Bonin: I did as a youngster going to the net with my mom and dad, mostly my dad. We lived over at Bumblebee, and our site was over here on Naknek Point, so we'd go from there over with the boat and check the net then go back to the cannery.

Rhonda Wanyer: Bumblebee was on the south side.

Betty Bonin: I was about seven when I started going.

Kim Sparks: Really?

Betty Bonin: Yeah, and then we'd just go—it was just a way of life just to go to the net every summer. And then in summertime we would move over on this side, and we had a cabin on the beach and just—mostly I babysat for a while, while my younger brothers and sisters were with us. And then, and I'd start off and on going to the net with mom and dad.

Harmony Wanyer: And how did you guys first get the site?

Betty Bonin: Uh, my—there was two [...] at the cannery, Bumblebee Seafoods then—and this old man was ready to retire, and he told my dad that, If you fish with me for two years, I'll turn the site over to you. So that's how we got the site and then my mom and dad fished together after that until he passed away.

Kitty Sopow: And how did you get started fishing?

Rhonda Wanyer: I actually had an interim permit, and I fished over on the west side. Mom, you know, got that kind of in for me and I used to fish with another guy. So every summer, I think I was about six or seven when I got that permit in my name?

Betty Bonin: Um-hm

Rhonda Wanyer: Everybody called him Huggy, but his name was [...] and—or I just called him Big Jim, cause he was a big guy. And so over there I'd have my summer's, so I fished over there until I was about fifteen. But it was a different kind of fishing then we do now here in Naknek. Cause we would just go out there on foot, you know, with waders—hip boots on—and when I was a kid I was kinda spoiled rotten, you know? Sometimes he'd let me sleep on the, you know, the late tides and I wouldn't have to go every single time, cause I'd still be on the beach. But back in the day it was a compound kind of a thing. There was a lot of people there. My Aunt Lil—or yeah, Aunt Lillian was there with her husband and a bunch of other people down the beach—there were other kids my age—so it was a lot of fun. You could cruise around on three wheelers and stuff like that, and picking fish to boot, you know? But they used to have to fly all the fish out from the beach, so planes would come in, pick up the fish, and it was just a different type of fishing. So, coming over here and then fishing with Mom—was a big transition, you know? What a big difference, but yeah, I've been in the fishery since—I took a little break, so I had about what? Seven or eight years on the west side of the Kvichak and then fishing here—I think this is our eleventh year fishing on the Naknek site. So, but she's [Betty] been fishing what, fifty years you counted?

Betty Bonin: Yeah, about fifty years. Mostly every year. There was a couple summers I took off, but it was just a way of life to go home and go fishing. (laughter)

Rhonda Wanyer: And then Harmony, when did you start?

Harmony Wanyer: Um, well we started fishing, or our family started fishing with my grandma—like 2006?

Rhonda Wanyer: That was eleven years ago, yeah?

Harmony Wanyer: Yeah, so I was in third grade, we had just moved down to Dutch Harbor. We were in Anchorage for a while, then we moved down there. And then, ever since then, we've been coming back every summer. I—when I was really little, I would come out and we would do subsistence fish. And spend some time out here, but—

Rhonda Wanyer: With her great grandma, who's no longer with us

Harmony Wanyer: Yeah

Rhonda Wanyer: Grandma Violet

Harmony Wanyer: Yeah, and she had a big smokehouse, and we would put up a lot of fish there, and she showed us how to fillet and everything. But I remember going down and visiting my grandma at the site and she was fishing with, who were you fishing with then?

Rhonda Wanyer: Will and...

Betty Bonin: Oh, my brother John and a young guy from New York, his name was Will. But those days, we didn't even have a row—we didn't even have a roller then did we?

Harmony Wanyer: Yeah, or?

Rhonda Wanyer: I think with John and them you did

Betty Bonin: Oh yeah, we did. But yeah, for a while there we just had a manual roller. Now we have the power roller, which is way easier (laughter)

Kim Sparks: I bet!

Rhonda Wanyer: Yeah, but one of the things I always like to think of and I'm really proud of, I guess, especially of my mother is just that she's worked really hard, you know? Cause, well she was a single mom for quite a many years (laughs)

Betty Bonin: Eleven years

Rhonda Wanyer: Yeah, and so she had three kids to take care of, and then there was—we always have to tell the story of when we were fishing now, of when—things get rough or its you know, rough weather out there—cause we're right at the point. Now we fish the inside and the outside site —back in the day, Mom and them, they just had the inside site. But now the inside set is in my son's name, and then the outside site is in my name, but we still all fish as a family, and take care of one another. My son had to name his fish company Three Tough Mothers Fish Company—based on my Grandma Violent, my Mom Betz, and my Aunt Caroline, cause they had those three tough mothers out there. They were all single for a time period, and they would be out there without a roller or anything. And so when the going gets tough now, its like, Hey. If those three tough mothers (laughter) can do that, you know, we have a power roller. We have guys on the boat, you know, and now we have two boats, two sites and we have six crew on average. So, that's a huge difference, and we have, you know, different things going on now, it's a bit of a different operation, but that's always what we go back to. So we can't wuss out, you know, those three ladies could do it, doggoneit, we could do it. So we have a tough act to follow with those ladies.

