

Graying of the Fleet – Voices from the West Coast

Participant: Phyllis Johns

Title: Chair, Port Orford-Langlois School District

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Courtney: So, as you know, part of why I'm here today is to capture some oral histories, some stories, for the Voices from the West Coast project. So I was just hoping you could tell me a little bit more about you. What your name is, introduce yourself, and talk about how you got to Port Orford.

Phyllis: I will do that. I'm Phyllis Johns. We moved to Port Orford in 2005, so we've been here for about 11 years. And we came over thinking we would have a little weekend place and fell in love with Port Orford, sold the farm, and came over and now we live here permanently. So after we retired we were able to do that. And have loved it ever since. And it's kind of a joke but it's the truth that when you come down that slope people are waiting and you get just bombarded with requests for things for you to volunteer to do. So I took them up on a few things and it's just become a delightful existence for me. I taught school for 33 years and I just miss kids so much. The first thing I volunteered with, Nancy Johnson was the SMART program, Start Making a Reader Today, so I got to see kids for an hour a week at the elementary school. That helped. Um, I also got involved with the library and you might notice this is a beautiful spot in Port Orford. It's about seven years old now. And I was involved in helping get money, grants, everything we could to buy this building and it's all paid for. There is nothing we are owing, even the landscaping, the furnishings, all paid for. We're open 7 days a week and uh that's more than most libraries can say. And have numerous programs and we're just totally proud of it. I'm, right now, you could probably tell, the Chair of the library board. And so anything you want to know about the library and its interaction with the fisheries you can ask. Then, um, I did get involved with the school board. I was asked to replace someone so I did and sure enough the first year I was there the, uh, Chair was unable to continue. I had been elected Vice Chair in the meantime. I was suddenly the Chair of the school board. And this was a whole new thing. When I taught school I tried to avoid getting as close to the Board as I could. Now I'm on the other side of the fence and it's been an education and a half. And I really love it. And we have policies that protect the staff, the children, the community. It's a wonderful service that the Board does for the schools and the community. So I had also joined the Watershed Council, more or less along the lines of what you're following. We worked really closely with the Red Fish project and at least were updated on their progress and so forth and have met a lot of the personnel through that group. And, I'm the Choir Director at our church. And I think that's about all, right now.

C: Just a few things *laughter*

P: *laughter* A few things, yeah. But it keeps one busy and I think that's really good. It's a rejuvenating thing as well as we live in the most beautiful spot in the world. So, it's a good place to be.

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C: Yeah. That's amazing. Can you tell me a little bit more about that nexus between the library and the fisheries?

P: Um, more or less we are partners. And, um, you know they have meetings. We have a wonderful big room over there that will support a large community group. And they support us just by mentioning us and so forth. And when they came up with the idea of putting the area that is protected out there, there was a huge clamor in the community as you could be well aware. And you know we tried to help educate and give information to people to try to convince of the importance of it. And help them along with that. As far as I know it is still a very successful project. The school helps, they interact with their children's programs back and forth. During the summer we have a wonderful program that's being kicked off today for the kids to read. And we work closely with the school and you know build up their projects that they're doing through their library and back and forth all year long. But it was one interesting story, in, um... I brought this for you. When was that, January this year, you might have heard of the Eagle III. Um, and the storm and the results of three or four deaths. One of the sad results of this is that it left a little girl without her daddy. The school rallied around her so beautifully and they had a box and the kids just quickly you know, just put in cards, stuffed animals, the Board even put a little stuffed unicorn to you know promote the idea of hope and... um, welcomed her back. The School Board and the administrator decided that you know come back when you can, as long as you can. She was part time for awhile. And, you know, by the end of the year she was doing alright. And it was just one way the schools could help the results of that. It was a tragedy, the whole South Coast of course, you know reels from something that happens like that but it was community support that I think helped the most. And of course you'll find out from Leesa more about that too. Um... how far afield do you want me to go? I can talk for hours about this place.

C: As much as you want to talk is great. No. It really, the other question I was going to ask is if you have more examples of memorable days, either memorable for good reasons, or memorable for bad reasons, so this is great. The more stories, the more you want to share...

