

Narrator: Leonard Yamada presents an interesting mix, fish biologist by training, painter by trade, bottomfish fisherman at heart. The family has always been fishing and I got involved with the bottom fishery back in 1962 -- 1962, tagging along with my dad and his friends. Back in the early '60s, the bottom fishing was more inshore, moana, akule, uku, papio, things like that. Then toward the later part of the mid '60s, my dad's friends the Dotays, started exploring Kaena Point ledges, and things. They were the first that taught us about the opaka, onaga, ehu fishery. My dad retired and he wanted to fish a lot. But I had a young family, so I -- work was important. I'm a self-employed painter, and my dad convinced me if I take off from work and we change our style of fishing and we fish harder and we sell the fish, he can have his fun and I can have my income, and it worked out real well for us doing that. He'd call the weather report every day and he'd talk to his fishing friends, and then he'd call me before I'd go to work. He'd say, oh, the weather is going to be good. The fish biting, how about we go tomorrow, meaning we go leave from tonight. So I would talk to my customer, whoever I'm working for and most of the time they'd laugh and they'd say, as long as you bring me a fish. Or some of them would say, as long as you bring me a Kona crab. So then I would have to go crabbing in the morning. So then after work I'd show up the boat is at my dad's place. I'd show up, the boat loaded, everything ready to go. Jump on the boat, go out fishing all night, come home about lunchtime the next day. My mom used to always, like, make us take the fish out and take a picture and then put the fish back in the box. I used to tell her, you're costing me 10 cents a pound when I take it out of the brine. But we'd put it back on the truck. I'd take it to the auction, go home, wash up, just go sleep so I could go work the next day. Wake up for dinner when the kids come home, my wife come home. Have dinner. Spend some time with them. Go back to sleep. Go work the next day. My dad would have the boat all washed up and everything when I come back after work. I just back it up in the garage. I think '86 to '88 was a real -- when we did real well. We were fishing at the most one day a week. I was self-employed. I'd work my five days. I'd work it out with my clients that if the weather came good, you know, I'd take off one day and make it up on Sunday. So I still had my one day to take my dad out. I had my full work week. I had the one day with the family. But in that short three years, you know it kind made a lot of people want to go full-time commercial fishing because the money was so easy. The few full-time guys we knew, like LOIS M and CINDY K, they were grossing over 150, 200,000. But one day a week fishing was making more money than my whole week of painting.

Narrator: In addition to bottomfish, Leonard does other types of fishing. We'd troll when the ahi is around.

LY: We'd go crabbing, Kona crabbing, white crabbing. Kaneohe or Koko Head or across to the banks. Anywhere -- anywhere that's on my way home from bottom fishing, because the crabbing is more for my family and friends. Most of my friends fish. When I couldn't fish, they gave me fish. So when I can go fishing, I give them crab in return because they're fishing when I'm fishing so no sense I give them back fish. Today's fishery, most of us are small-boat, multi fishery kind of guys. Most of the guys are fishing bottom fishing strictly for the money, trolling for the fun and the money. Like my dad used to say, trolling is fun. You go out there 12 hours and the fun happens in half an hour. Bottom fishing is different where it's constantly you're doing something, so it's fun all day. Even if the fish doesn't bite, you're doing something, you're looking for something, you're trying something dropping lines, you're moving around, you're throwing palu in the water. You're constantly doing something. So it's not like trolling where

you're just riding around. A long ago this old-time fisherman, Dale Crooker gave a quote that I always remember and I always tell my friend. He said, when you look at the price of an onaga per pound, and you look at the price of an ahi per pound, he said the only way he can justify with trolling for ahi is because the fish is big and our brain is small.

Narrator: Getting started was a gradual process and technology changed how he would go after his catch. I started with Elec-Tra-Mates. Because we already had the reels, the Elec-Tra-Mate units were cheap compared to buying like, you know, a setup. So we'd just buy the Elec-Tra-Mate and attach it to the reel that we have.

Narrator: While the electric wheel took the drudgery out of bringing up the fish, it was electronics that made the biggest difference.

