

Recorded Interview with Bob Jacobson

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Location: Newport, Oregon

Interviewer: Christina Package

CP: Could you talk a little bit about your personal background and how you got into fishing?

BJ: I was born in Northbend Oregon in 1939. I have a brother and sister, both have been involved in the fishing industry. My dad was a logger, but while we were growing up we spent a lot of time down watching the commercial fishing boats unload in Charleston, which is Coos Bay. So that kind of wetted my appetite for the ocean, fishing, and just the whole marine scene. I went on to graduate from North Linn High School and went to OSU and graduated with a BS in Business and went back for a couple years of graduate work. I ended up taking a permanent job with OSU here in Newport in 1967 and about a year later I decided I wanted to fish commercially for salmon. So I used my weekends and vacation time and fished out of a little 20 foot dory and actually did very well. That was back during the peak of the Coho runs, when the runs were just really out of sight. There were just tremendous runs during that period. I then ended up getting a little larger dory and then bought in 1972 my first trip boat, which was about 32 feet long. I replaced that a couple of years later with a 40 foot troller and I fished primarily salmon, but I also fished a little bit of albacore and a little Dungeness. By that time I was actually taking some leave time without pay from OSU. It boiled down to a three month leave over a five month period of time. During those early years my brother called me up one day, and he was selling stocks of real estate up in Portland, and he said 'I would really like to get out of here and go fishing. Do you have any friends down there that might have a job for me.' So I looked around. He eventually ran into Wilburn Hall, who was a friend of mine, and he offered Bill a position on one of his boats going to Alaska for king crabbing. He actually went up as an extra man, meaning that if anybody got hurt or quite then he got the job. Well they got to Dutch Harbor and one of the guys said 'I don't want to be here'. So he had the job. Bill had fished there for 8 or 10 years and he called me up one day and says 'There is a boat for sale that I think we need to look at'. It was a boat that was originally based here in Newport and it was in Alaska. So brother Bill and I and a fella by the name of 'Spike' or Mike Jones, bought the boat. I ran it for 3 or 4 summers. In fact if you look in this month's National Fisherman, it is the boat of the month. Genoa is the fishing vessel. So in 1983, I started fishing in Alaska on the Genoa and we made a conscious decision right from the get-go that we needed to fish as many species as possible to keep that boat as busy as possible. Halibut was the key candidate because the season stretched over a fairly long period of time. So we got involved in Halibut in 1983. We got involved in the Dungeness crab fishery around Kodiak. We fished a little bit of black cod. We fished tanner crab

in the winter. We took the boat to Bering Sea and fished King Crab, even though at 84 feet it was a very, very small boat for the Bering Sea.

So I got involved in a lot of fisheries right off the get-go. I had a really great partner in Kodiak by the name of Jerry Bongen. He still lives there. We allowed Jerry to buy into the boat and Jerry and I now own that boat plus another one. For me it was a huge adventure. I had spent a little time in Alaska because I worked for the University of Alaska for a year from 1972-1973. So I got to travel and I got to see a lot of the state, including Kodiak, but I really felt like it was an adventure. I mean just going up there in totally new country, new fisheries, new people, new area. It was just a tremendous experience. Really a lot of fun. It was also very, very rewarding financially. I mean we didn't have a bad year. We worked very hard at it. We kept our equipment in order, which you need to do if you are going to survive up there and you just needed to be smart, you know. There is a certain element there that is absolutely essential.

So that's kind of how I got started.

CP: When you had that boat up there, were you still involved in Salmon fishing down here?

BJ: Nope. I just totally dropped my fishing down here. Actually for the first couple of years I expanded my leave from OSU from 3 months over a 5 month period to 5 months to a 7 month period. So from the 1st of April or maybe the 1st of May on to the end of November. So I would be gone then and would fly from Kodiak back to here a couple times a year. But, I gave up all my fishing down here.

CP: What does the boat currently fish for?