Kitty Sopow: You know, before we came here we stopped down on the beach, and Annette said there were some cabins there—was one of those sites where y'all are talking about growing up and fishing?

Harmony Wanyer: Um-hum

Betty Bonin: Well our cabin—did you do go to Annette's cabin?

Kitty Sopow: We didn't go to the cabin, but we saw that Nole had a cabin there, her sister

Rhonda Wanyer: Nola? Um-hum

Kitty Sopow: Nola. Like the first one that you come to when you're walking down the beach?

Betty Bonin: Oh the middle one?

Kitty Sopow: Yeah

Betty Bonin: Oh, okay

Harmony Wanyer: So ours is two over from that.

Betty Bonin: Yeah, there's a little tiny one, and then ours is the next one.

Betty Bonin: But our site is isn't there, we go down and go in the boat—what is it? A mile and a half down the beach with the boat, that's where our site is. Right on the point, Naknek Point.

Kim Sparks: And just to clarify, are you guys set netting still, or are you drift netting?

Betty, Rhonda and Harmony  
(In unison): We're set netting

Kim Sparks: Set netting, okay. Okay

Betty Bonin: We like land.

Kitty Sopow: Look at them, proud of setting, they're like, Set netting. (laughter)

Betty Bonin: Yeah, we like land (laughs)  
(laughter)

Rhonda Wanyer: It sure is nice.

Betty Bonin: Long time ago I did drift with my ex-husband there for a couple summers, and I didn't like it that much. Oh, I'd rather be on land (laughs) cause sometimes you're out there and its—especially when the waters real high, you know, you look around, Oh my gosh! Where's the land, you know? (laughs)

Rhonda Wanyer: Well, and I think the nice thing too is when you think about being able to get back to land and even how women in the fishery, sometimes, you know—this is the stories I had heard, is most of the guys would go out because so physically—you know—hard labor. And then the sail boats, you know, most women didn't know how to sail, so then the women would stay on shore and do the set net, you know, and walk out and take care of the kids, cook the food, and when the guys came in, she'd you know, try—they mostly went to the cannery and they took care of them. But if they had an opportunity to bring them special treats and stuff that was kind of the stories we heard. And I think even as women, Mom was married to a drifter too, so he'd come to shore and here even though she was tired out—and this was before I was even fishing with her—she'd come, Oh Fred's coming into, you know, coming into Naknek. He's been down in Egegik for two weeks. I'm going to make him some cinnamon rolls, and make sure he gets them or cookies or, you know, send him clean socks, you know that kind of stuff. So we were kind of—raised with that mentality and women—even though we're still working hard and catching fish, if not more fish than they are—we still get home. We cook. We clean. We do all the laundry. And then some.

Harmony Wanyer: Take care of the kids

Rhonda Wanyer: Take care of the kids

Betty Bonin: Water the garden

Rhonda Wanyer: And make sure the guys get good stuff too, so

Kim Sparks: We've been hearing a lot of that, about how women have so much responsibility and how—a lot of people said like, Have you ever tried set netting? Its hard work. You have to be really strong to do that. Do you guys want to talk more about that?

Rhonda Wanyer: Sure, about you start Harmony? Why don't you tell about some of your most favorite experiences on the beach (laughs)?

Harmony Wanyer: Oh my gosh...

Kim Sparks: Yeah if you have a good story, we're all about stories

Harmony Wanyer: Well, I've always been pretty small. I'm a little bit bigger now, since I started rock climbing and stuff but, its always funny people just don't really take you seriously—when you're smaller and in the fishing industry. They're like, Oh come on, like you need some guys on boat or—something like that so—I don't know one of my proudest moments on the skiff is when I'm like pulling really, really hard or—got some more grit I guess. I guess that's what it's developed, grit and knowing that I could do it even through—it's all about the leverage I think.

(laughter)

Rhonda Wanyer: Now that she's taller

Betty Bonin: But she was pretty little when she used to go down there and have a tote on the beach and—and she would pick off the beach you know, as the tides going out and she was really determined, I have to get to the beach. I have to be there because

Rhonda Wanyer: They're counting on me.

