

Graying of the Fleet
Dale and Paula Dearing Oral History
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Interviewer: DC – Deanna Caracciolo
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Dale Dearing: Well, actually, we lived in Tucson, Arizona. I had a friend or, actually, the pastor at our church down there went on vacation. He came up to Oregon. He had a friend he had grown up with in Pacific Palisades who was a commercial fisherman of Port Orford. So, he came here and visited with him. He came back to Tucson and told me all about it. So, I said, "That sounds like something I want to check out and try." So, he put me in contact with that guy. I got a hold of him. He offered me a job in that crab season coming up. So, while we were up here, we made an offer on a house that was sold dirt cheap compared to Tucson property. We couldn't believe it. They took our offer. So, we moved up here. We'd only been married six months – that was forty years ago – and been here ever since. I fished with him for one year and fished on my own for 15 years.

Deanna Caracciolo: Wow. What was your side of it all?

Paula Dearing: It was an adventure. I was excited about it. Because we both were born and raised in Tucson. It was something new. We came up here in the summer. It was so beautiful and green and wet and rivers. It was like paradise coming out of the desert. So, I was like, "Wow, this place is beautiful."

DD: She fished with me for a year and a half, commercially.

PD: In the boat, yes.

DD: Until she almost died.

[laughter]

PD: It was hard. Fishing is a hard lifestyle.

DD: Well, she not only fished, she'd come home, and then she'd have to get food ready for the next day. Cook something for us to eat and go take a shower and pass out. She was doing all the rest of the work. So, it was real hard on her.

PD: Yes.

DD: It's hard on everybody.

PD: It was difficult because we didn't know anybody when we first moved here. You don't get paid until the catch starts. So, we started in November. We moved here November. You started working on pots and gear. We started weaving pots and doing all the stuff for crab season. But you've got no money coming in. So, when we moved here, all our stuff had gotten lost. All of our wedding stuff, everything was lost through Greyhound. So, we had 76, 78 cents to our name. This old fisherman that lived around the corner, an older man, he came over. He brought us this humongous cabbage for us to eat off of. We had cabbage and boiled cabbage and baked cabbage and Spam and cabbage and cabbage and Spam.

DD: [laughter]

PD: It was apple season. It was harvest season. So, people would bring us food. But that's all the money we had. We had lost all our belongings, other than our bed, our dogs, and the clothes that were in our truck. Everything else was gone. So, we started basically with nothing. He wouldn't get paid until the crab started coming in.

DD: Fortunately, it was 1976. It was a phenomenal season. The crabs were thick. As a matter of fact, we were put on strict limits. There was a nationwide coastline strike because they weren't happy with the price, I think. It's hard to recall. But I think they were offered 25 cents a pound for the crabs. One of the local buyers, Stan Anderson, he had Cape Blanco Fisheries. He offered his fishermen – there were a dozen of us, including the boat I was working on. He offered us 50 cents a pound. So, we went fishing. He was hooked up with Lazio's down from San Francisco, which my understanding is had some connections with the mafia. I don't know. But anyhow, the first opening day of the season – and I'm from Tucson, the first day I'd ever gone fishing – we go down to get on our boats. There's a long line of fishermen standing there from up and down the coast, with signs, calling us scabs and everything else. They're screaming, yelling, "We want to kill you." [laughter] Jesus, I just want to make a few dollars, so we can eat. [laughter] But as it turns out, we were told – I don't know if it's true or not – but I was told that Lazio's had four men armed with automatic weapons in the Cape Blanco Fisheries building in case violence broke out. They were going to protect us. So, I don't know if there's any truth to that or not, but it wouldn't surprise me. So, we went fishing. We were getting 50 pounds minimum per pot that first – well, actually, for probably six weeks at Lazio, those crabs were just thick out there. As a matter of fact, because we had a thousand-pound limits, because that's all they could handle, we would go down to Frankport, pull maybe 30 pots or whatever, and get our 1,000 pounds off it, or 2,000 pounds, stuff ten of the pots with 100 pounds each and bring them up to the bay and put bungees around the trigger, so they couldn't get out. The next day, we just go on the bay and pull our pots. We'll be done at 9:00 a.m. and go play or whatever. It was great. I thought, "Man, this is the easiest money I've ever made." Plus, there were no storms that year.

PD: [laughter]

DD: No storm. One storm the whole winter. It was during the last year [unintelligible]. It was awesome, flat, calm ocean. [unintelligible] But there wasn't anybody living here. But the crabs were so thick that one day, we dumped the pots out on the bay. We didn't bait them or anything because we didn't think there's probably any crabs right up close. I even left the rubbers across the triggers, so nothing could get in or out. We get back by the next day, pulled them, and they had averaged ten crabs per pot. They had to force their way in, push the rubber thing open, and get in. That's how thick the crabs were. It was phenomenal. Then they're trained to go in and out these pots their whole life. Those little, tiny crabs are going in there. They eat. They go out the escape hatch. All of a sudden, one year, they can't fit out the escape hatch, much to their chagrin. So, these crabs have been trained to go in and out these pots. They were forcing their way in. There wasn't even any bait to eat. But they were so thick on the bottom, they wanted to get in there. It was just an amazing year.

PD: That's when (Lester Allen?) came and gave us his words of wisdom, the older gentleman with the garden. He said, "I'm going to tell you kids something." Because we were twenty-one,

twenty-two years old. He said, "It's going to be feast or famine. You're going to make so much money that you can't even imagine you can make that much money. You better save because you're going to have famine." He said, "If you don't save your money, you're not going to have anything. Because it's going to dry up. The seasons will change. The rules will change. The price will change. Anything can happen, and you'll be broke." So, that was the best words of advice I think we got as young kids. It was very helpful. Because most people blew it. They just blew everything they made, which still happens today.

DD: Oh, yes. I see those crab fishers, all brand-new pick-up trucks down there and people buying new boats and motorboats and stuff. Two years, three years later, half those guys are filing bankruptcy and going out of business. I mean, it's like gold mining, fishing. You make big money fast sometimes. Then you can go for a long strip where you're just barely paying expenses, if even that. So, money management is the key in commercial fishing.

DC: Yes.

DD: Nothing -

[end of transcript]