P: Well, I think one of the things that is so wonderful in our school is that how we have a small 1,000 to 1,100 population town, very small school. We have two schools, you know, a high school and then the elementary and middle school. And, um, 200 students. And its declining population-wise because basically fishing, forestry, um, a little bit of dairy and so forth used to be the mainstays in this town. And all have really suffered, and uh, forestry is just no longer. We had mills all over the place here. And there isn't one. Dairies have all gone. I think there are a few small family dairies but that's about it. And the fishery business, while we struggle, I think it's healthy, as much as I can ascertain. I don't know how a fisherman makes a living. When I hear the cost of their licensing and then the cost of getting off the port every time. The insurance, hiring men, etc., etc. It's just an amazing... I think statement for the community support that they're still functional here really. So anyway that's how I perceive it. Because our school is so small people sometimes think you know our students can't really thrive there. They need to go to either

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Bandon or Gold Beach. And we tell them when you look at the scores its the result of having a one to 12 student-teacher ratio. That allows us to be so high above the state average on the last test that we took. I can give you the numbers. I just wrote them this morning. In the English language studies they had a score up in the 70s, the state is about 40. Math we had 50 percent and the state average is 34. And science we were in the 70s again and the state averages about 50. So we're way above the state average basically because of the good teachers we have but also the time that they can spend with the kids. Um, it's no lack of anything that, you know they say, well they just don't get football at Pacific High and we say well, you know, we have track, we have soccer, we have you know the other sports, basketball's a real draw from the community. And that's not everything. You know we have no lack of robotics, the best, um, probably tech teacher in the programs in both schools you know their kindergarteners right on through are getting at least access to a computer a day and, um, if not their own. And, um, music, you know, we have the teacher there that is the envy of the South Coast. They wish they could clone him. He is magnificent. He has kids drawn out and we had our programs at the end of the year and they were so professional done. You know those little guys should've been on TV. It was just a magnificent program. He included all of the skills they had to know in math, science and everything through music. Those kids will never forget that. And of course uh bands were just out of this world too. We had two kids there that are going on in the field of music. Eventually Nate will go on and we know he'll be famous. And this year Dune graduated and got a full ride at North... I don't know ... North Oregon or something. North Washington maybe. Um, music academy. And, um, it's just one thing after another that make us so proud of our schools. And, um, as I say, some of our parents are fishermen. And, or, you know relatives and so forth. So we know what's going on with them too through the kids. So, I can quit for awhile if you have another.

C: Okay. That's great. That's great. Can you tell me a little bit more about the community of Port Orford itself? Maybe about the demographics and maybe you can speak a little bit more about the economy, fishing as well as maybe what else is important here.

P: Well to take the place of the forestry, the dairies, etc. we have turned into a tourist town and we're really promoting that. I think we have about 8 galleries and um, all of them have a specific niche. We have 6 thriving churches. Um, let's see. Restaurants, we have a plethora. We have two new ones. I think we have about 6 restaurants now. The, um...range of foods is just diverse and very good, except we wish we had a Mexican restaurant. We don't *laughter.* Let's see that takes the place of probably a few jobs. But it's a pretty well known fact that if you live in Port Orford you're either retired with a pension, you're on welfare, or you can work out of your home via computer, whatever. And, um, it's really diverse in a way, but our diversity is poverty. It's a very poor area. I have information for you on that here. And this was from an article out of the Oregonian in 2013 and that hasn't changed much. However, I would ... you can have that. And I would like you to look at this too. It's the, um, achievement of kids that overcome the economic depression and it's a wonderful article about how our area may be poor and they give us a scalding report here of how when you drive into town it looks like we're deserted. And it's not true. And, um, everybody came a little unglued when they read this part of it but they did rate the schools very high and how they are a group of

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overachievers if you look at the poverty level. Those would make really two good reads for you I think. And um, this is the Eagle III I was talking about too. And it's more or less just the story of it, it didn't include that part of how the school responded to help the little girl.

C: Yeah. Thank you for sharing that story.

P: Yeah. So, you might find those good and helpful.

C: Thank you. I appreciate it. So I want to talk a little bit more about the role of fishing in the economy here. Feel free to share anything that you know or anything that you've perceived or if you want to elaborate, you mentioned that they struggle here for various reasons. And you talked about the cost of permits and the cost of living boats in and out. So anything you can expand on about the role of fishing here in the economy would be great.

