

Jim Cook: It seems like everybody who has anything to do with the Northwest Hawaiian Islands has this concept that they are pioneering something. I thought I was a pioneer.

Gary Dill: It was a venture. You had to prepare for this. And where we were going, there wasn't anybody else around.

Johnathan Hurd: You're looking for French Frigate Shoals, which is a very low atoll with no high ground and you're wondering, where are we? Those days we only had LORAN in those first years in the early '80s up there, so you're trying to tap the receiver and make sure that it's actually working and you're wondering about the fuel situation.

Bobby Gomes: I think I took bottom fishing from fishing the main islands, to as far as you can go fishing up in the northwest. Once I decided that was my career, then I tried to take it to the farthest I could go, you know? That means big boats and 21-day fishing trips. But over the years I think we brought in thousands, literally, maybe hundreds of thousands of pounds of bottom fish.

Narrator: The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands is known as a pristine swath of ocean, dotted with small islands and atolls. Now known as the Papahānaumokuākea National Monument, it's always been that way, even as some of Hawaii's most intrepid fishermen ventured far into the area. It was a hard way to make a living. But it was also an adventure.

GD: It was quite a ... kind of a...expedition formulating technique. You couldn't just jump on your boat and go run out to a log floating off of Barber's Point about six or seven miles. Nah, no, no. Didn't work.

JC: I did those things primarily because the Northwest Hawaiian Islands really interest me, and when I was fishing around home I would always run to, up to, you know, Moloka'i or on past Maui on my small boats and push 'em to the limit and I just started looking at this map and saying, gee, this is, I wanna go over there. No thought about trying to make any money, but I mean, you just wanted to see what it was like. And it was a lot of fun, you know, being up here in those times. There was actually, when I did it I thought, "Oh boy, I'll be some kind of pioneer."

Billy Wakefield: A lot of the Hilo boats launch West Hawaii started fishing Cross Sea Mount. Weather buoys got really crowded. Starting getting like 60 boats, not at one time, but 60 boats working the outside fishery and that's what drove me to the Northwest Hawaiian Islands. It was peace of mind and hardly any boats and it was really nice.

GD: The trips were minimum a week long. It's not just a couple days out to over to the Penguin Banks and back. Or maybe a three day trip to the north shore of Moloka'i and back. Nah, it was a venture at the time. You'd see an occasional fishing boat going back and forth, and you get on the radio, hi, how are things? And oh, "We're fine? How are you?" Oh, I'll be here another day. "Yeah, we're going out now," and yadadadada and it was like, I guess, the days of the Old West of America. You just didn't see anybody. You're a mountain man and you very, very rarely ran into anybody.

Narrator: Going hundreds of miles further away from port lso meant getting way from the competition and working a different fishery meant securing a better market.

Dave Kalthoff: When you're tuna fishing and you're out there fishing yourself then you have all these local people, people that live here with boats, and then they all run out and go fishing and the market gets flooded.

Steve Arnold: Flooded, yeah, price comes down.

DK: It just seemed like it was a way to get out of the tuna industry and get into something that was—

Steve Wheeler: Higher value.

DK: Yeah, not only was it higher value, but it was more consistent. And the opportunity too, I remember years ago meeting Dave, he used to fish for tuna. I remember meeting him actually at a bar and drinking with him, and he was telling us how great it was fishing up in the northwest. And this was before I believe it was permitted up there. I think it was just kind of a wide open, and it just sounded like, sounded like a fun thing to do and you could make more money at it.

BG: I did about, I would say about 10 or 15 years fishing around Maui County, Big Island, Kaua'i, and then I kind of graduated to fishing up in the Northwest Hawaiian islands. Like from Nihoa, Necker Island and then I think got a permit after about five years of that. I got a permit to fish Ho'omalulu Zone, which is from Necker to Midway, and I did about 15 years up there with bigger boats obviously. But yeah, it's been a long career of bottom fishing.

