Name of person interviewed: Susan Petersen [SP]

Facts about this person:

Age Unknown
Sex Female
Occupation Anthropologist who studied auction in New Bedford; co-founder of Coalition for Buzzards Bay.
If a fisherman,
Home port,
and Hail Port
Residence (Town where lives)
Ethnic background (if known)

Interviewer: Janice Fleuriel [JF]

Transcriber: Azure Dee Westwood [ADW]

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TRANSCRIPT

[Start of Audio]

[JF]: Ok, this is Sunday, September 24, this is Janice Fleuriel and I'm talking to Dr. Susan Petersen. Betsy Pye, the volunteer coordinator saw you walking by and said you would have a good perspective to share and I have to admit that's all I know. So I think I'm just going to start generally and ask what is your role in the waterfront of New Bedford?

[SP]: Well I moved to Massachusetts in 1973 as a brand new PhD from the University of Hawaii and I came to Woods Hole Oceanographic with the intention of learning about the Massachusetts fishing industry. And so the first week I was here in eastern Massachusetts I got in my car and drove over the bridge from the Cape into New Bedford. And in the early '70's, the highway, 195, wasn't finished yet. So you had to take Route 6 and I came into New Bedford and it had been urban renewed. So it meant it looked like it had been bombed and I wandered around and found the Custom House and the Custom House was where the National Marine Fisheries Service had its office. So I went in and I introduced myself to the fellows there, Dennis Maine and I can't remember the other fellows name, that's to bad and said, "Well, here I am, I'm an anthropologist, I'm going to study the fishing industry and can you give me any clues?" And so Dennis and I sat and had coffee and he told me in an hour or an hour and a half sort of his perspective on the background of the fishing industry and directed me towards some books and some articles and some publications and so I started to do research on the fishing industry. What I did with the National Marine Fisheries Service database was to learn the names of the boats and were they docked and who owned them and how big they were and so on and so forth. And then after I'd sort of gotten the background, the paper research, I got my nerve up and early one morning went to the fish auction which was in those days in the Wharfinger Building and it was really delightful. First of all it was really early in the morning and I was living in Woods Hole so I had to get up at 4 and come on over, it took me about 45 minutes to get here. And I walked in and the room was just wonderful. The whole end wall was a big black board with long column and in each column was a heading with the boat name and a listing of all the fish. And then there was a railing and the auctioneer stood behind the railing and the fishermen stood sort of in the back mulling around, mostly the captains and the mates, and the potential buyers were clustered along the railing. It was absolutely fascinating. You could tell which ones were the fishermen because they'd come off the boats, they'd come in early that morning and register their catch and they were still wearing their flannels and their boots and all of their gear and you could tell who the buyers were because they were kind of dressed in civilian clothing. Except there was one buyer – I'll never forget this – he was dressed in a cutaway. And it turned out his name was Danny Sullivan and he also ran a funeral home. And so the days he had an early funeral, he came dressed in his funeral outfit.

[03:30]

[JF]: Is that what a cutaway is?

[SP]: You know those fancy… with the pants with the stripe down the thing and the jacket…

[JF]: Oh right, like tux almost?

[SP]: Yeah. One step down from a tux. So that really made the whole setting and it was… again, this was the early 70's so there was a lot of cigars and cigarettes and pipes, so it was the classic smoke filled room and the tension of the auction with the bells ringing, I'm sure you have some of that, those were taped in those days. Those were great experiences, but the subtleties that went on in the auction and the jockeying for position and the strategies that the buyers used in order to… as you know they buy a whole boat load of fish but you can get the boat by bidding up any single species in the list. So the strategy was generally to build up the price on something for which it was relatively low volume. So you weren't committing yourself to tons of money but what you really wanted was the cod or haddock or yellowtail flounder which you didn't want to bid up a whole lot because they had lots of that. So that was my start in learning about the fishing industry and later on, as I got to know all the fish buyers, I went around to the various facilities and watched them offload the fish and interviewed the lumpers and interviewed the boat owners and some of the crew members. I got to know how the structure of the financing went, how the fishermen were paid - the lay system, which is how the revenues from the boat were divided up between the boat owner, the captain, and so forth. I had a wonderful time in New Bedford in those early years and it was a great time to be here because the city was going through… it had clearly been through some bad times but it was beginning to reestablish itself; the Historic District had been formed, WHALE was very active in trying to save what hadn't been urban renewed. It was a great time to be here. I enjoyed meeting all those folks. It was a time of transition because the foreign fleets had been very active off our coats for 5-6 years and a lot of our stocks had been decimated by pulse fishing by the foreign fleets and there were some positive ramifications to that because with the decline in fish, the price went up. So fishermen actually made more money because they caught less volume. At the same time, the scallops were down and were just starting to come back. I think in those early years – 73-75 – there were only like 10-12 scallop vessels in the fleet because the scallop stocks were so low.