P: I wish I could. I'm not really involved in it you know other than the meetings here. This man, Tom, will help you with that I think more than I ever could. I'll show you something today that explains why we're so proud of it though. Because OSU has come and, um, they have a center and anyone can come and use the dormitory and do their studies and stay there. And, um, so it is not going to just die. You know there are too many people involved in it here and know the importance of maintaining our fishing as an industry and for tourism. We have one of the best areas to go scuba diving out by the rocks and to see some of these various, um, what do you call them? Breeds of fish I guess. Types of fish. And uh that I know is one of the biggest uh draws to the area too for tourists. And you can drop your line off the end of the pier and get a crab. Or you can surf fish. I don't see too many people doing that but they do body surf. And we have one of the best areas right south of town for that. Yeah.

C: Do you have any thoughts about the role of fishing in this place?

P: Well, I think it's, um, something we kind of try to protect because, like so many things, you know, these are people that are living on a shoestring. And work so hard they don't really have time to become involved and we still try to, um, include them. We have the prayer for the fishermen every year at the end of the... well I'll show you that again today too. Out by Battle Rock. And the whole town shows up for that, you know to pray for the safety of our fishermen. It was especially poignant this year because of the death...deaths. So, um... we know they're there and we have a really powerful board on the dock there. Um, one of my fellow board members at the school's husband a very active member in that so you might want to talk to Mary Scaffo too because her husband is very involved in the, um, Port board.

C: And what's his name? Do you know? It's okay if you don't...

P: I don't have it with me. I'm sorry. Mary's husband. *laughter*

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C: Mary's husband. *laughter*

P: Yeah. Right.

C: Okay, great. Have you seen a lot of family-based fishing businesses here in Port Orford? From your experience.

P: Um, I know there are names out there that. I think Tom'll help you more on this. I have a personal friend that used to have his own boat but he doesn't anymore. Um, I'm just not really aware of that.

C: Yeah. That's fine. And these questions that are more specific about fishing, it's absolutely fine if you don't know detailed answers. We're just interested in your impression as someone in the community and a leader in the community. How fishing fits in. Yeah. That's great. Um, what do you see in terms of the age of fishermen here in Port Orford?

P: Older. Yeah, I think, um, you see younger ones that are probably single. Um, they do the grunt work I think but the ones that take the boats out and, um, own them or either manage them or whatever are older. You know I think they're probably in their 50s maybe. And, um, or else they don't age too gracefully. That is the hardest job in the world you know they don't get youthful and buoyant from doing that work. *laughter.* You know so that's just my impression though.

C: Yeah, no that's great. That's what we're looking for. You said you moved here in 2005 so you may or may not be able to speak to this but do you think that fishermen have always erred on the side of being an older generation or have you seen...

P: No, I think when it was just... when it was really thriving here I think it must have been younger you know because they probably had a whole force of people they could draw from to take out and do the fishing. And, um, you don't see that so much anymore. So... I think it was probably, um, they were probably in their 30s you know. Yeah.

C: Yeah. You mentioned that there are some young people here working, maybe doing more of the physical labor or working down there on the docks. Are they locals or do you think they're coming from other places? Do you have any sense?

P: You know, I don't. I don't recognize any of them out of our schools, you know. So I don't think they're locals but, um, it's just, you know I think they can work, make a good paycheck, and then they probably move on. That's the impression I get. I don't see it as a "This is what I'm going to do the rest of my life" type feeling. I really don't, so. There again I may have that all wrong. When we had the cannery we had, um, a lot of people working in that. That was way before our time first coming here but, um, in fact the, um, grand marshal of our jubilee Fourth of July parade, her name is Myrtle, um, Clark. And she used to work down there and it's hard, hard, hard labor. And uh, but she made a living

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and supported her family. She was a single mom at a point. And, um, we need that again. I think that would be a great source of jobs for our fishermen and for this community too.

C: Do you know when that went out?

P: No, I don't. But there are plans, I know to renovate them.

C; Hm, okay. Interesting. In your experience, if you can speak to it, why do young adults want to get involved in fishing and fishing-related businesses?

P: Well, it's there. You know it's an endless source. And it looks like we ought to encourage it. And get... when they came to the point of, um, asking the fishermen to give us input into how they felt about giving that area out there, you know, that's off limits, they could see the future of the fishing industry going in that direction. It's going to be a source of wave power for... and, um, probably wind power as well as fishing and tourism for the scuba divers and so forth. So they worked with the community on that and accepted the program that was brought forth by OSU I think it was. So... um, did that answer that question at all?

C: Yeah. That's great. Do you have any sense of if young people either don't want to go into the industry or have difficulty getting into the industry here, why that might be the case? You mentioned, I think it's just interesting, you mentioned the younger folks tend to come in, do the labor, maybe leave after they make some money and more the owners and people who have a longer term investment are aging. So...

