

Oral History
Simuka Smith
Dillingham Alaska,
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Interviewers: Anna Lavoie, Jean Lee, 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.

Simuka Smith: My name is Simuka and I moved up here to Alaska in 2001 and I started out at the cannery doing payroll and I got into fishing the following year. I was doing it commercially. We went out halibut fishing, longlining. The boats are thirty-two foot out here—we don't have anything larger. And I would longline out by Togiak, near Hagemeister [Island] for halibut. And we also passed the thing through the fishing commissioner to be able to catch our own fresh bait because buying frozen before we started out that was a little tough because the bait wasn't always what we were supposed to get. So we would lay out our lines and then we'd go off toward where the herring are and just throw in our net and pull it in and we'd have over a thousand pounds of herring bait. We'd do our spill and we made more time for ourselves.

I think it was 2004, we managed to petition more time for being out on the water for halibut. We'd carry at least 3,000 tons of ice on each trip and we used to come back loaded and we'd fill the town first—We'd sell all that out at the harbor before we would sell to the canneries. So our second trip out we'd come back and we'd do it for the cannery. We have to go through the [Alaska Wildlife] Troopers to do landings when we bring in halibut. It's not like salmon where you just take it to the cannery. But we have to document what size, everything for the halibut, how much it weighed, so it's really intense. So when you have all of your hold filled with halibut, you gotta weigh each individual fish before it can leave that boat and document it and then you have two to four hours to turn that paperwork in for this to be legal.

And when salmon season starts, we would switch our gear over, and we're drift net and we'd spend a lot of hours, a lot of times—when I first started we'd go out and we did pretty well, but as the years progressed it seemed like the fish were coming in earlier than when [Alaska Department of] Fish and Game would open the season up (laughs). We'd see this big pilot go through and it was just like, well, the main salmon just went up river and they wouldn't have counters out or anything so, it kind of messed us up a couple of summers, for a lot of the fishermen and it was just like, Man, how depressing.

But, it's fun! It's fun. I think the weather, just like herring, being out there during herring season, the water would be too cold so the herring wouldn't come in and I remember the cannery, 2001 in fact, they couldn't process. There was no water, we had a big freeze. So for two weeks everything froze in so when they started delivering herring all they could do was just grind it up and shoot it back out in the water. But, you can tell the difference with the weather and the way the fish are coming in.

Doing subsistence now, I don't commercial fish anymore. I did set net. I tried that once but that was really hard on the back, set-netting. It's not as easy as on a boat (laughs). I prefer to be on a boat, but yeah, I tried that one and it takes a lot of work out of you to

pick those nets and try to get it done before, with the tides and stuff. So and then we'd have to wait for the tide to go out far enough so we could drive down the beach to where the nets are. And it's sort of like what I have going now with my subsistence fishing too. I have to wait for the tide to get out so I can get around the bend and down to my net and it's usually already half out of the water. But it's a lot easier to pick because you've only got 10 fathoms (laughs) instead of 150 (laughs). So yeah, and, I do pretty well.

I see them coming in later and later every year. And I think it's because the water has to warm up enough for them to come in, and a good storm will bring them in. Like probably in the next week or two we'll have a good wind blowing storm and they'll start flying up the river and everybody's nets are gonna be smokin' (laughs) so (laughs), I like that.

But, yeah, I really enjoy it up here. I hunt. I haven't done any sports fishing. I used to sports fish all the time, but now I just get enough in my subsistence net I don't have to go sports fishing. I've got other things I like to do. I like to hunt like I said, and I like boating and I love being on the water. And—I don't know, I just (laughs), it's just fun out here. It's um, there are so many things that you can do. I mean you drive up the lake and there's moose wandering around on the road. I remember coming to work one morning and here's five baby cubs running down the road. And the mothers must have kicked the cubs out and there were five of them just running down the road, playing and rolling around and I stopped taking pictures, and they were cute (laughs). But yeah, you get to see a lot. I keep pretty active up here.

I can't say I wouldn't stop fishing because I do help feed my family, and others. I don't keep it all for myself because I have, I call them my extended family because I help them with fish because they don't have a net, or they can't drive down, or are too old. So it's just like, just take them and just dump it off, here you go.

And I can it, and freeze it, filet it, freeze it. So it's quite an experience if you actually get a chance to get out there and watch everybody out there picking their nets and just going to town. And it's like a big family ordeal when you do it. So—but uh—that's me in a nut shell.

Anna Lavoie: Well, if you don't mind I'd like to ask you more about when you are set-netting, because you said it's a lot of work, it hurts the back. And you mentioned once that you had pulled in a lot of fish just in one net and you had people helping you pick. Can you talk more about like the actual physical work of it and how hard it is?

Simuka Smith: Well, like on a boat you have um, your nets going up on a reel so you are basically standing up. Where out on the beach it's on the ground, you pull it up and you are bending over and you have to pick the net and you just work from the one end up, and then you pull your, you have a pulley down on the other end. And you use a pick-up [truck] to reel your net out and pull it in, and it's a lot of work to it, and it's more than a one person job. There's a lot of families across the bay here that um, they're just all lined up and it's a sight to see. And they've got their kids, everybody is out there and everybody is picking. Um, the only sad thing, um, that year they were actually paying \$1.25 a pound, from the 40 something cents I was getting when I was out on a boat, in the early, early years. And then I guess the prices crashed back down again. So it's like not everybody, a lot of people are selling their permits because, just not making

any money really. And a lot of maintenance to keep up things because you're gonna have, if you are doing it on the beach you're gonna have to have a truck so you can pull your net in. You have to have all your gear, all your lines, because even though your net's all tied up you have extra line so it will go all the way down and—man I can't remember how long that thing was, but the further out you go when you put your stakes in, the further out you go with your pulley, the better luck you have and then you can adjust with the tides. So, if the tide is a low tide you can take it out as far as you can or if it's a really high tide you can bring it in closer to shore. So it's still in the water at high tide but pulling it in you've got to be careful because it is dangerous. Anything could happen, like it could snap, and you never know. So you have to be on guard. But like I said it is really physical because you are hunched over, picking and trying to get it [salmon] out and then get that net right back out there so that it's working for you and (laughs), because the longer it stays in the water the better it is for you. Because I've seen some people, they'd have two nets. They'd pull one in and they'd pull the other one out while they picked that one, and then they'll pull that one in and throw the other one back out. So they had a really cool system going. But, that was, they had three or four permits right on that site so they could do that. Yeah, but, it was an experience, it really was.

