

Laura Anderson Oral History

Date of Interview: October 17, 2014

Location: Newport, OR

Length of Interview: 20:10

Interviewer: SC – Sarah Calhoun

SC: This is an interview for the Voices of the West Coast Project; my name is Sarah Calhoun. Today is October 16th or 17th, October 17th, 2014. I'm with Laura Anderson. Laura, can you state your name for the record?

LA: It's Laura Anderson.

SC: Perfect, thank you. So I thought we could just open it up very broad-like, I'd like to hear a little bit about your history and how you got involved in this fishing business.

LA: Okay, well I grew up in a fishing family. My father was a commercial fisherman and as was my grandfather. So I guess that would make me third generation of fishing. I started fishing with my dad when I was 14 years old when I would go spend summers trawling for salmon, mostly on the Northern California coast. I did that on and off up until maybe about 10 years ago, was the last time I fished with him. I also crab fished with him in the summers, so it was always just kind of a part time thing for me.

SC: What was it like being a woman or female on the fishing boats? We have this perception of it being a male-dominated industry.

LA: Right, well my situation might have been a little bit different than other women's because I was fishing with my dad. I think that he was very easy on me [laughs] and tried hard to make sure I was comfortable on the boat. So for example, all of his deckhands would sleep down in the hold of the boat, next to the engine room where it's really smelly and it can be really hot down there and he would sleep up in the upper cabin, but because I was his daughter, he let me sleep in the nicer bunk in the upper cabin. He let me sleep in a little bit longer than he probably really would have let other deck hands and it was generally fairly accommodating to trying to make life as comfortable as it can be on a small, old, leaky, wooden boat that did not have very many creature comforts at all. You know, there was no bathroom, there was no shower. It was very small and so it was a good experience though for me as a young girl.

SC: And I wonder what kind of relationship that created with your dad and if you had a similar relationship with your mom? Was she part of that involvement?

LA: My mom would get quite seasick so she wanted to fish with my dad and she tried it on several occasions, but she didn't have the stomach for it. I have two older sisters that my dad would have liked to have fish with him, but it wasn't really for them. So I think it was kind of a special thing for my dad and me, but, really no one else in the family had, and it was nice. We got to spend a lot of time together; we play a lot of cribbage. You know, just got to spend summers together that way.

SC: And so you said you haven't fished in about ten years, does your dad still fish?

LA: No, he retired also probably close to ten years ago now. He's probably 76 now, so, some fishermen keep going until their 70's, but at some point I think it gets a little hard on the body after all those years so he retired and uh just golfs a lot now.

SC: What do you do now, or have you done since the fishing?

LA: Well, I went to college, which no one really in my family had done before. I had an interest in science and I was actually pre-med when I started, but after my undergraduate degree I went into the Peace Corps and worked with artisanal fishing families in the Philippines for two years. I think as a result of that, [I] developed a stronger interest in marine policy and marine science and things of a more academic nature. So when I came back from that two years I started graduate school in the Marine Resource

Management program at OSU with the intention of... Actually I think when I started the program I didn't know how I would actually apply that degree, I don't think I had any inkling that it would be in a restaurant setting. But it certainly has been very helpful to me in terms of creating what is now, Local Ocean Seafoods. Known fairly well, coast-wide, as a sustainable seafood restaurant. I consider us leaders in the seafood industry. You certainly don't need a master's degree to run a restaurant, but in my case, as much as we have to do with fish and fisheries it certainly is helpful.

SC: Can you describe a little bit of what that process is like? How do you keep it sustainable, where do you get your fish from?

LA: Okay, well we buy from around 60 different vessels, most of them here in Newport to keep us in a fairly steady flow of all of the species that are harvested locally. So that would be Dungeness crab, king salmon, albacore tuna, rockfish, lingcod, blackcod, halibut; those are kind of the major keystone species for us. And I think that just as a result of a lot of education and academic training, kind of coupled with real on the ground, on the boots, boots on the ground work that I've done, I kind of just have a sense of what I think is good. Clean, fair, food. I also am involved at the state level for policymaking; I sit on the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife commission that sets policy for the state-managed fisheries. As well as a number of other, kind of task forces and commissions that are involved in various aspects in seafood, be it marketing or policy or research. So there are a lot of different aspects to it.

SC: And what led you to get involved in the policy, I know you went to school in part for that, but now that you own a restaurant how does that all connect?

LA: Well it has a way of creeping into your life [laughs] Once you kind of dip your toe into the pool of being involved and sitting at the table, it can kind of cascade. I think that you tend to see a lot of the same faces at the various kinds of policy settings and strategic kind of frame working that goes on in the state. So once you get involved it's kind of hard to get away from it.

SC: So I'm curious, so we know that fisheries is a very regulated industry, does that have an effect on the restaurant business?

LA: Oh absolutely. The whole supply of seafood is controlled by what seasons are set and how quotas are set and what gear is allowed to harvest so we're completely dependent on being able to access our product from right out our own back door. So if there is a closure, or if there is just a poor year for whatever reason, it can affect the availability of prices so we're really at risk with that because we are a local ocean seafood. We really don't have the ability to import substitutes from China for example; it would be totally against our whole brand and our whole mission. So I think that's one of the reasons why I work really hard in the policy arena, is to make sure that we have good, healthy fisheries, that fishermen can continue to have access to the resource so that I can provide that to our customers.

SC: And in this process, do you create relationships directly with the fishermen?