[06:43]

[SP]: And then of course that started to change as well and scallops were rebuilt and are of course very valuable by 2006, a really important part of the local economy and local employment. That was a really good time.

[JF]: Were you doing your research just for yourself or Woods Hole?

[SP]: No, I worked in Woods Hole Oceanographic. I had a post-doctoral Fellowship and when you're invited to come to Woods Hole as a Fellow, you come with a project. And I had studied fisheries management in Hawaii and my thesis was a computer simulation of the Honolulu fish Auction so I was particularly interested in the New Bedford fish auction to compare it. At the time there was an auction in Boston; they built an auction in New York that was a sort of fleeting thing and then for a time there was an auction up in Portland, Maine. I'm really interested in markets, market structure and how the fishermen respond to the changes in the market. So in those days, it was before a lot of foreign fish was coming into the United States. When we talked about foreign fish in the '70's we mostly meant fish trucked in from Canada; that was foreign fish. And now of course fish come from all over the place, all over the world literally. So different method of competition then we had in the early '70's. So, that's what I did.

[JF]: And how long were you doing that actual research?

[SP]: Well, I did that research on and off for 6-7 years; looked at the structure of the fishing industry, how boats were owned, how new boats were… how did you buy a new boat? Where did you get the capital to do it? And how did you pay for the insurance? I looked at the whole financial structure of the fishing fleet. And at that time, there were not Federal… there were some Federal loan programs but they were not generous, not the way they were later. I became very politically active in supporting the argument for the 200-mile limit.

[09:05]

[JF]: So you came in while that still hadn't been established?

[SP]: Oh yeah, this was long before, it was still in the early days of that and I was… we had a number of fisheries groups and I worked to collect data that would help inform those decisions. So a lot of the stuff that I did was to look at basic industry structure, the relationships between the stocks of fish and the health of the industry. So I kind of bridged between the economics, the biology and the culture of the industry. It was a great time. And then I worked really actively with the groups that were supporting the passage of the 200-mile legislation. We used to call it the Magnuson Act but it's since been expanded. And after the Act was passed, I served on the Scientific and Advisory Committee for the New England Fisheries Management Council and then for the mid-Atlantic Council as well. So I was bouncing back and forth; those meetings were in Philadelphia once a month so I went down there. And I continued to do fisheries related stuff. I also worked for the State Department as an expert in the Canadian-U.S. boundary dispute and that happened… I was working doing that in the early '80's because that dispute was settled I think in '83 or '84, I can't remember, maybe '85.

[JF]: That's probably in Susan Playfair's [?] book.

SP]: I don't remember those things. I can get the decades right but I can't get the exact years.

[JF]: So, that whole 200-mile limit thing, I do remember transcribing a tape or talking to somebody in one of the previous Festivals, and there was a trip to Washington with people, were you part of that?

[SP]: Oh yeah, I did that. In fact, we met… the group from the fishing industry met with the Secretary of Commerce, Rogers Morton, and I can recall that before the meeting we had our little caucus and Mickie Swain was there, Jake Dykestra [?] and Dick Allen, and Hugh O'Rourke, and I'm leaving out a lot of people… John Lenahan [?] and a couple of other folks from the fishing industry and they were all a little nervous because we were going to meet with the Secretary of Commerce. So they were saying, "Susan, how do we address him?' And I said, "Formally we call him Mr. Secretary, that's the name, and he'll know what to do because he deals with groups all the time, so he'll know that you're going to be a little nervous and so let him lead, and you just follow, and he'll ask questions and he'll have his staff there. What you really want to do is break up into groups and a few of you talk to the Secretary but make sure that all those staff members are covered." And we really had a good meeting with him. I don't know if you recall Rogers Morton, but he must have been 6'8", he was this huge man and it was very impressive to be in the same space with him. So that was a good meeting. But there were lots of hearings in Washington, not just one.

