Oral History
Annette Caruso
Nakenk Alaska,
June 17th, 2017: 9:00 AM
Interviewers: Kim Sparks (PSMFC, NOAA Fisheries AFSC) and Kitty Sopow (BBNA Project Intern)
Notes: Recording began after the start of our conversation

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: Yeah, so you said the river normally freezes over?

Annette Caruso: Yeah, all the rivers usually freeze and the lakes. But over the last five years this river [Naknek], we'll have ice here but hasn't frozen where people can go across and hunt or the Naknek, South Naknek people cross the river, like my coworker commutes from South Naknek so she flies over.

Kim Sparks: Okay

Annette Caruso: Monday and flies home Friday but, she was able to—you know—just drive to work every day from South Naknek after the river froze. I think it was in December or January is when it froze, and it stayed frozen until April.

Kim Sparks: Oh wow, okay

Annette Caruso: Yeah, but having all that ice—we're wondering if that played a part in where the screw anchors—I would have thought that ice would have took the anchors or smashed the anchor down, you know? But the ice was so thick, we have a big rock down here that it pushed the rock up to the bank, which I thought was—I mean we've been here for—when we started building, but we've been in the house five years, and we've had ice, but it wasn't—it wasn't as thick as it was last year I guess. Cause that, I mean that's a huge—

Kim Sparks: Rock?

Annette Caruso: Yeah, it's like one of these out in the yard that it just pushed it up to the beach.

Kitty Sopow: When we were at—so we were at Kanakanak Beach and it was interesting, like some folks' screw anchor needed to be re-put in, and then some—like Gayla's—was still there—like the one that's actually at the low tide mark, and then her high water mark was gone. And then the other folks, their high water mark was in, but their low water mark was gone, so I just wonder like if it's also how well you put it in or?

Annette Caruso: Yeah, depends on what's in the ground. And—you know—screwing, some people have screw anchors and some people have deadmans and duckbills. We've always used the screw anchors and depending on if they have a big enough screw anchor—so I—I do an eight inch one. And they're pretty tall so

you'd want to get it screwed into the mud over half ways, because you would only probably want the anchor to be this high off of the—

Kim Sparks: Like waist or knee high maybe?

Annette Caruso: Yeah, between knee and waist high, because if you have 7,000 pounds of fish in your net, that better hold.

Kim Sparks: That better hold.

Annette Caruso: 'Cause you don't want your net flagging. But that happens if you don't get your anchor screwed all the way in, you get a little bit of weight in there messing and the tide, the current—that's not fun when you have to go back out there after you picked all that fish and you're already tired.

(yeah)

Annette Caruso: Get all the way out there, and rescrew that anchor in, and reattach your running line.

Kitty Sopow: So, do you still set net now?

Annette Caruso: Um—hum

Kitty Sopow: And when do the fish come around these parts?

Annette Caruso: There's fish in the sub [subsistence] nets now, and next week is our free week. So you could—I think it's open Monday through Friday morning, nine o'clock or something, but I'm still at work at my job. I won't go put my net until I hear maybe there's 250, 300 pounds being caught, because I'm not going to go down for four fish, you know? So I'll wait—there's other people that'll—they'll start and then—Ocean Beauty who I fish for—Pete's [husband] still at his job too, so he won't head down to the beach until there's more set netters on, and—so next week though, they're going to be bringing their trucks down the beach this weekend and be ready because they're fishing in Egegik now, and I think they—started regulated 'cause last week was their free week.

Kim Sparks: Okay

Annette Caruso: And the sub nets are—they're catching. I don't know what people got on this tide, but like some people got 15 fish yesterday.

Kitty Sopow: What is a sub net?

Annette Caruso: The subsistence net.

Kitty Sopow: Oh, I like that lingo. Sub net. I like that.

Annette Caruso: Maybe they don't say that on the Dillingham side?

Kitty Sopow: No

Annette Caruso: Over here everybody it's just the sub nets. Just set your sub net.

Kitty Sopow: Okay. That is a cool term. Set your sub net.

(laughter)

Annette Caruso: Being in Dillingham, those eight years I got spoiled on all the kings. Because they get the big king run in the Nushagak, and so we don't a huge run here, so—all the kings I get in my commercial net, we have a freezer at the cabin so I'll freeze all my kings and after fishing I'll put up my smoke fish.

