

Project **Women in Alaska Fisheries**

Interviewee Esther Ilutsik [EI]

Interview date August 1, 2018

Location Dillingham, AK

Interviewed by Anna Lavoie [AL] and Jean Lee [JL] (PSMFC, NOAA Fisheries AFSC);
and Christopher Maines [CM] (Bristol Bay Native Association)

Transcribed by Jean Lee

Notes (??) indicates the transcriber's best guess for a word or name when
not verified by the interviewee. When not provided by the
interviewee, spelling and definitions for Yup'ik terms (shown in
italics) are sourced from:

Jacobson, S. A. (2012). *Yup'ik Eskimo dictionary* (2nd ed.). Fairbanks,
AK: Alaska Native Language Center.

AL: This is Anna Lavoie with Esther Ilutsik in Dillingham, Alaska, on August 1st, 2018.

pause in recording (interruption from phone ringing)

AL: So, Esther, when you're ready if you'd like to share your experiences here in Bristol
Bay fishing, both commercially and subsistence fishing, how you learned growing
up, and how things have changed over time.

EI: Okay. I grew up in the village of Aleknagik, which is 25 miles by road system from
Dillingham and all my life I've fished with my mother. And we used to travel down to
our fish camp with my dad's power scow, the Cougar. The whole family would be on
the power scow and it would take us like six hours to get to Ekuk. And it was an
interesting time because when we were really young, before my younger sister was
born, we'd fish with my mother, and we'd have a 25-fathom [net]. And I just recall
one time we were commercial fishing. And at that time they had Ekuk cannery
trucks come by and pick up our fish. We didn't have to deliver them. And this one
incident I just always remember so well is we worked and worked and pulled in—
we had caught so much that when we pulled in the net we'd take the fish out, pile it
up on the tarp, and then the tide went all the way out. And it was a minus tide. We
were still working on the fish. And pretty soon the tide started coming back in and
we're still working on the fish, taking out the fish, and the tide came all the way up
(laughs) to the high mark, where it was to be at. And it had taken us 12 hours to take
out all the fish and have it picked up by the Ekuk company. But somehow that
resonates in my mind, and my poor younger brother, Paul, he had his rain gear on
and he was standing there and it was raining and he started crying because he was
so tired.

And at that time, we always walked. We always walked from our fish camp tent all the way down to the fish site at the beginning of the bluff, which is about a mile, I would think. And so that's one of the things that I remember.

And then another, other times that, when my sister was born, some years my mother would fish, some years she wouldn't. But I was always there to help her. And in those days we didn't have a truck. We had a four-wheeler. And so we'd—or even before the four-wheeler, we'd just walk down to the site and my mother would pack a 25-fathom net all the way down. And we would pull out the net by hand and catch our fish and put it on the tarp and have the people come and collect our fish. And we'd always walk back. And then at some point we started to have a four-wheeler. So it was much easier with the cart, so we'd take the four-wheeler down to our site. And then we got to the point where we were able to purchase a wrench, so we're able to pull our fish in with the wrench and pull it out with the wrench. And then later on we started to have the truck, which made it so much easier to be fishing on Ekuk beach, and now it's such a breeze to be fishing now, being a fisherman.

And so, at some point we would—before fishing opened we'd always put up some fish. We'd put up some kings and then we'd also put up some reds. And I remember this one time when we were fishing and (laughs) the cannery had a limit and we went over the limit and nobody would take—wanted our fish because everybody was at their limit. And so we ended up splitting, like, 400 fish (laughs), so we had all these racks on the beach with our split fish. And I think that was the only time we ever ever did that. And then we always made sure that we knew what the limit was ahead of time so we wouldn't be wasting any fish or having to do the extra work.