[12:28]

[SP]: But there was one time when the fishing industry sort of marched on Washington, I think that's…

[JF]: That's probably what I heard.
[SP]: That was…
[JF]: Was that before your meeting with the Secretary or after?
[SP]: I think that was after when we were really heavily into the lobbying stage. As you know, Gary Studds who was then our State Rep, was really a strong supporter and his staff were marvelous and Senator Kennedy of course. And as you know, our President was opposed to this because they saw it as a potential limitation on our military access to other peoples coastlines, so they didn't want a 200-mile limit by the U.S. because it meant we would have to honor other peoples 200-mile limits. So that was a major international legal issue that really had little to do with fishing and more to do with military access and particularly the ability to pass through certain straits that are quite narrow. Those of us on the fishing side tended to take the narrow and very specific point of view whereas the folks interested in general ocean access…
[JF]: They were more concerned with retribution it sounds like.
[SP]: Exactly. So now it's hard to believe that the 200-mile limit hasn't always been there.
[JF]: To think that there was a time when you could go not far offshore and see a Russian factory ship or something.
[SP]: Funny what 30 years will do! One time I got to go out with the Coast Guard and do an over-flight, before the 200-mile Bill was passed. And so I could see all of the ships and it really was fascinating. They were right there; you could see them at night from a low hill.
[JF]: I bet, because they were just massive.
[SP]: They were huge.
[JF]: Do you have still a sense of how the mood changed when the law did pass? Was there a drastic change in the mood before and after?
[SP]: Everybody felt very positive of course because we felt like we had finally got some control, some management over the stocks that were born and raised here, but that euphoria didn't last very long.
[JF]: Because of the other…?
[15:00]
[SP]: Well, what happened was that through a number of Federal government programs, particularly the program that provided low interest loans to fishermen, there was an excess capacity in fishing vessels. They built tons of boats which were all Federally financed, the mortgages were held and an upper portion of them were paid by the Federal government. That led to tremendous overfishing. So I think it was a real roller coaster feeling for the folks in the industry who had thought that on the passage of the 200-mile limit that it would rationalize the industry. And what happened was we suddenly had a huge increase in the fleet's ability to capture fish; bigger boats, better technology, more crew, bigger trawls, better equipment to find the fish that were out there. And suddenly it turned out that Americans could overfish all by themselves, that we didn't really need the foreigners to teach us how to overfish and that came as a real shock and it came very fast.
[JF]: Like within a matter of a couple of years?
[SP]: Well, it was probably 6-8 years by the time it suddenly…
[JF]: So there was this little sort of Rose Bowl [?]…
[SP]: Yeah, between 1976 and 1986 it was a high and then low. And by the mid-80's, it was back down to pushing and shoving and deciding who was going to be where when, and as

you know from other interviews, there have been lots of different techniques tried to figure out how to preserve the resource and preserve the industry at the same time.

[JF]: And what do you think of how that's happening now? With the regulations?

[SP]: I haven't studied the fishing industry since the mid-80's so while I'm familiar with Amendment 13 and most of the things that have been happening, I'm no longer an expert. I don't have a scientific opinion. I have a personal opinion.

[JF]: Do you want to share that?

[SP]: Sure. My personal opinion is that we've gotten kind of a triple whammy; we've discovered that we can overfish by ourselves, we had some fairly major environmental changes related to climate and coastal water quality changes, huge population growth along the coastline – so changes in the coastal environment which are the nursery areas for a lot of the stocks of fish. And then we had a gigantic step forward in terms of technology. So we have these three things coming into being where the stocks are declining in part from overfish, in part from the environmental changes, and in part from technology changes and we're not able to react fast enough to it. So it's been really impossible for the folks who are in the fishing industry – the boat owners and the fishermen – to grasp it, because I think it happens so fast; there's been no way to make wise financial decisions. They are working in sort of marshmallow fluff.

[18:33]

[JF]: Oh, that's a great image.

[SP]: So that's a personal opinion. I think if I were to study it again, I think it could be better informed.

[JF]: And do you have any kind of personal opinion on how the regulations are helping or hurting? The current set of regulations with days at sea and closed areas?

