

Participant: Mr. Keith Cochran  
Researcher: Ms. Deanna Caracciolo  
Location: Newport, OR  
Date: 6/9/2016  
COMPLETED

Poor Audio Quality in places - Participant moving around  
[Start 0:00:17.8]

DC: Could you give me a rundown of how you kind of got into fishing?

KC: How I got into fishing [chuckle] I was pretty much born into it. Grandpa, Craig Cochran started fishing out of here, I don't know the year, way back in the day. Partners at Lilburn Hall. He got out of that and went a built his own boat, the 4 Seas. Tuna, Shrimped, Crabbed. He Salmoned, Tunaed and Crabbed out of here and then he kind worked his way up to bigger boats like this. He bought this one and then he bought another one, The New Life. And then his son Kurt, my dad, started running these boats in high school. And bought his first one, The Marathon, when he was 20 or 21 or something like that. So there's 3 boats in the family and that's kinda how I started. Started working on here when I was 9, going up to Alaska and fishing the summers. Did that all through college. I graduated from college, started working here on deck and been running it for 3 years now. So just kinda a family thing, started super young and working up and here we are. So I feel like I'm just starting, and hopefully there's a bright future ahead of me. But with all the stuff that is going on politically, it's looking pretty grim. But we are hopeful. We see a bright future and a big resource out there and fishing is definitely going to change but I think it's always going to be there.

DC: Okay, how do you think it's going to change?

KC: Oh, you look at this fishery down here and the IFQ's, rationalization, I mean its already gone through bigger changes. You know, the pace of fisheries, value, product, what we bring to town, how we look at things, you know. Valuable resource rather than just a little fish that you stomp in your hatch. Now we are trying to bring in a good product and get payed more for it. It's just a different mindset down here and we are starting to go through that process. You know, slowing down the derby style fisheries in Alaska and trying to better utilize the resource, and bycatch reduction, and there's a lot of stuff going on. So I think, who knows what the future is going to hold, but I mean in my short 5 years doing this full time, there's been a lot of changes.

DC: So what did you actually go to college for?

KC: I studied finance, business finance degrees, a little bit of communications, and stuff like that.

DC: Sounds like you really enjoyed it [chuckles]

KC: Yea it wasn't too...I mean, I much rather would have been here but It will be good so...

DC: What do you think motivated you most not to continue on with college type stuff and come back?

KC: I got tired of sitting in a chair for 12 hours a day. I wanted to go work with my hands and start doing something. So that was it, that was it.

DC: Did your grandfather or father motivate you to go into it?

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KC: Dad told me that I couldn't go and work for him unless I went and got a college education.

DC: Really?

KC: That was the uhh... that was pretty black and white there

DC: Did they want you to go into fishing?

KC: There wasn't any pressure, but they just said that if I was going to follow what they did, things are so different now than when they first started that you really need to have the education to succeed and be able to run a business no-in-days. It's not...used to be the harder you worked, the better you did, you go out there and you start catching fish and your great. Now it's more really about what you don't catch than what you do catch. And it's about going to these council meetings and talking to people and being diplomatic in order to promote our business so it's a totally different can of worms but it's what we've got so make it work.

DC: Have you seen the fleet changing at all cause of that?

KC: The fleet changing? ...um, no, Newport is pretty much all the same. Times of year we fish or different boats in different fisheries, maybe a little bit but it's pretty much...I mean...not much has changed here. So it's pretty much status quo as in who's in the industry and the boats and stuff like that. I haven't seen much change in that sense.

DC: Okay. SO then what's the average age of fishermen

KC: Average age? People I work with.