Kim Sparks: Okay

Annette Caruso: I just *love* the king. And—we'll do our subsistence net off our cabin during commercial fishing, which it's—we don't have to take care of it—the smoking part we do, but all our fillets—there's a couple of small mom and pops where you just drop off your sub fish.

Kim Sparks: Oh nice.

Annette Caruso: And they'll vacuum seal it for you, some of it be one for one, they keep one and we keep one. But, you just—at the end of the season you go pick up your case of frozen fillet or however many you want, and—so a lot of people here, they've—that's what they do now is they just use the—Nat King home pack or wild Alaska Salmon Seafood and—cuts out (laughs).

Kitty Sopow: Yeah, we like to have someone process ours from time to time, too, 'cause if you have like a job, job—it's like, well—sometimes you don't really have time to get all your fish processed.

Annette Caruso: Um-hum

Kitty Sopow: I mean, you could take time off if you're lucky enough to have PTO [personal time off]

Annette Caruso: Right

Kitty Sopow: And so this cabin that you're talking about, is that that the same one that you go to with your grandma—that you talked about earlier?

Annette Caruso: No, this cabin is our beach cabin that we commercial fish out of on the beach here, so it's—it's the last red cabin on, as you're going down Peter Pan beach—there's one, two—three, four, five cabins that people stay in for the summer. So—during fishing that's where we will be. But if we're only the set netters are only fishing one tide—I'll just come home, 'cause—and go back to work and I'll—beginning of the year, beginning of the salmon season I can still, because Fish and Game hasn't—they're still counting the escapement, so I can—we usually only fish one tide, so depending on how the tides are—I may be able to fish the one tide, and still go and work so I don't have to use up my, all my leave, which is kinda nice (laughs). I don't have to have leave without pay at the end of the season. So last year, that worked out really well. And there was lots of fish. So, it—with the fishing that one tide the first probably—I don't know—five, six, seven days worked really well for—for me as I got to—still put in hours at my day job.

Kim Sparks: And you're still teaching right?

Annette Caruso: No, I'm at the Southwest Alaska Vocational Education Center.

Kim Sparks: Oh, okay okay

Annette Caruso: Yeah, we just finished up our last classes, and so our center is still open, and the administrative assistant and the maintenance man our—they work throughout the summer up there, but I'll be done for the summer and Anisha, she's done. She fishes in South Naknek.

Kim Sparks: Okay

Annette Caruso: So we put on classes throughout the year, and we just had—finished up with the Hazsup class—Hazardous for the mom and pops—small fish processing people that wanted that class. So, we put on classes that the community wants, and they have a need for, for a certification, so we'll go find an instructor and put a class on. But—two of us are—we've gotten—attended train the trainer—so we, Anisha and I both teach CPR and we do the drill conductor for the commercial fishermen and we just completed a boating safety class. So in August we'll put on our first boating, recreational boating safety class for the locals, or for the villagers that want to come in.

Kim Sparks: Okay. Do most people take off the summer and go fishing then?

Annette Caruso: At my work?

Kim Sparks: Yeah, um-hum

Annette Caruso: Just two of us—RayRay, he used to—he fished for the people that I bought my sites from, and Linda—she, her family is originally from Pilot Point, and she grew up set netting down there. And I'm sure you've heard like typically the men drifted and the wives and kids stayed on the beach, and set netted. It should have been the other way around (laughter) 'cause those grandmas and moms, holy cow! Especially when they've got the mud, and when they first started, you know, just picking off the beach bent over and in the mud. Yeah, it's—when I first started set netting—I thought I was going backwards in time from the drift boats to set net because they were tying their net to the running line—and on a boat, the gillnetters they connect their nets with snaps so you could undo your net by just taking the snap off and leaving the rest of the nets out as your just picking in the one, and you wanna—when the tide is coming in—you wanna get your net out fast! And I was like, How come you guys don't use snaps? I don't get it, it was like—I just—this boat that we had, they didn't have any brailor hooks to hold your—your net your brailors to put your fish in, I was like, Who the heck was—how did they do this?!?