[SP]: I think that they have attempted to be more sensitive to the financial needs of the industry, but the Federal government has never been known for its sensitivity to the people who are actually out there doing the work. They are more sensitive to some higher calling or some other calling. So I think it's always a disappointment when so many people are marginalized.

[JF]: You mentioned that this was not your scientific opinion; would a scientific option just need data to do that?

[SP]: Yeah, you'd need to know more. Right now what I have is what I hear; I have hearsay and the newspapers, and those are about the same.

[JF]: So you worked through the mid-80's with Woods Hole?

[SP]: Yes.

[JF]: And what have you been doing since then?

[SP]: Then I went to Boston University and I taught there for a few years. Then I started my own company called Ecological Engineering.

[JF]: What does that do?

[SP]: Well, it treats waste water using all natural systems.

[JF]: Oh, you should come visit my husbands waste water plant in Shelburne Falls. He uses a reed bed.

[SP]: Oh, I used to use Aquatic systems and natural systems. Shelburne Falls, I haven't been to that one.

[JF]: It's up on the Mohawk Trail. I'll leave you the information if you ever want to… he loves to show people around. He started to get away from the chlorine too, but he's had the reed bed in place for at least a good 12 years or so, he has 2-3 of them.
[SP]: I think I've heard about those, those are for sludge.
[JF]: But the actual treatment I guess you're talking about?
[SP]: We did the whole treatment, not just the sludge decomposing at the end. But I did try to build a reed bed once because I had a little treatment plant in Harwich but the state DEP wouldn't let me.
[JF]: He had to do a bunch of convincing and I got the impression that it was sort of probationary in a sense but it's gone OK.
[SP]: He worked with Woody Reed. Who has died since, but he did a lot of work with Reed Beds. Which we always thought was funny because of his name.
[21:05]
[SP]: But I got into the waste water business because of the fishing piece and because of the changes in coastal water quality. And most of the loss of coastal habitat was because of two things: point source pollution that discharges from the sewage treatment plants and the storm water drains, and the second source was just the random distribution of pollutants in our watershed that gradually percolated through groundwater and would end up in the coastal water. So we were losing shellfish beds, we were losing marsh habitat where the finfish grow. Part of the outreach of that, I was one of the founders for the Coalition for Buzzards Bay. It all kind of fits together. So it was really my work in the fishing industry that led me to start a business to help improve environmental quality.
[JF]: And you still have that business now?
[SP]: No, the business still exists, it's up in Concord, it is now run by David Delporto[?], but when my husband retired from Woods Hole Oceanographic – my husband is John Teale [?] who is a salt marsh expert – when he retired from Woods Hole, I retired from Ecological Engineering and since then we've been doing consulting. Mostly I'm wetlands and water quality and wastewater.
[JF]: And are you still involved with the Coalition for Buzzards Bay?
[SP]: I'm still involved with the Coalition; I'm no longer on the Board but I serve on a couple of Committees and I give them money. Which is important.
[JF]: So you must feel good that that's carried on?
[SP]: Oh, really good. In fact I was just at their booth talking with some of their volunteers.
[JF]: And when did that get formed?
[SP]: Almost 20… this is the 20th… 2007 is the 20th year. So we're going to do a little 20th year celebration. So 1987 is we do our math right.
[JF]: What would you say… how do you feel, either professionally or personally, about the outlook for the environment in this area as well as the industry?
[SP]: Well, the Coalition for Buzzards Bay has done a really good job of monitoring the water quality within the Buzzards Bay area, and we can certainly see over 20 years, improvements in many of the areas. But I think that we're about to plateau because the huge increase in population in our watershed has made it really difficult to keep up with the water quality. We can't… it's just related to the number of people and we can't capture the number of pollutants that gets into the coastal…
[JF]: And are they coming from… are people, the population, is it septic system issues or…?
[23:58]

[SP]: Its septic system and sewage treatment plants. The biggest threat to the coastal ocean is nitrogen pollution. Nitrogen isn't treated in septic systems; it just flows right through it. So you may have a functioning septic system from a public health perspective but it's still contributing to the pollution of the coastal ocean.

[JF]: And is that true for the treatment plants also?

