Lacey Berns

Transcript of an Oral History

Conducted by

Anjuli Grantham

at

Bern Pile, Viekoda Bay, Alaska

On July 6, 2015

(With subsequent corrections and additions)

Kodiak Historical Society

About West Side Stories

This oral history is part of the West Side Stories project of the Kodiak Historical Society. West Side Stories is a public humanities and art project that intended to document the history of the west side of Kodiak Island through oral history, photography, and art. The oral histories chart the personal stories of individuals with a longtime connection to the west side of Kodiak Island, defined for the scope of this project as the area buffeted by the Shelikof Strait that stretches from Kupreanof Strait south to the village of Karluk. The project endeavored to create historical primary source material for a region that lacks substantive documentation and engage west side individuals in the creation of that material.

The original audio recording of this interview is available by contacting the Kodiak Historical Society. Additional associated content is available at the Kodiak Historical Society/ Baranov Museum, including photographs of interview subjects and west side places taken during the summer of 2015, archival collections related to the west side, and journals and art projects created by west side residents in 2015.

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Note on Transcription

After the initial transcription was completed, a second transcriber performed an audit/edit by listening to the oral history recording and verifying the transcription. The following transcript is nearly a word-for-word transcription of the oral history interview. Editing is intended to make the interview easier to understand. Bracketed words indicate they were added after the interview. The use of […] indicates that something that was spoken does not appear in the transcription. Often, these are false starts. In some cases, it is information that the interview subject retracted later. The original audio file is available for listening.

Citation

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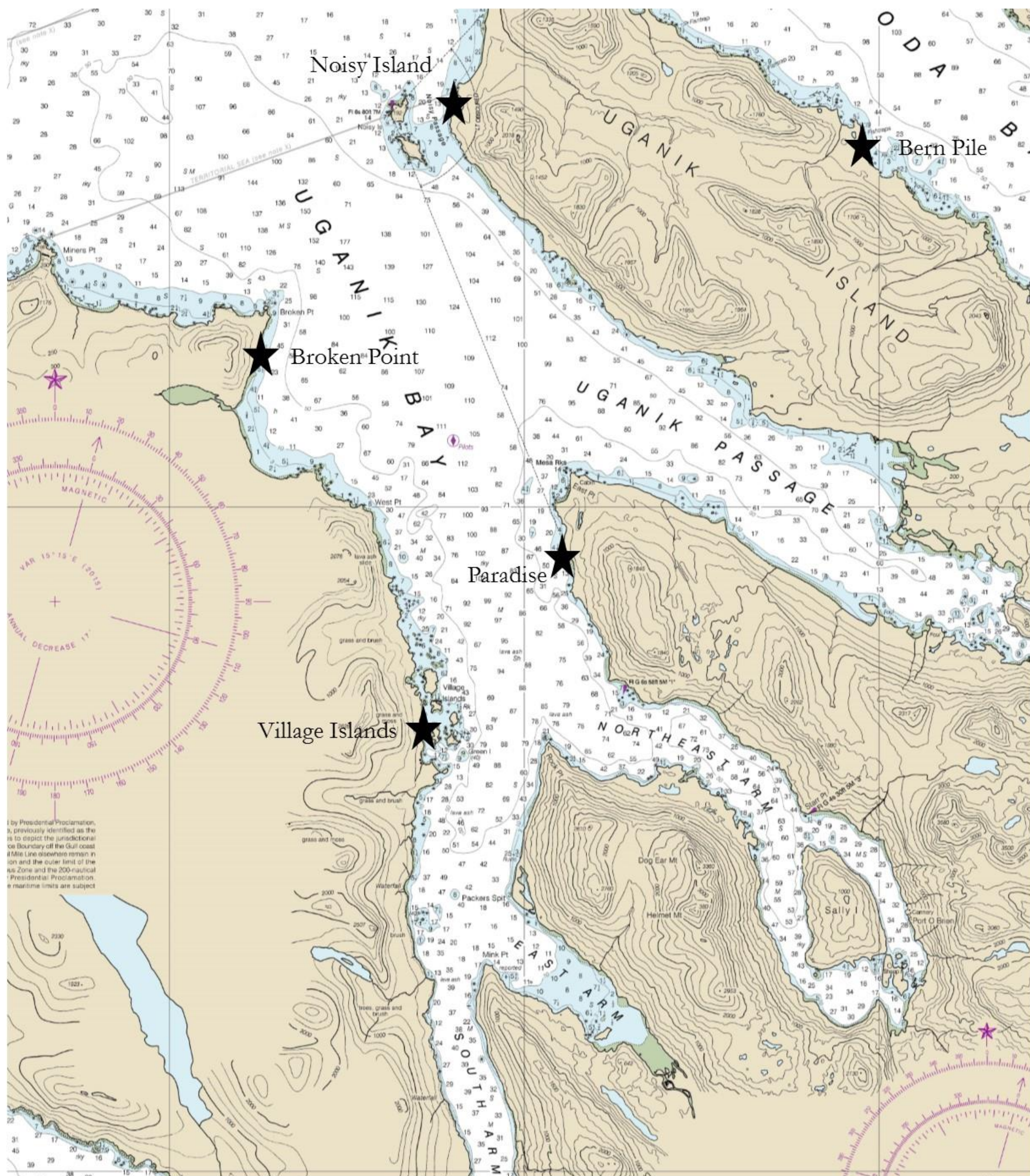
Cover photo: Lacey Berns, at Bern Pile, Viekoda Bay, on July, 6 2015. Photographed by Breanna Peterson for West Side Stories. P-1000-7-502.



Select locations within Uganik and Viekoda Bays mentioned in the interview.

Oral History of Lacey Berns

AG: It is July 6, 2015 and I am here with Lacey Berns. This is Anjuli Grantham. This interview is being conducted at Bern Pile in Viekoda Bay, and this is for the West Side Stories project. Lacey, shall we begin where it all begins? Can you tell me when and where you were born and a bit about your childhood?

LB: Well, Anjuli, I came from a family that was in the Air Force. My father was a pilot, and so we moved quite a bit when I was young. I ended up growing up in Palo Alto, California, where my mother had been raised, born and raised, and all of my cousins and family on my grandma's side were there. Then when I was thirteen my dad was transferred to Alaska, in 1968, so that was a little bit traumatic leaving everybody behind. But the thing that […] my brother and I discovered that summer was Ship's Creek [Anchorage]. That was only a few hundred feet from where we lived on Base and we could […] go inner tubing the entire summer. That was my first real experience with wilderness. I went to high school there, and then in 1972 they retired back to Palo Alto and I went on to University of California in Santa Barbara for a year. But then I went back to Alaska, to Anchorage, to work for the summer. The next year, in 1974, I had actually stayed in Anchorage for a while, I came to Kodiak on the ferry with Rob Sychs who I had known in high school. It was in October, and it was very rough coming over on the *Tustumena* and everybody was sick. But the minute that I hit the pavement in Kodiak, I was astonished at how beautiful it was with the deep bays and the mountains that had snow. I was also amazed at the number of young people that were in town that were making a good living fishing, and it was very exciting. It just seemed like the town was full of people my age and we were doing something unique, away from the standard convention of working an eight to five job. I started waitressing at the KI [Best Western]. Back then that was a really good restaurant and was very busy with crab fishermen spending money. And I just loved waitressing. So in 1977, I got an opportunity to go out to Uganik Bay with my boyfriend, Jeff [Povelite], and we were going to fish at a place called Paradise.

Jeff Povelite, Lacey Berns, and Chris Berns at Paradise, 1981. P-995-12.

Chris Berns and Slim Trueman. P-995-22.

Weldon and Jorene Cooke. P-986-10-1.

I had never had any experience camping or tying knots or nets, skiffs. I had never known anything about that. I flew out for the first time on a float plane in June of 1977 and landed at the cannery and then took a skiff to the site. It was a real learning experience for me. I […] felt very out of, like I wasn't really part of it for a while because I didn't understand what we were doing. I didn't understand the construction of nets. I didn't understand the knots. The owner of the site, Chris Berns, he needed to go work on the sets, so he left me in the cabin to hang a net. I'm left handed, so I had to take every knot apart to learn how to do the hanging knot my way because I was left handed. Of course, the same applied when I would mend nets. I was doing everything with my left hand, so I had to learn by myself pretty much how to do any of the net mending or hanging nets. And that's how I became acquainted with what the net was doing. One time I remember we were out picking fish, and Daniel Boone Reed was in the skiff with me, and I was a little bit overwhelmed with the number of salmon that were coming in. I hadn't learned to pick fish yet. But Daniel Boone was very funny, and he was trying to calm me down, calm me down a little bit because I felt like taking the fish—. I didn't want them to slap around, bounce around so much, so I was going to like hammer them, make sure they died quickly (*laughter*). Anyway, I remember that particularly because it was windy and very rough when we were doing it. By the end of the summer I was absolutely in love with Uganik Bay. The other interesting thing about it, at that moment in time, was that there were a lot of younger couples around my age, 23, who had come out and were starting to buy sites from people like Slim Trueman. Tony and Debby had Sockeye City. Let's see, we were at Paradise. Margie and Chaco Pearman were down at Paguk's. Don Fox was next door at Cue Ball's, with Barbara and Gary Cue. […] And then there were people at Gull Light, as well, I think Jeanette and Wink Cissil. So we were part of a young crowd that was able to get into the fishery

at that point in time because a lot of the old-timers were retiring. Floyd Anderson was still at Bartenders. Cliff [Trueman] was at Miner's Point. The Nickersons were out at Noisy Island. Then there were Weldon and Jorene [Cooke] who were at Daylight Harbor. It was a really interesting mix of folks when we would get together and have a party because pretty much the purpose was to become wild and crazy (*laughing*).