And then after you pick your fish, they wanted it to be iced so the cannery was offering slush. So you had to put in the bed of your truck, this cover like a tarp, and you make a slush out of there. They give you the ice and then you put water in there, and then when you go pick fish you gotta throw it in the slush. And if you put your fingers up through the gills they'll bleed. And so when it hits the ice it will take most of that blood out of them, so that, and it keeps it a better quality fish. And they don't sit there throwing it up on the beach. You gotta take care of the food, because then you bruise it. And so there is really a lot—that's why I like the boat better, because holds are right there and you got your slush bags in the holds and you just drop it right in the slush when you're picking it off the net. Where on the beach you got to pack it up to the—you can have the truck close enough but somebody's got to still go and pack it in as you're picking. So it makes it easy when you got a whole family out there picking and (laughs) going to town on that net.

So yeah, but—it's cold, it gets cold where we were at—because you are right on the beach, and that west wind would blow through on storm days. And you don't get a break. You just fish until Fish and Game says they are closing to let fish go up river. And then—then you get maybe a day, or twelve hours off or something because it's really up to Fish and Game, how they let us know when we can fish and can't fish. So if they don't have really good counters out there, then a lot of fish will go through and we won't get to fish. And then when they realize they let too many in, then they open it back up and we'll fish for days. So, and when the season ends here—a lot of the fishermen can go over to Togiak and fish there for the last part of salmon fishing because their season starts a little later than ours. Or pretty close to ours but theirs is extended. But if you're on a boat you have to wait twenty-four hours before you can fish when you move to a different site. Like to there, or down to Clark's Point or, so there is a waiting period when you change areas. So, but usually after salmon we'll switch our gear out, we'll pull our reel off and set up our boat for halibut again and go back out long-lining for a couple more trips before the cannery closes up completely.

And I tried to get people to start their own non-profit organization for delivering your own fish and get buyers and it all stays within that group that puts into it. And all they

had to do was pay one person to do the brokerage. That would have been the secretary, you know, to make, line up people for the fish, halibut and salmon. But nobody really wanted to participate that way and it's just like well, There goes that idea, because it would have benefited them to get away from the canneries and start making their own. The further west you go, there's a lot of villages out there where the village actually owns. They have five canneries over there by Platinum, and, the villagers actually own those canneries. And halibut canneries and then they've got several salmon canneries and it's just like, Why can't we have that here? And so I did a lot of fighting trying to get that happening here, but everybody wants to be the chief (laughs). So it's really hard to get them to break away from the cannery and just try to—I think a lot of it's fear, breaking away from a sure thing to try something new. And so it's just everybody from their grandparents on always dealt with the cannery. So it's not easy to get a culture to kind of change. But the younger generation, maybe one of them might decide that, Hey that's a good idea. And these kids get together and start doing something.

When I am out fishing whether it's on a boat or even on the ground—on the beach, it doesn't matter male or female, your duties are still the same. Um, halibut, it's good to have the bigger guys because they can flip that fish, hook the fish and flip it over. I usually just ran the gear. But uh, we all had our duties even, we'd have five people on board, the captain and four of us. And every one of us had something to do on that little thirty-two foot boat (laughs). So it's uh—drift netting and set-netting, male or female it really doesn't matter. They are both equally doing the same thing so there is really no arguing about Oh, they get more money because they're a guy. Not like back when I grew up. So, it's really nice that everything is equal on that part as far as the fish is concerned. But, I really enjoy it.

Um, when I was out halibut fishing out by Hagemester we decided to carry extra fuel so we put a fifty gallon drum on board up on the flying bridge because it was the only place that we could get it to work, it was out of the road. There were no tenders out there so we had no place to get fuel for our return trip and the cannery was not open at the time, and they had closed it for a year or two. But, uh, we were coming back and we got into a big storm, and, right between Cape Constantine there's like two sand bars and we are going in between the two sand bars and it's always rough going around the sand bar. So, the wind was blowing and we just happened to run out of fuel (laughs), right in between the sand bars and so—the captain, the crew, they went out to put fuel in the boat while I was trying to hold it in place and keep it in place without being blown on the beach or what not. We were having like thirty foot waves and it just like, it was, we were in this—trough (demonstrates wave action with arms)—just going to town, the weather is beating us and I think that was a little scary that time. I thought it was a little scary and—