P: That again, is just my impression.

C: Yeah. And that's what we're interested in as someone who lives and works here. You're a leader in your community, you know. What are your perceptions or what have you even just heard anecdotally. Are there challenges for a young person that might want to stay in it long term? Have you heard anything?

P: It's the cost, I think, to initially get started. If you can afford a boat *laughter.* You know, that's a huge outlay. And then have to pay for the licensing and... I just don't see, you know, how a young person could get into that unless they're independently wealthy. So, um, have a tremendous trust level at the bank? I don't know. *laughter.* You know to get loans, I don't know how that works. But... goodness.

C: If the fleet is getting older, if we're seeing this graying of the people that are owning boats, do you have any sense of how that might impact the fishing community here?

P: Yeah, um. Right now the board of the port there is very powerful in the community. And, um, you know, it's political. And, um, I see that probably staying that way until it either gets better or just goes away you know because right now they have a certain footprint in the community. And, um, they're very important to the community. So, I, I just don't really know on that one either.

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C: No, that's fine. That's fine. From your perspective, how might the fact that the average age of fishermen seems to be getting older impact Port Orford more generally? If we're seeing this graying in the fleet and there's not a younger generation coming up with ownership of boats. What would that look like here in Port Orford, if over time that's the trend?

P: Um, I don't know that um... you know somebody couldn't come here, buy a house and buy a boat and set up a business. Um, I don't think that happens much. I think it works you know they just work really hard to make a living and may rent. But as far as, um, one of our board members is a broker, you know, and tries to find places for people to live. And you know they aren't the fishermen that come here to look to buy, to pay the taxes and so forth on land. And, um, I think it's the, um, younger people that come here like I see probably have the ability to either commute 60 miles either direction and do it just for the love of this area. Or they work out of their home and, um, I don't know. That might define a fisherman. I don't know. *laughter.* But not usually, so. The community I don't think will um... we need them. And it is a source of just protein and if you get right down to the basics. But it is a source of jobs too. Maybe entry level for the younger people but, um, it's not like it used to be. Let's put it that way. Before I got here *laughter.*

C: Yeah, can you talk... I don't know if you can, and it's fine if you can't, I'm just curious - when you say it's not like it used to be, can you talk more about that change? Has there been a noticeable decrease in the number of fishermen, in the type of fish that they're harvesting or anything? I'm just curious if you know anything about what that change looked like...

P: I think it's, um. Well, I just don't know how to speak to that. The... boats are getting older. You know you go down on the port, I'll take you down there today and take a look at 'em. And uh, takes more time just to make sure they're working. And, um, you know they won't get in trouble. There's so many regulations but still you know the things that do trap people and kill them are, um, uh, nature, you know. And there's very little one can do about that. So, I don't know. It's just a hard thing to say about the future of that industry. So...

C: Yeah. Yeah. No, that's fine. What are other options for careers for young people.

P: Well, that's a good question. *laughter.* Um, services you know. If they don't get their education, however there's another thing. We had 17 graduates this year from our high school and all are going on to something. You know SWOCC gives a free ride to the first two years if they have a 3.75 and older, um, better grade point average and a lot take advantage of that. We had some go to OSU, some to West... and, um, U of O. And, um, the two that went...or one that went to the music school. So everyone, and then some went to the lineman school. Everyone has a place to go. And if they stay without the education they pretty well, um, either have to find a niche and I just don't know what they, if they're creative and can think of something they can do that people would buy or they have a product they can make. They can work at the store, Ray's Market. Um, well,

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you know we don't even have a McDonald's. You know that's the big joke, "If you don't have your education, you'll be..." Um, they can work in the restaurants and I think a good job is also working in landscaping, you know. Because the general population is getting older and can't do their own lawns and stuff so that would be one place they could set up a business. I don't know, I may be just terribly negative on this. Um, they can go away to college come back and teach if they get their Masters. Um, and that's a really good thing. We have Jared who is our IT guy for the school district graduated from here. Our County Commissioner who is on the school board, Dave Smith, graduated from Pacific. So, you know, some people can come back and make a go of it if they have something that.. um, they can contribute, a niche, somewhere they can work. But it's very hard. If they're a great artist you know maybe they can work in a gallery or something but... you know that's not really a way to make a living *laughter* it seems to me. So...