[SP]: Most of the treatment plants do not remove nitrogen. Now that's gradually changing as the state becomes more aggressive about requiring some level of nitrogen reduction but that's a slow moving target. So I think that we're probably at a place where Buzzards Bay is about as clean as it's going to get for awhile. Until we begin to figure out how to manage our watershed. And of course that has real impact on the fishing industry. It's not just the coastal fish – I'm not just talking about recreation or even local shellfish – I'm talking about the fish that use the salt marshes as nursery habitats.

[JF]: I hadn't thought about that. And then they go out to the deep fishing grounds?

[SP]: Well, a lot of the flounders, the flatfish, start out in the shallow, the estuaries and bays so they are really affected by coastal water quality. Not the cod and haddock; they are way out.

[JF]: I must admit I don't know exactly where they all are.

[SP]: Well, a lot of them start out here in coastal waters.

[JF]: I was taking a walk on the hurricane barrier last night and I saw the signs about not eating stuff out of the harbor, is the Bay edible?

[SP]: Parts of the Bay. You can choose some areas where you can eat fish and shellfish. All the fish is safe, it's the shellfish.

[JF]: So ideally you'd love to see it one day where you could eat everything?

[SP]: Where you could eat everything, right. And swim everywhere. The fact that you can now swim in Buzzards Bay, you can swim in New Bedford harbor now; it's cleaner than the Charles River. So that's good.

[JF]: And usually when I'm talking to people, I like to ask is there anything I didn't ask that you'd like to share; stories or perspectives?

[SP]: Didn't I talk enough! [laughs]

[JF]: I can listen forever.

[SP]: I should give somebody else a turn…

[JF]: Nobody is scheduled right now.

[SP]: There are always lots of stories about New Bedford and the fishing industry and I think that one of my… as an anthropologist, the part that I liked the best was, after the auction finished in the morning, there was a little coffee house, in fact in this building were we are sitting and it was really awful. I guess they served food although I didn't ever see anybody eat there. But after the auction, the buyers and the boat owners and all the "hanger's on", would come here and have coffee. It was just a great opportunity to eavesdrop, to listen in on the topics, the discussions, the ideas that they had, what they thought might be coming, in terms of which boats might be coming in and how much fish they might have.

[27:27]

[SP]: And it was in the days before there was easy communication and a lot of the radio contact was encrypted so you wouldn't give anything away. They spoke in code. They had their own codes. I'm not saying this was a complicated thing but… so there was always a lot

of backtalk in this little coffee shop. And it was a wonderful 2-3 years that I spent my early morning hours down here.

[JF]: So you came down…

[SP]: I came every day. So Monday through Friday. The scallop auction was earlier, and I usually didn't come to the scallop auction, I came for the fish.

[JF]: So, you also saw when the auction changed, went away and came back as a display auction. That was a huge culture shift from what I can tell.

[SP]: It dwindled for a number of reasons because there were some faction issues. So it became less popular and then is closed down completely and then it came back. But when it came back, you weren't allowed to just go. When I came to it, it was run by the Union and the change in the Union structure, it was Longshoremen, and it became Teamsters and there was just a lot of… at the same time Union's became less powerful throughout the United States, not just here. And the strike in the mid-80's took everything apart.

[JF]: That's come up so much this year.

[SP]: You know, the old auction was wonderful but the way it was done, you can't say it was fair. Auctions are designed to be as fair as possible but this one had evolved in a way that didn't represent the demand for fish. I think I described early on that you were buying the whole boat so you were bidding strategically in order to have as much as what you wanted at the lowest cost. But you wouldn't necessarily… if what you really wanted was yellowtail flounder, you might be bidding on the window panes because there were fewer of those. So it was a…Once you were there and you were listening to it, you knew what was happening. And the fishermen knew what was happening but the contrast was - in Boston, the auction was by species. And the reason it worked was in Boston, the pier was public and the boats would unload into bins by species and then the bins would be pushed over to whatever house bought the cod or yellowtail. But here the unloading is at a fish house. And so everything from that boat comes into the house and they buy the whole boat and then that house redistributes.

[30:32]

[JF]: So the whole infrastructure affected…?

[SP]: Exactly, the physical setting. And it made so that when you read in the National Marine Fisheries Service daily reports what the price for yellowtail flounder was for New Bedford, you really had to know a lot to read into that, what it meant. Whereas in Boston, it was a little more straight forward.

