

Fishtales
Saturday, September 29, 2012
Working Waterfront Festival

Interviewer – Markham Starr
Interviewee – Renee Ruscoe

MS Alright so, what is your name?

RR My name is Renee and originally, oh Ruscoe and I'm originally from Mississippi. I ended up in the state of Oregon. I spent most of my adult life as a, your typical marketing salesperson working for an industrial company that sold environmental safety and health things and travelled and met clients and did that sort of thing. And I found myself one of the millions of people without a job in this country. Didn't know where I was going what I was doing. Didn't find any doors opened and then I met a fisherman poet who, at a poetry reading actually is where I met him. And I start- he invited me to his boat. I went down to take a look at his boats and the next thing I knew, I was working on his boats. Then I was living on his boats and then he invited me to go fishing with him off Kodiak in Alaska. And so I became a first time fisherman, the last big thing I did in my forties. Yes in my life. And so I thought it was, I thought it was a really great experience, but story that I'd like to share is a love story with a King Salmon. So what the type of fishing that we did is called purse seining for salmon off of Kodiak. We were fishing up Uyak Bay which is one of the very beautiful places, Larsen Bay Alaska is the fishing village, the cannery village that's there and we were fishing and we were doing alright and in the, what happens is we surround the fish with the seine and start pulling the seine in. And this amazing fish started coming up the seine because it goes, the net goes over the power block and then we stack it on the boat. This amazing fish started coming up over in the net and she was at least 36 inches long and she was probably 6 to 8 inches wide. This skipper saw the fish and stopped the block and he said, "Get the fish out of the net" So I walked over to this fish and I gently pulled her out of the net and I could feel at that moment that she was a female. She had, she was full of roe. And so I gently pulled this fish out of the net and I sort of gave her a little, I held her like a baby and I gave her a kiss and I put her back in the water and I said, "Go find a river! Go find yourself a river." It was a King Salmon, a Chinook. There aren't that many of those anymore. And so it felt so good to know that I had done the right thing. That we as a team, a crew had done the right thing for the fish, for the sea and yeah, it was a love story. Course she was looking at me saying "Get me back in the water please!" But yeah, it was very interesting. So first time, first time fisherman and there's lots of really beautiful stories that you can tell, things that, like one day off the stern of the boat, probably a hundred feet away I saw a whale breach, beautiful whale, a few seconds after that, same whale jumped all the way out of the water from the tip of her head down to the bottom of her tail and fell over. A few minutes later she jumped again. Four times this whale jumped. We could feel the wake from when she hit the water on the boat off the stern of the boat. It was the coolest thing to ever, that I've ever seen. I don't even know anyone that can say they've seen a whale jump four times in a row. [laughs] But I can. So yeah, fishing, fishing first time fishing is an amazing thing when you're an older person. You don't know what it is that

you have to find in yourself to be able to do it. Because I'm not a thirty year old man, you know, honestly. So anyway...

MS How big was the boat you were on?

RR We were on a 47' fiberglass seine boat. It's specific, pretty specifically rigged for seining and so you know it's got the, it's, obviously the bow and then the house and then the stern is where the fish hold is and that sort of thing so.

MS And how many crew?

RR There are a total, there's a total crew of four people. One of the people, the skiff man, of course, is in the skiff taking the purse end of the net out which and then we bring it back over the power block. And then the skipper who, well everybody knows what his job is. And then there's the guy who was stacking leads, which is bottom side, the bottom end of the net and then my job was stacking corks. So. The net itself is a little over a quarter of a mile long and it's about 90 feet deep and so, no 60 feet deep, pardon me. And so we would, four to ten times a day, the net would go out and we'd bring it in and I'm telling you, it was the hardest, I literally had to tell myself several times, especially the at the very beginning, "Dig, dig, find it because you can do this." And interestingly somewhere along the summer, some--a transition happened in me where it wasn't so much about getting the net aboard as it was about getting the fish aboard. So. And the skipper says that that was when I actually became a fisherman, when it became about getting the fish aboard because I tell you, there's, I don't think I've ever experienced anything quite as exciting as when three or four thousand pounds of salmon come over the rail. And we're putting them right into the hold. Or when the hold is so full it's plugged, you can't get another fish in there and then the deck is full and you're lying across all these fish to keep them from going over the rail back into the ocean. Yeah. That happens, it's fun.

MS Were these all day trips then?