(laughter)

It was like—I just could not get over how this boat wasn't equipped that would have all these already in place where you could just hang your brailor and throw your fish in there, and—so I had my brother, I was like, You need to weld these brackets on my skiff to hold the net up. I was like, I'm not going to try to figure out how to tie my—there was no bins! There was no nothing! He had to put bins

in my skiff. Yeah, I guess they just let the fish be on the floor, or I don't know—that was, it was so (laughs) dysfunctional, I said, It was so medieval. I was like, If I would have been here one tide last year with whoever had this site—I said I probably wouldn't have bought it, cause I probably would have thought all the sites were that way, and their boats, but yeah different people fish differently.

And like I said, I'm fishing for Ocean Beauty—and this year, they're going to have their own quality control person down on the beach because they offer—chilling prices.

Kim Sparks: Oh, okay

Annette Caruso: So there's different ranges. You'll get 100% if your fish are chilled to this temperature, and you'll get this percentage or this percentage and before Pete and his crew had to test the fish, but now he doesn't—him and his crew—that's something they don't have to do. Ocean Beauty will have their own person down there, but we're so close to—'cause we're only nine sites up—and so when we come to deliver to Pete or the tender that just drifts by our site, you know, we could be picking the fish now, and two minutes later, we're delivering to the tender that's coming by. Your fish just don't have that time to cool.

Kim Sparks: Um-hum

Annette Caruso: But our fish just came out of the water, you know? Some of them are still alive as they're being delivered, and another thing that's happening is—we in the past got ten cents for bled fish, but we could only bleed our fish on the shoulders, like—right the first week of fishing or the first two tides, like last year I think we only—got to bleed two tides I think, and then usually at the end of the season. But last summer we didn't get to bleed our fish at the end for the higher price. This year Ocean Beauty's offering bled for the whole season, so if we bleed every fish that's going to be an additional ten cents on top of our iced fish.

Kim Sparks: ` Okay, is that worth it?

Annette Caruso: Yeah!

Kim Sparks: Okay, alright

Annette Caruso: (laughs)

Kitty Sopow: Is it ten cents a pound, or ten cents per fish?

Annette Caruso: Pound—so you'll get the iced and if—then you'll get the bled which would be fifteen cents on top of the—whatever price that their baseline, yeah.

Kim Sparks: They're offering, okay

Kitty Sopow: So you're talking about your commercial set nets. 'Cause it kinda—I'm getting a little confused, cause it sounds like there's a period of time where if you have a commercial permit you can keep those fish for subsistence, to count as your subsistence also?

Annette Caruso: Yeah, if you wanna take some of your commercial fish home, you can. But—you're not getting paid for those fish.

(laughter)

Kim Sparks: But you would probably take your kings?

Annette Caruso: I'll take my kings home.

Kitty Sopow: Okay, okay

Annette Caruso: Although, like Amanda's going to be offering—three dollars a pound per king.

Kim Sparks: Oh wow

Kitty Sopow: Who is Amanda?

Annette Caruso: Nat King Home Pack, she's the green building on the left right before you get to the highway. That's Nat King Home Pack. Yeah, that first cabin [on Pater Pan beach]—belongs to my sister Pam, but she—one of the commercial fishermen uses that cabin. It used to be an old saltery, I guess?

Kim Sparks: Oh no kidding?

Annette Caruso: Yeah, way back decades ago. And that's where they I guess—salted fish or whatever the canneries did. So he [Pete, her husband] has his crew there, and it's the first cabin—it's all metal. It's just a silver sheet iron building, and there's a tiny cabin. And then there's—the Wayner's—Rhonda and Paul. Her mom Betz and her grandma Violet Wilson—I'm not sure if you've heard of Violet. She has the very first site, she passed. But she had the very first site and she used to have her daughters fish with her, so it was just her and her two daughters that fished that first site and, you know, they would put in over 200,000 pounds. And it was just those three women! And so, she passed it down to her daughter Betz, and Betz fished with her kids, and her sister and now—Rhonda's kids are fishing it with her. But yeah, that's—that first site—it doesn't matter how the season is, that site catches a lot of fish, but Violet was—really big on the commercial fishing and the subsistence fishing. Her grandson is Everett Thompson.