AG: How did the older people respond to that?

LB: Oh, they were right in with it. They were pretty much heavy drinkers anyway. A lot of them drank every day. […] The tender would give us beer, so we only really drank on the closure. So the closure was a really big deal because everybody would meet up and have a party somewhere. What else?

Fourth of July party, 1980. P-995-10.

AG: Could you maybe describe the cannery when you first arrived out there?

LB: Okay. When I first came out in '77, the routine of the fishery was much different. For one, […] the tender would come out and pick our fish up at midnight and after. The only way that we knew they were coming was because they would shine a very bright light on the beach and they would honk their horn. So we had to scramble out of bed in the dark and run down and deliver. The other thing was that the Uganik Cannery was full-tilt operating with hundreds of cannery workers there that had flown up from Seattle. They had a wonderful grocery store and they had an ice cream machine. You could also go in the mess hall and have coffee when you went down there, which we

did, because it was the only place we could buy food. So we'd stock up on maybe a head of lettuce, or Pilot Boy's bread, cereal, whatever we could get, usually canned, and then we'd take it back to the site because at that point in time the tenders did not deliver food. That pretty much stayed the same until, I believe, APS came into the bay, the Alaska Pacific Seafoods, at the behest of Chris Berns. He brought in another company to compete with NEFCO, New England Fish Company. That was a huge change in that bay because it had been NEFCO's territory for many years. After that, then things started changing a little bit at a time for the setnetters in terms of getting supplies.

AG: When was that?

LB: I'd say '78 or '79 because I remember delivering. The next year, 1978, Jeff and I and his brother, Andy, and Kay, my sister-in-law, […] we took our skiffs and we went all the way out to Little River from town. It was an abandoned setnet site. There was nobody there. The only thing that we had to live in were […] a Coleman tent, a broken down shack about 8x8 with a rock floor, and a wall tent that we brought. So we took everything we needed for the entire summer, and I believe it was rice and eggs and Pilot Boys and peanut butter and salmon pretty much for the whole time. The *Tidings* would come out there and pick our fish up when we could deliver. It was rough the entire time, but we loved it because we were young. I believe I was 24 then, and even though what we were doing was incredibly dangerous in wooden skiffs without any kind of flotation in case we went overboard, we loved it. It was challenging, and even though we didn't catch that many fish we'd survived something like a war. We still had sea lions out there so we had to get up at four in the morning, run to the skiff, run to the nets […]. We would sit on the nets for hours to make sure they didn't eat the fish. It was really really a hard summer but we loved it. When we got to town I remember we celebrated by going to Solly's and having a cheeseburger after a long, three month period. Then in 1979, we went and decided to look for another site closer into Uganik Bay so we went to Noisy Island, and nobody was fishing on those islands in Uganik. We built a cabin in about three days. It was 16x16, two-foot centers with the 2x4s, and we proceeded to put nets everywhere that we could think of that might be able to catch fish either coming into Uganik or backing out. We finally ended up putting a net across the bay on this rock, which we called the Hole in the Wall rock, and we ended up putting a 150 [foot gilnet] out there, and that became definitely a good site. We had an early pink run in July. We would just get slammed with pinks because they were just starting to come into the bay. They'd come around Cape Uganik and go down the beach and just go right into our net that was at the end of the beach there. So we were really excited because we'd found a site. We didn't have to purchase one. The only issue with it, again, was that we had a lot of sea lions. Traveling there from Noisy

Noisy Island. P-995-11.

Island in the morning was about a quarter of a mile, so we'd get up every morning at four, just grab our boots, run down to the beach, jump in the skiff and then head over there to check out what the sea gulls were doing, flying over the net, and the six or seven sea lions were doing. It was very hard work still, but we caught quite a few fish. At that point, that site would quit catching salmon around August 10, so we ended up going inside to Paradise and fishing with Chris [Berns], the permit in there for the Uganik run, which worked out really well.

AG: Was it your permit?

LB: Jeff and I had the permit, yeah. He had gotten it for $5000.

AG: Why did you determine to go to Little River and who had fished it before? Do you know anything about the older history?

Chris Berns and Paul Soper on the *Tidings*, 1981. P-995-19.

LB: I'm trying to remember the family. There was a guy that fished there. Nick is what I think the name was, but he had abandoned it. It was just wide open for weather. Any north east, north west, westerly, south west, anything hit the beach there and it was shallow, so it was very difficult to fish there and, therefore, I think Jeff had heard that it was abandoned. So we went out there to try it.

AG: Because it was just a place that—.

LB: It was open. There was nobody fishing. There was nobody at Two Cone Point. There was nobody at Cape Kuliuk heading into Uyak. So […] Chris, a couple of years later, he was getting bored being inside the bay at Paradise so he went to Cape Kuliuk and put out a net, and he ended up living in his skiff basically because it was so rough there and so many sea lions, but he did really well. It was just a really tough place to fish.

AG: So the reason that you decided to go to Noisy Island was because Little River was too exposed?

LB: Too much. It was way too much with the kind of equipment we had and too far from everything at that point. We couldn't get enough supplies and things we needed for the summer, so going back to Uganik made sense.

AG: When you were at Little River then, were you still delivering to the Uganik Cannery or were you more doing Larsen Bay?

LB: The *Tidings* from APS came and picked up at Little River. Then in 1979 through '81 when we were at Noisy, the *Tidings* picked us up. I've got a lot of pictures of that.

AG: And they as well were APS?

The *Tidings* in Uganik. P-995-15.

LB: Yes.

AG: So you had broken from NEFCO?

LB: Yes. We never fished for NEFCO. No. We went right to APS.

AG: Does that mean when you would go to the cannery to buy your groceries you'd have to pay cash?

LB: Good one (*laughing*)! Yes, we did. We couldn't charge it. Now see this is, okay, I'm not sure about this question. I'm trying to remember that because we did go to the cannery every once in a while it seems like, but […] it was not a problem buying groceries there. I think we tried to avoid Ivan Fox just because it was a little uncomfortable. Then slowly APS started getting a fleet of gillnetters. That's a good question. I don't remember if we quit going to the cannery, but after a while anybody could go. It wasn't such a big deal. I might ask Christy [Allen] about that.

AG: What was the benefit of fishing for APS instead of NEFCO?

LB: Well, then you had two competing companies trying to buy your salmon. It just gave us some leverage as far as price and an option […] to have pick-ups during the day instead of in the middle of the night. Being treated differently, not according to NEFCO's policies, but also we were able to get supplies and grocery orders from town from APS. So that worked out. That was the reason.

AG: […] Currently we're up to around '79. What did you do in the winters?

LB: I worked at the KI (*laughing*). I would just go back to town and somehow there'd be a job waiting for me. I absolutely loved working there. I would choose my schedule. I think I worked Wednesday, Thursday, Friday nights, Saturday, Sunday days. So I'd get that Saturday weekend brunch rush, but I could also get the Wednesday, Thursday, Friday night tips, so I loved it.

AG: What was the talk of the town in the late '70s?

LB: Oh my gosh. I remember walking into Tony's and there were guys in there that had just gotten off the crabbers, the king crab boats that had made like $30,000 in a trip. Everybody would line up in Tony's and talk about the boats they were on. A lot of them had […] an aura of being successful boats, like the *Cougar* was one, the *Progress*, the *Sea Barb*. Many of these guys were like—. Skip Bolton, he's a legend as far as how well he did. Being on a certain boat kind of made a big deal because you knew it attached to it some sense of grandeur that they were out being really successful. Even in the rough winter months they could still do well. And Tony's was pretty much the gathering place as far as the young people that we hung around with. All of our friends would start heading in there around four o'clock in the afternoon, and then it would just become wild. That's where everybody talked about what was going on with fishing. I just continued to waitress. I tried crabbing one time in 1979 or '80. I went out a 130-foot boat, and as soon as we went around Chiniak it was blowing north east forty and the galley didn't have any windows in it. I said, "Okay, I'll make tuna sandwiches, guys." 'Cause I was supposed to cook. And as soon as I got out there I was trying to make the tuna sandwiches. I got really sea sick and I barely made it into the bunk, and I said, "That's it. I can't stand up. I'm sick." I was out for two days I was so sick. But then gradually it calmed down and I did work on deck for a while when the weather got nice. But that was it for me. I just said that I knew I wouldn't be able to fish in the winter like some women. A lot of my friends ended up on boats fishing, whereas the group of people I went around with, after we had salmon fished, we all became part of the setnetter group. But no, I could never handle the really rough weather.

