

**Participant: Bill Hall**

**Title: Lincoln County Commissioner**

**Date of interview: 5/20/16**

**Location of interview: Newport**

Courtney: Before I get started, do you want me to tell you a little bit more about the project itself or are you feeling familiar enough?

Bill: Well I think, your email I think gave me the general idea so if you're ready to jump in I'm game.

C: Okay, yeah. Perfect. So part of why I'm here today is to capture oral histories for a project that NOAA's working on called Voices from the West Coast. So, to that end I'd just like to start out with a story from you. It can either be about your job here as a Commissioner here at Lincoln County or about your day to day life living here in the community. Just something that captures what it's like to live and work here in Newport.

B: Newport's a really interesting community to live in and work in. I have been here 29 years. I was born and grew up in Portland, spent my first 26 years there. Never thought this was going to be my long-term home, but I love it. It's a community of a lot of richness, a lot of diversity. You know you see a lot of second, third-generation fishing families, timber families. We've got the tourism base, but we've also got a rapidly growing kind of scientific educational base here with the presence of the Hatfield Marine Science Center, all the federal agencies that are part of that complex. I watched the Oregon Coast aquarium go up and now it's celebrated. 25 years almost in the community. Just this spring OMSI opened up Camp Grey. It's a very attractive retirement location for folks from all over the place and I think that is part of the reason we have a very thriving arts community here, which adds to the cultural richness of life. So, for a city of about 10,000 I think it's got a lot going for it.

C: Great. Are there any special days or particularly memorable days that you've had here as a Commissioner.

B: Oh gosh. Since I became a Commissioner... well, certainly one of them was the day that my fellow Commissioner Terry Thompson walked in and we knew that NOAA was going to be looking for a new home for the West Coast research fleet and initially we had heard that one of those vessels might be relocated in Newport, but he had been at a meeting at the Port of Newport office and says, we've got a chance to get all 6 of them. And the Port of Newport was willing to kinda spearhead that project, do that application, but they didn't have the ready cash available to hire the consultant that they would need to move that forward. And one of the things that Oregon county government has an advantage of, we receive by law every year a small percentage of the video lottery proceeds from within the county and so we've designated that our community and economic development fund and almost immediately we agreed to contribute \$10,000 up front seed money. I think we later put in an additional \$10,000. The City of Newport

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matched that. And then um within a couple of years there we were dedicating the permanent facility and I was one of the speakers at that event. And I said everybody said it was a gamble, nobody thought Newport would ever beat out Puget Sound and lure the fleet away but uh, I said how appropriate that we took a gamble with gambling money and it paid off big.

C: That's a great story.

B: Thank you.

C: Yeah. That's a great. So you mentioned that you were born and raised in Portland. How did you end up being a Commissioner of a coastal county?

B: Well, I went into journalism. I loved both print and broadcast journalism from the time I was very young. And my interest in politics and government was kind of a main reason why I went into that field. After I finished graduate work in journalism I was looking for a job. And I had always loved visiting the coast when I was growing up and Newport's newspaper The News Times was looking for reporters. I interviewed. They offered me the job the next day and I came down here three days and later and started. And uh after I was at The News Times not quite four years I went to work for a group of radio stations here where I was the news director for fourteen years. So that whole 18 year period I was covering local government including the county government and Jean Cowan, who was a three term Commissioner, more than a year before the end of her term she asked me into her office, which incidentally was this office, I moved into it after Jean retired. She told me she wasn't going to run again. She said have you ever thought about doing this job, Bill, instead of watching. And that kind of set things in motion for me to run for Commissioner. And I was elected in 2004, took office at the beginning of 2005, and just on Tuesday of this week was re-elected for my fourth term which'll start in January.

C: Wow. Congratulations.

B: Thank you very much.

C: Can you tell me a little bit more about the role of fishing in the community here of Newport?

B: Fishing is huge. I think it is a huge driver not only of our economy, but of the culture. I think also it is under appreciated. Again, I mention my colleague Terry Thompson. He is a lifelong fishermen. He got started in the business as a teenager and has kept his hand in to this day, more than 50 years later. And he has told me, you know said, fishermen tend to keep to themselves, not mingle in the community, go to the Chamber of Commerce meetings and events, and so there is this huge industry that I think you know people see it as picturesque, and I know that's one of the draws I keep hearing about Newport, even compared to a lot of other coastal communities. That people love to go to that waterfront because its a true working waterfront. But, uh, I don't think they realize what a source of income it is. Maybe that's starting to change. I know there was a story

all over the media last year that Newport is now the number one fishing port all up and down the entire West Coast including Alaska and I think that opened a few eyes. And people realize certainly its not just the owners and the crews, but it drives industry in so many other ways. The Port of Toledo purchased a few years ago a privately owned boat yard and the, my other colleague on the county commission Doug Hunt, who, his focus is mainly in economic development and transportation. He sits on our regional advisory committee to the Oregon Department of Transportation, the ACT, and he helped secure I think it was \$5 million in state funding to greatly expand the capacity of that boat yard, to install a larger boat lift, because you know as the fishing fleet is shrinking one of the ways I think the commercial vessels are dealing with demand, they're getting bigger. And so to either expand existing vessels or uh maintain new ones they have to have a very large haul out. And so that is going to help maintain and expand the job base at that boat yard in Toledo. Lots of good paying, steady jobs.