I didn't tell you this one—we went out and I was reeling in and a storm—we got a radio—came over the radio that there was a storm blowing through. And we had all our lines out, so it was like—we had eight totes of lines and so we started pulling our lines in and we got two. I was in the wheelhouse because I was making dinner and the wind started to pick up and it got really rocky—captain yelled down to the one gentlemen that was on the reel to stop, because if you don't stop when he tells you your line will go under the boat and you'll prop your line. And the worst thing you can do is have that line wrap around your prop and then be dead in the water. Because there is nobody out there for us. We always ripped it off to—by ourselves (laughs). So it was like we could radio but there wouldn't be anybody to come and get us. And so he had me come out

and we had to take—since it cut the line—we had to go all the way around to the other end which is almost a mile down. And that kept the buoy on the other end so we could pull the rest of our line in and grab whatever fish we could. And I was sitting on a five gallon bucket because I—when you are reeling—we had this reel and I am whipping the line in a tub (demonstrates by moving hands moving in a circular motion), this great big tub, and the hooks, and that and trying to keep it from getting tangled up and that is what I do. And I would slide back this way (leans back) and I'd try to pull myself up because we're in a trough and the waves—I looked up and it was above the wheelhouse, the flying bridge—I'm looking up at this wave as we're—I'm going like this backwards (leans back looking up)—I'm trying to pull myself back over because our deck is only that high (holds hand at shoulder level) so that bucket, I'm sitting above the deck itself, or the side of the boat there and it was just like, OK (laughs). So we're trying to get that in and then we finally get everything on board and we're trying to get back to safe cove so that we can hide out from the weather and—the wind—we're riding it like this (moves arm in forward wavelike motion) because we didn't want to get stuck in the trough—the lights go out so we had no overhead lights. And so here we are with a flashlight trying to see where the waves are and—I mean that one was scary. And then the anchor line broke loose. So we were worried about that—“Hold 'er steady!”—and I was just like, But I can't see nothing. And he goes, “Just hold the flashlight up and watch the waves” (laughs)—I was like, Oh no (laughs in despair). Yeah, I couldn't believe it, the light on our mast went out. Don't know why it just went out (laughs). And it turned out it had a short in the wire system.

The boats, we usually do all the maintenance and stuff too. We do all our fixing, mending your nets, and lines and whatever we have. You do it right there on the boats so you can re-use it. Because you can't afford to come back in just to do a repair on anything. So that trip when we almost lost the anchor and the line went back and almost propped it, it was like OK, next time we'll leave the lines in the water and just get out of the weather. But we were already committed and it was just no way of just drop what you're doing. We had to get them in because we could only let it soak over one tide and then we have to pull it out—we can't just let it sit there because then that fish will rot down in there and be full of sea lice. So you gotta take care of your product when you are out there, on, any of it.

Anna Lavoie: And yourselves.

Simuka Smith: Yeah, and yourselves.

Well, it's like I said we go all the way out to Hagemester, just out past Togiak and we are usually the only ones there and that's where we see all the trawlers, the Korean trawlers and stuff. We fought to try and get those out of our area. They were banned from the Bering Sea and here they are, right here in our local community. And you could tell the difference because we weren't getting as much halibut because they are taking everything. And, but uh, we lost that battle. We tried though. That's all we can say. We did petitions, we sent people up and, up there and—they chose just to leave them alone. And they increased their bycatch from 35% to 65% and it's just like, They are already raping us. I mean they are wringing the grounds. A couple years in a row we had very little kings [salmon] come through. There hasn't been a commercial king date set to fish for kings and even if they do, they don't pay that much for it. We were getting less for our kings than we were for our reds. And one year we were getting big bucks for—we call 'em dogs, and they would pay big bucks for their eggs. They

wanted the eggs, the canneries out there. And so here, your reds and your kings, you're getting thirty cents a pound. They were giving you—two cents for pinks, we call 'em humpies, and the dogs they were paying us fifty cents a pound at that time. That was in 2003 or 2004, I can't remember. But it was like, kings, they should be worth a lot but they're not. Everybody, that's what these uh, subsistence—that's what we go for, is the kings (laughs). So, it's like, if they're messing up our subsistence nets because of the trawlers. Because they gotta come through that area to get here. And it's like—it's messing with our food. That's our food chain.

Everybody puts up fish. They smoke it, freeze it, can it, salt it. Like, they'll take the heads and they'll salt that and store it for the wintertime. And then they'll take it and rinse it out, and boil it up for fish head soup (laughs). But I've always been lucky—families will go by and be driving by while I am cleaning, and ask for the heads so I don't have to haul it to the dump, and they just come and take what they want and so, I have been pretty lucky about that so I am not wasting anything.

When we go up river—we used to take the boat up there too—and do our hunting in August because we'd be done with halibut and salmon. And the silvers run about that time but we don't have a buyer. The cannery usually closes and wouldn't buy silvers. So it was just like, OK our season has ended in July, and we could have went, if they would stay up longer, everybody could be, making more money. But the cannery didn't want silvers, yeah silvers. Then one year they stayed open a little bit longer to buy our silvers. But they weren't giving us a very good price so hardly anybody went out, and, it's frustrating. If you're not gonna get paid for the effort that you put into it then you're not gonna go out there. Because you're talking fuel, maintenance, all of that on that boat. And same with set-netters—I don't think I've seen anybody set net for silvers because we don't have a cannery to sell it to. So it makes it hard.

But (laughs), we would take our boat up there, up river and we are allowed to drop a little net out and so, there's dinner (laughs). And, we'll cook right on the boat and hunt right off the boat. We'll go up a little slough and there we'll shift—because we had a draft of two feet with this thirty-two footer and we just pull in as far as it would go and we just shimmy the boat around a little bit so it settles. So when the tide was completely out we're sitting straight flat, you know that's sideways, like a lot of these other boats. And so it made it really nice and we'd just sit there and watch the bears and wait for the moose, wait for Bullwinkle. I used to call him Bullwinkle. And I see a lot of cows out there. That's what they call the females. They are cows and you can't shoot those. But a lot of wildlife out there when you go up river. And, you get the ducks, beaver, otters, and so there is a lot of activity going up there during August when we go up hunting.