Narrator: There was certainly some money to be made, but there wasn't anything easy about it.

BW: You have some really slow days where you catch only 100 pounds or something. You start freaking out, you know? Crew would get grumpy and sometimes you drop down and the sharks would just steal your whole rig right off the bat, constant problem. It's up to the captain to move the boat to another bank, or switch species, or just keep looking. And then, all of a sudden you start catching and everybody's happy and you'd have progress.

BG: [1980] It's a hard job. It's not very many people can do what we do. Not that it's just the hard work being away from the family and the dedication it takes to do this kind of job and the risk involved with being out there, but you got to really love the ocean. If you don't love being in the ocean and fishing then it's just not worth it.

JH: So it takes from here to Nihoa, 153 miles, is maybe about 22 hours at a slow speed. And that'd get you up into the east side of Nihoa.

Guy Ohara: The thing was if you traveled far, the farther you went the faster you had to catch the fish, right. Unless it's not worth it.

BG: [1980] Where we go it's so far out and the weather is a big factor so if it's blowing hard you're gonna have a hard time anchoring and you're gonna have a hard time just staying in one place.

GO: Once in a while if the waves are breaking on the deck or something then it's hard to fish. You know, too much wind.

BW: Three man crew. Three of us go out and it's just back-breaking, physical, roping these fish.

GO: I wasn't one water man before. But, when I went fishing especially long range at first I got sick. I bring the sea sick pill then get sick for, like, three days. Then after my body got used to. But I loved it out there, though. It's peaceful, peaceful.

Narrator: As it is in the Main Hawaiian Islands, the bottomfish fishery in the Northwestern Hawaiian islands was done with relatively simple gear.

JH: No one seems to realize that bottom fishing Hawaii is one hook one fish.

BG: The style of fishing and the gear hasn't really changed just maybe some swivel improvements, but it's generally the same kaka line we been using for the last 30 years. The same gear I used in the north I use here and it works. So it's basically the same rig. I use four hooks. You got a lead, four hooks and a chum bag, basically. Some guys use more hooks or less, but that fishery hasn't changed much in all the years.

Narrator: While catching more was always good, what was caught, and when it was caught really mattered.

JH: One of my other friends that used to fish up there his trick was always to get in three days before the holiday. No matter how it was he would structure his calendar to get in just before the holiday. You're gonna get really good prices 'cause everybody's trying to buy for the holiday.

BG: Fishing up where I did in the northwest is a little different from here. It's all timing. For me, I would always try to come in on a high demand time. Either New Years, Christmas. And if it meant staying out for Christmas and coming in for New Years that's what I would do. And I think over the years I hit 'em all. Generally, the higher the demand the higher the price at the auction. If there's a big convention or there's, like, a holiday, New Years, red fish, onaga. Culturally that's a fish that everybody wants to eat during the New Years. So I try to target that fish and be in at least three days before New Years and you get a higher price. So yeah, you try to target special times.

GO: Well you want to catch the snapper, right, because that's the money fish. But anytime you bring in too much of one species then the price goes down. Like when I fish with Bill Strickland, we go out and if we go for paka we'd catch, like, 600 pieces paka and then we work the rest of the fish. But he's the only guy he put up numbers before we left and we came home with the numbers. He would say, "Okay, we're going for 600 piece paka, "100 piece hapu'upu'u, 100 piece onaga". And we would do 'em.

GD: Because I was limited by ice, I would pump the ice, it would begin to melt and I would go up to Nihoa and catch fish. It would melt faster and then I had to turn and run for home while still figuring out how much ice I had left. I used to boggle the minds of some of the crewmen that I had when we get out we'd turn and we'd head home and he'd go start putting a lure out. What are you doing? "There might be some mahimahi around up here!" And I said, yeah, so. "Well,

don't you want to catch some more fish?" And I said, come in here. Open up the thing. See that? There's plenty of ice. It won't be there in a day and it takes us a day and a half to get back to Honolulu.

