

PETE OLSEN
ON
COMMERCIAL FISHING IN CORDOVA AND KODIAK WATERS
DURING THE 1930'S THROUGH 1960'S
AND
1930'S LIFE-STYLE IN CORDOVA

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The following autobiographical interview was held on April 6, 1993, with Mr. Pete Olsen, a retired fisherman and carpenter. The interview was held in the home of the interviewer, Michael L. Parker, student of the Alaska History oral history project.

My name is Pete Olsen. I was born and raised in Cordova. My dad was a Dane, Danish descent from Copenhagen. My mother was a native Aleut born in the village of Nuchek in Prince William Sound on the island of Hinchbrook.

What brought your dad here? Well, in them days a lot of them Scandinavians toured the world and when they come up here they liked what they saw and just settled. A lot of them because they seen all that fish they settled down. All along the coast you'll find Danes, Norwegians, Swedes and Fins. They came in the old sailing ships too around Cape Horn.

Do you know what year he came up here? I think it was 1906. I'm not sure. That was just about the time the Copper River North Western Rail Road and Kinnecott Copper mine was built. He didn't come up for that though.

Did he ever work there? No, he never did work on the railroad. I don't know what year he started fishing. But he was a fisherman, of course, he worked around town during the off season, and when I first started fishing in the gill netting, I like gill nets and seines. They were made of cotton. They didn't last long at all. That silt on the Cop River really ate up the gill nets and you were constantly working on them and replacing the web every other year. That's as long as they

lasted and often times didn't last that long. In them days they used cotton corked lines and cedar floats, and then of course lead line was made of cotton. When all of that soaked up the water towards the middle of the year the corks got water logged. They become so heavy. But that was an interesting life.

In them days the population of Alaska was about 60,000 people. When Cordova was founded there was no town there. There was a Native village in Neack? Lake, and about 1895, around then, there was a cannery built in ??? in 1902, 3 I guess it was. It was when they were going to build that railroad up to that Copper mine. They started then and I think it started operating in 1909. It was a roughly 200 mile railroad.

But getting back to fishing, you're seines were cotton. We usually used manila for cork line and then they added what they called Spanish corks. They come from cork trees, and at the end of the season those were water logged and they floated, only half the cork showed then. Your web soaked up water, your lead line soaked up water and your seine become very, very heavy and that went on for years until they finally made nylon seines.

But getting back to them days, it was very interesting. The boats were usually around 30 to 34 foot. A 45 foot boat was big. The smaller boats, they'd have any where from a four and a half horse power Atlas single cylinder to a 12 horse two cylinder engine. What year along was this? Back in the thirties. And the bigger boats would have a bigger engine. They'd be maybe 40 horse power, and those engines, a four and a half horse Atlas it would probably make maybe two or three of your engines in a car now,

and they were nothing but a solid chunk of iron, and they only turned up about 300 revolutions a minute.

What were on the big boats, were they gasoline? Yeah.

They didn't have the diesel? No, it was, well the diesel was starting to come out back in the thirties, but a lot of your tenders had gas engines, 50,60 horse. They were heavy duty too. They didn't have high speed engines.

Are you talking about the diesel engines? Yeah. Then the diesel engines come out and the tenders started ??? and they were really heavy duty. Really heavy, heavy engines. For instance, a four and a half horse Atlas gas engine weighed about six, seven hundred, maybe eight hundred pounds. They were real heavy. And back in them days that was quite interesting.

No body had radios. No body had radios in them days. When you were seining in a bay you talked to the tender then and he'd tell you he'd be back so and so time the next day or some other tender would. Even in them days a lot of the tenders had no radios and whenever they came up from Seattle the cannery never knew where they were until they got to the cannery. But that was the life style.

Is this when you were fishing with your father? No, that's after. But in them days it was an enjoyable life. A lot of people don't understand it because the conveniences now, but they had their merits. There wasn't that many fishermen. Nobody had to compete with each other so much. A lot of guys come into, just stay in certain bays and just plug away through the season. In them days if you saw a school of fish first everybody had

unwritten law that those fish were yours, so when the season opened you could go ahead and take them which isn't like that now.

How far in advance are you talking about seeing those fish? If the season is going to open tomorrow, you go out the day before and you go out scouting around and you see a school of fish and you anchor up and you watch them and the boats come in and they'd see you watching them, they left you alone.

But that was the way of life in them days. We got a nickel a piece for our pink salmon, and I don't remember what the reds were. Dog salmon, or chum, were six cents apiece. A penny over. Of course that was the way of life then. You could take a family of four or five and live on a thousand dollars. Of course a lot of that in them days was putting up fish, digging clams, putting up your berries, and go out and get your deer meat. A lot of times the cannery would back you on a winter supply of food. You'd get your beans, your sugar, rice, and all your bulk staples, and all of that carried you through the winter. It was kind of a quiet life.

Was the cannery right there in Cordova? Well there was a half dozen of them in Cordova, and you'll find them all over the different bays too. They were scattered all around the state. All the way from Ketchikan clean up to Bristol Bay.

Then, course, after that came World War II, and that made a drastic change. But just before World War II, little boats, the thirty footers, were coming out with high speed engines.

Usually start out with four cylinder, eight cylinder, or six

cylinder engines. And of course when they first come out we all thought those won't last. They're turning up so fast we thought an engine that turned up two thousand RPM's would just blow itself to pieces. Everybody talked about they wouldn't just last at all. We only seen the beginning.

But that was interesting, and then they started getting radios, and radios in them days were big, clumsy pieces of equipment.