I did get a moose one year, and I wrote a little story, and my kids went and put it online (laughs). But it's just like, we all share—even though one person will get a moose we share it with several families. And then they get a moose and we just all share. We don't just, Oh this is mine, you know? And I really like that. That's why I like my extended family because if I don't go hunting they'll always bring me some moose meat, and which makes it nice. And when I go, I divvy mine up to three different families. So it's like one part of it's going here, there, a leg a piece (laughs). And they're huge. I can't pack a moose leg by myself. I cannot lift it. A caribou, I can, but not a moose. I am just not big enough (laughs). I have to put it on the trap and drag the tarp to the boat (laughs) and put in the—the guys roll it into the skiff (laughs) and we

take it over to the boat and use our boom to pull it up out of the skiff. And then we'd hand it there so that it bleeds. We'll butcher it all right there on the beach and quarter it, and then take it home. We had cleaned it up and take it home. And—you don't really have to take much groceries because you got fresh fish out there, you got fresh berries. We'd go out there, as we're walking around in the woods, and by the time we get to the boat we're too full because we're sitting here eating all the berries (laughs).

So, but it's fun. I like it. I like it up here. In wintertime we get to go moose hunting and people do ice fishing. I'm not one for sitting on the ice because that's just a little too cold for me (laughs). But I have done it before. And they get trout and pike and dollies [dolly varden], they call 'em. And, I don't know, just sitting there over a little hole with a fishing pole, and forty below weather—it's just not my cup of tea.

I'd rather go out and get firewood. And take the snow machine out to the woods and cut down some dead trees, and there I've got plenty of firewood. Just bring it back—chop—do them in long pieces, about six foot pieces, and then bring it home and chop them up and then I've got a log splitter that would split all the wood. And it was just like, hey, two days of that and we'd have a enough wood for all winter, and always keep enough so that in the springtime we always still had a lot of wood left over. When we'd start to go fishing, that's when the wood stove would go off—never light it again until wintertime. In November we light the wood stove and it stays lit until we go fishing again. So it cuts down on fuel prices because fuel prices were very high when I first started. We were paying almost seven dollars a gallon. And that was in the winter time. And then they'd drop the prices during the summer time and it was just like, Why are you dropping it *now*? These people are just visiting. If they had to pay what we do in the wintertime, you know? Maybe some of us could keep our permits (laughs) and not have to sell them because we can't afford it. But now that BBNA [Bristol Bay Native Association] bought the fuel dock, the one fuel dock, the prices have been—decent—four something a gallon. So it's just like, Yeah, about time (laughs) we get some decent prices. And so, we are pretty fortunate here because the further west you go, it gets higher and higher for fuel. So we're pretty lucky to be in this little hub.

Another thing about the winter time when we are getting firewood we're always on the lookout for moose because we have a second moose season in December—from December 1 to December 31st. So whoever didn't get a moose in the summer time, we would go out in the winter time and get it. And it was really fun because we had the sled with us already and we'd just go out, cruise around, and we'd almost get over to Togiak sometimes before we spot a bull. And we'll shoot it, and instead of skinning it, we just chop it down to size, the legs and that and throw it in the sled and bring it back. And we also get to get caribou. But caribou hasn't been running very much up here like it was when I first got here. Caribou is a lot tenderer but it's small, they're a lot smaller than the moose. You figure a great big Clydesdale horse and you are thinking of a moose, if you have ever saw a Clydesdale horse. But yeah, it's huge. A few winters ago we had one up at the lake and my friend called me about, The moose is coming up the road and get my dogs in the house. And so I walked in, in my wind break, and I opened the door and here's this moose. And I could reach out and touch her belly right here (extends arm in front of self) and I could see the calf on the other side of her. And she just turns her head like this at me (turns head sideways)—and just the look on her face—I just slammed the door like this, and I ran into the other room (laughter) and I grabbed the gun. And it was just like, she is gonna come stomping in here and kick me (laughs), because they are very protective of their baby. They were saying the reason

she was staying around the area was because we had wolves for a change, and never seen a wolf out here. And—the following day they tried macing, and that tried to get her to shoo her out in the woods someplace, and she just wouldn't leave the area, and so they had to put her down.

And they took that meat and they gave it to—what they call the food bank and distribute it, and some went to the senior center. So none of the food was wasted. They are really strict about waste, and they fine big time for it. Same with fish. I've seen people picking their net and they don't want the red so they'll throw them off to the side, which makes it dangerous for everybody else because that attracts the bears. Well, the bears are going to be attracted anyway, but to just throw away good fish when you could be giving it to, like I said, the senior center or some family that can't go fishing. And so they try to keep on top of that kind of stuff because there's a lot of people here that can't afford to buy a net and hang it and—because if you don't know how to do it, then you're gonna have to have somebody do it for you. Luckily I had an elderly gentleman show me how to do it and I watched, and I like tying knots so it was like, OK I can do this. So I was able to do my own. But a lot of people, they have somebody do it for them and it isn't cheap for somebody to hang your net. And to see somebody just waste food, it just really upsets me because there's a lot of families here that just don't have, and it could go to good use. We also donate fish to the school district, and so the kids can have fresh fish on Fridays (laughs). Well, sort of fresh fish on Fridays when they're at school. So they've got all kind of programs for food going. I think BBNA pushed that through, and BBEDC [Bristol Bay Economic Development Corporation] and the superintendent that worked with it. So it made it kind of nice, so all the schools are getting fresh salmon in the summertime. And it's a tax write-off for the fishermen to donate so many pounds. Peter Pan [Seafoods] processed it for them so they would process it, package it up and give it to the school. The only thing they haven't done yet is have somebody donate moose meat (laughs) for the school. Because kids get tired of fish and it's just like, Ah, we don't want that, we want pizza (laughs). The committee usually really stands together when it comes to the children—men and women both.

