

**Project**                      **Women in Alaska Fisheries**

**Interviewee**                Joanne Nelson [JN]

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**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 Joanne Nelson in Dillingham, Alaska, on August 2nd, 2018. So Joanne, when you're ready, if you'd like to share your experience as a woman here in Bristol Bay and fisheries, your experiences with change—I'd just like to open it up and let you share what you think.

JN:     Well, I came here in the spring of 1952, and so a lot has changed. And I was working in a small hand-pack cannery across the bay on Nushagak bluff. And the thing that I really noticed about the—I think the population of Dillingham might have been about 400, and a lot of the people had subsistence nets on the beach, and subsistence had always been the life: not just a part of the life, but the life of the people. And so we all, all the women and children who stayed on shore, we took care of the subsistence and did the smoke strips and dry fish and there was no, like, freezing and very little of any canning going on by the local population. That started happening over the years, especially—let me see—I'll say once the cooperative extension service chose one woman from each of the surrounding villages and flew them in and had the expert, master canner from Anchorage come and teach a canning class. And each of these women was, it was expected that they become master canners and go back to their villages and make sure that the women knew how to can salmon and did it safely. And they also, there was a section of that one where they canned moose and caribou and birds as well. So that was a wonderful program and that stepped the women forward a bit. And so even more of the local resource was able to be used.

Let's see, and the climate. I think the climate has—it's turned warmer, there is no doubt about that. But pretty much Alaska weather is Alaska weather. We get a lot of rain and sometimes we get wonderful sunshine. We never get warm enough lakes for swimming (laughs) unless you're a very brave soul. Let me see, what else?

AL: Well, I could ask you a question if that's okay, because you mentioned the cannery and the canning. So, when you learned it was essentially from that head person in Anchorage who brought the people down and teach the women the canning. And so was that for working for the cannery or for doing that at home? Or is it a combination? So did that help benefit women outside of—

JN: No, that was strictly for the home canners. They wanted all the women in all of the villages in the Bay to know how to put up fish safely. And it turned out that all of us women were canning for 90 minutes and this gal came and told us that 100 minutes was acceptable and some women were canning in quart jars, and it was pointed out that there was no established procedure for safely canning in quarts. But they would come out with that sometime in the future, and they have. Now, women do can in quarts.

AL: So, then you after that—you've subsistence fished for a long time? And when you did that, did you do it on your own or did you do it with family? How did that work?

JN: In 1950 (laughs)—I can't even remember the year—I don't know, I got married to a local and his mother had been putting fish away for her family forever, learned it from her ancestors, of course. And I learned it from her. And that's how I learned to do subsistence—not only fishing, but hunting as well and we'd go up river in the fall every year and stay in the cabin and get moose. In the winter we would go up later on, later years we went up by snow machine and hunted caribou. And in the fall we hunted spruce hen along the roads (laughs). In the winter also we hunted ptarmigan and did fishing through the ice, smelts on the river and trout up at the lake. And berries—yes, we've picked thousands of berries; salmonberries mostly, which we really love. Lowbush cranberries, which are my favorite. Blackberries might be my favorite. Let's see, highbush cranberries, they're fine but they're almost only good for making jam or jelly because they have these flat seeds in them that you can't use them for *akutaq*<sup>1</sup> or main dishes.

And also I took a course in wild, edible, and poisonous plants from Janice Schofield, who is the author of the definitive work on plants of the Pacific Northwest [Joanne retrieves *Discovering Wild Plants: Alaska, Western Canada, The Northwest* from a bookshelf to peruse]. And she and I have had many a cup of tea together and a walk in the woods. And I learned a lot from her. In the book, if you open the front cover, you'll see that she mentioned me on those times. And these are some of the communication between the two of us. And I took another course—and from that

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<sup>1</sup> Mixture of berries or greens with shortening, seal oil, and sugar

time then I always gather lovage. It's *cuassaaq*, we call it, and I freeze it for winter. My son plants a garden. I harvest kale and freeze it, and rhubarb, and freeze it. Once in a while we get enough cauliflower and broccoli to freeze but mostly that's just consumable. And let's see, there was another—I got stopped.

AL: Oh that's okay, this is great. So it sounds like, and we've seen the book that you've put together on the ornithology and birds. And with your knowledge with the hunting, with fishing, with these plants—edible, nonedible, medicinal—maybe we could think about any environmental change again. So since you've been around all of these aspects of the environment for so long, is there anything that you notice that was strikingly different over the years?