AG: So you then kind of found these good sets on Noisy Island. How long did you fish out there for?

LB: I fished until 1981, and then by that time Jeff and I had split up. After that, in the '80s, I had my first child, Hunter [Berns]. I went out to fish with Hunter in 1983 when he was four months old. I was a crew member at the Fox Hole out on the Shelikof with Don Fox and Ilva [Fox] and it was an amazing place. There is always something special about every site that I've been to, and I think I've fished at eight different sites. The Fox Hole had so much territory between Miner's Point and Cape Ugat that Don had tried fishing at every single point in between. He had about six sets that he would fish at different times of the year whether the fish were north bound or south bound, humpies or reds. Don was just constantly working his two permits to try to figure out where to have the sets. So we would fish. Someone would watch Hunter on shore. We'd be out in Opheim's [skiff's] fishing in 15-foot waves and catching a lot of fish. He would have probably four nets out, so it was intense, but it was also a wonderful place to live in the summer. It was just two tent frames, and you can put everything in a tent frame that makes you comfortable. Kind of like living on a sail boat. Life is just simpler. You don't have as much stuff. You've got your stove. You hook your hose up to the creek. You've got running water, and you've got your food, usually stored under the cabin. The thing about that place was that it had this wonderful little canyon with a creek that came down the hill. There was a cold box in the creek that we could keep food in. In the evenings when the sun would start to set, the little breeze would come down the canyon and you could smell all the flowers that were caught up in the breeze, and I can still remember that, to this day, being at the creek. Those flowers

(*laughing*). […] Again, I was 29 at that point and I could still fish as a crew member with one child. So I did it and loved it, absolutely loved it. I fished the Fox Hole probably three times, I believe. Then in 1984, I went to Bartenders and fished for Floyd Anderson with Hunter, who was then a year and a half old. That was an interesting experience. I didn't have a babysitter. I think his nephew helped watch Hunter, but Hunter was really easy to take care of. But we weren't catching very many fish. Floyd's holding skiff had disappeared off the mooring anchor, and he was really upset about it. He thought that it had been stolen. You might not want to put this in there. So we didn't have a holding skiff for a while. And one day I was walking along the cliff and I had Hunter in my back pack. […] I was quite a ways from the cabin, and I looked down and I saw this little tiny cavern area under the cliff but near the ocean, where the holding skiff had gone in there and just lodged itself. It was just sitting there. It had been there the whole time (*laughing*). It was like a little garage. Anyway, it must have come undone from the mooring anchor and just floated in there. That was a good find. Sometime during that summer, Don Fox came and stole me to fish out at Fox Hole because their pink run was so heavy. They couldn't keep up with it. So I ended up fishing out there again in 1984. Let's see.

AG: Were you in '82 involved in the strike […]? I know there was a big strike that year.

LB: '83?

AG: Was it '83?

LB: Back then setnetters didn't strike. It was kind of like the unspoken thing. We didn't have to stop fishing.

AG: Why was that?

LB: It was a big strike. Wait, maybe that was 82. It was 82. They didn't fish till August, did they? Probably because […] the fish pass us and they don't come back. We don't get the opportunity to move around. So once they're gone, they're gone. I believe the seiners had acknowledged that. So I don't remember that we quit. I don't think we did. That was a bad strike.

AG: Do you remember anything from it?

LB: It was Chris's first year seining, I think. Yeah, so that was a really tough year to begin on. Yeah. You missed June and July.

AG: Do you remember if there were any repercussions from that strike?

LB: No, I wasn't involved very much politically. We didn't really have a group that advocated for setnetters. So no. We were really separate from seiners. We were totally, that was a group of guys on boats and we were people who lived in tent frames and cabins. […] There was really no cohesion to the salmon fleet.

AG: You mentioned that when you first […] went out to Uganik that a lot of the older people were retiring. Why was that? Do you think it had anything to do with limited entry?

LB: No, I would say more their age. They were all, at least according to what I saw them back then, it looked like they were all in their 50s or 60s, that they were tired of fishing. They were happy to sell their sites to some of the younger people that were moving into the bays. I think it was just a natural

Netting. P-1000-5-31.

progression, kind of like now (*laughing*), now that we're old-timers. Back then it was a lot tougher to fish for someone in their 50s. It was all arms and legs and picking, so it was a lot tougher.

AG: Did you build all your own nets then?

LB: Yes. And we constantly mended because of the sea lions. We would spend the entire closure mending. It was really […] a lot to do during the closures.

AG: I know that you started right after limited entry, but do you have any sense as how limited entry might have changed setnetting in Uganik or on the west side?

LB: Yeah. Most of the people that received limited entry permits had been fishing for a really long time, so they had their history and their ownership, which was good. But then I think there were a lot of loose permits that were in Kodiak that people weren't going to fish. They had been able to get one because they'd fished for salmon. So I think it opened it up to having over 180 permits available, and like we did in 1978, we bought one that was loose that nobody was gonna fish. So kind of the progression of it was every permit began to be utilized and every site became utilized, and then pretty soon the Refuge came in and said you can't go out here and build a cabin anymore. So slowly it evolved into basically the way it is today. Every site is fished and there aren't any places that you can basically go to set up a cabin or a set that you want. […] I guess it would be called utilized, fully utilized as far as that, the occupation and the place.

AG: When was it that the Refuge started to really kind of have more active—?

LB: In the '80s.

AG: Do you know what caused that shift or anything?

LB: No. […] I don't know the answer to that, but it had to have been a policy change of some kind because we were able to put tent frames up for a while without a permit. […] Oh, it could have been, part of it, because of the land—.

AG: ANILCA?

LB: ANILCA and the lands that were being claimed. Some of them, like Noisy Islands, were in the Alaska Maritime island group, but none of that was decided by 1980, '81. It all became more solidified in the '80s. And the same thing with the Refuge. Maybe it just got more organized and had more duties.

AG: So what sort of reaction was there in Uganik when the Refuge started to take more active role in management?

LB: Nobody really likes it. They don't like people visiting and being asked for permits or having limits put on. For example, this year, there's a ban on four wheelers on the Refuge which is pretty tough for folks in this bay because most everyone in this bay is over 55 or 60, so it's tough to get your wood up the beach. I know that has been very unpopular. Some of the changes they've made are beneficial because […] you can build a gear shed and a house and you get so many square feet for a gear shed and you get so many square feet for a house. Now they've just added another building that you can build is a generator shed, which it can be 12x16, so that is actually an improvement in the past few years.

Noisy Island. P-1000-5-297.

AG: And banya?

LB: Oh yeah, that. Anything that was here, this is our footprint. The banya was here, the outhouse and the smokehouse and the two cabins. Anything beyond that, the only thing we can build now would be the 12x16 generator shed or something we can take down, like a greenhouse.

AG: So when people were buying sites in the '70s, what were they buying?

LB: Well, it depends on the site. For example, Broken Point came with tent frames, gear, and a permit. And that was basically it. […] At that site, it was known as a red site and so you had the production records. And as that continued to evolve, when the Karluk reds were becoming more, the runs were becoming much stronger, all of the red sites became much more valuable. I think by the '80s, […] most of the sites were going for around $125,000 or $150,000. Was pretty high. Then in the '90s and early 2000s […] some of the best sites went for $400,000. There's a site in Alitak that went for over $700,000. […] It's very difficult to get into the Kodiak setnet fishery if you're an outsider, and also because there's not a turnover anymore like there used to be. People tend to keep them with their families and they tend to be older now. They are expensive and I would imagine that most sites now, for example in this bay, are well over $300,000, and then if you have two permits it's probably more.

AG: So when you buy a site, you're buying the location of the site and the permits?

LB: The permits, the gear, the skiffs. The catch records are not something you buy, but it's what you look at so that you can see the value and estimate what you're going to make there. The cabins, even though we do improvements to the cabins, they don't belong to us, they belong to the Refuge. Basically, it's just a package of some of it is real and some of it is statistical information about your catches. You open your books up for people if they're serious.

AG: […] What was it like to […] have a four month old baby and be out in the skiff. I mean, you had just given birth (*laughing*). I can imagine that was quite a challenge.