I've seen a lot of girls have their own boats and they'll be out there fishing, and they'll have a crew. And yeah, it will usually be just family members basically, a lot of them up here. I was an outsider when I came in, but I had a friend so it was really cool for me and everybody was just shocked, here's this little gal out there, it was just like, a lot of these women here are small too, so it wasn't just me being small. We keep up with the guys just as, you know. And if you don't work then you don't get paid (laugh). So it's not a competition between the guy and the gal or anything. It's just part of the lifestyle. And the guys also help put up fish on the subsistence, they'll be sitting there filleting, and it's not just the women's job. I remember my friend's dad would be out there and he showed me how to fillet my first king from subsistence. And so I was sitting there and he showed me how. He hung it up, and cut strips, and hung it up in the smoker. And then he'd close the little shack all up and he'd light the—woodstove, and they smoke it. But you let it hang for a few days so it gets all that moisture out. And the key to it is if it's raining, your meat will sour. So if you keep air blowing through there your meat won't sour and before you light your—and smoke it. So it was pretty interesting to see how they did that. And it also keeps the flies from laying eggs on your meat. Because as long as there is a breeze you're not going to worry about—they call them **chivuks**, and they're flies, big, big like horse flies. That's what they reminded me of. But—we just put a fan in there and let it air out and let the fish hang in air, and

then it uh—as soon as it's fairly dry then we'd close it all up, seal the whole thing off and build a fire, and we'd put the wood in from the backside and the chimney is in the inside and just smoke it up. So it was about the width—about from this to the edge right there, of how big of a—it's square, that's the smokehouse. So that's a lot of fish hanging from the ceiling, I mean, from the rafters. And we'd put up *a lot* of fish, and they'd do all kinds. So they made strips. They make, um—they take the fatty piece on the salmon and they cut that into like big chunks and they'll smoke that too for something. It's like candy (laughs). Then they have their little square, long square—

I don't eat salmon but—it doesn't like me (laughs). But I love halibut, and so it all works out in the wash. So I'll cook it. I'll clean it, cook it, prepare it any way they want it, and I have no problems with that. I usually put up a lot and so when—if there's like a funeral or wedding or something, I'll pull out a bunch and I'll cook it up and take it. And I'll also make a dip with cream cheese. And I'll take my canned stuff and use that for a dip, mix it with cream cheese. And I'll take that and then I'll take maybe two kings. And when I freeze them I vacuum seal it so that they stay fresher and they last longer. So I can have fish all year and then whatever I don't use, I will can that. And then get fresh, and restock my freezer. So, I always have fresh fish in the freezer. And I didn't get to go this last summer to do any subsistence because I was so busy working that I didn't get a chance to get a net out. But this year, back to the grinding stone (laughs) of taking fish. But I like it because you see everybody out there on the beach. Once in a while a beluga will—they'll get a beluga on the beach and the whole community will be out there taking stuff off of this beluga. And they use the oil and all that so nothing goes to waste. It all gets cut up and taken away—surprising, they'll even go on the radio station and talk about it, Hey there's a beluga on the beach! (laughs) Everybody tears on down there, Give me some! Get me some! Just cut a slab and they share. Everybody shares.

So it's beautiful up here. I like to watch the killer whales. When we go out halibuting they like to jump around our boat. We thought one of them was gonna jump into the boat (laughs). You get to see stuff that people don't see on the beach, normally. They'll see belugas but they won't see killer whales. In fact we did have one out here one year. We did have one out here one year, but that was a rarity. They don't usually come up this far. So we get a lot of stuff out there. And they travel in pods, they're going like this on both sides of us (moves both arms in forward wave motion), and then they'll cut up in front of us and come up out of the water and (laughs). And it's just like, OK, slow down (laughs), slow the boat down.

Yeah but fishing, it's really the only job I can say in my whole lifetime that is equal opportunity (laughs). *Actually* equal opportunity—there is no prejudism *at all*. They might have problems with how you take care of your fish. And if you want to get paid good you're gonna take care of that fish. If you don't take care of the fish then you're gonna get less money. So what you do with that fish is the most important when you're fishing. And I think, my personal thought is, I think the women take a little better care of the fish than the guys do. Because the guys are used to the old ways where you slam it, you know, pick it and slam it and then throw it over here. And it's just like, No, don't be doing that! They don't want damaged fish. Just pick it, run your fingers up [the gills] so you can get it to bleed and drop it right into the ice water. Because it's the slush and it'll bleed in the water. But I see a lot of guys still that don't really take care of their fish because they're still back to the old school. I think uh, early 2000s, when they started to do refrigeration—having ice on board and stuff for the salmon, slush

bags--that's when they decided that throwing them on the deck and then throwing them in a hold was damaging the fish. And so they said, Oh we gotta stop doing that. And I think it was like 2003 or 2004 and then we, everybody is taking better care of their fish. But you still see, even out there on the beach and stuff, they're just picking the net and throwing it up the beach to get it away from the waterline. And they're just throwing it, and it's like, OK, I thought we were supposed to take care of these fish (laughs). And things get banged around *a lot* (laughs). But yeah, it's hard to break old habits I guess. But it's like I said, you bring in fish that looks pretty beat up, they're not gonna pay you the price you want. And they'll end up blackballing you from delivering fish to them. And so then you're gonna lose out fishing because you didn't take care of your product, your commodity that you're selling. So—that's my life in Alaska and I love it (laughs). So it's fun.

Anna Lavoie: You talked about the year the salmon prices were low and you talked about the trawlers. What was the year? That was at the same time right? How many trawlers were here?