Betty Bonin: Yeah, they're counting on me and I don't want to be late. She was real determined to be on time (laughs). Be there before the fish dry on the beach.

Harmony Wanyer: Yeah, like when you're little the job is beach crew, so you have a little white tote, and then it has a rope. And then you put it around your shoulders. And then when the tides going out, then you walk out there and you drive the four wheeler and you think you're so cool because you get to drive the four wheeler down there.

Rhonda Wanyer: And bring the dog.

Harmony Wanyer: Yeah, bring the dogs and its pretty fun. But, yeah my brother, when he was little like—like eleven, eleven or so—I would go with him. I'm two years younger than him, and then he would show me like, Ok you hold the tote, I'll pick the fish and this is what you do. You gotta flip over the fish so that its on top on of the net, so that if it drops in the water then it will be on the net again. And just like little things like that, that you learn in the fishing industry from just people showing you, and taking the time to show you. And so like we kinda have those jobs for certain ages. And then—so yeah, but someday I would be out there by myself and have the little tote on my back just like—pretty bean pole like girl

(laughs) and uh—yeah and it was wavy and it would pull you and once you got some fish in there

Betty Bonin: It gets heavy, yeah

Harmony Wanyer: it would be weighted down, and then it starts getting waves into the tote, and then it like—then it starts sinking so you gotta bring it back and

Rhonda Wanyer: Empty it out

Harmony Wanyer: Or it tries to pull you in, and

Rhonda Wanyer: And if you got a lot of fish—cause we have, most of the time we fish with, out of one boat, and then we go check the outside net, come back to the inside net, you know? Inside net, outside, back inside, but if you're loading up with fish, you know, then that's when we might go get the other boat, you know, and get that loaded up with ice. And that takes time, and while the tides going out, and you're racing against the clock and the tide, you know, if—heaven forbid you have to cut your net off at a certain time because they say, Oh, you know, the openings only for this amount of hours, and you have to cut it off within a certain time period—you need that beach crew there. Not only to keep the fish from, you know, getting—any mud on them and stuff, cause it changes the color, it changes the quality—they don't get in the ice right away. And you have to rinse, so it takes so much more work to rise all the mud off and everything, so we hate picking in the mud. We don't—we try not to do that. And hope this year, knock on wood, we don't have to.

Betty Bonin: Avoid it as much as possible.

(laughter)

Rhonda Wanyer: But then, how important that job is to have that beach crew.

Harmony Wanyer: But yeah, it's also kind of hard as a kid, because they leave you, and then you're just stuck there. And then you start loading up with fish, if like, the net keeps catching you just don't know what to do. And so then I've have a lot of mental breakdowns, like they're never going back (laughs).

(Laughter)

Rhonda Wanyer: Get there, What took you so long?!?

(Crosstalk)

Harmony Wanyer: Yeah, by then I have half the net cleaned out too.

Betty Bonin: Cause they have to deliver to, when you go to deliver that takes a while.

(Group): um-hum

Rhonda Wanyer: But then, like on the boat, you know, that was the one thing too—when Mom was on the boat, and I was on the boat, and we'd have Harmony on the boat, and my son—and my husband, he tries to work his schedule so that he can be there at different times. We try to have just four people on one boat that the most, so

there's not like—you know, then you don't have room to pick and move and stuff like that. But when they were little, you know, we could have like a little person on the boat, but it was so neat having Mom there because she—I remember that first year I fished with her—and I wasn't used to being in a boat like that, and then we got our first windy day. And I was getting kind of nervous, you know, its like I'm not used to being on the boat. The waves are pretty high. The wind is blowing. There's some rollers hitting the beach pretty hard. And Mom, Well you just, when this happens and its hard to pick cause the net's moving, you know, over the boat after you have it pulled up and over with the running line, you just tie it off, that's what you do. You just tie it off, and it might move a little bit, but it won't go super hard, and you don't have to hang on really. Like little tricks that you learn, that makes you work smarter, not harder. And then so you just pick fish, just pick fish, she'd say, Just pick fish, don't look out, you know, they're not going to—the waves aren't going to go over the boat. We're fine, we'll go up and down with the waves, how she was reassuring me. And, then I was like, Okay. And I never did get sick on the boat, but I came close to it a couple times (laughs) I would have never admitted it to her (laughs) but just having her there to give me that reassurance, so now I find little things that she would say, I say to our crew and my daughter and, you know, new crew members who are a little worried about stuff or concerned—about the conditions. Cause its—really so much easier to pick on the boat, than in the mud. So.