DC: Or just all over? Any observations

KC: Well I'm one of the younger guys. I'm 27. My relief skipper who just left was probably the oldest guy in the fleet and he is...let's call him 65. So the average of that [types into calculator] is 46. SO that would probably be the average age. But there's a bunch of young guys coming up. There's young guys all over the place. A lot of young guys in Kodiak. Young meaning 27 to 35 or something like that. There's probably 8 or 10 boats with guys that young running them. You've got older guys definitely but there starting to be a pretty good crop of young guys getting interested, maybe they aren't running boats, but on deck and starting to learn and work up. Everybody says that everybody's getting old and everybody...their getting old. And there's a lot of people starting to retire and kinda phase out but there's a big push underneath them. I mean, at those meetings they say that everyone is getting old what are we going to do? but there's plenty of interest and there's plenty of young people. You know, there's...there's...I got 2 or 3 guys on my boat who have ambition and want to run boats and are working towards that and it's promising. SO I don't know if a lot of the older guys see that, but being a young guy. Eric Massero, he runs that thing [points to boat dock in front of us] and he's my age. There's a bunch of guys, Jeremy Hold, he's from the Marathoner now, and I could just go on, and on, and on, and on, Justin Johnson and Clayton and Bartollas on the Raven, and I mean there's more young people in this industry than people give us credit for. It might just be a little bit behind the scenes and not really on the front lines yet, but I think everything that everybody's worried about really has a way of working

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itself, and will work itself out. But it's fun stuff to talk about, gives you guys a job, so I get it. It observation...

DC: It's good to hear that honestly

KC: Yeah, and you look at the supporting industry businesses, Englund Marine, people doing wires, stuff like that. Or you got welders up in the ship yard, or camera people coming down to the boats, or...there's a lot of young blood in the industry overall. It's fun, makes it cool, and I don't know...But the older people are important too, you know. Learn from them and learn what's going on, and the history and stuff like that so it's definitely in a good balance. But, that's my observations for what it's worth.

DC: I like it! SO what about being able to get to the point that you have been able to get to? So the head of the boat. Is it easy for young people to kinda get to that point? Or is it...

KC: If the guys really ambitious, if he wants to work, if he wants to learn, if he's will do the satisfice, basically if he is capable, he's teachable, coachable, it's out there. Different boats, different extents, as far as what...if there's a need, you know...if you don't need anything...you got 2 guys that are middle aged running a boat and their happy with their job, there's really no opportunity there. But with people getting older there are more and more opportunities. It's kinda one of those things where it's not like a corporate job where professional...where you work so many years and then you get promoted and then you work so many years and get promoted and there's kinda a timeline there. This industry it's you work your tail feathers off, you learn as much as you can and when there's an opportunity, if you're ready there it is. It's kinda how it happened for me on this boat. I was working on the back deck and all of a sudden a guy said - hey I need some more time off so here you go- type thing. You never know when it's going to be. It could be tomorrow, it could be in 4-5 years, but if a guy puts in the effort and shows he's capable and able to do something, he is going to get recognized, he is going to get noticed. We've got 3 boats in our family and we really need 4 or 5 good skippers. Cause every boat has 2 people to run the boat so they can take some time off, and there's a huge shortage, that we see, of young qualified able people. Maybe not shortage but there's a need, so were trying to fill that, and it's not an overnight thing. A guys gotta learn the nets, learn the gear, learn the boat, learn the electronics, learn navigation, learn all sorts of stuff. So it's a pretty...it's a pretty...it's a stressful job and it's a pretty in depth job but the opportunity is there if guys want it. And some people do, some don't. Some people gotta work longer for it, some people...it's just...every boats a little bit different. As far as time frame but there is a big need for good young people, who want to see a future in this. But...I mean...Right now this industry is going through some tough times. Last year was a record low year for most of these boats, and this year is way worse than last year. Sit its...a guy's gotta stick out the hard times and see a future and not kinda get scared and jump around and go chase the gravy all the time. That is a... something that we have to...are always kinda struggling with, you know. Just keeping good people around even in the good times. But, anyway I don't know if that answered your question...but...

DC: No, that totally answers it. Your right. Your hitting everything, I need. Thank you!

KC: Good Deal

DC: So what primarily attracts people your age to fishing then? If we are going through what sound like...