LB: Yes, I was still nursing him (*laughing*). I just was really lucky because Don and Ilva Fox were like family to me, and Verda Koning was out there that summer, and they didn't have a problem watching him. He was very easy. Again, at that point in time of my life, I could get up at four in the morning and I could also take a break and take a nap with Hunter. I had my own tent frame. I don't remember it being so difficult that I wanted to quit. That happened in 1988 at Broken Point where I had Leslie and Hunter, and Leslie was eighteen months old and Hunter was five and I still was fishing for Don at that point. He still got up at four in the morning, and that was really difficult by then, just not getting a full night's sleep and always being up early. I remember I had to leave around mid-August because it just was too much. I also had babysitters. Balika [Haakanson] was my babysitter and also Mika Momberg.

AG: They came out with you working for the summer?

LB: Yeah, so that worked out pretty well, but I always felt like I had more to carry, you know. I was doing a double job and so it wasn't easy. Like I didn't expect to be treated differently because I had my kids there, but at the same time someone must have said or looked at the situation and said, "You must be crazy!" Because as a crewmember you don't have any control over the hours or the amount you spend in a skiff. So I remember feeling like I wasn't sure I was pulling my weight because I was tired on both ends of it.

AG: So why did you continue as crew?

LB: That year? I quit. Is that what you meant?

From left: Leslie, Galen, Lacey, Edin, and Hunter Berns
At Bern Pile in Viekoda Bay, 2003. P-995-35.

AG: Well, just in general if it was so difficult.

LB: Oh, well, I just quit early. I just couldn't do the whole season. I just had to fess up to myself and say, "Hey, you're a mother. You've got two little kids here. You can't do both at the same time." As opposed to when you own your site, you can pretty much delegate and tell everybody what they need to do. So '88, 1988, was the last year that I was a crewmember, and then I bought Noisy Island in 1992.

AG: So from '84 you were at Bartenders and then you went to the Fox Hole. Did you continue working at the Fox Hole in between then and '88 at Broken Point?

LB: A few times. In 1987, […] my big summer plans were I babysat Toby Sullivan's daughter, Jordan, and I came out with Leslie and Hunter. Now Leslie was three months old and Hunter was four and I did it for three weeks while Suzanne [Abraham] went to Ireland. I had a blast. I mean, three weeks I could handle. The hard part was getting them all to nap at the same time (*laughing*). So […] '88 was the last time and then '89 was the oil spill. We had purchased ten acres of land in Village Islands in 1988, so that gave me my place in Uganik to be able to come to for the summers. And in '89 we built a cabin there during the oil spill.

AG: What prompted you to buy the land in Village Islands?

LB: When I first started fishing in Uganik, Nan and Dan owned the homestead over in Village Islands. They were a really interesting couple to visit. They had lots of gardens and their house was completely stacked full of magazines and letters and herbs and jars of food preserved, and you just had to walk through this narrow little channel around because they never went to town. They never left the house. They just constantly filled it with things. They became very near and dear to most of us younger people in Uganik, like to go over and visit Dan. He would come down to the beach and he would say, "Bring up a rock!" That was his way of clearing his beach. If every person brought up a rock every time they visited, pretty soon his beach would be clear. And it worked (*laughing*). Also, we could have wonderful tea there that Nan had made and just her wealth of information. She was such an interesting woman. I think Dianne [Herman] probably has spent more time with her. After they passed away, the children divided the 160 acres up into parcels. I saw that ad for sale in one of the papers in Kodiak, and I went right down there and I picked out a plot of the ten acres that had

Nan and Daniel Boone Reed's cabin in Vilage Islands. P-1012-17.

ocean front. I said, "I don't want the old houses. I want the next one up. So we got that ten acres as soon as it was advertised 'cause it's just special. Mostly Don and Ilva [Fox] own property and Dianne. We've all fished out there, so it was kind of nice that the local people were buying it instead of strangers.

AG: Who else was living in Village Islands when you first started spending time in Uganik?

LB: Well, I know that Deedie [Pearson] and her sister [Hazel] and the Owens family were out there, but I did not meet them for many years. […] We didn't go to the same parties or gatherings. Oh, I did meet the Lindbergs and get to know them because the mail plane went there, and they've been very funny people to know. Did you see Linda?

AG: Oh yes, I stayed the night with her. Were there others out there?

LB: Oh yeah. That just made me remember. That was when I met Mary Jacobs because she owned this wonderful place in Mush Bay. Mary at that point was raising two kids, and I would see her running in her Opheim [skiff] to get mail, and hoisting those kids out just like they weighed nothing and she'd put 'em on the beach and they'd run up. She just seemed like she was a natural part of the skiff and she was such a really tough woman. She lived out there all year round and had been cultivating the gardens. I think some of them were already there. So going down there has always been fun. Then when Jeanne [Shepherd] bought it, which I don't remember what year, she really expanded on the gardens and took really good care of it. I think that's about it. I can't remember any more.

AG: What were some big events that happened in the '80s?

LB: Oh, well in 1988, that was the year that the Nickerson brothers disappeared from their site at Noisy Island, the site that I purchased in 1992. They were gone and their skiff had been found flipped over and a bunch of raingear floating around by Noisy. The troopers came out to investigate and the crewmember was still up in the cabin, and he said the boys, the brothers, had skiffed to town. So we thought, everybody thought, it was an accident and that they'd drowned. But their friend, Gary Cue, didn't think that was possible. So he went out there at some point with the troopers to look around the cabin in the rocks, and that's where he found Danny and Robby Nickerson. They'd been murdered, and the whole story came out. Their crewmember had—, they'd […] been drinking and doing whatever and something had happened and the crewmember got the upper hand. There had been a very big struggle and somehow he was able to shoot them. When the trial was going on in Kodiak it was all being printed in the paper, so we all began to realize there'd been a really sad, terrible situation there between the brothers and the crewmember. Unfortunately, that's what happened, and then nobody fished there until 1992 when I went out and bought it *(laughing)*.

AG: Well, you had fished there in '79. Was that the same spot?

LB: No, this was a different spot. The Noisy Island spot that Nickerson owned, his call sign was Noisy Island, and that was because he was the furthest out. There was nobody past him, so he kind of claimed the whole area. When I fished at Noisy Island we called ourselves Silent Island because nobody could ever hear our CB. So we are on Noisy Island, but we didn't use that call sign.

AG: I see. What were the Nickersons like?

LB: Well, I think what I remember of them is that they were both good fishermen, really tough, but had a tendency to drink a lot. I know Robby had fallen out of his skiff a couple of times and had been rescued. The skiff just goes around like this [in circles] when the motor's running, so it's really dangerous. I do know that they were into some other things down in Washington. They were kind of a different breed of folks. […] There were some people in the bay that were escaping from things in Washington. I wasn't really clear what they were, but I do remember that when there was kind of a history of violence there because Nickerson, Danny, claimed everything from Daylight Harbor all the way out past Cape Uganik. When he saw us on Noisy Island in 1979, we were really afraid that he was going to shoot because he did take pot shots at seiners. […] He was known for that. There was one good story about Danny. Pete Kendrick on the *Advantage* was coming to pick up his fish, and Danny said on the radio, Pete goes, "I'm on my way, Danny," and Danny says, "I've got you in my crosshairs." So that was kind of a joke that he probably didn't mean it that way, but it went along with the story of the Nickersons. So when we were in our skiff traveling from the site on the cabin on Noisy Island, we would kind of duck down and not really like going by the cabin because of the rumors about them with the guns and rifles. That was kind of an element that we weren't involved in.

AG: Do you remember when they found the bodies? Were you in the bay at the time?

LB: No. I'd gone home early in '88. I'd gone from Broken Point. I believe I was down south somewhere on vacation. But it was really a gory story.

AG: What inspired you to then buy the site?

LB: Well, I knew it was a really good humpy site. There was one brother left, and I ended up negotiating with him and the mother, Borgnina Nickerson, to buy it. Because it was in Uganik, again, and I really wanted to be there. But I did buy it site unseen. When I went out there to start fishing

and walked in the cabin, I could tell immediately what had happened in there. I was astonished that the Troopers hadn't seen what I had seen and what anybody else would have seen. It was a crime scene. So it was really uncomfortable for a few days because I knew exactly what had happened to those two guys and how gory it was. There was gloved handprints of blood on the ceiling and shotgun shells everywhere. Two holes blown in the wall. Just knew that a terrible battle had gone on in the cabin. One of the mattresses still had a shotgun blast in it because that's where Robby was shot. The first thing I did, because I had my kids there, was haul everything out that was related to the crime or to the murders and then we painted. We painted the cabin turquoise, pink, blue, anything we could get our hands on that changed, that covered up, what had happened. […] I do remember going through a period of about a week where I was so struck by that something so horrible had happened there that it brought me to tears because you could literally see that it had been a long, drug out fight between them. That if you were in the cabin you could pretty much piece it together how it happened. So it was really sad. It was really sad. I felt like it had been an evil place. but once we had transformed it with the kids and laughing and telling stories and doing other things, it pretty much it went away for us. So we stayed there for four summers.