Simuka Smith: There were like three of them out there like near Round Island, Hagemeister. You could see them from Togiak in fact, and there was like three, four of them and they're trawlers. They're big trawlers and they were the Koreans and they'd be out there taking up the radio. And you're trying to call to see if there is a tender anywhere close so that you could get fuel. I had the captain sick at one time and it was just him and I on board, and we were just gonna do a little bit. And I got us over to a tender—I found a tender that just happened to be on his way to Seattle and I pulled up there to see if he had anything that I could give the captain to make him feel better. And then I had to bring him home because he was so sick. He'd lay there in the wheelhouse sicker than a dog, and I brought the boat all the way home. And I just followed the tide. I waited for the tide so I could, I had to pull the anchor by myself. I don't know why we were out there just the two of us. I think we were doing some salmon, silvers or something. We were going to get some silvers to put up, can and stuff. So we went out there, and plus to check for halibut to see if its gonna be a good year for halibut, and we had all these trawlers out there. And it was just like, *Man*, we gotta get rid of these guys. And I think that was 2004 or 2005. But they'd been out there every year. They're out there.

And we tried to—tried to have the [Alaska Department of Fish and Game] commissioner kick them out of that area. Whoever, because it went though a lot of the fishing board. There were different fishing agencies, and they were all there and they were listening to our complaints, and we sent one person to represent our area and they got up there and presented their stuff and the guys weren't even taking notes. And it's like, Where's your pencil? (laughs) Is anybody taking notes? And, huh? What? (laughs) They start taking notes. My friend was really good for getting up there and getting them to laugh, and then actually getting down to business, what he wants to say. But he could never write so I would write the proposal and then him and a few of his fishing buddies would go over it and, Oh we want to add this, we want to add that. So I'd do all the drafting and (laughs), I'd just—Just tell me what you want. So I'd have, when you're writing stuff up you're gonna have this, this, this. I mean it's like somebody took a deck of cards and shuffled it. And so I'd have to break it down and move things around and (laughs). Ok, so this is what I have, and I'd read it off to them and stuff, Oh yeah, yeah. Yeah but you need to add this here. And its like, well I had to add it up here because I've already—we're covering different areas.

So, but we keep trying. We keep trying to get those out of there because they are interfering with our fishing. Even out all the way up to here. Togiak, they get theirs, and if their fishing is light then that whole village is doing without because you got these trawlers out there getting, taking everything. They don't have no—regulation, basically. Because the commission gave them sixty-five percent bycatch, which is a lot of bycatch so they can just take anything they want. And a lot of them were in trouble because they were taking too much bycatch when it was thirty percent. So that jumped, doubled, a little over doubled the bycatch. Instead of cutting it back like we asked. And, but I think the reason for that was because they couldn't get a good person on board to police the situation because they would take bribes, and people are human (laughs). I need money in my pocket so, it's like, OK. That's probably why they did it. Instead of fight it, just take it. But then they couldn't restrict where they fish too. Because if they were restricted from the Bering Sea, Bering Strait. They are not supposed to trawl in there. What are they doing inside our bay? So they are here during herring right up through salmon. Because after we finish with salmon we go out there and they're still out there. 'Cause we'll go out for the last few runs of halibut before the cannery closes completely. But yeah. I think it was 2004 I had leased my friend's father's vessel and permit and I went fishing out there with it and (long pause).

I remember all that. I quit fishing after we got in a car wreck. I tried once doing, like I said I did set net. I tried that and that was just way too much. Because I did a lot of damage, internal damage when I was in the wreck. And my friend, he got really busted up. We got hit head on by a drunk driver and so--sold the boat, sold the permit, so now it's just subsistence. Which is OK. I miss the boat but—miss being on a boat actually. I like the boat better than the beach, still (laughs). So, any other questions?

Anna Lavoie: Well, you mentioned going up river for hunting. Is it every year on a friends boat? Or was it when you had your boat?

Simuka Smith: Yeah, it was my friend's boat. We were roommates and it was a thirty-two footer we'd take up and we'd pull our skiff behind so we could just go putt around the little sloughs and stuff and get in places where the big boat wouldn't. Everybody else would be anchored outside the streams, but we were pretty protected. And so while they were getting blown around out there, we were sitting in a nice calm little crick, it's like a crick. I used to call it a crick. And he goes, "Ah it's just a slough." It just comes in, and really narrow, and we'd putt around in all the little thingies and we got a lot of moose that way. It's just that one time we got it where I was standing on the boat. And it was just a shock (laughs). It was five hundred feet out and I didn't even think I'd really hit it because I thought I just scared it. It had heard the gun, the report, and lifted its head up, looked over, and the next thing you know he took one step and down he went. So it was just like, we got up there to clean and I had shot him right through the heart. So I didn't damage any meat (laughs). It was just like, I was aiming at his neck (laughs). Because I was looking for a big spot to hit (laughs) and I figured the neck, yeah. But uh, yeah, so—

Before you put the boat away, you need to service it, winterize it. A lot of people don't do that. They just pull it in and let it sit and don't winterize it. Once you get everything winterized and everything stored away, then next spring all you have to do is go in there and check your fluids and you know, just do very little maintenance and turn the engine over and it should just click right on, if you put it away right. And got all your gear stored away so you just put it right on board. We don't have to worry about

anything. We'll go through the nets, make sure the nets are all OK, or if we have to patch anything. That's one thing we don't do in the fall. I tried to get 'em to, Let's do that, but it's just put it away. We got hunting, we got this, we got that. So, it's like, OK, so when we are out halibuting we have a person come and fix our nets. And if it's not fixable then he'd hang a section of net for us, and just take all the floats and the lead line from that bad net. And so it's not interfering with our fishing because we are still longlining and then when we come back the nets are ready. And we take all the gear off of the boat, the longlining stuff. Then we put the reel back on the boat, and then wind the nets onto the reel so we're ready to go drifting. And that's just like, you throw your line in and everybody goes to sleep. But somebody has to be at wheel watch and that was usually me. I'd be on wheel watch just so we don't drift off into somebody's boat or the net drifts off to the beach—with us. We almost had that.