Narrator: Ice was an obsession for these long-range fishermen. Ice meant quality. And quality meant profit.

DK: You know our ice, we started off with generally 10, 11 thousand pounds and usually the last couple of days of fishing we wanted the high end fish because we didn't want to burn that ice up on something like butaguchi. I can't say that we really targeted those unless we knew that we were only gonna be out for four or five days versus our eight or 10 day trips.

SA: And quality, quality was real important. Really take care of your fish.

SW: Gotta look good.

SA: Gotta look good. Kill 'em right away.

SW: Always mat on carpet.

SA: Yup, lay them on carpet, keep the scales in place. Brine 'em, get 'em zipped, leave 'em in the brine too long, don't have the brine swimming like this busting 'em up. And dry pack 'em, and dry pack 'em.

DK: Yeah, we dry pack. And this might sound a little corny but this fish gave its life for us. We're gonna get this fish back to market in the best possible shape we can and get the most money for it we can. And that was always our train of thought on our fishing trips.

JC: I had a split-hatch that I put in that boat so that I could freeze part of the catch rather nicely, rather well. The boat was fast so we could make a long distance and fill the boat up. And with the freezer I could use other species that normally you couldn't hold too well. Like, butaguchi and some ulua. I did that. I thought it was a real smart idea. Maybe in the end it didn't exactly turn out to be, but it allowed me to bring back kind of large loads that even though it wasn't a lot of money for these other species it was some and it helped pay the bills.

BG: I think the best feeling you can get for fishing in general is having your boat full of fish and you're traveling home knowing you got a nice load of fish. For me it was up in the northwest and to get home would take me about five days. So, for five days you got a good feeling, you know.

Narrator: But then there were the risks of being on a boat, far off in the Pacific Ocean.

BG: Close calls? Oh, plenty of those. Traveling at night and on the big boat it's important somebody's on watch and we almost hit a, well, one of my crew, almost ran into a freighter by Kaua'i once. I woke up looking up to the boat, but that could have been a bad thing. When the boat's traveling at night you gotta always have somebody up watching. Guys'll be so tired they fall asleep. I fine 'em 100 bucks every time I catch 'em sleeping. Sometimes they come back they owe me money. You know what I mean?

DK: We had some, you know, your typical gale weather up there where we're not fishing for three or four days because it's just terrible and you have to go out and slip the anchor line a few feet every four hours or so 'cause you don't want it working in the same spot. If you break it off now you're drifting in this stuff.

SW: I remember that time down at Necker we were trying to get our anchors to hook up the bank, on the top. It just kept on dragging.

SA: Looks like a broken umbrella.

SW: Yeah, so we put two of 'em together and it did the same thing. Didn't even slow us down.

DK: That was pretty bad weather.

SW: That was pretty bad weather.

BW: Water spout came at me. I gunned it trying to get out of there and it was, like, no use. It was coming at me. And then it dissipated. I had freighters coming in on me and I'm on the emergency channel trying to get ahold of 'em and they keep coming and submarines want me to change course and come up to 25 knots in the middle of the night. And I said, sorry, I don't have that kind of speed and I'm low on fuel I gotta go in and unload and they just wanted to play around. All kinds of things, I mean, catch on fire. I was 100 something miles out and had to deal with it. All kinds of things. Yeah, it was fun. It was, like, thrill of the hunt. It was part of my life. I loved it, but it was good to come home.

Narrator: The fishing, the money. They were all attractive. But just being out there was its own reward, too.

JH: And you see a sand spit in front of you after traveling 100 miles, which would be what. All night and perhaps 3/4 of a day and there's a sand bar right in front of you with waves peeling off of it. It's a pretty tremendous sight to see and then behind that able to get behind the shoal. So, that area there is really beautiful. Really, really beautiful area. Some of the other things, Nihoa, real beautiful island, Adams Bay, a lot of seals, a lot of wild life. A lot of Hawaiiana. A lot of terraced home sites. It's a really beautiful island over there.