C: Yeah. Great. Um, what do you think would happen here in Port Orford, and this is hypothetical so I'm just interested in your initial impressions and thoughts, what do you think would happen here in Port Orford if all of the family-based fishing business, so all the boats that are owned by families here in Port Orford, if they were sold and no longer belonged to those families?

P: Oh. Um, well, I think they'd keep the lifts there. Maybe not... you know they can't, they have to charge so much to get those boats off the pier. Um, so I don't know if sports fishing is the answer. I notice once in awhile that big yachts come out and park off the end of the dock and um, then come on in and take advantage of our services, our restaurants and so forth. Um, I don't think it's enough to make it a, a going proposition though. We'd really miss 'em, you know. Because they do, it's fun to go down there and get your tuna every year. And those people can make it who have the boats and can get out far enough. And you can pick up your crabs down there. So, it is a pretty good business if you can um, you know, have a boat, have a crew, have the money to get off the dock and get out and get 'em *laughter.* That's a lot of ifs. So, I don't know. It would really hurt.

C: Yeah. Well that was the end of my formal questions that I had. Is there anything else either related to this idea of the graying of the fleet, which can be somewhat jargon...what we're really trying to get at is, there's some studies that are suggesting that the average age of fishermen is getting older and there isn't a population of young people that are coming up to fill their places, so that's what we're trying to understand. Is this happening in Oregon. If so, what does that look like? So, if there's anything else either related to that idea that you want to speak to or anything just in general about the relationship between the fishing industry and Port Orford that you'd like to talk about that I didn't ask you about, this is the time.

P: I think you've been very thorough as far as my knowledge Um, I think the answer is more of the programs that OSU is promoting here in this town. Um, it hires, it must have a large group like Leesa and um... just to do scientific studies to see how we can, um, use the coast not only for fishing but as, um, for other resources and, um, I think that's the answer to try to save it so it's not just a big plastic holding tank, you know. And, um,

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that, that's what's sad to me. You know every year we do SOLVE down there and, um, while it's a great way to get the kids out from the high school and they meet people and are great ambassadors, it's still, you look at especially since the tsunami, the beaches are still littered with plastic and we know there's a big island of it out there. Something like that could be a real challenge for the right person. Something they could look in and how would they solve that? What could they do? Could they get a big barge and just tow it in? *laughter.* You know it's a huge problem but there are so many things like that, that's studied through the coast and through the ocean could bring about a better life for the coast as well as the whole country.

C: How is that relationship between the scientific community, and OSU and others, and the fishermen here? I know it was pretty, Port Orford was ahead of the curve in terms of establishing Redfish Rock as a community driven effort before the state came in. So I'm wondering if you can tell me a little bit more about how that? How that transpired or ...?

P: Yeah. We, um, we all kinda sat back on that. You know, we though well it's too bad that you know so much of its gonna be controlled and, um, everybody around here is just um, very independent. We're an independent place you know. People can do things and go out and fish and, but now regulations start popping up and, um, you know it's just a real adjustment for the fishermen, I think more so than the community. The community did push back on it, though also. But they're the ones that came 'round and I remember, sitting in on meetings where they would actually defend the views brought into the area, um, by the scientists and "Yeah, we've gotta protect these particular fish you know because they're just dying out. We aren't seeing them. So let's try this." You know. And uh, they ended up bringing a real good feeling I think between the community and the scientists and the fishermen. It was good how it ended up.

C: Yeah, that's interesting. Great. Is there any other closing thoughts or anything else you want to share with me about Port Orford?

P: Oh my. Um, well. I just have been sitting through the kind of distasteful job of replacing our Superintendent at schools. And, um, you know Chris was so marvelous and it was just real hard to replace her. But when we started sending out applications or the notice thereof that we needed a new Superintendent the people that came and sent the applications knew about this area because of its beauty and quality of life. And I think that's our best selling point. And uh, in fact, the man that we did hire, Steve Perkins. He'll start July 1st is from Sutherlin so he's coming from the big I-5 over here to 101 because of the area. And he's aware of it and, um, he likes to fish in Elk and in the Sixes. You know, they're the best rivers in the state. And, um, the golf course there in Bandon is a real draw. And, um, so it is a good place to live. It really is. It's just what you want to make of it. If you want to get out and volunteer and you know lose sleep over some of your decisions you can do that or you can just kinda fold in and go out on the deck and read. You know, it just depends on how much you want to give to the community. But it is, um, as I say, it's a real positive place to live. And I think we see that in the kids that do return, but they're kinda few and far between.

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C: Okay. Wonderful!