And I think when we lived at Ekuk during the summertime, especially in the evening it was a time where my mother always told, shared with us her traditional oral stories, late in the evening while all of us were in our bed and with the stove. We had a oil stove—not an oil stove, a wood stove. And it would be dark and my younger sister would say, *Qanemcinga(??)*—tell me a story. So my mother would tell the story. And oftentimes it was about the squirrel, about a story about a squirrel or the raven walking along the beach. And this is a well-known story throughout the Yup'ik region. But there was also a story about the little mouse who liked to wander on the freshly, fresh snow and leave tracks and think they were beautiful and had a long tail. And he would say, Oh, walking around on the fresh snow and he heard something—whoo, whoo—and at that, during that time different animals understood each other. And he heard the owl say, "Your tail is so long." And the little mouse said, "Oh, to make beautiful tracks on the snow." (laughs) And then the owl said, "Your jaws are so long." And the little mouse said, "All the better to grab my grandmother's food" (laughs). And then—Bong!—the little mouse was gone. What happened to it? The owl came and ate it up (laughs). So, stories like that. And you remember those stories and I just remember my mother was such a good

storyteller. And it would all be in Yup'ik. And you could just imagine it because it was so dark in the cabin.

And then there was a lot more family time because we weren't, we didn't have to go to school, we had to be a part of the family. And we'd do a lot of things in between, checking our nets and putting up fish. When we first arrived to Ekuk we would go down the beach and go find cottonwood, drift cottonwood that we would use to smoke our fish. And my mother would make sure that we knew how to look for that cottonwood, to make sure that we understood what a cottonwood was to smoke our fish. So we'd gather those and then as the season progressed we'd go out and gather—when we were cooking and boiling our fish, she'd tell us to go out and gather *cuassaaq(??)*, the wild parsley. And we'd gather those and she'd put them in the pot of our boiled fish, and you ate them with seal oil. So that was really tasty. And then one of our neighbors, Mrs. **Naomi Chythlook**, she would let us help her gather *it'garralek(??)* which are—I don't really know the English term for it—but it's a green on the beach. And we'd gather those and help her gather those and she'd put those in soups or make *akutaq*¹ out of them. And then another thing that we would do is that we would gather *quagciq(??)*, the wild rhubarb. And there was one dish that my mother always made that I'm just kicking myself because I can never remember what she called it. But she'd chop up the *quagciq(??)* put them in a pot, boil them, bring them just to a boil and then she would add seal oil and crushed up salmon eggs. And it was really a delicious, delicious pot of greens with salmon eggs. And *quagciq(??)* we made, of course we made *akutaq* out of them too with shortening and sugar.

And then later on, every summer before my younger sister was born I'd always go walking with my mother. And we'd walk from Ekuk and we'd go all the way down the line and climb the bluff and walk and walk, and we'd stop for a little snack. And we'd have crackers and dried fish. And then she'd take the dry fish and wrap it up and hide it in the ground and say, "This is for the animals so they can find it." Instead of just throwing it, she said it was for the animals. Then we'd go and then we'd walk all the way to Clark's [Point] to where her cousin lived, Nancy Wilson. And we'd go there and we'd spend the night and we'd go to the store and—I don't know, every year we'd do that. And then we'd walk back. And that's a long walk. That's a long hike. And then my late sister had interviewed my late mother just before she passed away and when I was reading the transcript she said that her father and her and her brother were fishing at Clark's Point and her father passed away on the beach there. So I always wondered about that because we'd be walking along the beach toward Clark's and she'd always stop and look around and maybe she was thinking about that time, but she never shared that with me. And then we'd continue our walk. So it's interesting, things that you find out later that weren't shared by your parents.