Kitty Sopow: And so that first set, that's a commercial set and if they get kings they probably keep those too or?

Annette Caruso: Yeah, a lot of people will take a couple of kings home and if they've got enough or some of the, maybe some of these people that don't [pause] live here in the winter, they may not have the freezer capacity or they'll go drop it off to Amanda, and at the end of the year, you'll just—end of the season go up and get your fish.

Kitty Sopow: And so then you said your dad has been commercial fishing—

Annette Caruso: Since the fifties, yeah.

Kitty Sopow: Okay, and then who taught him how to fish?

Annette Caruso: Well his dad, my grandpa came up on a steamship in the early 1900s, he left home when he was fourteen from Nebraska. Made his way over to Washington and got on a steamship and came up and never left. But my dad had four older brothers, so—actually he had six older brothers, 'cause he's the youngest. And so he—grew up fishing with them. He said he never fished in the sailboat, but he started fishing in the fifties. And he got his first—I can't remember if he said he got his first boat at fifteen? At the cannery, they leased out boats at that time—he had an old bow picker boat—and one of the guys that he fished for vouched for my dad. Said, Yeah this kid can—he knows what he's doing and would be able to—get you fish. So, he's been on his own since.

Kitty Sopow: And then was your mom ever doing the sub nets while he was out fishing?

Annette Caruso: Yeah, that's what my mom did was the subsistence, subsistence fish. When she was ten, that summer when she was ten my grandma ended up with TB [tuberculosis], and so she spent two years at ANMC [Alaska Native Medical Center] in Anchorage. And since my mom was the oldest daughter, she was the third oldest child—my grandpa and the oldest son came to fish and my mom and her older brother had to stay home with their aunt and watch three younger kids and the youngest one was eighteen months. So she was *ten*. And she had to put up, you know, a couple of thousand fish and then they moved out of her aunt's into their summer cabin themselves and—at ten years old she was taking care of her younger brothers and sisters and putting up fish. And she says, You know, I don't even know if we all took a bath that summer (laughs). We were all in the water, and she, you know, they were playing. And she was like, They washed being in the river, but we never actually took a steam bath, you know? (laughs)

Kitty Sopow: Oh my gosh, okay. So, okay that woman [referring to a picture on the wall] is that the women who had TB?

Annette Caruso: Yeah that's my gran.

Kim Sparks: Okay

Kitty Sopow: Your mom's mom.

Annette Caruso: My mom's mom.

Kitty Sopow: Wow! Okay, so what did your mom's mom think, like when she came back from Anchorage and saw how her daughter taking care of the family?

Annette Caruso: I'm sure she was pretty proud of her, I mean—you know, you gotta do what you gotta do, but you know the elders and the Natives they don't talk a lot, so—I've never asked my mom that, but what my mom did say is—'cause there was ten of them kids.

Kim Sparks: Oh wow

Annette Caruso: And, so she was used to cooking for a big family, and then she married my dad. And so it was just the two of them. She said it was so hard to—she said she overcooked, overcooked and overcooked for so long. It was so hard to learn how to cook for two people. (laughs)

Kim Sparks: Just do two, that's funny.

Annette Caruso: Yeah

Kitty Sopow: Okay, and so then that cabin was in what village again?

Annette Caruso: This—this is in Levelock, that's when I was—when I was growing up, I would go and spend my summers with my grandparents.

Kitty Sopow: Okay

Annette Caruso: But when my mom was growing up, they were on the Kvichak in Kaskanak, down below Igiugig. Yeah, they moved there when my mom was ten.

Kitty Sopow: Okay

Annette Caruso: For school.

Kitty Sopow: And so when your mom was ten, she was taking care of the family at which place?

Annette Caruso: Kaskanak

Kitty Sopow: Okay

Annette Caruso: The summer, yeah

Kitty Sopow: Okay, what an interesting story. We haven't taken a steam, what's it like?

Annette Caruso: But you know what a steam is?