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KC: To fishing, what attracts people...[pause]...everybody thinks you're going to go fishing and you're going to get rich quick. They think you're going to go out there and make a bunch of money and it's gonna be great. There are times of that, but rarely it is it a lasting thing. It's a pretty good paying job for somebody without an education. You don't need a college degree to go work on the back deck. You need to be big strong and able to push things around and be strong, and work safe. You need to be smart, but there's no qualifications for it. So somebody can say 'hey' I don't really like sitting in a chair, go work with my hands, I'm good at that. I can work long hours, let's go fishing. So there's kinda that rough and tumble aspect to it and the payoff is usually pretty good, but when you really look at the amount of hours we spend in town and doing boat work, working holidays, you're really not getting payed that much per hour you work. So it's...once you get into it your like, oh I didn't really know about this, but it's...it's kinda fun. You're working with a team, and a bunch of guys and you kinda become like a family, a cohesive unit. You take care of your boat and have some pride. So it's fun in that aspect and it attracts people to kinda work in that way. What else?...I can speak for our boats because that's all I know, not everybody else is like this way, but we try to have some...have a rotation on the boat so a guy doesn't have to work all year long. So he can have this job, works half the year. It's a month on, month off rotation. So ideally he gets 6 months off with his family and he works 6 months and he can still hold down this job. So the time off is nice. You know, most of these boats, guys are on all year and don't have much of a family life, and it's pretty hard to have both. With the way we set up things, guys might not be making as much, but they are getting to raise their families and be home. So that is a big incentive, that is a big reason we hear that people wanna come work here. So...that's probably the biggest benefit, you get to go do this job and spend your life on the ocean and make a decent living, but you can still raise a family at the same time. I would say that's the biggest incentive on this style of crew rotation, why people kinda wanna come work here. But everybody's got their own reasons so...

DC: So on the other side, what are barriers to entering?

KC: A barrier to entering this job is probably the skills, expertise. It's kinda like any job you know? Everybody wants a guy with experience, to know he is going to do a good job, but how do you get experience without getting opportunities, you know? Someone's gotta hire you without any experience. But, that's a barrier. Things like diesel mechanizing, knowing your knots, sewing, stuff like that, understanding boats, trawls, and how the year comes in and out. Those are all things you look for when you hire somebody. Not saying it's pretty easy to pick up for a guy whose sharp. So, not saying that people without experience don't get hired. But that is probably the biggest barrier for somebody who's just coming down asking for a job, we ask what boat have you been on? what do you know? type stuff like that. And usually, they don't have any good experience and can't say I've been here, I've been on this boat, well if somebody told me I've been on that boat over there, I'd go talk to those guys and get a recommendation. If guys don't have that kind of stuff it's hard it's kinda hard to know what you're getting so that is probably the biggest barrier. But, we do understand that everybody's gotta start somewhere, so if you see some potential in a guy sometimes you give him an opportunity, but the specific skills, sewing, net mending, is probably the biggest asset a guy can have. If he can do that then you can utilize him and he's gonna get a job so...

DC: So if or when you have kids would you...

KC: [chuckles] 2 months! I've got my first one on the way!

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DC: 2 months?! Oh my gosh! how exciting! congratulations!

KC: Yeah, it's going to be [chuckles] it's gonna be interesting.

DC: Girl or boy? Do you know?

KC: We don't know, we kept it a surprise so... Yep, it's going to be fun

DC: So this question is super applicable

KC: Yep, yep, so it will be 4th generation fishermen in this town

DC: So do you think you will encourage or discourage your child from entering the business?

KC: Umm, not going to go either way. The kid can do what it wants.

DC: Same way your father did it?

KC: Same way my parents...whether it's a boy or a girl. I wasn't pressured into this. I would always see my dad leaving and I would always want to go with him type thin. Where's dad going? He's going fishing. Well why can't I go? When I was of age, or what they thought was age then I usually go to go with him. And it was never a pressure. I was never forced to work, or forced into it. I would just come out and see what was going on, and have a good time and have fun. Then once I was able to be of help and be useful, then I got to work and got paid a little bit. So I kinda eased into it and it made kit more fun. It wasn't this big burden that I had to go do. So it was kinda...I think that helped me create a good relationship with boats and with work, and a good work ethic and all that stuff. And it wasn't ever pressured or forced or anything like that. So I have a great relationship with my dad and I'm thankful for him. To kind of bring me up that way. So it will be the same way with my kid, you know. If he wants to come check it out, that's great. And if he wants to learn about it, we can teach him, but if he is interested in something else, that's great too. You know, they have gotta be happy and this definitely isn't for everybody. But, yeah, if they want to be a fisherman I'm all for it. It's a great job. You definitely have to have a family that's understanding and it's not for everybody. Time will tell what happens. But if they wanted to come be a part of the family business, that's cool, and if not, there's other things in life that are super rewarding too. Who knows what's going to happen, but it will be an adventure so