Troy Lanning: At sunset, if you're anchored way up on the east side and the sun is setting it's a beautiful sight to see. Nihoa in the background with the sun setting. I can feel that mana, you know.

Narrator: Not all of the fish brought back was for sale. Hawaii has a long tradition of sharing what's caught.

BG: We don't sell everything. You gotta give away, take care of the people around you. I just kind of give my neighbors fish, because they're courteous when I go in and out with my trailer boat. Yeah, you gotta spread it around.

TL: A lot of fish get given away to the family. If not, if you didn't do good then you can't give away too much. You gotta pay for your expenses and stuff. But yeah, family definitely gets fish.

BG: For me was giving my family, 'cause we have a big family. So everybody would get enough fish. And now I pretty much still do the same thing. I don't catch as much as I used to, but I still try to give enough of it away to make everybody happy.

Narrator: Then there was the fish itself. Everyone has their favorites.

BG: I like the butaguchi, that's my favorite. A lot of oil, moist. It's a good fish. You can make mostly panko style. The regular way everybody makes it, but the fish holds its moist and it's got a lot of flavor. Yeah, if you dry it it almost tastes like abalone.

GD: Gindai, steamed, Chinese style. It's just silky smooth, it's beautiful. It's a fatty fish. It's real nice, rich fish to eat. And steaming of course is the way to do that kind of fish.

JH: Probably gindai. It's got a bigger bone structure. Baked. Wrapped in aluminum foil and baked.

GO: I like the gindai and the hogo. They have a natural flavor. Their flavor, you don't have to add anything.

TL: Onaga. I'll filet it and I like to fry it panko style.

SW: I kind of like sea bass.

DK: Mine's gindai.

SA: Gindai. Steamed.

SW: Well on the boat I don't know if we steamed it.

DK: No, we'd fry it.

SA: Fry it on the boat, yeah.

DK: Yeah, we'd saute it.

SA: Saute it.

DK: Yeah, we'd saute it with butter—

Interviewer: Makes it taste better when it's sauteed rather than fried.

DK: A little white wine and capers.

Interviewer: Okay, that sounds good.

Narrator: But, as the old saying goes, othing good lasts forever.

GD: So the entire northwest became a coral reef reserve with restricted fishing. We could still fish, but it was given a five-year period to morph into a sanctuary. That was the concept anyway at the time. So we knew the end was at hand and sure enough a couple years later Bush came along after some tremendous battles being waged between the preservationists and the conservationists. I like to call us fishermen the conservationists. Whereas the people who want

to preserve the fish for no other use except to preserve them, well, they're the enviromaniacs. Well, they were struggling desperately against the fisheries people, the conservationists. Who said, "Hey, we can have our cake and eat it, too. "If we manage it properly". So a big battle, big battle. So Bush ended it all. He said, "To heck with all this stuff "I'll make it a monument and everybody's out, bang!" In fact the only bright light that I've had at all was when I got this email that said all the fisheries councils in the United States have written the president to tell him to open the monuments up to fishing. But, I'm not going to put too much hope on it.

TL: I would love to be one of the guys to go back up there. I used to fish up there, this is what my dad taught me. I didn't go to college. This is all I did was commercial fish.

DK: I know that there's been some consideration about reopening up the Northwest Hawaiian Islands and there's a movement. I hear about it, a movement going on. And I've always felt that that was an extremely well managed zone 'cause it's 100s of miles of banks. It's a huge area.

SW: And it's hard to get to.

DK: Only six boats were allowed to and it was quite expensive and difficult to get to. We were the area's police. When we saw a foreign vessel, which we would see frequently. Three, four times a year, and they'd come in with their trawls and they'd trawl over the top of a bank. You could go over to that bank and there was just nothing left. My concern is that's still going on. I have to wonder how well is it being policed up there anymore.