Kitty Sopow Yeah

Annette Caruso: So some steams they have, you know, an upper and a lower bench, and so you got your big tub of water on there and so you splash with the dipper and—our steam—I like, for whatever reason in the winter it just seems like it's so much hotter. And, you know, if I could have my steam at 285—that's how the temp I like it—and we have a bigger steam now, and the bigger steam for me—I don't, it just, it doesn't—the temp doesn't feel the same as a smaller steam that's a little bit more—I don't know. Our steam here is too big and—compared to the steams where they used to crawl in at fish camp where my gram and them are and it was just a tiny, little, dark—so you actually had to be on your hands and knees and crawl in. Now the door is big enough for a six foot person to walk in (laughter). I was like, Who are we building this steam for, you know? (laughter)

Kitty Sopow: Wow, and then so besides the erosion of the bluffs you talked about, and the more bear activity now, like what other kind of changes are you seeing? Like environmental changes.

Annette Caruso: You see driving down from King Salmon (sighs) all the cotton.

Kitty Sopow: Yeah!

Annette Caruso: Is it like that in Togiak too?

Kitty Sopow: No

Annette Caruso: No one here, and Pete's been here, you know thirty nine years—seasons—and no one here has seen it as white as it is. I mean we could even see it across the river over there! Maybe it finally got cold enough last winter and—I don't know! This is like—we usually don't see a lot of cotton until we start fishing, like after we've been fishing a couple of tides and then we're coming back up, Oh look. Getting more and more cotton. And this year it's so early for whatever reason and so much!

Kitty Sopow: There's fields of it (laughs).

Annette Caruso: Just acres and acres! Because I was in Dillingham, I don't know, maybe ten days ago, maybe not even that, and it didn't seem like it was like here. And even in Igiugig where my mom was, I was like, Is your guy's cotton like this too? And she said no. I just—we don't know what's going on. I was like by the time we start fishing, I was like it's going to look like we have two feet of snow come (laughs) July 1st, it's going to be so thick! And we had a little fire out here in the tundra and now you could notice it—it is just so thick white in that burnt area.

Kim Sparks: Okay

Kitty Sopow: Was it like a wildfire or someone plant it?

Annette Caruso: It was—it was like in January—that one winter. Because in the wintertime—we had snow last winter, but this was two winters ago I think? We didn't have as much snow, and think somebody shot a firework or something. In the middle of winter, that tundra caught on fire.

Kim Sparks: (gasps) no kidding

Annette Caruso: It was either a flare or a firework.

Kitty Sopow: I usually think of tundras as being pretty wet.

Annette Caruso: And it was winter, it was like—January maybe. But last winter we had snow, so that was nice. And—yeah I've been here—like I said, since '06 and we had one winter when we were renting this house next door as we were building this house—maybe 2010—'cause I had a car. And I couldn't drive out the driveway, it was just—so much snow. And the drifts were higher than the—you know those vans—those vans that fishermen use? Like we have three vans out here. Across the street there, the snow drift was up over the van! We had so much snow that year! And it was—the year before that—it was the coldest. Like in January. It was 37 below. It was Russian Christmas and I couldn't start my car in King Salmon to go (unknown word) and then that next year we had that snow. And then after that, we didn't have hardly *any* snow, so—you come here—you still see the tundra. There will be patches, they'll be snow in the trees, but—we don't get a lot of snow here. They used to, like in the seventies and early eighties—like driving down the highway. Pete said, Yeah the drifts used to be—high out on the tundra. And they used to—the caribou used to cross and we just haven't had—the caribou that come through. But last year that Mulchatna herd came in and they

opened a tier hunt across the river. We couldn't hunt them on this side, but we got to hunt them on that side.

Kim Sparks: Okay, did you guys get one?

Annette Caruso: Yeah, and luckily we got to because—it was open early so some people were flying to south side, spending the night. By the time we went in December, the river was froze, so you just got to—and so the people here just took their snow machines across, and got to get caribou. But yeah—they hadn't had—caribou hunts for years and years, and then they had the tier one, tier two hunt. Like I've been here—I don't know if this is the second or the third time that they got to caribou hunt here since I moved here.

Kim Sparks: Okay

Annette Caruso: Versus like when—you know, in the seventies and eighties—I mean, people could go out and get like five caribou, then we were limited to two. And then it was that tier hunt if they—

Kim Sparks: Pulled your name?

Annette Caruso: Um-hum.