We had to actually get out there and pull the net in. Something happened to the reel and we had to sit there and manually pull that net in with all the fish in it and everything, and you're pulling it and trying to crisscross it so that it doesn't get all mangled up. Because it's going to be hard enough to pick the fish as it is because it's—all this big pile (laughs), all the nets—150 pounds of net and you got all this fish and the fish are flopping around on the deck, and then you have to go and try and pick it. But it's a lot easier, when you finally get to the end you just hook that on the reel, and then somebody can hold the reel as you're picking the net and get it back on the reel. We had, I forget what went out on it, but that was the hardest work, having to pull that net in by hand. We were all just sitting there after we got it in, Do we have to pick the fish yet? (laughs) Can we have a break? (laughs). Because it was hard work. That was hard work. But sometimes you have to. You just have to do what you gotta do, so that you don't lose what you have. Because if Fish and Game sees you, the troopers, and your net's still out there when they close-- that's a big fine. And if you don't pull your net in, like with ours, just let it sit there, it's not gonna do any good because you're gonna get fined because it's gonna close here soon. So let's get that thing on board—and bad time for it to go out too because it was almost closing down. We had to really hustle and (sighs), so it makes it rough, when stuff does break. But luckily we had another reel at home. And so when we got fish delivered we just came back, switched the reel out, and back out there. And we'd just camp out there and wait for the next opening. So we don't come to town and hang out. Once we go out we stay out. Halibut, we come back after a week and go home, steam [bath], get supplies back out on the boat and gone again. And salmon the same way. Well, we buy food off the tender. The tenders have food that you can buy off of them. And so you don't really have to come to town. And you can get your fuel right there. And depending on their water supply, if they got good water, because I believe that's why my captain got sick, because the water wasn't good on the tender that we got it off of. I always had my Diet Coke, so I was like (laughs), I don't drink that water on the boat (laughs). That's my washing water (laughs). But yeah, so there's a lot of things to be careful for out there. It's just like something so simple, you think you're getting fresh water and it turns out their tanks are bad. So you gotta take care of all your health issues and stuff to make sure everybody is safe.

Anna Lavoie: That sounds super challenging and I am happy you are OK. From all of your adventures and your accidents.

Simuka Smith: (laughs) Well, it's an experience. I like it. It—it *makes life exciting* just to be able to say, Oh I did that (laughs). I like that. And it makes me feel good about myself. I tried it. Because I try everything. I've worked on bridges. I've worked on dams. It's just like,

I just wanted to try it and do it. So, I've done a few girly jobs, you know, like work at the bank, and waitress, cook and now I've got this inn and it's just like, I get antsy. I want to do something physical. And fishing is physical, and I like it. Because when you're done fishing, it's like, Boy I could just kick back and relax a little. I know I got food in the freezer, everything's good to go.

Kim Sparks: So you mentioned earlier about heating oil is really expensive around here. You know, if you don't have other options you may have to sell you permit. And I am wondering if that's a common story.

Simuka Smith: I think a lot of it was due to the prices, and it costs so much to run a boat, and you're not getting that much for your fish. And now that they got those dual permits, so that they can carry an extra fifty fathoms. I thought that was wrong having that happen because we got everybody from the lower 48 with all our permits, and it just bounces us out. A lot of the locals here—like they had Ocean Beauty, they wouldn't sell us our ice, they wouldn't—they had their fishermen from the lower 48, that's who gets to deliver to them. And we'd have to come to the cannery, and then we finally got some other tenders out there that we could deliver to. But still, it was still unfair. And the pay was different too. Their crew from the lower 48 got more money than what we get. It's their vessels and stuff because a lot of them store them at Peter Pan but it's still—I can see where everybody gets frustrated. Myself—we were just too banged up. So, still want to do it, but it was like, Yeah but (laughs), what if (laughs). Well I think a lot of it is because of the pricing and the cost to actually—a lot of them are in debt to Peter Pan and Sno Pac, Trident, because if something goes wrong with the boat, they'll fork the money over. And so whatever fish you had, probably won't pay that bill, so you didn't really make anything that year. So I've seen a lot of that happen. And they had to sell.

Kim Sparks: Is there any way to buy back in if you wanted to?

Simuka Smith: They kind of ripped them off buying them at, like, \$35,000, and now to get one you're paying almost \$100,000. So, they bought them out sold them to the guys in the lower 48 (laughs). So it didn't even stay in the community. I mean, it's like, Well, let's try to get uh, since we're Native, we shouldn't even have to buy a permit. And I go, Yeah, you could do that because in Washington, the Natives there, they get to actually fish right there in Lake Washington. And in Lake Union, the guy will have his net strung out right there (laughs). Because I used to do tourism there, and it was just like, Wow, they got their net out here (laughs). So, I know my grandmother was a fisherman. And her and Grandpa used to go for salmon, and they used to do tuna. And they were based out of, right there by the [Ballard] Locks. They had their boat, right there in Ballard. And—she was really upset that the Natives could fish and she couldn't go out there and fish (laughs). She had to go off elsewhere to fish. So, she was just like, That's not fair! (laughs). But it's just life. So, it's like anything could happen if everybody banded together. They could probably push it through where the Natives wouldn't have to have a permit. And they could still sell their product, just like down in the lower 48. I'm not an Alaska Native. I am a Samoan, but I just love to do all this stuff. And—it doesn't matter because there are so many people up here that aren't Native that are fishing. So, it's not just for the Alaska Native.