¹ Mixture of berries or greens with shortening, seal oil, and sugar

- AL: It sounds that you a lot of stories to share or memories of what you learned from your mother, and it seems like you've, you now have a lot of that knowledge. Are you sharing that now with your children and the rest of your family?
- EI: I share it with my daughter and with my nieces. And then later in the fall, we'd go gather salmon berries. And the hill is full of salmon berries. So we'd pick a lot of salmon berries. Seems like we were always doing something besides fishing (laughs).
- AL: Yes, from our interviews it seems women play a lot of roles here and work very hard doing various things. Would you like to share more about that?
- EI: Well, she taught us how to mend the nets. And then she taught us—one of her cousins taught us how to do splicing of the nets. And I'm trying to think (laughs).
I don't know, I have a brain freeze (laughs).
- AL: It's okay, I'm trying to ask questions too.
How long—are you still commercial fishing and if not, how long ago did you stop?
And is anyone in your family still commercial fishing?
- EI: Okay, the site where we fish at, my mother and her grandfather used to fish at that site many years ago. And they used to live off Snake Lake, the Snake Lake area because she grew up with her grandfather. And the story that she shared is that she remembers taking a *qayaaq*² from Igushik to Ekuk, and she would get in and crawl into the front, and he would be sitting outside. So that whole time she'd be in that dark little space in the *qayaaq* and she could hear the waves flapping against the *qayaaq*. And they'd go across the bay. And then they would, she said during that time that the canneries gave them nets to fish with. They didn't have to buy their own nets. They were given the nets. And so she was able to—after we started to use her site to fish and—there was something else I was going to mention (laughs).
- AL: You can take your time. It's okay.
- EI: (laughs) What was your original question?
- AL: It was, you commercially fished before.
- EI: Oh, I commercially fished with my mother and then when my daughter was born, Michelle, I brought her to my mother and I asked my mother to give her a Yup'ik name. And my mother gave her '*Atkiq*'. And I asked, "Who was *Atkiq*?" And she said, "That was my childhood name. I want her to have that name." So, and then my kids fished with me, all their lives they're fishing. They're part of the fishing experience.

² Kayak

The kids love Ekuk. They can't wait to go to Ekuk. That's their little heaven—to play and just to be free.

And so about three years ago, I told Michelle, I said, "You know, I really want you guys to take over the fishing operation and I want to make sure that, that you know how to do it and that I won't have to worry about you." And so she knew a lot of things just from our fishing experience. And then so two years ago was the first year that I wasn't down there with them. I said, "If I'm down there I'll end up doing everything. If I'm not there you're going to have to learn." And so she was always—thank God for cell phones, she was always calling (laughs). And you know, they did well, made it through the summer. And then so this second year by themselves she hardly ever called—you know, just to report on how they were doing and nothing major and so she got the hang of it, so I feel really comfortable that she'll be able to pass on the fishing with our family.

AL: That's wonderful.

pause in recording

EI: So, I wanted to share about the Ekuk cannery. It was owned by many different companies. And the cannery in the past, they always provided, they always provided—in the fall they would provide a grubstake to their fishermen or have them order grubstakes. Food for the winter. And they provided that even if they weren't able to pay it off fully. Because every year we'd get a grubstake. And then they would provide all the things that you needed from the cannery, whereas now we have to buy it from Dillingham or we have to order it specially from someplace and it's such a hassle and you have to load your trucks up and have it barged down to Ekuk with all the stuff that you need. We don't have a store there that—we used to be able to go to the Ekuk store and buy all our groceries. They'd even have a lot of fresh produce. They'd even have a mail run. And you could go to the net loft and just buy whatever you needed for your set net operation. And now everything we have to bring down from the Dillingham area or other areas. And a lot of people buy food from Seattle, barge it up and have it dropped off at Ekuk. Some of us still go through Anchorage. Costco sends out our food and then bring it down on barge, so it's a totally different—we no longer have that dependency to the cannery.