[JF]: Now the one they have now, down here, is it by species or is it…?

[SP]: I don't know, I don't do fishing anymore. I do sewage.

[JF]: I don't know if you have a perspective on this and I'll make this my last question, we got talking to Paul Swain who maybe you know, and he got into the whole thing about nicknames. He and I think it was Jimmy Dwyer will it down now and again and so far they've come up with a list of 200 nicknames that they remember from days gone by.

[SP]: And Paul Swain used to work for the National Marine Fisheries Service and he was the name I couldn't remember. I met Paul Swain and Dennis the first day.

[JF]: Yeah, we talked about his work there and at the auction too. Then he was saying that doesn't go on anymore and I wonder how much losing the face to face, daily interaction of the auction might have changed some of that stuff. I don't know if you have any sense of that?

[SP]: I don't have a sense of that but I can tell you that when I first came here in the early 70's that industry was dominated by square heads, Norwegians. Then there were a group of eastern Europeans, Latvians, who had come over in the 40's.

[JF]: And I interviewed one of them last year.

[SP]: And then there were folks from Nova Scotia [brief interruption]. And at the time there were not very many Portuguese boat owners. There were a few. And most of the deckhands sort of sorted out by ethnic group – and it was mostly language based – and so the biggest change that's happened in the industry that I have not followed is the shift – it's a classic story of immigration; when you come here and you're first generation and you don't speak the language very well and you need a job, the fishing industry was traditionally a relatively low entry cost industry.

[33:30]

[SP]: So people came in and fished and then as they became more and more prosperous which certainly happened in the 1970's, they sent their kids to college and those kids didn't go into fishing, they went into other industries or they may have been in marketing or something else but very few of them continued on the boats. So there was a shift from being a deckhand, to being a mate, to being a captain, to being a boat owner, and then to moving out of the industry. So what's happened is the Norwegians who came over in the 20's and 30's, have shifted so that we don't see very many Norwegian deck hands anymore and the eastern Europeans who came over in the 30's and 40's, have moved on too. So what's happened in this transition is that the Portuguese have now come in and they've used the same entry into the local economy that these other groups have used they are just 30 years later. So they've come in and they are doing the same transition and we're now seeing Central Americans coming in and working in the fish houses and working on some of the boats. So it's an entry stage economy. Because you need skills and you need street smarts but you don't need a lot of the language in order to make a living.

[JF]: Do you think it would have been any different if the Union would have survived? Do you think the earlier immigrant groups would have stayed in the fishing end of it or not, they would have still followed the pattern?

[SP]: I don't think so, I think it's a pretty traditional pattern. We've seen it in other ports as well. You know the shrimp boat fleet down in the Gulf of Mexico transitioned from being backwater Louisiana types to being Vietnamese. And now the Vietnamese are being replaced by other ethnic groups that are coming in. So, you know, it's an… fishing has always been one of those great jobs that you…

[JF]: Yeah, if you're willing to work and you're smart enough to get it right, then you can make money.

[SP]: Well, in the absence of restrictive regulations, yes! [laughs]. You used to be able to make a good living. And now it's a little bit of a… it's a much riskier place to be.

[JF]: Well thanks. I guess the one question I wrap up with everybody is what would you want to see the average Festival visitor come away understanding from having come here?

[SP]: I think a little bit of what I was just talking about. The fact that the fishing industry is so diverse and dynamic and that the skills, the technology, the knowledge of the resource, of the markets, is evolving and changing and that fishing has become much more sophisticated over the decades that I've been involved. Fishermen now know a lot about equipment, electronics, computers, and things that 30-40 years ago they didn't need to

know. And it's a nice marriage between the street smarts that they have about how to handle their gear and the book smarts that we get in collaboration with the University and SMAST and other researchers that are telling us about what the resource looks like. And then the ability of the community to respond and support that evolving industry. So I'd really like folks to come away from the Working Waterfront Festival understanding a little more of that dynamic.

[JF]: And you're here volunteering for the Oceanarium?

[SP]: I'm volunteering for the Oceanarium. I'm going to go work in the Baker Books tent.

[JF]: Wonderful, well thank you so much.

[SP]: You're welcome.

[37:38]
[End of Audio]

TRANSCRIPT

[Start of Audio]
[00:00]