Kim Sparks: Okay, and they used to go like every winter?

Annette Caruso: Yeah, the caribou would cross the highway and there would just be caribou everywhere and I guess that herd is building back up.

Kim Sparks: Alright

Annette Caruso: I guess it died off somehow, I don't know if it was some type of hoof disease or what it was, but—

Kim Sparks: Yeah, I think I had heard about it from—some other people that it used to be a lot bigger.

Annette Caruso: Um-hum

Kim Sparks: Was it Togiak they were saying, they're getting a lot more moose but they don't have any more caribou.

Annette Caruso: You know, like through social media and seeing the different people post, yeah they got lots of caribou in Dillingham. I don't know where they go, if they go up the Wood River or—

Kim Sparks: Yeah, maybe. You said earlier that you went out with your dad at, what was it? Thirteen?

Annette Caruso: Sixteen

Kim Sparks: Sixteen

Annette Caruso: Yeah, I didn't get to commercial fish with my dad. He took me finally when I was sixteen, and then I fished 24 years on the drift with him, and him and my

brother. And I didn't—after I had my family is when I was—done fishing. And then eight years ago is when I started set netting on the beach here in Naknek, but before that I had no set net experience.

Kim Sparks: Oh okay, okay. So you never went with mom or your grandma before your dad?

Annette Caruso: No, my mom and my grandma, they never set netted. My mom set netted with my aunt, actually when—she first married my dad. And my aunt—they set netted somewhere up the Kvichak I think and then—then my aunt started drifting.

Kim Sparks: Okay

Annette Caruso: Yeah, my aunt used to run her own boat here after her husband died.

Kim Sparks: So you really learned from your dad then?

Annette Caruso: I learned from my dad.

Kim Sparks: Okay

Annette Caruso: Yeah—my grandpa, my mom's dad, came and fished with his sons. There were—like my mom's aunt—she set net and her daughter set net, but for whatever reason my grandpa didn't let my gram and his daughters set net. And I never asked.

Kim Sparks: Okay

Annette Caruso: That was just something that happened.

Kim Sparks: So what was it like being—a woman out drift netting?

Annette Caruso: So on my dad's boat, and—so there was my dad, my cousin Randy, my brother and myself when I first started. And when I first started I wasn't out in the stern picking every, every set like if—we had a night set or whatever, my dad and uncle wouldn't wake me and my brother up to go fish. If there was lots of fish in the net then yeah, we all were out there picking, but—it was—it wasn't like an intern I guess where they showed this is the process how you, you know, pull the net, pick it and—it was you just did it. You weren't told how this is the proper way or (laughs) yeah my dad didn't—he liked to show you versus tell you and that's how I just—how he learned I guess was just by watching with anything in life, like even working on his own motors or building something, it was something that you learn by watching. You shouldn't have to tell you, I shouldn't have to ask you to come help me. You should just—

Kim Sparks: Know how to do it (laughs)

Annette Caruso: Know how to do it, yeah.

Kim Sparks: And you said, you started at sixteen 'cause he didn't want you near the canneries?

Annette Caruso: The canneries, yeah I—you know I've, when I was fourteen I wanted to come—I wanted to go babysit for my sister in South Naknek while she was set netting, and he didn't want me to come and do that and I told my mom, I really want to

go! And she talked to my dad and he said that he would let me go, and then he didn't let me go back the following year. And then that next year he said I could finally come, come and start fishing with him, so he could have his eye on me. But, you know, at that time—at the cannery there wasn't a lot of, you know, a lot of young girls. There was a lot of men and teens and all the cannery workers. There was a lot—a lot of cannery workers that came from like the Kipnuk area there, so there a lot of Natives at our cannery that worked in the cannery that weren't fishing, and like now when you go to the cannery there, there's not a lot of Native workers in the cannery. But when I was—first started fishing there was—there was plane loads and plane loads of village people that came and worked in the cannery. But yeah, my dad wouldn't—he didn't want me in that cannery setting too long—if in between the closures we would be anchored out across the river and—I just thought he was so mean. We're here to fish, he said and we'll just only go to the cannery to grub up and fuel up and shower up and then it was back on the water.

Kim Sparks: Back out, okay

Annette Caruso: Um-hum