DC: Wow, well congratulations

KC: Yeah, thanks

DC: No wonder your so busy

KC: Yeah, there's a lot of reasons. They got a [unclear] here, their skipper just actually quit, so I get everything myself now. So trying to find somebody and train them. So that's kinda been a big stress. But it will all work out, and I'm excited. Not too worried. It will be fun. So what's your next question?

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DC: Alright, so if you weren't in a fishing family and this boat wasn't in the line up to you think you would have been able to become a skipper?

KC: [chuckles] I like to think so [chuckles]

DC: [chuckles] not that I think you have insufficient qualifications but...

KC: [chuckles] Nope, I like to think that I earned it. I started as a cook, as the cook on this boat and kinda worked my way up. I like to think that it wasn't because of who I am or who my family is, or how I attach to something. That definitely plays into it I'm sure, but I think that I could go somewhere and be a good hand on any boat. Maybe you work on deck for a few more years or something. But I think that if people have the drive and certain qualifications and are willing...you know...if they want it bad enough, then you can go earn it. And I can see other people out there earning spots on different things. And I like to think that I can compete with them too. And that's a big thing for respect for the guys that work under me. They have to know that I have this job because I am qualified to do it and I can produce and I'm running the boat safely. If they have any doubts in my ability, then we aren't going to be a good cohesive team. And if I'm not out there loading the boat with fish, they aren't making any money. So it all kinda proves itself kinda thing. You give somebody the opportunity, and in this industry you either make it or you don't. You either catching fish or your not. The boats either making money or it's not making money. And people who can operate the boat efficiently tend to do better and get more responsibility, and the people who don't, they kinda weed themselves out. So, yeah, to answer your questions [chuckles] I think I could hold my own anywhere else, but hey maybe... you never know. But I guess that's my 2 sense on that.

DC: Yeah, I meant that in the most respectful way possible

KC: Yah, no, that's a valid, fair, and good question

DC: Alright so we are coming to the end here. So what would it be like if the business was sold?

KC: What would it be like? [slightly surprised]

DC: Yeah, what do you think?

KC: Well it would probably be sold to one of these big companies who's taking over our industry. If the entire business was sold with all three of them or just one of them?

DC: Either, which ever scenario you have more thoughts on

KC: I'm not a boat owner, I'm just a skipper, so I can't really talk to the financial. But if it's your gains or...I really don't know much about the financial. I don't know how that effects things. If things were sold, I think we would have to be in pretty hard times, and we couldn't make it. I don't think we would just go sell things to become rich. That's not what we are trained to do here. We are just trained to make a good living for ourselves and provide jobs. I think we employ 16 different families between the 3 boats. All out of Newport here, or a majority out of Newport. So it's an impact on the community. It's not like we are looking to get in and get out. It's a long time thing. Who knows, maybe someday down

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the road it will get to that. I hope not. We will see how management and policy goes up in the North Pacific. We spend a lot of time here but we spend a majority of the time in Kodiak fishing in the Gulf of Alaska. And they are going through a big change right now, trying to change the fisheries and its looking pretty grim. Depending on how they do it, I think some people might be forced to sell out and maybe get out of it, because there's really not going to be a viable fishery if they make certain decisions. But I don't know, you see some boats getting sold. That boat over there [motions to a boat out the front window] was privately owned, family owned. They sold out a few years ago to a big company. And different people have different reasons. I think as long as there's a future of young people coming up, whether its family members or good people, young guys who just want to make something for themselves, I don't think there's any reason to sell out. If the boats still profitable and a good business and you give people opportunity, and you try to do the things yourself and it's...we are pretty much just a mom and pop operation. There's nothing fancy here that we do. it's fun. My wife's getting into the canning side of it, learning the books, and kinda doing the office end of it. I'm out there catching the fish, running it, so it's...there's a lot of work to go around. It would be fun to keep that in the family, but, as long as there interest, I don't see why we wouldn't.