Leslie Berns on the buoy swing and Hunter Berns behind, Noisy Island, 1993. P-995-29.

Southwest wind, blowing 30-35 mph, Noisy Island. P-995-5.

AG: How was it as a site?

LB: Well, Noisy, as a site, is hard because it has no beach. The running line is tied to two large rock formations that come out from the hill, and they're shaped kind of like an M or an upside down W. So your running line had to go all the way out and […] it was attached to a post in concrete on one side and then attached to the land on the other. But you had to tie your skiff up in a certain way so that

you wouldn't hit the rock when you were coming in. […] At different tides there were different places that you could jump off, so it was interesting because it was like having a pier. When the tide was high we would unload stuff right on the top of the rock, and when the tide was low you could still get off on any other part of the rocks. When we would go to get wood for the wood stove, we would chop it up on Noisy, bring it over, wait for the tide to go up because it was like a little pier or mooring, and we could just put all the wood on the rock and then walk up the 30-foot stairs to the cabin.

AG: Was it a good site then in the end?

LB: Oh, it ended up being—. I struggled a little bit the first couple of years. And then in 1995, when we had the largest run on the island, by then I pretty much figured out the sets. I moved the net closer to the cabin, and we had just incredible fishing for over a month and a half to where we couldn't keep up with it. So I was really happy with it. The weather had been so difficult that summer, with south west twenty, thirty most of the time, and I had skiffs full of fish. The holding skiff would be full and I'd have to try to figure out how to get off of the rock, into the skiff, with it being heavy with fish in it. So after that summer, I took a three or four year break from salmon fishing and I leased it out to Brent Cathy.

AG: Could you tell me about your experience with Exxon Valdez out here?

LB: Hmmm. Yeah that was really a terrible event. I had gone back to college at Humboldt State in 1988. I was actually in California in '89 and I remember seeing it on the television that day. I burst into tears because we just knew what was going to happen. It was spring. It was just such a huge oil spill, so when I came back to Kodiak in late May the town was really disorganized. Most of the action and activity had been up in Prince William Sound and […] I believe the oil started reaching Kodiak a couple of weeks after the spill in March. It was coming at exactly the wrong time for herring and then for halibut and salmon. Gradually there was a boat or a vessel program that Exxon started developing in Kodiak exactly as they'd done in Prince William Sound, but only certain boats were put into it. So we decided that we didn't want to even have anything to do with Exxon, so we would go out and build the cabin [at Village Islands]. We were really lucky to get away and do that because I don't think we would have had another summer available just to have that time. We went out for the whole summer. I think we built it in nineteen days with our crew and had a really good time. I moved in as soon as I got a stove in there. Apart from that, I don't think it really settled in until after that summer that it was not only just this ecological disaster, but […] Exxon created this inequitable way of dealing with boats. Some of the boats that were on charter made half a million dollars. There were many people that went out after that and bought brand new boats, whereas people who didn't get the charters had nothing. We were stuck with our same boat whereas the fleet now had fifteen new 58-foot seiners in terms of competing. […] We recognized that issue right away because we went to the Fish Expo up in Seattle and people were paying cash for new boats. That's like having ten seasons laid on you. So that made it difficult for folks that were running seiners that hadn't been able to get a charter.

AG: How did it impact setnetters?

LB: The setnetters got jobs cleaning up the beaches and they were paid by the skiff, by day, so they actually ended up doing just fine. Our little moral compass was, "We are not gonna work for Exxon." (*laughing*) We just said, "Nope, we don't want to have anything to do with them."

AG: And are you happy about that choice?

LB: So so. Yeah, I am. […] We've always pretty much stuck to our ethical sense of how you want it. Do I want to be part of this and get paid? At that point in time, no. We didn't really want to get paid by Exxon. It was too grotesque. But then ten years later you're going, "Wow, I could have made a lot of money." (*laughing*) So it made things harder. I think after the Exxon Valdez is when we started becoming very involved politically with certain issues going on around the island. Also, Kodiak Seiners Association formed because of the oil spill, which we were members of, and the Northwest Setnetters formed, so it galvanized salmon fishermen to advocate for themselves.

AG: Could you tell me about the beginning of the Northwest Setnetters?

LB: At that point in time I wasn't setnetting.

AG: It was during that couple year hiatus?

LB: Yes, it was '89 to '92. I wasn't really a setnetter, but […] we were part of the Kodiak Seiners Association and Chris was always on the board.

[End recording]

AG: Now it is July 7, 2015, and I am with Lacey Berns at Bern Pile. This is for West Side stories.

LB: Hi, Anjuli. In 1978, we were fishing out at Little River. I kind of decided to talk about this in terms of weather, hip boots and Opheims. The reason that we wore hip boots back then was because we had an Opheim skiff and if we brought it onto the beach in a storm with the running line, we had to hop out when it was up to our necks and just walk in. So we did wear hip boots most of the time which were pretty cumbersome. That summer in particular we worked really hard, so some of the things that stood out for us in terms of stories were things that we thought were hysterically funny at the time. For example, we were completely inundated with sea lions on the nets, so we would have to go just sit there for hours at a time tied up to the net. […] One afternoon, Kay [Underwood] and I were out there taking a nap in the Opheim, and all of a sudden we heard this "whooo" come up right next to the skiff and we both woke up and we panicked! There was this maybe a 20-inch wide sea lion head just sticking out of the water to see what was in the skiff. He went "whooo" and went back down, but he scared the living daylights out us. We were like (*laughing*),"Oh my God!" We were so scared because he was huge. It was probably 1500 pounds. Another thing that happened that we thought was pretty funny was we tried to scare the sealions with a shot gun or with the rifle and get them away from our nets, so we always had one in the skiff or in the holding skiff at the time. One of the crewmembers went to grab it one day when we saw sea lions out there, and he accidentally, as he was bringing it out of the bow of the holding skiff, he shot the bow (*laughing*). He shot the bow off! The only thing that made

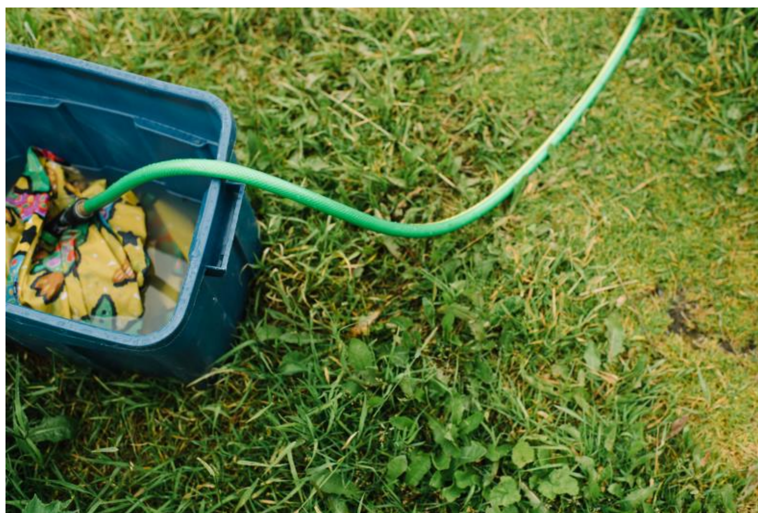
Kay Povelite (now Underwood) and Lacey Povelite (now Berns). P-995-23.

it funny was the fact that it was above the bowline and so it didn't sink. But we had this shot-off red fiberglass bow that just disappeared. At the time, we were a little bit freaked out, but when I look

Cruising in the yellow Opheim. P-995-28.

back over it it was pretty hysterical. Another thing, we were really limited on what we ate out there because the tenders didn't bring too much food to us. So Kay and I decided with what we had we would try to make Reese peanut butter cups. We ended up mixing Milk Man with peanut butter with honey, and then we melted chocolate and we made them into these like a blob full of peanut butter. We thought we had really accomplished something by doing that. So that was also another highlight was in how creative we could get with what we had. We cooked with a Blazo stove with a little oven on top that I learned to bake bread in that in 1977 at Paradise, and that was a skill that I actually have always loved to do was to make homemade bread. We also, at Little River, we woke up one morning and the Ophiem was gone. For some reason, it had gotten off and come unloose of the running line. We all panicked immediately. So Jeff went out in the holding skiff that had an engine on it, and I guess he went about two miles off shore. Luckily, the weather was good. The only way he saw the Opheim out there in the middle of the Shelikof was because it was painted yellow. So he did bring it back, and I consider that a big stroke of luck for us that year. Let's see. So in 1979, we decided to find another place near Uganik where most of our friends were by then. So we decided we would build a cabin. It was 16x16 and it didn't take us very long to build it. […] One of the times