LY: Well, I used to tell people that, you know, I learned from a stone-age guy that used only landmarks and intuition, and we'd search on this table and he'd hunt around and he'd find this little knothole here, but it might take us half the day. Then Loran C came along, and it gave us one accurate leg and the other one wasn't because we only had one good station. But with that and the depth, now instead of searching all around the table, we just hugged that line until we reached that depth. So it made it easier. So we covered only half the table to get there. Then GPS came along, we didn't have to search anywhere. We'd just go right there. So it saved us a whole bunch of time, which translates to more fishing time. So we thought, gee, you know, we've got three, four times more fishing time, we're going to catch three, four times more fish. But we found out that wasn't necessarily true because the fish don't bite the same all day long. So some days you get there early and you get the good early bite that you might have missed if you were searching, but we'd never know because you cannot be in two places at the same time. Then there were the days that we'd get there real early but we've got to stay there until real late until they start biting. The depth recorder helped me find -- target the bigger fish. The GPS made it easier to get to the area to find them because they're not always exactly the same place all the time and it made the selection of targeting easier. The most important thing in the fishery is to know spots. If you know spots and you know the fish are at these spots, then you can figure out how to catch them. Very quickly I realized that my father's friend that fished at night used spots that had fish at night but in the daytime they weren't too good. And the ones that gave me spots that fished during the day, at daytime we were okay but at night they wasn't good. So there are different places for different times.

Narrator: Long ago, Leonard and his dad started a tradition of fishing for others who couldn't fish, that continued for years.

LY: Especially around graduation time. Now not so much because my friends' children have all grown. But before, around graduation time, yeah, a lot of requests for party fish, and things. We'd make special trips to go and try and get them their party fish. The ideal situation was we'd make money and be able to provide them with free fish so it's a win-win for everybody. I get to go fishing. If we only catch a fish for them, I got to go fishing, that was a plus. If we catch the fish for them, they're happy, I got to go fishing. If we catch two, I made money and they got their fish. Those are the times -- few times my friends would fish with me trying to catch their fish for their kids' parties. And we'd always -- during the good season, especially bottom season,

we'd always set aside money to buy the fish in those situations. We used to call it putting some fish into the bank so we can withdraw the fish later.

Narrator: Leonard understands and appreciates that not everyone is able to catch their own fish.

LY: A lot of our older friends and older fishermen friends, especially, don't go anymore and can't go anymore. I think a lot of them would like an onaga. But then . . . since usually I don't have enough onaga to give everybody an onaga and I have, in numbers paka is the most, everybody gets paka. I don't -- I like to give everybody the same thing. I tend to go by the number of people in the household. So, generally, three to seven pounds, I would say.

Narrator: Over the years the reason Leonard went fishing started to change.

LY: It changed when my children started to go to college and I needed the money, especially after my father stopped fishing in 2004. Whether I could find crew or not, I had to go so I went. If painting got slow, weather was good, I'd go. Usually around the good -- you know, light wind time we got rain so I can't paint anyway. So I'd take the day and night off and I'd go fishing.

Narrator: And then despite all the success he had out at sea Leonard had to take a nine-year hiatus.

LY: Since 2000 and -- when was it -- 2008, I hung my boat up to take care both my parents. Now they're both deceased and I'm just getting the boat back in the water again.

Narrator: Just as it was when he fished with his dad, Leonard waits for the right wind conditions before he launches his boat.

LY: Well, like for us, it's totally weather-dependent because we're a small-boat fisheries now. In the past, the bigger boats, they had range. They could go outside the local weather. Or they could weather the storms. But today's fishery is more an overnight type of thing, a one-day fishery with a lot smaller, faster boats. So we're more weather-dependent. We're looking primarily at the wind. We're looking for ideal conditions, variable, five to ten knots. On occasion, depending on the location, 10 to 15. If certain holidays come and we really want to give away fish for the holidays, then we don't look at the wind and we look for places we can hide from the wind.