JN: Really not. I mean, I could go to a certain little patch behind that hill over there and one year there would be abundance of salmonberries. And the next year there might not be anything. And so it's not like what's changed over the years, but what changes from year to year. And we have a wonderful crop, usually in the woods here of the wild currants. And this year there is just a little green currant here and there. I don't know what happened to the currant crop this year. We never know. In the winter we'll say (gasp), Lots of snow, we're going to have lots of berries! But that's not true. It's just—we're dreaming (laughs).

AL: It seems there's so much, sometimes uncertainty with the natural change in cycles here.

JN: Um-hm, I think so. I think it's just nature. I do not have any doubt in my mind at all that there's global warming and things will change a lot now that this is happening, but it's happening so slowly, you know. I don't know. Just seems like it's happening so slowly that unless a person really paid attention they wouldn't even notice it. It would be just life.

AL: Um-hm. And so with this wealth of knowledge that you have—for example, are you sharing this and passing it on to your children or anyone in your family? Are you able to do that on a regular basis?

JN: (laughs) It just comes naturally to them. They all, even a little two year old—we took her out and we let her gather. There's this plant called twisted stalk. And when it grows up, it's like this [demonstrates with hands], and underneath every leaf there would be a little stem and a nice little fat berry. And it looks like the shape of a watermelon, and it's beautiful red. And it tastes kind of watermelon-y, but really nobody eats them. The little girls, they use them for playing, playhouse—*naanguaq*(??)<sup>2</sup>. And so I took the little ones out, including the two-year old and let them pick them because they were easy and brought them in, and we made little jars of jam. So they each could take a jar to their family, you know? And it was a

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<sup>2</sup> Toy or object used as a toy

horrible mess. I'll never do it again (laughs), but see, we do teach them from little time. Oh, and took all of those little ones fern-picking this spring too, and they did a great job! And the ferns, we bring them in and one—Morgan—even taught us a new way to get the bracken off of the ferns. It's a tough job. And I pick up the fern and scrape it on both sides and toss it in water and—one by one by one, those ferns. Well, she said that she heard that you can put them into a pillowcase and throw them into a dryer and turn the dryer on for 10 or 15 minutes and take it out and all the brown stuff would be off of the ferns. And when she brought it upstairs and showed me—sure enough! But the brown stuff was still in the sack so I just took them out by the handful and ran them underwater to rinse the brown stuff out and they were perfectly clean. That's a new one on us.

AL: Wow.

JN: And there are other greens too that we gather. And I gather the—it's called *chythlook*<sup>3</sup>, and it's a medicinal plant and it grows wild everywhere. And I make a salve called balm of Gilead. It has the greatest healing properties. There was a young man, he was autistic and he'd get these little bug bites, you know, and then he couldn't quit scratching them and they would turn into huge sores. And his mom and dad had tried everything and so I said, Why don't you try this? And they did, and it worked. I took a mascara case and popped the inside out and filled it with that balm of Gilead and gave it to him. And when he used it up, he would come down and ask me to fill his little—because it healed his—wonderful, wonderful stuff.

AL: Wow. So are there a lot of people that come to you for that on a regular basis?

JN: They do (laughs). In fact, one time some gal needed some healing and I gave her one of those. And when I was in the store two women came up to me and said, Hey, so and so said you gave them, and could I have some too? I said, Stop out at my house, because I make it and put it in little tins. My daughter orders the tins for me and so I have that to share. And I decided, well if that works so good, then why couldn't we make a medicine out of—oh, pardon me! The balm of Gilead is made out of the new buds on the cotton poplar. Yeah, I made a mistake there. And then I said, Well if that works with the balsam, why can't we use it with the *chythlook*? And so then I made the same recipe, only using the *chythlook*. And if you take a *chythlook* leaf and look underneath, you'll see it's kind of white, powdery. I always kind of think that might be cocaine. You know, it's something like that. I think it's the medicinal property.

AL: Wow. [To Christopher] Did you have a question?

CM: Yeah. Joanne, you arrived here in 1952, you said? Have you noticed any changes in women's roles within the fisheries since then?

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<sup>3</sup> Wormwood (*Artemisia* sp.). YED provides alternate spellings of *caggluk* and *caiggluk*.