that we were doing the roofing, Jeff was up on top of the peak and he was sitting there with a piece of plywood nailed in, so that […] all he needed to do was get off the roof when he was done putting the tar paper on it. Instead, he was kneeling down kind of like looking at the nail, and then he pulled it out with the hammer. Then it was like in slow motion. The 4x8 piece of plywood just went sailing in slow motion with Jeff on it, like this, like giving the look with his mouth open like, "What did I do?" because he went sailing through the air, kind of wafting through the air, and he landed just perfectly into the grass. I fell over laughing so hard (*laughing*), but I just couldn't stand how funny it was. We tended to take ourselves very seriously, so that was one funny happening. Another one was we were changing the oil in the lower unit of one of the kickers. For some reason, we're both standing there, and we unscrewed the nut, or the bolt, […] in order to open up the lower unit so that we could drain the oil. But it was under pressure for some reason and as soon as it came out it completely covered our faces with black oil, and all you could see was this look of like, "What happened?" and just our eyes showing (*laughing*). So, that was another one. I actually have pictures of that. I think one of the big things about fishing back then was that it was so much more difficult and a lot more hardship in terms of how many times we picked. When we had to get up in the morning we would run down to the beach and just jump into the skiff because of the sea lions, but […] our humor, the things that happened that were funny, I've repeated them year after year to crewmembers and told them stories about it. I remember the really hard times, but I certainly remember the funnier times more because we took time to really laugh and enjoy the fact that we weren't perfect. Some of the things we did were actually really comical compared to today's standards of fishing. We actually, in order to get clean, we brought out a cow trough, and we thought we were really uptown with that. We put it over on the beach that's now called Pilgrim, in 1979, and we would build a fire under it and get in it. But we had to learn the hard way that we actually had to make some kind of a mat that would sink when you got into the tub because we would burn our butts so badly that we couldn't stay in very long. We ended up making something



Washing tub. P-1000-5-53.

Clothesline. P-1000-5-42.

with holes in it so that we could actually take a bath. We had kind of looked like we were being cooked with the steam coming up around our heads. I also have a picture of that. It was pretty comical. We also didn't have fresh water on Noisy Island so we would haul it over in buckets, and it was pretty tight for us in terms of how we used it. So we thought we would be pretty clever, and we started using salt water to wash our jeans and our shirts. What we discovered was that the zippers didn't work afterwards (*laughing*), so none of us had pants. We had to like oil our zippers with WD-

40 so that we could get our pants back on (*laughing*). I love it. Actually, Chris, at Paradise, I remember […] he would just put his dirty clothes in a brailer bag and hang them off the stern of the Opheim, and as the Opheim bounced in the water, it was like this "kachink kachink," the motion of a washer (*laughing*). So we weren't that picky about how we got our clothes— clean is relative. I've never been into having a washer. Even up to now I don't use the washing machine even though I have one because I feel like clean is relative. I use a plunger and a tub and it's faster and it works out great. Anyways, some good memories about laundry. [...] Okay, that's all for now.

AG: […] I have a couple of questions. With the Opheims, how much would it cost to buy a boat and did you have any say in modifications or anything, or was there a special design of Opheims for setnetters?

LB: There was. I think ours was 16 or 17 feet long, and it was made locally by Ed Opheim over on Spruce Island. […] I'm not sure what sort of wood he used on the sides of it, but on the transom it was mahogany. There were two small seats in the stern, but there was also a bench in the stern and then there was a smaller bench up in the bow for people to sit. […] They weren't very large skiffs. We were out in pretty rough weather with them, so picking became really difficult because we would go down the net […] and every time we went a skiff length we would just pull the net up and pick salmon out of it and we held the cork line with our knees. That was […] really hard in rough weather, but that was how we picked salmon. We thought we were really clever one year as we brought out these hooks and we attached them to the other side, the port side, of the skiff. So when we pulled down, instead of our hands or our knees holding the net, we would put the hook on it and we could just pick salmon. Then I think the next year we discovered we could actually put the net over the Opheim, so that the corks were over the bow and the leads were in the stern. […] We'd put oars up so that the net didn't slide around in the skiff, but we actually got the entire net over us and we could just pick the fish without bothering our backs and our arms and our necks. That was like, "Wow, we've really accomplished something here quite technical." (*laughing*) The funny thing was in Uganik we were all die-hards about having wooden skiffs. It's just that was the way everybody fished and we thought it was a classic beauty of a skiff. When we heard that Viekoda had aluminum skiffs and then we heard that Nickerson had an aluminum skiff, we just all kind of pooh-poohed it because it was like, "Well, that's not pure. You want the warm experience with an Ophiem 'cause wood is warmer and aluminum's cold," (*laughing*). […] I guess it wasn't until the late '70s, early '80s when people started switching over to aluminum and you realize, "Oh, I can actually run this up on the beach without having to caulk the Opheim all winter and mess with it." It was definitely a transition from the classic style of the skiff and the wooden aspect of it that we were all so attached to and into the aluminum skiff which was more technical and made a lot more sense. It was definitely a transition when people started giving up their Opheims.

AG: How much would you pay for an Opheim?

LB: I think, boy, it maybe was $1000 or $2000 for a new one, and a used one would be around $400 or $500. It wasn't very much, but that was a lot of money back then. That's what I remember. I don't remember who we bought ours from, but it was used. We had to bring it back to town and every winter we'd flip it over and make sure, try to make sure, that it didn't get iced up because that would cause the cracks, more cracks in the floor boards and a lot of caulking. I certainly remember […] in the springtime we would have to turn the skiff back over and recaulk the seams, and then we'd put it in the water for it to swell up so that the wood would swell up and it wouldn't leak as much. I can remember driving in the Opheim and actually seeing water squish in as we were hitting little waves. It was like, "Oh, need to do some work on the Opheim." I think in 1977 we were all next door at Gary Cue's site, Cue Ball, and we were having a Tang party. We called them

screwdrivers. We all got kind of excited and it was a flat-calm night, and we all decided that we all wanted to go to Miner's Point. Which at that time, was way out there. It was several miles out on the capes and we were inside Uganik. We put on like twin 25s [outboards] on the stern of the Opheim, which was absolutely never done, so we thought we were really fast. We all jumped in this skiff and it really putted along. Then we ended up rolling into Miner's Point and having a party out there. But anyway, yeah.

AG: What other kind of changes in technology do you remember?

LB: Well, Chris Berns was the first one to have a fiberglass skiff as a holding skiff. He brought that out in 1978, I think, and it was blue and it had twin 50s on it with a throttle. That was just mind-blowing to have a fiberglass skiff that you didn't have to mess with and it went fast. You could actually deliver to the tenders without towing it. It had motors on it, and it had bins that were inside of it for the fish.

AG: What would you use for a holding skiff before? Did you have an extra wooden skiff before without bins?

LB: Yeah. It was just an extra Opheim possibly. Although Chris did, I can't remember, I know that he also built a picking skiff out of fiber glass that would hold a lot of salmon. But it was huge. It was just a huge skiff. I don't remember. I think Opheim made holding skiffs, really large Opheims. I don't remember what we had. In 1978, by the time we were at Little River, we had a Harvey dory. It was a red one and it had motors on it, so we were using that to deliver with when we could get out to the tender.

AG: And Harvey, is that a ?

Lacey Berns in a Harvey dory in 1979. P-995-14.

LB: It's a make, a brand. They had to be shipped up from Seattle on the tender.

AG: What about any changes in nets over time?

LB: That's definitely an aspect that was […] actually really difficult because we had so many sea lions going through our nets during the openings that we would basically spend the entire closure mending and patching. I don't remember that we ever had extra nets. We just had that one or two nets that we could use, so we spent a lot of time trying to keep them together. In the '80s, when the red runs and prices were stronger, we started hanging spare nets. Then it got down to hanging shackles of gear like 25 fathom pieces that you could just take out a part of your net, if a whale went through it or it was really trashed, and you could just replace it with 25 fathoms, you know, tie the leads and the cork line together. Ordering web became much more detailed in terms of the mesh size and the strength of the web and the colors, so we started ordering. My favorite has always been Uroko combined with a momi color. The strand size was a multi-strand Alaska-6 with two shades of color, and then we hang 25 fathom shackles of it or 50 fathom. I like the idea of having a darker web. Some people prefer the really light web, but I always thought that the darker colors blended in more with the color of the water around my sets. We also got brand new corks. We used to use very old gold corks and just crummy little white corks and just […] put them on the net kind of haphazardly. I think as we were able to afford it, we would all get lots of corks and more expensive to buy.

AG: Has there been any changes in suppliers over time that were notable?

LB: Well, […] for years we ordered from Seattle Marine. Then Kodiak Marine became a small store in the late '70s or early '80s, and then we could buy locally. That's kind of switched in terms of how we can buy things. I order web in the fall, and I have it in the spring in time to have it hung for the summer.

AG: Do you still do all of your own hanging?

LB: No. I have Don Fox hang my nets. He's a pro.

AG: That's nice. What about changes in kind of making a home? I know that maybe in the beginning you maybe didn't have running water possibly, or electricity or generators. What sort of kind of household, I guess you could say technologies, have shifted?