Narrator: The Bottomfish Restricted Fishing Areas, or BRFAs, closed off much of the fishing spots just east of Oahu and forced fishermen like Leonard to other grounds more than 26 miles across one of the roughest open ocean channels in Hawaii.

LY: Now that I have a little bit bigger boat, and like I say, it's a gamble for me to go Middle Banks. Unless the weather is marginal or my time is limited, I don't go to the banks I mean, I don't go to Makapuu, I go to the banks. The banks have got more spots. If you hit here, hit here, don't have -- you know, unlimited spots to look for. But Makapuu is real limited. That was the sad part of that BRFA, that when they expanded it, out of the something like 40 spots I had over there I got three in the open area.

Narrator: The State Division of Aquatic Resources has been raising the idea that the BRFA's will be reopened for fishing. Maybe.

LY: But I'd like to get some kind of study done at least for an idea, and then let's open it up. Because we gave up so many years. But like my friends say, maybe I wouldn't have been as patient as I am if I was able to go fishing. But over the years I haven't and only now I'm ready to go back. So actually, for me, if we spend another year, I lose only a year. They lost 10, 15 years already, yeah. Yeah. It's almost like Makapuu with a new BRFA. Got three of my spots remaining, but they're all on the south side of the ledge. So if I go over there, it detours me maybe an hour an hour if -- if I head straight to the banks, I'll get there an hour earlier than if I went to Makapuu first. So if I stop to check Makapuu and the current is going the wrong way, then I lost an hour. If it's going the right way, I have the decision to make how long is it going to go that way. Shall I try anchor here and fish here and if in so many hours the current changes and the fish stop biting, then make a trip across to the bank, which way is more favorable? So now I very rarely fish Makapuu because there's only one side available. Whereas before, current doing a certain thing, I go to one side. Current changes, I go to the other side. So I could fish all night. And now I'm limited to half a night in a good situation. And if the porpoise comes, I don't have that other guy on the other side to distract the porpoise.

Narrator: Some believe that fisheries are subject to trends. Leonard believes they're subject to cycles.

LY: I really believe it's -- all the fisheries are going through cycles. I think everything goes through cycles, and the climate conditions and things used to be more predictable. They seemed to have been repeating more -- or on a regular basis. So I kind of look at what's happening on land and what's happening in the ocean, and I try to make sense of what's causing trends and . . . I believe it's the climate. It's changed now where before I would say every nine, ten years we'd go through this real windy, real stormy, real -- you know, type of winter. Or this real dry summer. And now I think we only see the real extremes, and the rest of the time the weather seems to be the same. Some years the currents -- the current is always there, but some years they're very extreme. Some years, they're not -- you know, you can fish all night and the current changes, but it doesn't pull hard. Some years it pulls hard the whole night. It kind of changes the dynamics of fishing. And I found that contrary to what I believed in before that the moon makes the current. I found that if there's no current, even a full moon night, it's good. If there's a current, sometimes on a full moon night, it's extreme and sometimes it's not. So I'm really questioning whether -- I know the moon controls the tides, but I don't think it controls the currents. I'm almost certain that we don't have a prevailing current. I think it depends on where the North Pacific gyre is in relation to us. We have spin-off eddies from it. Because they're eddies, they're not a consistent current. They come and go and they change very rapidly. They're different when I'm at Makapuu and I see some certain condition that I talk to my friend on the banks, the current is going opposite, but we're both in the Kaiwi Channel. So it's not the whole Kaiwi Channel moving in one direction.

Narrator: Ultimately, success is all about knowing where to go and when the fish will be there.

LY: But you know, you hear a lot about it's a specialized fishery and you need a lot of skill, this is where plenty of my fellow fishermen get upset with me, too. I don't believe that. I believe I can take you, put you on a boat, put all the equipment and give you so many GPS coordinates and you can duplicate what we're doing. Because the fish doesn't know. If the line is in the right place with the right bait, they don't care who's up there. It's knowing those spots. That's why you see these young guys that come out with two, three generations before them instantly doing well.