JN: Yes, I was here in the first year that motorized boats were used in the Bay. And it was sailboats. And it was the men! And it was men! And the women and children they were on the beach doing the subsistence. After the motors came on, then sometimes husbands started taking their wives as their crewmen. And then eventually it turned out that some wives, independent women that they were, bought their own boats and permits and became women captains. And this fellow, Donald Blank, that wrote the *Who Killed the Pebble Mine?*, he did a series of three DVDs—documentaries—and one of them at least—and I think two of them were shown on National Geographic's, you know, on TV. And the first one was *Caught in Bristol Bay*, and that was just general East Side (unintelligible). And second one was *Making Waves*. And that was—he wanted that one to be strictly about women commercial fishing captains. And then he did do eventually a third one called *Reds and Blues in Bristol Bay*, which referred to the red salmon and the sad price that was being paid for them that year. But yes, the women did, they started taking a leading role. And you would see women out on the scows, you know, working on the scows.

In the cannery they used to bring in—they called them cowboys, and they were Native people from the Kuskokwim, were there. I guess they must have had TV before us or something because those guys who were there, they liked to wear a cowboy hat and belts, you know, and so that's why we called them cowboys. And they would bring them over in mass to work in the cannery. And after a while that changed, and I've worked on the sliming table, the patching table, the lidding, the canning, the casing. I've worked in every department down there—kitchen—except the office. I never worked in the office. But more and more there were women down there on the line doing the work. And now I don't know who they get. They ship people in from somewhere but I'm not sure what nationality they are, do you know?

CM: It varies.

JN: Lot of Filipinos, I think.

CM: Would you say that the women were fairly compensated as opposed to the men that were doing the same jobs?

JN: Well, I expect that when it was the wives that went on board it was just money in the pot. If a man took a woman on for a crewperson, they probably paid them less. You know, that just feels comfortable (laughs). Men did those things, you know! I was just looking at one of George's old delivery ticket books and there it showed what percent he was paying and there were two guys and a girl and the girl paid much less. But of course she was our daughter. That might have had something to do with it! But there was a change in that definitely.

CM: And in your opinion, what do you think women have added in value to the fisheries here in Bristol Bay?

JN: Well, let me think. I don't know if I'd say they have added anything to it. The Nushagak Bay was always known as the fisherman's bay. And so I couldn't say that women came in and calmed the guys down and they became nice guys (laughs)—no, I can't—but no, I just don't know if there was any change in that direction.

CM: Actually, a bit of personal curiosity, what brought you up to Dillingham?

JN: Well, there was this family that moved into this little one-horse town where I lived. The city was one block long. And everything off of that paved street was paved out to there and everything else was gravel. You know, this just tiny little town. And I got acquainted with them in the spring of that year. And they said they had a little hand-pack cannery here in Alaska over on the Nushagak bluff, and they had—they were Seventh-day Adventist people and ordinarily recruited workers from the Upper Columbia Academy and Auburn Academy<sup>4</sup>, but that year they had recruited, I think, six kids, and only one of them ended up gonna go, and so they were going to be short of workers. And so, spur of the moment—I mean, I knew them for maybe a half an hour or so when they asked me if I'd like to come up and work, I was so excited and I dashed home and asked my mom, and she said, We have to ask your dad. And my dad said, I have to meet the people. And when he met them it turns out that the wife's brother was a good buddy of my dad's. So he says, Oh yeah, these are fine people, you could go. So that's how I came here. And we got, we loaded everything (unintelligible) built a tent on the back of a flatbed international truck. And half of it was tented over and two cots and extra mattresses in the middle, luggage underneath, foodstuffs, two big drums at the back. Because in Canada we knew there would be no gas stations. We had to haul our own gas. And there were 12 of us and we all climbed in and headed for Alaska from Idaho. And arrived in Anchorage where we camped by Lake Hood. It was just a wilderness then! And chased a moose because we didn't have any better sense. We should have stayed away from it, but we were just stupid kids, you know. And small planes, local pilots here. The people that I was with, they arranged for them to fly us through Lake Clark Pass, so we were right through the pass. It's from Anchorage Merrill Field over to Dillingham.

