

Participant: Mr. Gary Ripka
Researcher: Ms. Deanna Caracciolo
Date: 5/30/16
[talking about Deadliest Catch - Discovery show]

GR: It was interesting. We will see how it goes. If it goes good we will be doing it again next year so...

DC: and your crew is all in for that again too?

GR: Yea some of them we have had a little bit of problems with that but for most part it has been, a couple of them are...it's, it's been interesting. The whole thing has been interesting. It is a whole different show than the other one. Yea it's a spin off, it's not the same show. So it's a whole different thing than being...the fishing is very similar but you know, the show is a lot different in the aspect that it's about our families, way more personal. It's about the town of Newport. You know, a lot about the town. A lot about the coast, the towns, the history, the families, histories of fishing. It has a lot of heart. There's times where it makes you want to cry. It's a very, very emotional show compared to the other one. It's a lot different. They went in a lot different direction. This is a new show so they decided let's do some stuff. I mean, do something different. They wanted it to appeal to more of a family audience yet still have the Alaska audience, the people who like to watch the rough weather and the crab fishing, and the competition, and all that, but then they wanted to try and appeal to more of the wives and women. Try and show us the soft side, the emotional side part of the industry, and the business, and what we do. And the danger. So it's a way different...real pretty. I've seen about a third of the first episode, maybe half and parts of the second episode. I haven't seen any more of that. They have done 6 and 2 specials, and the pilot was 6 and then they did their test audience in NY and their test audience groups gave such high numbers they ordered 2 specials. They have never ordered a special on a show that has never been on TV. So we are pretty hopeful...pretty hopeful. We will see. It may turn into something really big, we don't know. It looks really good, it looks phenomenal.

DC: are you going to have your whole family together to watch?

GR: they are going to fly us to LA and they are going to do a premier party in LA. At first they were just saying they might not even have us come down, but their test audiences...it's interesting how the networks and production companies work. At first everything is really low, "we don't know if we will get a second season, we will see how this goes and everything" and now that they have die the test audiences we are so high now it has changed. Now it's gotten to where we have had the executive's in town several different times, meeting with us and trying to prep us for it and we met with Discovery executives to try and prep us for what they think is going to happen. Which if what they think is going to happen, our lives are never going to be the same. So it's turned a lot, completely different. Yeah. It will be way different. So we will see! Who knows, it could bomb too. These guys don't usually miss when something...it's their job to know what's happening and this could go really, really well. We are putting a store in, my wife and I, on the Bayfront right now cause of it so we will see. Selling shirts and hats and coffee cups and shot glasses and all kinds of stuff. We are in the middle of that. Hopefully we will have that open by 4th of July weekend. That's why today is the best day because tomorrow is going to be very busy.

DC: So it is May 30th and we are here in Newport with Mr.Gary Ripka. Thank you again for meeting with me. I kinda just wanted to open up the questioning broadly and I wanted to hear if you had any stories or if you had a history of how you got here and joined fishing, family influences...anything?

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GR: yeah I started fishing with my dad when I was 10, sport fishing, on weekends. He really enjoyed sport fishing to the point that he wanted to do commercial fishing. And he got a little day boat/salmon boat in the 70's and I fished with him on the weekends. We commercial day-fished salmon on the weekends and then he got a bigger boat, then he quit his job and commercial fished for a summer. Then built another boat and I worked on it, salmon fishing, and I grew up all through the 70's and early 80's salmon fishing with my dad.

DC: Here?

GR: Yeah. well we traveled up and down the coast from California to the Canadian border. We were all over the place. Then I started running one of his boats, a salmon trawler called the Judiara. It was a boat that was built locally here in town for my dad, and when I was 17 I started running that boat. Ran that boat until he built another boat and I ran that boat for him as a crabber, bigger boat, and took it to Alaska and fished up there for 4 years.

DC: Does anybody in your family now fish with you?

GR: My son runs one of the boats

DC: One of your 3 charters?

GR: No, I own 2 crab boat/trawlers. One's a crabber, shrimper, trawler the other one is a crabber, tuna, and black cod boat. And then we have a charter boat and my son runs the shrimper-trawler, and he runs the one that black the other boat. I run one during crabs and he runs the other one during crabs.

DC: So your motivation was mostly family oriented for getting into fishing right?

GR: Yes. Long line of hard working people.

DC: Have you noticed any change in the fishing industry since you started?

GR: Oh it's not even close to the same industry as when I started. Well back in the 70's salmon was really big, and now salmon is still a fishery and is still a vital fishery to the Oregon economics of fishing, but it's not nearly as large as it used to be. The fleet, it's just completely changed. Salmon used to be... there used to be a couple of hundred salmon boats out of Newport and now there's like 50. So that has changed. With rationalization and the ground fishery in the last 5 or 6 years has made major changes there. When I started trawling, bottom fishing, dragging, I think I started in 89' doing that, there used to be 30 or 40 trawlers out of here now there's just a handful, so that has changed

DC: What do you think is causing that?