RR No, well actually, what happens is we, we fish out of Larsen Bay. That's where the cannery is. We go out from Larsen Bay and we'll stay out for a few days depending on how long of an opener we have which is set by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. We'll go out for a few days. Or if it's open longer, we'll go out for longer. The last part of the season it's open, it's just perpetually open, it's open until further notice. And so we, we were out the last part of it for a month. Yeah. So we have to, you know, plan for supplies and food and that sort of thing, laundry. It's interesting they have what they call tender boats that collect the fish, because we deliver our fish every two days at the maximum depending if the hold is full, obviously, you deliver every day but you deliver your fish every two days for freshness and then the tenders take the fish back to the cannery. So they make day trips, in and out every day. But they also handle our laundry. They handle our mail. They handle, you know, anything like, if we have parts that need to come out to the boat, they'll bring the parts or, you know, whatever, and it's interesting to try and find, to match the tenders up with the fishing boats because you know sometimes they'll send

laundry out on a tender and you may not see it for a week [laughs] so it's a very interesting way of living and it's again, it's something that I, you either find it in yourself to do or you don't. And I was really fortunate to be able to find it in myself to do it.

MS What about the, were there any other women on the crew. Or is it mostly male dominated or...

RR You know I, there are women who salmon seine. I've met a couple of them through other festivals that I've done, well, attended. But I didn't know any women people, workers where I was fishing off of, out of Larsen Bay, Kodiak, or Uyak Bay Alaska. So, it was, I was an anomaly yes, but I was also, I was there for me. It was interesting. I wanted to see if I could do it. I wanted to see what I could...and the other thing is, being a person who had looked for employment for so long, it was the most interesting thing, I think one of the most interesting aspects was, I didn't spend any money for three months, money didn't mean anything, cause there was first of all, no place to shop, nothing to buy and whatever I needed from the cannery store was bought on credit and it would get paid from the settlement at the end of the...so back when we got back to Kodiak, the funny, a funny thing happened. The skipper handed me a hundred dollar bill and I looked at this and I said can I buy somebody a cup of coffee [laughs] so I bought my friends that I was with a cup of coffee and I got change and it was really kind of cool. And then I started having trouble keeping up with it. It was like, where does this go? So we were gone for four months. Yeah. So we were out for four months and I didn't spend money or I didn't have change for four months. It was an interesting, very different kind of thing.

MS And then was that. Are you done with fishing at the end of that or...?

RR Salmon fishing, I, back when we get back to Astoria, the skipper and I are going to begin working on a couple of boats that he has there. One is a steel boat, one is a wood boat. We've got some work to do on them, but we also plan to be able to go out tuna fishing in the Pacific and so the thing about fishing as I understand it, he's fished all of the fisheries, you know, from tanner crabs and king crabs to salmon to herring to roe, all kinds of things. But he says he thinks that it would be fun for us to go out and tuna fish. And it sounds fun. Tuna fishing really though because they're so fast and they're just amazing to watch in the water which secretly is probably my favorite thing is to be able to see these beautiful beings. They're just incredible, the different species of fish, species of salmon. There are five and they're all different. If you know what you're looking at they are all very different.

MS So it sounds like you're hooked.

RR Probably, yeah. Well it's interesting. You know the more, a little more to the story is, the more I got into fishing, the more it seemed that fishing got into me. And they say it's kind of like a disease, once you catch it. So I think I probably do have a little bit of that whole fishing fever going on. I think so. And I did wear my XTRATUFs all summer. I know some etiquette around XTRATUFs. When your pants are tucked down in your XTRATUFs, you're working. When your pants are outside of your XTRATUFs, you're

going to town. You fold your XTRATUFs down at night so that you make sure you have dry boots to put on in the morning and you wear your XTRATUFs with everything. You wear 'em with pants, shorts, skirts, you do. Well I'm just saying you could. So, but the point is, yeah so they're called "Kodiak sneakers" "Kodiak tennis shoes" kind of thing because everyone does. They wear their XTRATUFs all the time whatever they're wearing, wherever they're going and that sort of thing so. I had mine on all summer and I do have to tell you I enjoyed wearing them. They were comfortable. I never got cold. I had the insulated ones and I was glad I did. My feet never got cold which I was worried about because, you know, I'm used to being warm. I'm used to, I'm a southern person, I'm used to being warm and don't particularly like being cold that much. So I was glad I had the insulated boots. Anyway just wanted to kind of

MS Thank you so much

RR Yeah Thank you. I you know, it may not be much of a story, but I

MS No it's great

RR I think one of the things that I'd like to say, more than anything is, no matter what, you know, you look around and you don't see any doors open, or maybe you see one open and you're not sure what you're looking at, go for it and don't ever, ever give up. Don't give up. Because I seriously I had been looking for work for three years. I found fishing. And I'm not looking for work anymore. I now know something that I can do. And whether or not I spend too many more years as a person on deck, because I probably won't, but I can still do other things. I can cook for the boat and I can you know take care of other you know types of jobs that the skipper needs a person to do. Anyway, so I'm looking forward to continuing in this lifestyle. So yeah.

MS Great

RR Thank you

MS Oh thank you. [laughs]