DC: How are things changing up in Alaska?

KC: Right now the fisheries are what the ground fish used to be out here. Just a set quota, and everybody goes out and races for it. And there's bycatch issues, and all sorts of stuff, and it's pretty much coming to its knees up there. So the state of Alaska says okay we need to change this fishery. Slow it down and rationalize the fishery, turn it into whatever, quota system, catch share program. But nobody can agree how to do it. The fishermen are saying hey we have a good template down there; the whiting fishery down here is great. We are maximizing profit and the bycatch reduction has been amazing, and we are going to electronic monitoring, and the fishery...the demand for the product is low right now because of global economy and stuff like that and Russia, and the depressed dollar, and that's all global stuff. But the guts and the structure of the fishery is really taking off since it happened. S they say 'hey let's do this type of thing' and the state of Alaska doesn't want anything of it. They want to do bycatch, quota system, or they want to do...what are they talking about? ...they want to take the fish away from the trawlers and give it to the communities and give it to everybody else and kinda just break things up and really make it hard for us to survive. And so the depending on which way they go, there will either be a bright future up there or it will be kinda coming to an end. The meetings are actually going on right now. The Pacific Council manages the west coast, Oregon, Washington, California, and Idaho, and the North Pacific is Alaska, I think the pacific northwest or something. Those meetings are going on right now in Kodiak. My dad actually sits on the AP direct advisory panel to the council and he's up there kinda fighting to represent Oregon, fighting for the guys down here, and even in Kodiak because we spend so much time up there. It's a big political headache that we're...we got through it down here but we are trying to make it happen up there, but the state of Alaska is really anti-trawl for some reason, and their trying to basically ruin us by just changing the...what they are doing is they are rationing down the bycatch. Each year we get less, and less, and less, and less and they are not giving us the management structure in order to meet those things. You know if we had a fishery that wasn't a race, if everybody wants going out there competing, if you give each boat a little quota, he can go catch it a lot slower, a lot cleaner, a lot safer. And they don't want to do that for some reason. They want to keep it a race and manage it on bycatch alone. And we are saying hey that's never going to work. The paramount feature in one of these things is totally ending the race. So I'm not competing with that guy. I'm just competing with my number and with what I got, and if I can do a better job great, and if I can't

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do a better job then I'm out of business. So that's what we are fighting for up there. And we are hoping that people wake up and see the light, but it's not looking very good so...but anyway that's a whole other side of the world, but it's probably 75% of what this boat does is up there. So it's a big part of what we do.

DC: Well the last thing I have for you is going back to what we were discussing earlier, what do you think it would be like for Newport if all of the family fishing businesses sold out?

KC: If everybody sold out? It would be...well you still gotta fish, you still gotta have people run your boats, so there will still be jobs. But there's basically no more competition, a couple companies run everything. And I don't think that's really a way to manage a resource. You need people competing weather its for price, or for quality, or for...you know...driving ambition out there. You see these other company boats that have been sitting in town for probably the last month and a half, just because the fish plant doesn't want to start up. And if there's no fish plant going there's no, there's no dock crew working, there's no processing crew working, there's no electricity water being payed to...so it's a lot slower pace, they can individualize and they can...cause they aren't just in Newport. They are in Alaska, they are on the east coast, so they don't really care as much about the town, it's all about what helps their bottom line. The family boats, this is all we got you know? Newport is where we eat sleep and breath, and you know we keep this town going by just routinely fishing and year over year just delivering here. So I think it would be a hurt to the town, I don't think it would stop fishing operations all together, but I think the drive, and the competitiveness, and the resources that are brought into this town would greatly decrease. And I think people would see that over time. But thankfully we aren't there yet, and hopefully it doesn't get to that point. But you never know.

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