LB: Well, originally [...] what we did is we found a couple of sites to live in or fish at, we were in tent frames. So in 1979, at Noisy Island, we actually built a plywood cabin. At that point […], many people were getting these portable gas stoves that had three or four burners on top that had been in a trailer or mobile home. They were still small, but it was really a big move up from the Coleman. At that point we were buying propane in order to have a cook stove. That cabin, in particular, we built a table and we had chairs. We made chairs out of logs. We would just cut like a round, the top of the round off, except at the very end of it it was just a piece that went straight up. And we thought we were really clever to do that. So we had log chairs. […] You know, I think we just slept on three or four inch foam pads, but it was still uptown considering what we'd slept on at Little River which was a wet Coleman with a really wet foam pad for the whole summer. So having a wood cabin was really, really nice with lots of windows. Then in the '80s, when I started crewing at different places, Broken Point still had tent frames that they had to take down every year because a winter storm would wipe them out. Up until I purchased Noisy Island, I had pretty much fished living in a tent frame, which was fine for me. You had everything you need. You had a little wood stove, you had a place for your beds, and we didn't have that much extra. There just wasn't a lot of stuff. But when I purchased Noisy Island in 1992, we started hauling out supplies and things for the cabin. At the same time,

things had really turned around with the tenders. Now we were being able to have a lot of stuff delivered like lumber, furniture, wood stoves. So for that cabin I had running water. I had a shower. We set up a little Paloma. I had a waterfall in the background of the cabin at Noisy, and we would run pipe all the way to the top of this little hill, and then it ran into a garbage can, and it came down into an outside shower which was really up town for us. That place was really special to me and I loved having water, running water. Lots of it.

AG: Yeah. Did you have a banya, too, in most of these places?

LB: Well, at Noisy Island there was a little banya, but we, Sara Bruce who fished with me then, she changed it into a little cabin because getting wood up there was pretty difficult, so having the shower was probably the more sensible thing to do.

Bern Pile, Viekoda Bay, 2015. P-1000-5-51.

AG: I'm wondering what was a crew share?

LB: Technically, I guess what we've always done was pay about thirty-three percent to the crew, about a third of what we make. Fuel off the top, sometimes split groceries. Somebody more experienced would get more than their share from the following year or they'd get a bonus, but typically thirty-three percent.

AG: And that's what it was when you were a crew as well?

LB: Yes. If you had three then it was three-tens, or two tens and a twelve, or if you had two crew then it was fifteen each. That kind of a thing.

AG: You've talked a lot about how, in other conversations, that it used to always be about humpies and it was such a shorter season. Could you maybe talk about changes in management and how that's affected everything out here?

LB: When I first started fishing in 1977 there was no June fishery for the Karluk sockeye. It was still being rehabilitated, so the Department of Fish and Game had it closed for years. […] So actually we were targeting pinks in the '70s. That was the fish that we wanted to catch. We were getting thirty to forty-five cents a pound. We were getting a really good price. […] Mostly that's what we talked about when we'd get together at parties was, "How many pinks have you caught?" Then in 1978, when we were at Little River, we had our first June fishery out there, and it was possibly June 9 and June 14. It was blowing so hard, so hard out there that it wrapped our entire net around the cork line along the setline. […] It took us a couple of days to unwind it, and also it took a long time for the tender to come pick our fish up because it was so stormy. So anyway, we collected about six reds from it that looked like they'd been twisted up for a couple of days, and we ended up going out to the tender and just throwing them on the *Tidings* like, "Here, Paul!" You know. We called ourselves Little River Six because we had actually fished in June, but we didn't really catch much. Then, still at Noisy Island, we were still targeting pinks. I think we got around fifty cents a pound around that time, '79 to '81, and it was unusual. We weren't at all concerned about the number of reds we were getting. […] I do remember that they were about a buck twenty-five, a buck fifty a pound. If we caught one, we'd say, "There's a tank of gas for us!" You know, nine bucks. That would fill up your tank. That was like having a little extra in order to face the winter. Then into the '80s is when Karluk really took off for the early run and the late run, and the prices were really good. 1988 was a huge year in terms of price. It was $2.75 a pound for reds and I think eighty cents for pinks. Even though we didn't have a huge run, […] that was a year that pretty much everyone agrees was one of the best years Kodiak had ever seen. The following year was the Exxon Valdez, but the '80s were really the beginning of a very successful salmon fleet that was developing. All of the permits were being fished. Everything was utilized. The number of seiners, the number of gillnet permits. That's when setnet permits went up to over $100,000 just for the permit, and I believe that seine permits, also, went up to over $100,000. That all had to do with the red price and the pink price being strong. It just developed the fleet into fully utilizing everything. Every vessel. In the '90s what happened, we had huge runs of pinks around the state and so the pink price collapsed. It gradually went down to, the lowest I believe, was a nickel a pound and fifty cents a pound for reds. That lasted for about ten years or so, and there was a huge statewide reduction in the number of salmon boats and permits. The permit prices fell around the state, so it was very difficult for most people. You had to catch a million pounds of pinks to make $50,000. There weren't that many guys left fishing in Kodiak, and I believe at one point there were only fifty or seventy boats out fishing out of over 300. In a sense, […] the management was very successful, but we flooded the markets. From in the entire state harvest, we would just flood the markets. One of the big issues was that there wasn't an older generation eating pink salmon out of a can anymore, so that was an issue that the processors had to attack and get creative.

AG: What was the mood out here? What was it like to be a setnetter when prices were so low?

LB: Well, let's see. I took a few years off in the '90s. In 1998, I had twins, twin boys, so I was mostly involved with the seine prices that we were getting because Chris was still seining at that point. It was really stressful, really stressful fishing for that little. It just made life more difficult. At the same time, anybody that had diversified into herring, halibut and salmon, you could still make a good living.

AG: So it might have forced a lot of people who formerly were just salmon fishermen to do year round fisheries?

LB: Well no, from the very beginning in the '80s, people were fishing herring, salmon and halibut. That pretty much […] added a lot of volume and dollars into the fleet. A crewmember could actually afford to buy a house and live in town then, but when the prices started falling and when IFQs were implemented, it completely changed the character of the salmon fishery because— (*voice comes over the CB radio*). Okay, I gotta take a break.

AG: We were just talking about management and how before it was really just about humpies and then reds, but then there were too many humpies. What was the relationship that setnetters had with Fish and Game? Has that changed?

LB: For years, for example, the management plans were written, helped and developed by Larry Malloy, who was a longtime Kodiak area biologist for salmon and herring, and under him worked Kevin Brennan […]. There was a mentoring system in place where guys would begin work. For example, Kevin Brennan started out as the herring biologist, and we would see him out there when we were herring gilnetting and then would go into salmon, but he still worked under Dave Prokopowich who worked with Larry. So there was this two-tiered mentoring system that went on. When that changed was probably eight or nine years ago, when biologists were hired from other areas or from Washington and didn't really have the history of the fishery. Prior to that, the Fish and Game building was downtown, so it was a constant stream of fishermen into there talking to the biologists because it was so close to the harbor. Guys would come in and say, "Okay, we just saw a huge school of herring over on the mainland," or, "We're catching tons of reds over here." There was a lot of communication, a lot of back and forth. That has changed in the past few years. Also, the new Fish and Game building is on Near Island, and so it's not as close to the downtown area where people just can run in there and chat. Also, the offices are behind a wall. So I would say, in terms of getting information and talking to fishermen, it just isn't the same. It's a completely different ball game now. Also, the mentoring system is lost. It's not happening. So I think it's been more difficult for fishermen to challenge some of the management decisions when we've seen errors in the management plan. It's not greeted as well as it used to be. But in terms of our relationships with the processors, when we went through in the early '90s, we started going through very difficult times with our prices, and we saw our friends being dropped out of the fleet because they could no longer afford to fish because they'd purchased $150,000 seine permit and $200,000 seiners. No one could afford to stay in unless you had been in for quite a while, so there was a resentment and a hostility that developed between 1991 and in 1997 we formed United Salmon Association in Kodiak, and we actually pulled off an island-wide strike for reds. We started in late May at our house. We had five people there: Bruce Schactler, Chris Berns, Virginia [Edwards], myself, and one other person, and […] Chris just said, "I ain't fishing for a nickel. That's it! Not gonna do it. Not gonna give my fish away to the processors. Can't do it. Won't do it." That was where the idea that we should form an association, statewide association, of salmon fishermen because we had reached a bottom that seemed like we had to take the drastic step of a strike. How we did that was through meetings at Fishermen's Hall. Every night we had a meeting with permit holders, and we gradually pulled everybody in. Mike Martin flew around the island and pulled in the seiners that were tied up around. We kept it very strong. We talked to fishermen. We talked about the history of our fishing and how we couldn't do this anymore. We wouldn't fish for sockeye for fifty cents a pound and a nickel was too low [for pinks]. The fact that we were able to pull off a strike in June of 1997 was a huge accomplishment because the setnetters struck as well even while sockeye were going by. There was a tremendous loss of income for the setnet fleet. At the same time, it was historically the first time