But I—and they used to have, growing up every week they'd have a—feature a Walt Disney movie (laughs) at the cannery, at the warehouse. And everybody was invited to come and we'd run to the store and buy our pop and candy and go sit on wooden benches and watch these wonderful movies that we wouldn't have—otherwise never see. And you know, because we live in the villages we'd never see them, we'd just see them at Ekuk. And then the Ekuk (cannery) also provided, they used to just provide the fishermen with the steam house and a place to do their laundry. And the women got upset (laughs) because they didn't provide—we had to have our own laundry facilities, you know, gas run washing machines and stuff. And then, finally

one year they provided us a laundromat that we're able to use for free and it's still down at Ekuk. Everybody could do their laundry. Everybody could go take a shower if they want. Separate men's and women's and of course, when they built those, they only had three stalls for the women's shower and, like, nine stalls for the men's shower (laughs) as if there were more men fishing on the beach (laughs). And it's the women that run the beach set net operations, although now you see a lot of men with their big trucks and just fearless compared to us women who are very (laughs) cautious (laughs). And back in the day it was mostly women that would do the set net fishing. And it was really hard work because not only did you pull in the, pull the net out by hand, but you'd also pull in the net by hand. Then you'd take out all the fish and there was a period where the cannery had us—we were issued these brushes, these heavy-duty brushes. And we had to brush the fish and brush the sand out of the gills. Imagine doing that for 2000 fish (laughs) before they would take our fish. That's, that's unreal. And now you just—and then we used to have to wash all our fish, not only gill them but wash them and then put them in the truck. And now it's just, you know, getting ice and icing down your fish and throwing the fish back in the back of the truck and then delivering them.

And then the Ekuk cannery was owned by quite a few different companies that provided everything. And Fourth of July, they would come through the village, they would come through the village and pass out bags, bags of goodies, they'd be ice cream, pop, candy, and an apple and an orange. Fourth of July—so we knew what Fourth of July was (laughs). And every Friday, because we'd be eating fish all summer, and every Friday they'd have a steak night, or Saturday. So the whole village, people would go down for steak night, but you'd have to pay. It was, like, nine dollars for steak night, steak dinner, but you could eat as much you wanted. And then it's interesting how when we would have different superintendents come—I know that John Ekern, or Jim Ekern, was down there for a long time for many years. And they used to have, live in this—the caretakers would live in this white house next to a pond, and the pond was this beautiful white bridge. Do you remember that? It was beautiful! It was like a fairy tale. And we'd always go play in the pond and Rosa Heyano—they were the caretakers for the winter. She'd come down and yelling at us in case we drowned (laughs). But now there's no pond there. They just filled it up so that, you know, there wouldn't be any accidents. And the beach was way, the beach was way up here and now it's, you know I really can't tell my distance, but there's how many—the beach has been extended out.

AL: So there's more beach or less?

EI: There's more beach. You can't even find the old, where the old beach was. And when I walk along the old beach sometimes I'll find the old stake, old set net stakes, you know, still in there.

AL: And the shore's recede—

EI: And the shore has become bigger. And I'm really bad at judging distances, but it's, you know, it's a lot longer. The beach is a lot longer than it's been up toward the cannery versus going down the line. And when you go down the line the set net site where we're at, we're losing a lot of gravel. And the people that build the homes and trying to protect their property off the beach pile up all the gravel, so we're losing all that gravel and it's making changes within the beach. And there used to be a Russian Orthodox church down there that fell down. And there's, you know, nice graveyard because it used to be one of the old village sites. And **Pete Heyano** was saying—he used to be the caretaker down there—he was saying that in the wintertime they'd be care, you know, be the caretakers. And he'd look into the village and he said he would actually see, he'd actually see the **maqivik**³, the smoke coming out of the **maqivik**, like there were people down there, but maybe this was in his imagination (laughs). But he'd actually see it, he said, "The people were down there. You know, they're *maqi*⁴-ing." And so it's such an old community that there's a lot of history and a lot stories. Because there are generations of fishermen that are just like my family that's passed down in Ekuk. You know, we're how many generations of people have fished at Ekuk versus being transplanted from someplace else.

AL: And so for you how many generations?

EI: Well since my great-grandfather, my mother, and then myself. And then now my children so—and then, what others? What else was I going to talk about (laughs)?

AL: We talked about the cannery and cleaning fish with the brush and a little about the changes, a little bit about how men are now doing more set netting in the big trucks.