GR: Regulations, economics, the fishery for several years was in a real downturn. And economics took care of a lot of that. And just regulations. Regulations got a lot harder, weeded a lot of guys out, changed things.

DC: What about for people entering the industry?

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GR: Now? or when? Well when I started and bought my first boat that I actually bought of my own, I think I bought it with \$1000 down and it was pretty run down and you didn't have to buy any permits. You just bought a fishing license and hard work and you went fishing. Now you have to buy permits and it's very difficult now to get in. The cost of permits...it's not just the boat. You have to own the licenses to get in, and that's very expensive and very difficult. The opportunities are not there anymore like they were for me.

DC: So what about your son? Do you think he would have been able to enter?

GR: No, he wouldn't have been able to do the things that I have done because of the cost of the permits and stuff. I mean the crab permit for The Western Breeze is like \$300,000 just to have the license to go. Not the gear, nothing to go with it. It's pretty tough for a young guy getting started. It's really tough. It's very difficult to start from the bottom and work up, where I could.

DC: So where do you see the industry going?

GR: I see it...I think there will be opportunity but you almost gotta be born in. And it's pretty tough to try and get started. I don't see opportunity for an outsider anymore. There's no opportunity for an outsider that just wants to go fishing. I mean there is some in the smaller fisheries like salmon and stuff. The window of opportunity is very small compared to what it used to be. I mean even if you can get in salmon fishing and get started, which there is still some opportunity there, it's really tough to go anywhere beyond that. To where I worked my way into trawling, with licensing and individual quotas, its cost prohibitive. You even kinda have a ceiling where you can go there. It's very difficult to move any farther past that.

DC: So do you have hopes for the fishery then?

GR: Well that will never change. Once you've turned that corner, those doors are closed, those doors will never re-open. That's not going to happen again. The fishery will never be back to what it was then. For the young person to get in. Well, the reason for that, is cost. There is no room to get those doors back open, once those doors have been closed, permit costs have gotten in there, and Q's [quota]. The way the regulations...the regulations will have to relax for that to happen, and that will never happen.

DC: Have you notice a change in the age of the fishermen?

GR: Oh yea! The age of fishermen has really changed. You don't...because of the cost of getting in, you don't see the younger guys starting like I did. Before, in the 70's and 80's, even the 90's you could, if you talk to a lot of fishermen now, especially my age, a lot of them did start with families, but a lot of them just showed up in Newport or somewhere on the coast and said "I wanna get a job on a fishing boat, and try fishing" and they did, and they liked it, and there was a way to work their way up. They say that its pretty good money and they liked it or whatever and then they made a goal to try and buy their own boat. And that's all changed. You can't do that anymore. You can still get a job on a fishing boat, but its very...and you could move up to the wheel house to run a fishing boat. But to own one is very difficult. Take years and years and years and years, you can progress near as fast.

[gets up to get glass of water...talking to bartender 00:13:12 - 00:15:10]

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DC: Did you actually encourage your son to go into fishing?

GR: No, I did not encourage my son to go into fishing. I told him no...the way the industry was its a tough life. It's not simple life. A lot of time away from home, a lot of time away from families. He's already divorced now. It's just a very difficult life. It can be a very rewarding life but it can be a very tough life. And it's not always good money. Like right now we are fishing shrimp and last year we caught 2 million pounds of shrimp and this year we arent even going to catch half of that. We will probably catch a third of t that. So this year it went from really go times to not such good times. We had a fair crab season. And we have a lot of groundfish so we are diversified. We will shrimp for a little while then we will probably go groundfishing, which the guys income on the boats will probably be half of what it was 5-6 years ago.

DC: Do you think that is due to stocks or...?

GR: No, I think its cause of El Nino is pushing condition. And now the El Nino is receding and ocean conditions will improve and probably things will improve. I have seen it before. I have seen 3 or 4 El Nino in my lifetime. In the 80's we had a really bad El Nino. That's why I went to Alaska in the 80's, early 80's. We had a 5 year El Nino, which was the worst one ever. '97 they say was bad but the 80's was worse. '97 we saw 3-4 years of bad production and then things got better. It's a natural up and down thing.

DC: So you aren't too concerned?

GR: No, things are going to rebound. We don't have the fleet we used to have. Our fleet is way down from what we had 20 years ago. Half or less.

DC: Due to regulation or...?

GR: Regulations mostly.

DC: What would you say the average age of your crew is?