I mean we've got a lot of families that bought permits from the Natives and that started out for widows. Um, and elderly women and stuff. That's what set net was. Set net was for the elderly. And then when it got to be such a big thing, and here's all these people

coming up from the lower 48. And they were like, Oh wow, we can hook up with this gal and we'll get her permit. And that's where it went. Everything went. So it's just like with anything. If you let people come in and walk on you, you're gonna get walked on, you know? If you keep your stuff and go forward. That's why I always tell my friends and their kids, I say, You need to take care of your stuff because if you don't put it away right, come springtime you're gonna have to ask the cannery if they can help you fix your boat because you didn't winterize it, and something froze up on it. And I said, So you're gonna be in debt already, before you even get the boat in the water. And then you gotta buy grub and you gotta do all this stuff. And it's like, if you take care of it right now, you won't have to worry about it in the spring. And we try to tell these young kids because they think that—I hear them at the high school, well, *I'm a fisherman*. And I go, Well the fishing is fine but it doesn't get you through the whole year. You're still gonna have to go out and get a real job, because we just don't make enough just on fishing. Not to live throughout the year. I don't live on a Native allotment so I have to pay rent. So here I am. They may have to pay for fuel or electricity, but I'm paying rent, fuel, electricity, and all the little things I like, like TV or Internet (laughs). But, you know, you just can't live on fishing anymore. The prices are too low, so you have to have a full time job when we're not fishing. Yep, I say, Just because you're a fisherman doesn't mean you can't get another job. Because that's not gonna hold you over, and if you decide to have a family you are *definitely* gonna have to have another job. I work two jobs, sometimes three, just because I'm a workaholic (laughs). Keeps me busy. I just love to try different things.

I made a little story for the grandkids about the moose that had a bad hair day or something. I was telling how I came out and it had a bear's tooth in its hoof. When we got up there it had a bear tooth in its hoof and you could see the claw marks. So the moose had kicked the bear off of it and broke its tooth in its foot. And so, I have that, and my little trophy. And I wrote about it, yep it was having a bad hair day, and then he met Grandma (laughter), or something (laughter).

Jean Lee: You talked about your extended family up here, and making sure that they have food. Can you describe who you consider your extended family?

Simuka Smith: Like the captain of the boat, him and I are real close, and his family. He had his dad. He has his brother and their kids and stuff, and then his daughter and her. So that's kind of like extended family. I have some really good friends I worked with at the store. And, single parent, he's male and he's got two young kids, and so I'd consider him extended family and I'd take him fish. You know, because I know its hard raising children by yourself. Been there, done that, and it's just like. Yeah, he works a lot of hours so the children are usually there in the summertime by themselves. Or if their auntie comes in from the village then they have somebody there— I would take some up to the senior center, and Granma's house, and—because I'd have way too much. I'd have way too much, and they'll take it. I can get room to put all the fish I take. I can get places, freezers to put them in. But it's just like, I'd rather give some of it away, because I'm not gonna eat all that. That's gonna last me two years.

And I'm gonna can a lot, and its just sitting there in the pressure cooker. And, not one of my fun things to do because it takes so long. You gotta keep an eye on it, especially if you've got an electric stove. If I had a gas burner, then I could adjust the flame so it will come down quicker than electricity. Electricity is a little harder to cook with the crock pot. Because you don't want the temperature going too far over and blow your top and (laughs). And you want to keep up to where it will seal your jars, so you don't have to go

back and try to reseal them again. Because once I pull it out of there, I don't want to have to wash it down and then put it back in to re-seal because it didn't seal all the way. We did have—I remember my grandparents, we had—she showed me how to use cans. And she would put her tuna in cans, but she got a whole case of lids—the seals were all bad so all her fish went bad. And I've seen that with even jars. We do the Mason jar and sometimes those lids aren't good too. So you spend a lot of money just to put fish up. And then like I said, I vacuum seal. So you figure, three eight foot freezers of vacuum sealed fish (laughs). And they are big fillets, and I'll put like the reds, I'll put in the round. I'll gut them but I'll leave the head on so that way it will be a lot easier to fillet and do what I want to do with it. What I got from Peter Pan, they had cut the heads off. But normally, we cut the one fin, right near the gills. We'd go behind that and cut that there, so then you got the head with some meat on it. And it makes it easier to fillet when you cut it off there instead of having to fight around that fin, and all that. But everything, it costs, vacuum seal bags cost, for the FoodSaver. I've gone through three FoodSavers since I been doing this. I used to do the same thing with halibut. I'd fillet my halibut, and I'd leave the skin on, and I'd just put both halves—because you fillet one side, and I'll cut it in half and I'll put those two pieces in one vacuum seal bag. And then I flip it over and then do the other side, because they are flatfish. Then when I cook it, I just section it off and stick it in a pan, and put some butter and lemon pepper, and it's almost like poached fish.

I came down on the tender to Lake Union and the owner of the boat came on board so I made him a fish dinner. I had salmon that I baked in the oven and I did some halibut up, and he had his wife and somebody else with them and they were just totally amazed. They go, You should get a restaurant, and he goes, “Why don't you come be on my boat?” And he has research boats over in Cook Inlet. But I go, No, I gotta try something else. I gotta try something different. I'm just starting into commercial fishing and fishing was over, and they needed another person on board to bring the tender back. I go, OK, let me go put the boat away and I'll come back (laughs). And that's what I did. I flew out to Togiak and hopped on the boat (laughs). It was fun. It was an experience. I really liked it. Going through the inside strait and, that was fun. I wish they—well the tenders out here, they do have the women on board. But the ones that come up from the lower 48, they don't usually. It's usually a wife or something. And we get likethe boats from the Deadliest Catch. They'll come out here and be a tender. And so, we get all kinds out here.