LA: Oh absolutely. I think I kind of credit my father with a lot of my success in building those relationships because it is so important and the fact that many fishermen knew my father, they had fished with him, and he had, has a really great reputation that people were willing to trust me before they actually really knew me. So that was very helpful. I also had a business partner when I started Local Ocean Seafoods who was a commercial fisherman, also of very high integrity, a very good reputation and so he also brought a lot of credibility to our business. And now, after ten years of being in business and having bought out his interest in the business, and being on my own, I just, I really cherish having those strong relationships [0:10:00] because it's very important. There's a high demand for the product that's available, making sure that we get it, it's not always just a matter of price. There's a lot of pride that fishermen have and it is a lot of trust that has to go into a buyer-seller relationship.

SC: And beyond that relationship, can you talk a little bit about the Newport community, and if that has, or what kind of impact your business and your roles have?

LA: Yeah, I think I know what you mean. I like to think that we have a very positive impact on our community because of our success and our growth; we've become a pretty major employer, which is important for the local economy. We employ 60 people in a year-round basis, probably closer to 75 in the peak seasons. But also the fact that we buy all of these dollars that come into the restaurant get distributed not just to staff, but to the fishermen that bring us product, so I think that dollar-for-dollar we have a very positive impact on trying to keep those dollars in the community. But also, I think that people look to us as kind of a showcase for the best of the seafood that's available here. So I know a lot of people like to bring their family here when they come and visit from out of town and I think there's kind of a shared sense of pride and shared sense of ownership in that. That's, I think, a really great thing.

SC: So we were talking briefly before the interview that you've expanded recently, can you talk about some of the changes that have occurred in your business over time?

LA: Yeah, well we were getting quite popular [laughs] shortly after we opened, which is a great thing. There are worse problems to have, but it was really kind of a problem for people who wanted to eat here because our wait for a table could be an excess of two hours. Which is really discerning to a lot of people who travelled far distances to come and eat here so being able to expand was really a great thing. It's cut the waits down considerably and it's also just been nice because we have this wonderful view of our whole fishing harbor and fishing fleet from the upstairs of the restaurant so people, I think, really appreciate kind of getting that birds-eye view and looking at all the different kinds of boats that are here and the activity on the bay, the NOAA fleet, it's pretty special.

SC: And what are some of your hopes or aspirations for moving forward in the future?

LA: To keep doing what we're doing. It was quite a push this summer to get through the expansion and I had a wonderful staff of people that helped make that happen, but I think we're all kind of looking forward to slowing into the winter and taking a deep breath so no big plans for the future right now.

SC: So I know that this, I'm sure takes a lot of time and it's a big part of what you do, but I'm curious if you still have a connection with the ocean, similarly to maybe when you were fishing when you were younger to working in the seafood business.

LA: Yeah, you know I don't get out on the ocean very often. Truth be told, I get seasick myself and I would always get sick the very first day of the season fishing with my dad until I got my sea legs on me, so if I just try to go out recreating for the day, I can get quite sick. One of my passions is scuba diving and it's something I try to do as much as I can. But I also just recently bought a kayak, which has been nice. I don't take it out on the ocean, but it's a great way to get close to the water and stay connected in that way.

SC: So if you had any advice for someone thinking of getting involved in the fishing industry, can you think of something? Whether it's going out fishing or business wise.

LA: Yeah, I think that I'm always really excited to see younger people getting involved in our industry at any level. You know, for those who are looking for a career on land, I just encourage them to go to these various meetings that are happening where the decisions are being made, getting to know the players and getting networked in that way and starting to understand the issues and how they're evolving here. And there's no shortage of meetings at the state, regional, and national level for fisheries management. But also just talking informally, especially with fishermen, and most fishermen are very approachable and love to talk, especially to young people about the industry, about the realities of it, about the challenges, about the highs and lows. So just getting familiar with a few people who can kind of give you that sense or maybe take you out fishing, I think those are all good things to do.

SC: So I'm coming towards the end of my questions, is there anything you'd like to add or you can think of that you'd like to talk about?

LA: Not particularly. I think that the focus of your project being women and the fishing industry; I do find that there are not a lot of women that actually are on the boat fishing, and doing the labor aspect of it, but the few that I do know are amazing women. Whether they run their own boats or work as crew or work with their spouses, it's not a traditional role for women to fill. So it's always a very unique thing when women do choose that as a career. I'm sure that you've talked with other women who find that their role is more in supporting the business and that's more of the traditional role of women in fishing is making sure that the business aspect of the boat is taken care of and that can be everything from purchasing the groceries and the equipment to marketing the catch, you know when it comes in. But I do think that there are more and more women getting into the policy end of things. I was at a meeting yesterday for the ocean, Oregon Ocean Policy Advisory Council (OPAC), and it's pretty even spread between women and men participating at the decision-making level so I think that it's encouraging to see that there are a lot of career opportunities for women who want to go in to that kind of vocation as well.

SC: Can you think of any reason why there's an increase in women's involvement?

LA: Well, at the risk of sounding a little bit cynical [laughs] I said I wasn't going to say anything too incriminating, but I think I might. One of my theories is that a lot of the jobs that are involved, whether you're working at a non-profit level or state government, or at the entry level, are not incredibly high-paying jobs. I suspect that more men to start in a position that's paying quite low is, that a man would be less likely to take some of these entry-level jobs and I think that's part of the reason we see a lot of younger women coming right out of college and going into these entry level jobs. And then hoping to advance, of course is the goal. So that might have something to do with it, is just the pay.

SC: One question I like to really end the interview with is if you can think of one word to describe the fishing industry, do you have one?

LA: [Pause] It's very dynamic. It's yeah, that would be a good word for it. Constant state of flux, constant state of change, always new stressors, new challenges to overcome and they seem to just pop out of the woodwork [laughs]. Like the ocean itself, is a very dynamic environment and can be a little bit unpredictable at times. Yeah.

SC: I don't have any other questions, is there anything else you'd like to add?

LA: Nope, that's all Sarah.

SC: Okay, well thank you very much.

LA: Thank you.

[End interview 0:20:10]