Kodiak Island salmon fishermen had been completely united as a front as opposed to not fishing anymore for rock-bottom prices and wanting a contract with the processors. The meetings were very tense. There were negotiations. We had Matt Keplinger, who was in charge of that, and he's a negotiator for the Kodiak Island School District as a teacher. We had three people that would go in and talk to the processors. Over the summer we had another pink salmon strike in August, but at the end of the summer we had accomplished something that had never been done before, where the fleet was united and where we ended up getting slightly higher prices for our fish. We also had contracts. Unfortunately, the United Salmon Association unraveled. We tried to go statewide. It was really difficult to organize other ports. Kodiak is uniquely situated as a salmon port because you can see all the boats in the harbor. When we were on strike, everybody was there. All the boats were in port. As in Southeast, it wasn't such a centralized area where you could see all the boats tie up. There were many ports. There was Sitka, there was Juneau, Petersburg, Ketchikan. So that area was much harder to organize in terms of having a strike. Prince William Sound did come in with United Salmon Association, as well, but unfortunately after a couple of years, the whole apparatus of the group fell apart. It no longer functions. Fortunately, in 2003, our prices started to go up again because of the fact that we have wild salmon as opposed to farmed salmon. Our relationships with our processors became very tense, but as for me, I was friends with Tim Blott, who was our cannery manager. Even though he didn't like it that we were on strike, we still remained friends after that and until he retired in 2014 from Ocean Beauty.

AG: […] Who financed USA?

LB: The fishermen did, and we also had a special salmon fishery that summer that grossed, I think, a million dollars. We sold the fish to a cannery that was willing to pay the price for it.

AG: So USA sold the fish?

LB: Yes.

AG: How did that work?

LB. It was like a co-op. Virginia would know. She would remember more. Maybe. There was a harvest, and only salmon fishermen can harvest the resource. That was done as a way to fund United Salmon Association's efforts in Kodiak. We had that balance of money for quite a while, but slowly over time there were disagreements about how that money should be spent. Statewide or keep it local? That's what drove apart United Salmon Association were the disagreements in the future, how it should be formed. My thought was we should work on Kodiak, keep it together, keep it strong, and not spend a lot of money trying to go statewide but concentrate on the most likely area that would be able to hold a strike again. Have it very obvious in front of the entire community what we were doing and have the support of businessmen and shop owners downtown, like we did. That just wouldn't happen in any other community.

AG: So what were some of the strategies that you employed to convince everyone to strike?

LB: This is where I wish that it had been documented in a film because the meetings for all of the salmon fishermen were held in Fishermen's Hall. They were led by a couple of very strong speakers who had a long history in the fishery. Chris [Berns] was on the sidelines, and if someone was objecting or not talking about the history of the salmon fishery in Kodiak in an correct manner, he would be like the dog (*laughing*) that would say, "That's not true." It tied everybody in. There were a couple of guys that were also on the sidelines that were standing up, I very clearly remember that that came up with the slogans [...]. They were more like if we don't stand together then we all fall apart. That was something that we had on all of our signs. It was a nightly roundup of getting

fishermen. We started sending them out by plane to like Alitak. Mike Martin went out there, and he was a good example of a leadership position for him. He flew the entire island and every port and every small village. He would land, and he would get those guys even though they didn't want to strike. There were plenty of guys that were scabs in 1982 or '3 when the other strike was and everybody remembered who they were. Everybody. So those guys got pulled in and said, "We're gonna do this and we're gonna all do it together." That was really integral was the leadership qualities of several of the guys that were just pull everybody in and get everybody to say, "Okay, we're gonna do it," every night. That was day-by-day. Every twenty-four hours we did that, so that people were strong and committed.

AG: […] I just think of the fact of like flying to Larsen Bay, for example, or flying to Alitak, what you're actually doing is you're flying to the cannery.

LB: Right.

AG: So you're on cannery land telling them to strike.

LB: Yeah. It was pretty amazing. In the outlying villages they didn't have the strong waterfront processors. It was like right in their face in Kodiak. I think it was much more mild down in Alitak in terms of talking to the fishermen.

AG: What about the setnetter organizing? How did that happen?

LB: That happened in 1989. In order to get a contract with Exxon, a charter, you had to be an organization. You had to form a group of setnetters that looked professional and that […] were advocating for their rights to cleanup oil on beaches out where they fished. Which is actually a good idea, a good strategy.

AG: Who was instrumental in that?

LB: I believe Dan Ogg was instrumental. I remember him speaking at one of the first meetings in 1989 that we all have to join together. UFMA [United Fishermen's Marketing Association] was the only group that was getting vessels into the charters. That was the only salmon fishery representative, although he represented also the crabbers and some of his longliners, and he did a multi-species organization. That was when the Kodiak Seiners Association said, "We need to get together as salmon seiners." After that, that was when there was more unity and cohesiveness. From building on that, that was when we were able to pull a strike off eight years later, because of that, because we were together. We'd been having issues at the Board of Fish and we had to work together in order to (*indecipherable*) as seiners and setnetters. We started the Kodiak Salmon Workgroup, which was supported by the Kodiak Island Borough. That was a group of seiners and setnetters. […] It wasn't a paid group, although the Borough paid me to facilitate it and I was given an office in the borough building. That group was purely voluntary. We were able to head off a couple of very heavy propositions by the Cook Inlet drifters, UCIDA [United Cook Inlet Drift Association], that they wanted to close down certain areas of Kodiak Island to salmon fishing between July 6 and 25. So our cohesiveness at that point really paid a dividend because we were able to minimize what happened to us at the Board of Fisheries. That resulted in having closures in some of the zones around Afognak and other areas in the event that we were catching too many sockeyes going to Cook Inlet.

AG: To what extent do you think Exxon was kind of a training ground for all of these other political—?

LB: Absolutely. Absolutely. Right after Exxon we realized how disorganized we were, that in order to affect change of any kind, we needed to be vocal about it. We also formed the first project that we […] called the Forest Practices Group. That was in '91, '92, and we were concerned about the logging operations, the clear cutting on Afognak Island around the hatchery. We had a community meeting. We invited the Native corporations, we invited the Habitat Division from Anchorage, and Fish and Game, and we had a panel discussion about it. It was extremely successful. We were able to convince the logging operations, too, even though they were on private land. We were convincing enough to the community, and there was community support to limit or to maximize buffer zones around lakes and around the hatchery. […] That was the first group that came out of the oil spill. The second group was the Kodiak Salmon Work Group. Simultaneously, there was a coastal communities group that we were part of to organize against IFQs. Chris and I, in '92, won the Chamber of Commerce Cornerstone Award for our efforts against IFQs for the community of Kodiak. So I would say that the '90s and the early 2000s were pretty intense. As far as us as a fishing family, we were very involved in every issue that had anything to do with small boats and the salmon fishery. Any effect that a regime change would make, or changes that Fish and Game, Board of Fish, NPFMC, we were right there.

AG: In addition to the strike and the forest issue, what are some other kind of victories that you experienced during that time?

LB: [...] Chris and Bruce [Schactler] knew a guy named Jerry Mackey in Southeast, and they'd gotten to know him through UFA [United Fishermen of Alaska]. He wanted to run for Senate. At that time, the districting was Kodiak Island and then the Southeast archipelago. Jerry had to campaign in Kodiak, so Tim Blott and I became the campaign people for Jerry's race in Kodiak and we won in 1996. Then I worked for the legislature for four years, which I found that I could really—. I was independent in the office, by myself, and was able to do most any advocating that I wanted to with constituents or even fisheries meetings, or panel discussions during Comfish. That was really rewarding. Ultimately, when the state was declared an economic disaster due to the salmon prices in 2002, I was able to work on trade adjustment assistance for folks and develop how that would apply to salmon fishermen. Ultimately, a lot of those programs benefited us because we were able to get funding for our direct marketing that we wanted to do in 2003. We were able to get trade adjustment assistance for quality purposes for our RSW skiff. There was actually a silver lining after eleven years. There were benefits that could be applied to salmon fishermen around the state in terms of retraining money if they wanted to do that, but mostly the crewmembers benefited from retraining. Fortunately, I had about six crewmembers who were able to take advantage of the TAA funding. One completed dental hygiene school and was also able to get all of her tools, $5000. Several of my crewmembers completed college with the money. I went to Humboldt State University to the program called Environment and Community from 2003 to 2005. I completed the master's program there and wrote a thesis about the Kodiak Island salmon fishery, the cultural and social importance of it.

[...]

Bern Pile crew, 2015. From the left: Alicia Hedlesky, Galen Berns, Lacey Berns, Leslie Berns, Eden Berns and Bryson Marks. P-1000-5-28.