BJ: It's still involved in the same fisheries. Well I take that back. We are still heavily involved in the halibut fishery. As you probably know, North Pacific Council when to IFQs over a dozen years ago now. Our timing was almost impeccable when we got started. We didn't know it at the time, but we got started in the fishery on the first of the qualifying years for Halibut. So in 1984, 85, 86, and 87 we had just tremendous seasons. So when it came to handing out IFQs we were really among the top 15 boats in Alaska. Fairweather Fisheries was the name of the corporation. I think we were among the top 15. So because we worked hard at it and never missed an opening we did good. We still fish Halibut. We still fish cod. We've given up Dungeness. One of our big fisheries now is the pot fishery for cod. That is a fishery that in the last two seasons brought in about 2 million pounds of cod fish fished in crab pots that are modified specifically for cod fisheries. So that has been a very good fishery for us, particular when the prices got up to the high 50s about 3 years ago and then all of a sudden they just dropped. In fact we didn't even fish one of our boats for a year because the prices were so bad. We would have lost money if we fished it. But the prices have crept back up to the low 30s now and we can still make a buck or two at that price.

On the crab quota that we earned that is now leased, so both of our boats (we bought another boat in 1992) no longer participate in the crab fisheries. All of our quota is leased and quite frankly when we are getting Red King Crab for 70% on the lease we can't fish it and make that kind of money. We pay the crew 39%. So that leaves us only 61% for all the fuel, bait, groceries, and so on. If we were fishing it ourselves we would probably making under 50%, but by leasing it we are making 70%. So, it was an easy decision as far as we were concerned.

CP: Do you think a lot of people have done that?

BJ: Yup. If you look at the number of boats participating in the crab fisheries that is what one of the big concerns is. The big concern among a lot of the crew men is that because many boats have chosen to lease their quota to other boats it leaves fewer jobs for individuals who had traditionally done crab fishing. So, I imagine there is going to be some changes in the next few years to try to compensate for some of that crew job loss. But, that is just speculation.

I mentioned the second boat that we bought in 1992, called the Pacific Venture. It is a 104 foot steel boat built by Bender Fish Building in the Gulf. It was built in 1968 or 1969. It was converted to crab fishing and it has been a very good boat for us. They fish pot cod. We tender that boat in the summer and they fish a little bit of halibut in the spring. They are now tendering salmon. Come September 1st they will be tendering pot cod. So, it keeps us busy.

CP: Did you spend much time in Kodiak when you were fishing up there?

BJ: Yeah, that was our home port. The halibut trips ranged from hours to days. When we first started we had some days that were 4 or 5 days long. The year before the implementation of IFQs we had seasons that [lasted] 8 hours. We definitely had 12 hour seasons, so you didn't spend much time out at sea, you know. So you spent a lot more time in town. I spent a lot of time in Kodiak. I got to love the place. I still go back about 4 times a year. Generally just for fun. I don't fish anymore. It's a nice town.

CP: Has Kodiak changed a lot from your experience?

BJ: Big time. It used to be a pretty wild place. I mean obviously you weren't there in those early years, but when the King Crab fleet would come back from fishing in the fall, it got pretty raucous. It has changed. The streets didn't used to be paved down by the waterfront. It was all gravel. Now they are all paved. The infrastructure in the city has changed tremendously over the years. I don't think it has grown a whole lot. Maybe it has, but I don't think so. It's a really nice town.

CP: Is it very common for people from Newport to go up there to fish?

BJ: Well, I put together that list for you. There are quite a few and I probably missed a few on that list. I think there are probably 50 or 60 guys that matriculated from this area to Kodiak. You know, there was some people from here who went up early and were kind of the forerunners who

kind of set the pace for the rest of us. Wilburn Hall was one of them. A fella by the name of Ted Painter Sr. was up there and all his boys followed him up there. Clifford Hall was another one. Kenny Knapp (?). They preceded most of us by 10 or 15 years. So we were all watching, you know. What are these guys doing. They had a great year. 'Lets go' we said. 'Lets do it'. So they really provided the kind of impetus for the rest of us to go to Alaska. Some of them were provided crew jobs and the rest of us got excited about what they were saying and the stories. The potential for doing well in the fisheries up there was good. That was the reason that a lot of us ended-up up there. Plus, it was a great adventure. It was some place new. It was just a lot of fun.