GR: 30's, Yea, 25-35. Any older than that and it's pretty hard. I mean every once in a while you will see a guy in his 40's. I got one guy that's over 50 but he's also running the boat part time and he's not, on deck all the time. he runs a hyrdos and stuff and we find jobs that he doesn't have to physically...but he is really good. He is running one of the boat right now. He works on deck some and then drives at night, but most of your guys are 25-35. You see a few in their 40's, but most of the guys in their 40's you see in the wheel house.

DC: Has that changed since you entered?

GR: I think its older now. Guys used to get in the wheel house younger. When I was young...I was in there in my teens but that was kinda an acceptance to the rule. But still you saw a lot of guys in their 20's. It seems that guys start a little later than it used to be. It's hard to find, generations change too. I mean people change. I see a huge change in the way people think. In the younger people compared to the older guys. The work ethic has changed from what it was. Worth ethic used to be way more than it is now. It's hard to find guys now like it was before.

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DC: Do you think that's...

GR: I think it's generational. We have a generation of entitlement. That is probably the best word to describe it. You know when I was growing up, we were working when I was 12 years old. The generation now doesn't even think about getting a job until they are 16. I mean it is a big difference. It's hard to get them off the couch. People don't seem to realize that in this country right now. I don't know if you see it in other industries like you do here. But industry where it takes a lot of self-motivation industries, probably like agriculture, fishing, timber, your nuts a bolts have to be self-motivated, work hard method. You just don't see that like you used to. It's alarming. I hear it in other industries, welding and stuff. They are having problems keeping guys or finding guys. All of your ship yards especially. They are having terrible problems with that. It's a generation that would rather push buttons on a computer than get their hands dirty.

DC: My father works construction and he has been doing it his entire life, he's 60. And since I was a kid I can remember him telling me about how awesome his helpers are and now he's telling me he can't find good help and he has told me a few times...you know you should join...

GR: Can't find good help. You know that interesting to me too. We are talking about Mike Rowe. He is a big believer in this. You know there's a lot of good jobs out there, good paying jobs that you don't need a 4 year education. There's a lot of 2 year schools, welding schools, machinist schools. That are really, really high paying that if you are motivated at all you can move up through the ranks really fast because there just aren't motivated people anymore. It's kinds troubling to me right now, what I see is going on. And it's not just in our industry. All industries are like that. Everyone just wants to go to school and push a button. 'Unfortunately, there's just not enough jobs for that. Yea and you know make a butt ton of money. Most of the time I just see people coming out with college work and not being able to find a job.

DC: How do you think that this aging is going to impact Newport?

GR: We see a little bit of the aging think taking some effect right now. Seeing that it is getting hard to find people. And I think it is going to get tougher as we go on. Fish plants are having a harder and harder time finding qualified people, they have huge amount of Hispanics working for them who actually want to work, where Caucasians don't wanna get their hands dirty. It's going to be more and more difficult and I see that. The money is okay but it is hard to find young guys wanting in because they are so limited on how far they can go. If you're not born in its tough. And they see that.

DC: Do you think there is a tipping point for once a community gets to a certain point?

GR: I don't think...Well you see it in the smaller communities on the coast a lot. here is a tipping point. You see these communities drying up. Florence, Reedsports, Banden. Where the plants pulled out and the fleets a lot smaller and the salmon fleets have gone away. Those are the ports that really were supported by the salmon fleet and with that fleet reduced to what it is, those ports don't have the infrastructure anymore to fish...

[GR phone rings...answers 00:23:00 - 00:23:40]

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GR: So the reduction in the salmon fleet has had a huge impact on the small, Garibaldi, all these smaller coastal towns have really been hit hard. So there is a tipping point obviously there with that. Newport, it's hard to say. Newport is pretty diverse and has a pretty big Alaska fleet. It has...the guys that are here now are pretty solid. It makes me wonder what's coming behind us after my son's generation. I really wonder about that. It's gonna get...if there is a tipping point I think it is a little way away. We are still 20 years away. 10-20 years away. In this particular area, but in other areas I see, yes definitely. I mean, you go to northern California, that fishing fleet just damn near has disappeared.

DC: What about the impacts on the culture of the town?

GR: In which way?

DC: So you mentioned how there are impacts on the community so are you seeing changes in the fleet and the processing plants but how do you think that Newport as a whole...will the culture change?