C: Great. Can you expand a little bit about your comment about the role of fishing in the culture?

B: Well, I think it uh you know that's a good question. Let me think on that just a little bit. But I think even for folks who aren't directly touched by the fishing industry... yeah, I'm just having a little lightbulb go off over my head. People say that one of the reasons why Newport has so many successes as a community, like for instance, bringing the NOAA fleet here or now we're on the verge of seeing Department of Transportation compete a major \$360 million project on Highway 20 coming in here, the people keep saying Newport has a competitive spirit, a spirit of cooperation, a spirit of accomplishment, a spirit of accomodation and I think a lot of that comes out of the fishing industry maybe. That uh, in the 1970s, when the joint venture fishery started with the Soviet Union. It was Newport fishermen who pioneered that. You know certainly fishing, commercial fishing is an extremely cyclical industry with ups and downs but the people I know in the industry, or I hear from indirectly, say because Newport is willing to diversify and willing to innovate it has probably ridden out the challenges better than a lot of west coast ports and that's probably why the Newport fleet is in the position where it is today. And I think that really maybe has kinda seemed over into the larger community in the way that we view business.

C: That's great. You mentioned earlier as well that you notice that there's been second and third-generation fishing families here. Can you talk a little bit more about that? About the role of family-based fishing businesses here?

B: Yeah. I think uh you know I've, I've known several of them personally. Others I've heard about. But it does really become, I think, a way of life. And you know, commercial fishing sometimes I think in the media takes some unfair hits. I mean you know I know things like overfishing are real, but I think unfortunately people who aren't aware of the way the fleet does business in Newport don't realize that again Newport has led in development of like new nets for example, that help dramatically reduce bycatch. And I think, again, that's because it does become a family business for so many businesses that uh the true fishermen are conservationists because they want to, they want to have fish

out there for their sons and now increasingly their daughters to go out and catch. That uh they don't want to wipe the ocean clean.

C: Yeah. Have you seen any changes in these family-based businesses?

B: Oh... yeah. I think like in so many industries maybe uh you know there's just a concentration of resources because of the buy-backs and you know some of the families have gotten out of it, and the ones who've stayed I think just as a matter of economic survival they have had to get bigger, either acquiring more vessels or building larger vessels or expanding existing ones.

C: Sure. What do you see in terms of the age of fishermen?

B: You know I haven't spent as much time with the fleet in recent years as I did in my reporting days earlier. But I, you know, some of the uh, some of the old-timers that I knew very well in the early days, you know they have retired or stepped back, passed things on to their sons. But just anecdotally my impression is there is a younger generation coming up and uh they want to continue the tradition and want to continue to uh make a living this way and contribute to the economy.

C: Yeah, that's really interesting. Do you think that back maybe when you had more interaction with the fishing fleet that there were as many young people in it or is it kind of a trend as older people are retiring more young people are getting involved or...?

B: I'm getting the impression that kind of the, you know, some of the guys who really through the 60s, 70s, 80s, even into the 90, that that was a very strong group of men and the lifetime fishermen and that you know we are seeing a natural progression now as they age out, retire, pass away, that uh you know sometimes its their sons, sometimes its newcomers but you know there is a natural cycle, a natural replenishment going on.

C: Do you have any sense of why young people might want to get into the fishing business here?

B: Well, I think certainly if you're smart, if you know, it can be very, and aggressive and willing to take risks it can be very lucrative. I mean, extremely. Even crew members. But certainly for vessel owners, uh, a certain sense of adventure, of independence, that you're truly your own boss. One longtime fishermen here I knew very well, Barry Fisher, and you know, the NOAA building here at South Beach is named in his honor. He said "We're the last cowboys." And really for anybody who doesn't want to be buttoned down by a 9 to 5 job, going to an office every day, uh, you know the sense of adventure and you know especially maybe the element of danger. I mean I think no intelligent person willingly takes risks, but uh I've talked to enough fishermen that I think there is certainly a kind of a jolt of adrenaline there knowing that you're, you're going out there, you're putting it all on the line, figuratively and literally.

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C: Yeah. That's great. Are you aware of any challenges young people might have getting into the industry here or is it a pretty open field if people are interested?

B: Well, I think, you know. Probably the main bar is economic again because the uh smaller boats have pretty much uh I think been for a large part...well there's still some fisheries I think where they're viable but the ones that are going to really succeed are the bigger ones and that's a huge investment. I mean I remember you know, I think this was early 90s, a fishermen taking me through his new boat. I think it was, yeah, my fuzzy memory is it was something like 72 feet long and taking me into the wheelhouse and pointing out - this is a half a million dollars worth of electronic gear. So, you know. It...the price of admission is getting steeper I guess that would probably be the number one barrier from what I know.