- Kitty Sopow: Do you every worry about the future of set netting?
- Rhonda Wanyer: Everybody does, really. I mean, especially when you're in the science, you know, realm like this young lady is (referring to Harmony).
- Harmony Wanyer: Yeah, I don't know, I worry about the warmer water temperatures too.
- Betty Bonin: Yeah
- Harmony Wanyer: And just on a practical side, with temperatures—like for the cannery, being set at a certain time. Like, Okay this is a good quality fish has to be at this temperature—it's really hard to get it down if the water temperature is like—
- Rhonda Wanyer: Continues to rise
- Harmony Wanyer: Yeah, fifty five or so—and we just pick it out so fast—that we can't get it.
- Rhonda Wanyer: The temperature down. It takes a while to actually chill the fish down, and so we don't have the capacity on a skiff to—to carry a whole bunch of ice, right?
- Harmony Wanyer: And we have to get ice from the city dock, and so we have to shovel it into totes if no one's there with the forklift.
- Rhonda Wanyer: Which is physically exhausting.
- Harmony Wanyer: Yeah, you have to shovel it from the tote up into a tote in the back of your truck-
- Betty Bonin: Then shovel it to your boat.

Harmony Wanyer: And then shovel it to your boat, so carrying it in Rubbermaid totes and then bringing them every single time you go out.

Rhonda Wanyer: So you develop some muscles.

Harmony Wanyer: Yeah  
(laughter)

Kitty Sopow: I see those muscles.  
(laughter)

Harmony Wanyer: Yeah, so just kind of—any then the later run time’s too—has been a thing of concern for us, but—

Rhonda Wanyer: Although it seems like there’s some fish out there some people are talking about the fish coming in, you know?

Kim Sparks: Okay, okay

Kitty Sopow: Yeah, what do you mean later run times?

Harmony Wanyer: Um, well the past couple of years, like we have this end of the season festival called Fishtival, and—you’re supposed to be done at that point, but I remember these past couple of years I would just be winding down the beach, we’d still be catching so much fish and the run is normally the first and the fourth—like through the fourth of July.

Betty Bonin: Traditionally it would be the peak, is the fourth of July.

Rhonda Wanyer: Up through the ninth or tenth.

Harmony Wanyer: But like, my grandma says, the fish faucet just didn’t turn off.  
(laughter)

Harmony Wanyer: Once it turns off, then its done.

Betty Bonin: Yeah

Harmony Wanyer: But then it just wouldn’t turn off, and so I was like, I just want to be at the parade and—like its—all the historical—set dates are kinda of—they might have to adapt to the different conditions.

Kim Sparks: Have you guys seen any other kind of changes like that? That you’d like to talk about?

Betty Bonin: I noticed since when I first started fishing we never worried about icing or bleeding or anything, so that’s all new since—just since they’ve started fishing with me you know?

Rhonda Wanyer: We’re some of the first people who iced our fish on the beach.

Betty Bonin: Yeah, so we get a higher price for our ice, sure we’re going to ice our fish, we want the extra few dollars, few cents you know? So its a lot of extra work, but it



pays off in the end. And mostly just about—well there's a couple canneries that don't require it yet, but mostly everybody's requiring you, ice your fish.

Rhonda Wanyer: But in the natural habitat, anything else you'd noticed like with the erosion maybe?

Betty Bonin: Ummm—there's always been erosion ever since I was a kid, you know, some of the houses down here in Naknek—there's a couple that aren't even there anymore because the bank has eroded. But yeah.

Kim Sparks: So I guess my question for you three since it seems—it's really special to have three generations of fisherwomen. How do you guys—feel about that? That you're all three doing the same thing, you're all three here learning from each other—if you guys have any words to say about that?

Harmony Wanyer: Pride.

Betty Bonin: Yeah, I'm proud of them too, cause well my mom, she wanted to sell the site, and I wasn't going to—I wasn't going to buy it at first and then I said, I can't let it go. I said we need this for our kids and our grandkids. I bought the site. Now they're buying me out, so it's just—it'll be interesting how many years it's going to be in the family (laughs).

Rhonda Wanyer: I know. It's been a huge gift through, that she was taking the risk and knowing that it was something that we always kinda wanted to do, but we didn't want to put a bunch of pressure on her either. And we were just at that stage in our life and our kids were old enough to—I guess put them to work (laughs) in a fun way. But the one thing I do have to say is, you know, of course Reese and Harmony both, but Reese being a boy—I've always told the kids, and I think partly Mom raised us this way too is, if you can do this, if you can do the set netting, and all the stuff you have to—its not fun sometimes. It can be miserable and cold and dirty and gross and when its stinky and stuff like that, but if you can do that, you can do dang near anything, you know? So sky's the limit, don't let anything hold you back because you've already been through some tough times.

Betty Bonin: And then you just have to remember, it's only for one month. You could do it, and it's going to be over. You could see the end in sight (laughs).