CM: I guess I just had one question left personally. When it comes to your children, growing up in this area, especially back then, did you push them into the commercial fishing industry or—

JN: Well, their dad was a captain so as soon as they were able to pick fish they went on board. I think the two oldest boys must have been, like, 8, 9, 10 years old when they first started fishing with their dad. And then the others just followed suit and the older two bought their own boats eventually and had their own—limited entry permit came around at that time, too. They stayed in the fishery for quite a few

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<sup>4</sup> Upper Columbia Academy and Auburn Academy (currently Auburn Adventist Academy) are Seventh-day Adventist boarding high schools located, respectively, in Spangle, WA, and Auburn, WA.

years but finally sold out. Yeah. The girls, not so much (laughs), but the boys, yes, they were definitely commercial fishermen. And then George, he got hired by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game to be their test boat captain and he took the kids with him as his crew when he did that. He didn't take hired crew. He just took the kids and ADF&G put a biologist or two on board as well. And so they'd go out and set net, pull it in, keep track of the time it went out, when it came in, where they were, scale samples, weight of the fish. And what they were really doing is gathering information while they waited to identify the leaders in the big run that was going to come. And then when George felt like they had hit paydirt then he would call ADF&G and tell them, The run is coming, it's right down there. And then they would say, then ADF&G would make an announcement. They would say, Well bring our fellows in and grab your crew and anchor out there because we're going to make an, have an opening at a certain time, you know? And so, that's what George would do and then ADF&G would come on and make the announcement and all the other fishermen would hit the deck running. Yeah. He did that for 20 years. They're trying to be nice (laughs, referring to her grandchildren trying to be quiet in the kitchen).

JL: Can I ask, so you started working in the cannery, is that correct?

JN: I did.

JL: And can I—what was that like, and how did that change over time?

JN: Well, let me see. One thing I do remember quite clearly is that they did not ever put women on the slime line. They felt that was too dangerous. It was the sharp knives and the heavy fish, but they ended putting me on a slime line, and I was ever so proud. When you work for the cannery, you went down there to go to work early in the morning, you had breakfast. And then you worked and then you had 10:00 coffee break. And then you worked and you had lunch. And then you had 3:00. And then you worked and you had dinner. And then you worked and you had 9:00 in the evening and then you worked and you had a midnight meal and then you worked and you had a 3AM coffee break. I mean, it was—when the fish were running it was endless. I don't think it's that way anymore because they've converted from the canned. They don't do so much canned anymore, it's flash frozen. And it takes less manpower and probably don't have to work at that extensive of hours.

AL: So when you were working at the cannery were your hours, like, 12-hour days essentially, or more?

JN: Oh, more. More. Yeah, you made good money in the cannery because of the overtime. And although I lived in a house right downtown on Main Street and could easily have gone back and forth to work—you know, for midnight meal and 3AM mug-up and that—it wasn't a good idea for women to be out cruising the streets that time of the night. So they had a little house down there, they called it the girls' house. And that's where we would go sleep and then get up and go do our job and go

sleep. I just hired a family—a man, wife, and three children—to move in with my kids and take care of them while I did that.

CM: Did you work just for the one cannery or did you—

JN: Peter Pan Seafood, yeah. And at that time it was Pacific Alaska, Pacific Alaska Seafoods. No, Pacific Alaska Fisheries<sup>5</sup>, PAF, because they used to say it's "Pay After Fishing."

AL: And how long did you work at the cannery for?

JN: I think that I worked there—Degan(??) was a baby and by the time he—I think he might have been about 11, 10, when I didn't work there anymore. And by that time I was big stuff. I was a kitchen worker. I was a waitress.

JL: That was in the cannery, you were a waitress?

JN: Um-hm, yes. They used to have these big long tables and benches and then they had these big—they called them "deeps" and "platters" and all that stuff—and when it was time to, just before it was time for, like, say, lunch, then us waitresses were in the kitchen there and we were running from the kitchen out with these big, setting them down the middle of the tables and guys would come in. There was, like, the cowboy's room and there was the blue room, which was for the superintendent and his guests. And there were, you know they had them kind of segregated. And each of us were assigned to the room that we would take care of. And it was our job to keep—if a potato bowl went empty, boy, we'd better get another one out there and get that potato bowl back to the dishwasher and, yeah, very busy, very busy, running.

JL: What did the people who worked in the cannery, where did they come from? I've heard it was very diverse back then.

JN: The Kuskokwim mostly, in the early days. And then later when it was discovered that salmon eggs were about more valuable than the salmon itself, and the Japanese got their egg house, then we had a bunkhouse that was Japanese. And then Filipinos. We had Filipinos that came at one time. And now I don't know, I don't go down there anymore, I don't know what the mixture is.

CM: Primarily Russian. Nowadays they ship a lot of people from South Africa.