C: Yeah. Do you see that having any impact on Newport, on the fishing community here in Newport? If its harder for people to get into the industry as it becomes more expensive?

B: Yeah, that's a good question. I'm just not sure how that's playing out.

C: That's understandable. I'm wondering if you can speak in a little bit more detail about the relationship between the fishing community and the community here in Newport. What that interaction has been like, has it changed at all, what role do those fishermen play in the culture and the economics and you know, if we're seeing this trend toward bigger boats, more expensive boats, how that relationship might be changing.

B: Well, you know. I'm just thinking about the interactions on the waterfront, certainly. Watching the Port of Newport through the years and uh as different port managers and port commissioners have come in again uh... I'm thinking back to Barry Fisher talking about a port manager before my time here, his, you know Barry was a very colorful guy and great phraseology, he said, "He thought we were a bunch of rabble rousers with dirty hands" and that was a port manager who built a recreational boat marina at South Beach which was actually unsuccessful financially for many years although kind of the market has grown into it. But uh yeah I've seen kind of an ongoing, off and on struggle between fishermen and the port over issues of dock access, dock maintenance, and then with the city government, you know, I talked about the dynamic between that being a waterfront that does attract tourists, has a lot of tourist-related businesses, you know, restaurants, candy shops, gift shops, art galleries. But still actively not only landing product but the big processing plants and there's even discussion right now about how the city can uh accomodate both, both the fishermen and the tourists. They're I guess talking about a new parking plan that I've heard at least has some fishermen really kind of up in arms because they need dock access, they need park - long-term parking spaces - if you're going to sea for a few weeks you need, you wanna have somewhere where you can park your truck nearby and get to your boat and so, it seems, you know, as I said I've been here 29 years and sometimes it's waxed, sometimes it's waned but it's kind of an ongoing tension there. And I think as long as the two things tourism and fishing are trying to coexist on that bayfront it'll always be there.

C: Yeah. What other options are there for young people here in Newport?

B: There aren't a lot. And that is something that's really concerning. You know, for good paying jobs, good opportunities, there are really few. And I've heard more and more people through the years saying they're frustrated, they hate to see a lot of our best and brightest go off to college and then don't return because you know... Most of the tourism employment is low-paying, often part-time, often seasonal. You know, it's really not family wage work for the most part. We do have kind of a good core right here in Newport because you've got government. You've got county government, city government, some state government presence. You've got education, the school district is headquartered here. The main campus of our community college is here. Again, the whole Hatfield educational science complex, but uh beyond that there aren't a lot of good opportunities for young people.

C: Sure. What do you think would happen here, looking out into the future here a little bit, if all the family based fishing businesses were sold and there wasn't that opportunity here?

B: Ooh. I think that would really change the community dynamic and not for the better. I think uh you know, already I hear that with fish processing again, when I came here there were I'm not sure the numbers but several more processing plants and they were locally owned and locally controlled and now they are kind of part of these conglomerates up and down the West Coast. So, again that means local control, local management passes away and I don't know. That just seems to be kind of the way of life in so many things, businesses you know. My old business newspapering, when I came here The Newport News Times had already passed into ownership of ABC Capital Cities but before that it had been, it had been locally owned from its founding in the 19th century up until I think the 1970s and then for awhile it was part of a regionally owned Oregon group of newspapers. Although now again its back in the hands of a local regional group so... you know dynamics of various industries...radio, which I was part of for a long time as well uh kind of concentrated to just four or five big national groups. But it looks like at least a couple of them are imploding. And we're hearing you know kind of small town radio is making a return so... nothing seems to be permanent in this world and dynamics always change. But you know I \*sigh\* you know it always is concerning to see wealth and control move out of the community.

C: Do you think that will have any impact on the character of the community of Newport? Even if the fishing industry is still here but it doesn't have that local ownership?

B: Yeah I think uh definitely, I think definitely it would because uh even though not a lot of fishermen are kind of directly involved in the larger political and business life I think enough are that it has influenced the community dynamics and the community priorities and I hate to see that happen.

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C: This has been great. You may or may not be able to speak to this but I'm just curious about this decrease in the number of locally owned processing plants. Do you have any sense of how that transpired?

B: I really don't beyond the fact that uh you know the... that the big firms came in and made them offers they couldn't refuse, too lucrative to pass up that uh, that's just kind of the way capitalism seems to work.

C: Sure. Okay, well those are all the questions that I had prepared today but if there's anything else related either to graying of the fleet or this idea that at a larger level at least, maybe not here in Newport in particular, but at a larger level we're seeing a trend toward a graying of the fleet or the aging of the fishermen involved in the commercial fishing industry...So, is there anything else either related to that or just to the role of fishing in Newport that you thought we'd talk about today that I haven't asked you about?

B: No. You really had some thoughtful questions and I can't think of any aspects that we haven't talked about already.

C: Okay. Great, well thank you so much.

B: Thank you.