EI: And the women are learning how to drive, so, the big trucks. And then—it was so much cheaper to fly down to Ekuk. I just remember a time when it was 15 dollars for a seat fare. And when I was talking with somebody else they said, "Oh I remember when it was five dollars a seat." And then you think about it and pretty soon it was 20, 25, 35, 40, 50, and now it's over 100 dollars. But you have to charter now because they say that—well it's 600 you could bring as many people as you want. So you bring six people it would be six—hundred dollars apiece (laughs).

And there used to never be that many homes and now it's just a village. Just all these huge homes. All these—I used to really enjoy Ekuk because no electricity, we brought all our drinking water, all our drinking jugs. We'd use rainwater for washing. And it was peaceful and we'd have the cannery or our own **maqis** to **maqi** for the steam bath. But now a lot of those homes have electricity, flushing toilets, showers, there are wifis (laughs). I mean, why go fish camp, why call it a fish camp when you're living like that? And so I told my daughter, I said, "You know, fish camp

³ Steambath house

⁴ Steambath

is to experience life and to enjoy it and then come back and you enjoy more what you have, what you take for granted when you're here." So we don't have electricity, we don't—we pack all our water down. We collect rainwater and so it's—we live in the dark. It gets dark (laughs). And actually we have flashlights now, but you know, that's such a difference, you know. And I haven't talked to people that have all those wonderful things that they're taking with them to live at their fish camp but it's different.

And we used to really like to go all the way down the cannery, I mean, all the way down the line almost to **Etlin(??)** Point just to do beachcombing and just to look for agates. We used to love to collect agates. And there was this man that would buy agates from us when we were young. And he'd tell us to fill a butter, empty butter cube, cardboard, and he'd pay a dollar for them (laughs). And he said he would make jewelry out of them and sell them. But that got us into collecting agates and to this day we still collect agates and it's always so fun to walk the beach looking for agates.

AL: What are agates? What are they exactly?

EI: They're a sort of a golden clear rock. We call them agates. I don't know what else they're called. They're called agates, okay (laughs). I should have brought an agate (laughs).

(unintelligible; interviewer misheard “agate” and asked for clarification)

EI: I don't think it's a birthstone. No, no, it's just an agate. Maybe it is. Yeah, you'll find them. You might have some.

EI: And then at my late sister's site, it was really muddy. I just need to share this story. It was really muddy, just totally mud and my sister and I, when we were younger it was easy for us to walk out into the mud because we're light. But as we got older (laughs), so it became really difficult for us to go check the outer stake, and so—or take the fish out when the tide had gone out. So we, so one of the carts used to have a cover, a plastic cover. So we made a hole in it and we tied it to a pulley, the truck pulley. And we let one of Virginia's sons, **Bossy(??)**, my nephew, sit in it and we'd pull him out and he'd take the fish out and put them in this mud sled, we called it (laughs)—and then we'd pull him back. And that was, you know, that was fun for the kids to be in a mud sled and be able to go out and collect the fish that way.

I'm trying to think of other stories (laughs). Oh, they used to, the cannery used to always have, they'd always deliver us water for washing. Because we'd collect, we'd have our drinking water but they'd deliver us water for washing. They'd have the truck that delivered water to us, which is really good and we'd have these great big barrels and the water truck would come and fill up our barrels. So they were really good to their fishermen, you know, they catered to them and made sure that they had a grubstake for the winter and that all the equipment that they needed at the cannery versus going elsewhere. And just, and it's really sad to see that type of

ownership gone from our canneries. And it's a different, different type of fishing now. And then we have, seems like we have a lot of, a lot more outside people fishing on the beach. But I'm really glad to see at least we have a handful of people that have been, have fished from generation to generation. And I hope that continues and I hope that, you know, people will have help to continue that because it really becomes expensive, especially when we don't catch the fish to pay off our bills. So this last couple of years has been fine, but you know once the fish go down it's so expensive, such an expensive operation to run. So I'll leave it at that.

end of interview