JN: (laughs) Really? That's amazing! There was one thing they did in the kitchen that I thought was really awesome because, you know, in a big thing like that where they're cooking up all this food and they never know how much people are going to eat and they don't want to run short, so there's always too much. And people from—well, two places, down by the cannery there was a place called Tent Town and later

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<sup>5</sup> Pacific American Fisheries (PAF) was purchased by Peter Pan Seafoods in 1965.



they moved it to where PAF boatyard is. And the families of the men who came to work in the cannery came with them and lived in those tents while the dads worked. And these families would bring over their, you know, coffee cans and sit 'em on—they had a shelf there outside a window at the kitchen. And afterward, then the leftover food we'd just put in those cans. And I know some people did do it to feed their dogs, but a lot of people did it feed their family and they would come and gather their cans afterward and take them home and they would have food. And I thought that was a great thing for the cannery to do, because you know, it took manpower and hours and stuff. They could have just dumped it. But I always liked that very much.

AL: So, while your husband was commercial fishing, what were you doing at the time for work? Were you working at the cannery or were you involved in that, his fishing in any way?

JN: I did go fishing with him, but I am susceptible to sea sickness and so that—I kept at it and I tried it for several years but one year I went out with him and it was really rough and we were way out there and that's where the fish were and I was so sick that I was in the bunk and couldn't eat, couldn't do anything, and he said, I can't keep worrying about you, I'm going to take you to Clark's Point and I'm going to dump you off. You just have to grab a plane for home or something because I want to go where the fish are. And so he pulled in there at Clark's Point and I was so sick I never even thought anything of it when he nosed up at the beach I went and jumped over the front and almost killed myself (laughs). I mean, that's a long drop! And so I made my way up onto the dock and went to the local family, Joe Clark's, and his wife Clara, she got me a cup of tea and got on the radio and called for a plane and sent me here, went down the hospital. I had pneumonia and so I was in bed for quite a while. And I never went fishing again. That was the last time.

From then on, the family had to handle their own way, you know, but I took a job with Southwest Region Schools. I was Indian Education Act program coordinator for this area for several years, and I had to go visit each of the 36 villages in the district at least once a year and meet with the parent committee so that they—and tell them how much money the government has allotted them that year and how they want it used to benefit their children. And, so write up those proposals and send them in and order the stuff and—so that was my job for several years.

And after I quit that I went up to the Marine Advisory Program, the Bristol Bay campus, and applied for secretary to the Marine Advisory Program agent, and was hired. And that was 1992. And that's where I learned about master canning. And my agent encouraged me to teach. I taught canning here and classes here and people could sign up and pay their tuition. And smoke strip making, I would put away king salmon until I had six of them. And then I would advertise the class and get those out and thaw them, and I would sign up—let me see, I'm number 8, 7, pardon me, we

had 4 (laughs). Anyway, so everybody got the experience of cutting a king salmon head off and filleting and stripping and hanging, and I did that for three or four years. And then one year after the ladies were gone—after the smoke strip making class, we would always have smoke strips and crackers and tea. And after the canning class we would have canned salmon and crackers and tea. And one time after the smoke strip making we were standing here—my husband and I—looking out the window at the freshly hanging strips, and I looked at those and I said to him, You know, honey, even from here, those don't look good (laughs)! Because people just butcher the fish so shamelessly. 'Course they don't know any better. They don't have the technique but it hurts the heart to see the fish so badly used. So I quit. I wouldn't teach class anymore (laughs).

AL: Do you at least keep your own salmon?

JN: Oh yeah, we do.

AL: Your own smokehouse?

JN: It's going right now as far as I know, yeah.

AL: So it's still going.

JN: Um-hm. We just have dried fish in there now. The strips have already been cut and put away and divvied up. And the guys on the close days, they would go take the skiff and go up across the river and subsistence fish and just bring us—well, the last batch we had was 40 reds. That was a small batch.

AL: So then are your sons, now you're saying, are they the ones doing the subsistence fish for your home?

JN: Yeah, actually no. It's the husbands of the daughters and granddaughters, they're doing it (laughs). Yeah, my granddaughter **Cindy**, her husband **Jonathan** he brings us fish. **Marina**, my daughter, is married to **Richie**, and he brings us fish. And sometimes when a fisherman is out fishing and he breaks down or something, or like when George was out testing and had to come in, they'll have fish on board. Well, we usually end up with those because they can't deliver them, you know? So they just bring them home and give them to the family, and the family, we get our winter—

*end of interview*