CP: Because the fisheries were new up there, was there also just more room to get involved?

BJ: At the time that I went to Alaska the hand writing was on the wall Christina, that something was gonna happen to the salmon fisheries. They were already starting to talk about limitations on Coho because Coho stocks were declining and that all, as a matter of fact, just happened. While there wasn't a lot of talk at that point in time about limits in the troll fishery down here, it was pretty clear that they were going to take some steps along the line to limit the fishery down here. You know 320 miles of coast line is a pretty small coast. You talk about Alaska with about as much coast line of all the rest of the country put together. There is just a lot of area up there and a lot more potential. That's basically what all of us were looking at. Almost without exception, all of us who went to Alaska had some experience with the fishery. There were a few that might have had friends up there with now experience, but not very many of them. Most of the guys on the list I gave went on to become skippers. That list did not include the guys who went up as crew men. Some of the guys who went up there stayed there, including my brother. They are pretty well entrenched actually. Many stayed there for a while if not permanently.

You asked a question earlier about what fisheries we are involved in and you didn't ask how those fisheries have changed. I did mentioned the IFQs, but as more boats and more fishermen went to Alaska, and we can take Halibut as an example, the IPHC found it increasingly difficult to manage that fishery in any sane way. More boats, more effort, and plus, it was kinds like a giant chess game between the management, the IPHC, and the fisherman. They would shorten the season and it was a game of what can we do to get more fish. What can we do to run more hooks. What can we do to catch more fish. So they would shorten the season by a day and so we would say 'Instead of 12 foot hook spacing we were going 6 foot hook spacing and we are going to cut the side out of the boat so we don't have to waste time lifting those fish over the rail, which all of us did. We all just cut a big hole on the side and put a big ramp there. So, it's like a huge chess game. Move here, move there. Finally when that got down to openings as short as 8 hour openings, I am sure we had 12 hours openings, they said 'we can't do this anymore we are going to IFQs'. There was a lot of opposition about implementing that program, including a little from me. I won't say a hundred percent of us, but after we have seen what it has done we all figure it was a good idea. A big majority of the people are in favor of that now. They understand what that has meant to the fishery in terms of it being a more orderly harvest of the resource. I

think it has created a harvest that induces less mortality on the resource because we are not constrained by any timelines. Certainly it is safer. We have seen huge increases in prices. The year before IFQs were implemented we were at under \$1 a pound. This year we are going to average \$4.50 a pound for our fish. I contribute a lot of that to spread the harvest out a longer period of time. We have fresh fish on the market for 8 to 9 months, as opposed to having fresh fish on the market under the old system for maybe a total of a month. Maybe. I mean fisheries changed dramatically over the time that I fished up there. We witnessed it all. I mean it needed to change. It simply could not have continued to be managed on the systems it was on previously.

CP: How does that compare to crab rationalization?

BJ: Those are two very very different fisheries. Lets take crab first, even though it was the second fishery to become rationalized. The crab fishery was about 100% big boats. Look at the Halibut/Black Cod fishery and there was a mix of boats from 126 to 12 or 14 feet. So the needs of the IFQ program for the Halibut/Black Cod fishery were a lot different than those of the crab fisheries. One of the things the council said back when they were dealing with Halibut IFQs was 'We need to protect the smaller boats because they are an important component in the Halibut fishery.' So the rules they implemented are really a lot more constraining and a lot more restrictive and certainly more protective of vessel size categories than anything we see in the crab fishery. All we see in the crab fishery are big boats. I think quite frankly that those protection measures that they implemented were probably pretty well thought through. There is still some movement to try to get some changes in specific areas with regard to the Halibut IFQ program that I may not agree with, but for the most part people feel the program was pretty well thought through and that the father of that program need to be complemented for doing a darn good job. Those are kind of my thoughts in a nutshell.