GR: With Newport it is interesting what we have. What we have here, it is a healthy fleet. We are smaller but we are pretty diverse but we are pretty healthy, like I was saying the other towns. So as a culture I think here in Newport, I think the fishing will always be a major part of this culture and this town. Fishing and this town go hand in hand. Yes, there is a lot of tourism here. But the reason there is a lot of tourism here compared to say Seaside and places like that is Newport has a working Bayfront. You can drive right up to Newport drive into town, get out of your car and walk down the street and see the fleet working, and be really close to them. Where in other places you can't do that. So yeah we have tourism, but also the reason we have tourism, or a big part, is because of the fishing fleet. People love to come here and see the fleet working. So it's a little different. Newport is pretty unique compared to a lot of places. As far as I know, this is the only working Bayfront where the tourists and the... where the tourist industry and the fishing industry interact. It's the only one I know of on the west coast. So fishing will always play a big part here. And the community supports the fleet tremendously, way more than everyone else [laughs] they are trying that now in Astoria and they are trying to change things but it's coming around but it's been a long time coming.

DC: So Newport has historical support?

GR: Yeah. You see Astoria and other places, they are supporting their fleet, they didn't...they did for a lot of years that was the big hub and then it kinda went away and now it's coming back a little bit. Nothing like it used to be. And now you see the town trying to support that. But see that never went away here. It's tough to bring something back that went away. So fishing and Newport go hand in hand, and I think it always will.

[00:27:40 - 00:28:05, DC-touched on all of the questions...]

DC: So is there anything else that you think that I should know about? That you would like others to know about Newport and fishing?

GR: Newport and fishing...I think the thing that people need to realize about this town and the fishing thing is that fishing is so important to this town. Tourism and fishing go hand in hand and the fishing is the more important of the two. And if you don't have the fishing, you're not going to have the tourism. We have seen it in Florence, and Banden, those places. Yeah, they have tourism going on there but it's

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nothing like here [Newport]. It's to some degree I see those places are getting better, Gold Beach, those towns used to be really thriving fishing towns and they have tourism also but tourism...they both kinda died. When the fishing died the tourism died. Now the tourism is coming back but the fishing's not coming back, and I don't see that coming back in those places. With the reduction and consolidation in the fleet, that's not going to come back. They have tried, unsuccessfully, a lot of people have thrown a lot of money at those little towns trying to get a plant. But it's the infrastructure. Once you lose the infrastructure in fishing industry and the town, you lose the fleet. We saw that in Garibaldi, we see that in Florence, we see that in Banden, Gold Beach. Brookings is struggling; they are trying to hold that, but they are struggling. It waits to be seen if they can.

[End 00:29:50:00]

[Extra notes from late conversation]

[Discussing Catch Shares, Regulation, and the Pacific Fishery Management Council, 00:33:43.00 - 00:37:26]

GR: Q's [quotas] are only...how old many years have we been in Q's now? 5 years with Q's. And it's been an evolving process. It is far from being worked out. It's a program that has a lot of bugs to work out. If they don't work them out, then it won't be successful. A lot of the industry will suffer cause [audio interference] the council is always about 2 years behind where they should be with regulations and it's really hurting the industry right now. The fish are rebounding way faster than anybody thought they would rebound. Everyone said it was going to take 50 years for rockfish to rebound. Well guess what? we are in 10 and they are back, and they are back really thick. Well it's hard to execute the fisheries because the fish that they say will take 30 years to come back, and now they are realizing they are back, but now that they have done stock assessments they say - oh yeah their back! But you have one group, the environmentalists that are saying "wait, wait, wait!" but the stock assessments are saying this so that when you are trying to get away from catching certain species to execute another fishery, there's so much of the fish that you can execute because the fish they say aren't there anymore are there and theirs so many of the you cannot, not catch them. And the quotas are way down but the research is saying they are up. The quotas haven't caught up to the research and its really got us hamstrung. Next year, well a good example right now is Canary Rockfish, they have agreed there is 10 times more than there should be but they still have the quotas the way they have been for the last 4 years. They could have raised them this year but the environmental groups said it was too aggressive. Which what's being done now is its hamstringing the rest of the fisheries because you can't execute them. You can't catch the fish they say there's a lot of because the Canary Rockfish get caught. But now next year they are saying they will raise it 10 times the quota for next year. Well why can't we do it right now so we could execute our fishery. Its literally causing me tens and tens of thousands of dollars. It's not just them being...their conservative. And no fishermen wants to catch the last fish. Your best conservationist are usually your fishermen, they really are. We don't wanna catch fish that aren't there. that doesn't do us any good. Your best conservationist are the guys that want to try and make their living in it, for the most part. Especially how the fleet is now, we have all been through the really rough times, we have been through the rebuilding. We know what we are talking about. We don't ever want to be back there. But the regulations are not catching up with what's in the ocean. There's way more fishing in the ocean than the regulations are saying. And that's hurting us. It's got us tied down. And the stupid thing is "oh we are going to raise it next year," well that doesn't do us any good right now. So the council is always 2 years behind, and you know they have always been 2 years behind. they just move at a very slow, slow pace.

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[continues on to briefly discuss the number of beach trawlers and the consolidation of that fleet, regulation constrictions due to Canary Rockfish]