CP: What about crab?

BJ: Well, I don't know of anyone who would have quite anticipated the reduction in the number of vessels that would be fishing crab after the third or fourth year of crab rationalization. If they had envisioned that there might have been some different regulations to protect some of those crewmen who lost jobs. But, one of the things that gets totally overlooked is the safety record among boats, for one, I don't think there has been loss of life. But, I think the IFQ program is enviable. Yeah, we have lost some crew jobs, but money is still being made by someone out there fishing his crew. So, if you talk to the crews that are full time on a lot of the boats now they say they have never had it better. You know. We are making a lot more money than we have ever made in the past up here because we are fishing more product. We have lease product we are fishing, we have our own product, so depending on who you talk to you will get a different answer when it comes to the crab rationalization program. I think it has been a good program. I say, if its not broken, don't fix it. That's my theory.

CP: Do new fishermen here still go up to Alaska?

BJ: Yeah. There are still a few. Guys are taking kids up there now. You probably notice a lot of the same last names on the list I gave you. There is probably a dozen sons up there fishing and they take crewman from here to go up there. I think it is going to be more difficult for guys to go up and jump on the boat and within two or three years be running the boat, like we did when we went up. In my case, I went up and started running it immediately. Guys still go up and make good money. I don't think we have anybody from Oregon on either of our boats. There is still an opportunity. A lot of it is who you know. If you have the right contacts, it makes a big difference.

CP: Anything you would like to add about fishing in Alaska?

BJ: It was just a great experience. Sometimes your heart was right up in your throat. The weather gets ya. I remember one night we were fishing Halibut in September we were out in an area (4A). There were some gale warnings on the radio from the east and it was just flat calm. 60-65 winds out of the east. It was times like that that you wished you weren't there, but it was all part of the experience. I have never really been much north of Dutch Harbor really. [interrupted by client/fire marshal]

Anyway, talking about experience, there was a halibut season in area 4D which is up around St. Mathews, a couple days north of Dutch Harbor. We said, 'Lets go'. This was back in the mid 1980s, still during the qualifying years. We got up there and there are actually 2 islands, St. Mathews Island and little island (Hall Island) adjacent to it with a pass between it. We got there about 20 minutes before the season started at noon and we could see the fin of a big killer whale about a mile or so ahead of us. I put the glasses on it and this pod of killer whales had surrounded this school of walruses. As we were idling up to watch the battle I had the video going and totaling forgot it was running. I was just totally enthralled. They were just toying with those walruses.

I also remember being anchored up under the Island of Four Mountains which is about 100 miles west of Dutch Harbor on the Aleutian chain. I anchored up there and remember looking up one night and watching this active volcano 4,000 ft above your head spitting fire. I mean, just great, great experiences. And there is always that spirit of competition between the guys and I have always been pretty competitive and that was one of the fun parts about it. With the IFQs, that is lost. We have lost that competition, both in the crab fisheries and the Halibut/Black Cod fisheries. In the early days, that was a big part of it.

CP: Does that impact the enjoyment people get out of fishing?

BJ: It did for me. I have not fished up there since 1999. That was after the IFQ program. I think it impacted it a little bit.

CP: Anything else you want to add?

BJ: No, not really. I am glad I did it. I imagine anybody else you talk to is going to say the same thing. It was just a wonderful experience. It was a pretty integral part of my life. I worked for the university 28 and half years and fishing has been a great retirement program for me. I got a great partner in Kodiak who takes care of all the boat work and I take care of all the books. It's something to do. It's good income. Looking back it was a great investment. Timing and location were keys for me, really. That was impeccable. It turned out good. Now guys have to buy their way in. I have not followed how crab or halibut shares are selling right now, but for \$23 a share is normal now, when back in the day shares for \$4 or \$5 were way over priced.