Was this sometime in the forties? Just before the forties, the early forties. They were big, took up so much juice you had to have a big battery to talk on them and slowly they started improving. And then of course everybody got radios then, and about when you were going to move you'd contact the cannery or the tender and tell them you were moving on. That was interesting new life-style in the fisheries. Getting faster engines, getting radios so you could talk to one another.

Do you really think it made a big difference in how many fish somebody caught and how much better they were able to live?

Well, it didn't make much difference in the living but canneries then began to, the tenders if they began to spot fish they had a code. They would ask the fishermen where they're at, and they all went to code then. Code for the bay, code for the amount of fish. So then they went to different codes, and beginning of season the cannery would give you a sheet on the codes; cannery code, tender code, and location code so you would always listen in and often times keep your radio on while you're fishing listening in.

Then back in them days you would pull in all your seine by hand, and made seven or eight sets in one day you had a real hard day. Course when you got fish you didn't notice it, how hard the work was, but when you'd pull an empty seine which we called a skunk haul, when you pull them in tempers start flying. Another thing too, when you'd snag up, when you'd hit a snag on the bottom and tear your seine a lot of time and loose you're fish. That would help your temper a lot too. But, those were interesting days. They were a life-style that's all you knew. It'd be a lot different to go back to that now after going through this. In the gill netting, I gill netted in Cordova, Cook Inlet. One year I gill netted in Bristol Bay on a sail boat. I would get up there and gill net every year but it was pretty hard to get in there unless you knew somebody.

Back in them days, days of thirties, a lot of them guys after fishing about four weeks a peak season they'd come home with two thousand, twenty five hundred dollars. Back in them days twenty five hundred dollars is like a hundred thousand now. I remember when I was a kid, if you bought a hundred dollars worth of groceries it would fill up a pickup them days. A hundred dollars would actually fill up a pickup. You just couldn't believe what the prices were in them days. Like a can of milk would be around ten cents.

Were the prices of things in Cordova a lot higher than in say, Seattle? Well I didn't know because...But in then days the prices were way down. It was just unbelievable what you'd get them days for two, three hundred dollars. But then again like I

say, only a thousand, fifteen hundred dollars back in them days you lived pretty good then. It's hard to visualize it unless you were there.

Then as seining progressed they started getting these plastic floats that never soaked up water in then their cork line, the line that floated. It really changed the salmon fishing completely.

Were you fishing when that came along? Oh yeah. In fact, going back to older years we had what we used to call a pew. It was a one tanged pitch fork. That's the way we pitched the fish out of the boats into the tenders and course the tenders are out of the canneries. Then came the day when they started talking about doing away with the pew, so they came and we were only allowed to pew them in the head.

Why did they change that? For health reasons. Those pews, they ended up sitting on the boat, they'd get rusty. We used to just grab the fish through the belly or just anywhere.

Then you had to sit there and aim for their heads? Yeah, and that only lasted a couple of years and then they went to unloading by hand. You couldn't use the pew any longer. You had to handle them all by hand.

About when was that, the thirties sometime? No, that wasn't too long ago, about twenty years ago I guess. Then later on they called for health reason you couldn't use the old wooden boats lined with wood. They fiberglassed them for cleanliness. Of course wood would soak up the gurry. There was a big change, then of course the invention of the power block came along where

you had the big block up in the rigging and you run your seine through it and lifted it up on deck and of course that changed fishing completely, because where in the earlier days, where you made seven, eight sets at the most, in the same amount of time you could make fifteen, twenty sets.

When about was that? That was in the fifties.

And then of course as time progressed they, well going back to earlier days, our seines were only allowed 150 fathom seines. Now, they're allowed 200 with a fifty fathom lead. In them days we were allowed only a twenty five fathom lead. That's short, twenty five fathom net that had big meshes in it. That was to hold you off the rocks. They had big mesh so fish could go through them. When the power block came along, that was a tremendous improvement along with your seines being so much lighter. Seines today didn't soak up the water like the cotton did. That made a tremendous difference.

Then back in the late forties, early fifties, up until then everybody fished in the bays and they did what they call round hauls. They'd find a school of fish and go around them. Then in later years they did what's called hook hauling. Going up against the beach and running straight out and make a kind of hook on the end of your seine and slowly, just real slowly, tow it around and back to your skiff. Now that's about all they do now is hook haul because they found then as time progressed bigger boats started fishing off the capes in strong tides which meant they had to get heavier lead line, then of course the seines were deeper. We used one hundred fifty mesh lead seine

four inch mesh a hundred fifty inches deep. A hundred mesh deep was called a strip. Nowadays they fish with seines that are four strips deep because the tides now go out in the capes, they have to at most, we'd have two pound lead on our lead line. Now they've got four and five pound lead on they're lead line so... *That was on the deeper nets?* Yes. And of course in the early days when I started fishing we used a skiff and let the seine go. Skiff man would hold back with the skiff and get the seine to run out and that was with oars. Then later on we progressed to nine horse outboards, ten horse, and later on getting up to twenty horse and nowadays the bigger seiners they got jifney. We called them snag skiffs in them days the jifney? has got bigger motors than we had when I started fishing, much bigger. Now those that use outboards now will have hundred fifty, two hundred horse power outboards.

It has changed just so drastically, and of course then everybody started putting radar on. Where we used to travel by compass only, and going back to the old days of tenders that's where they'd get to is all by compass as they traveled. Then of course they got their depth finders. Then they got there radios and radars. Now they got that, what's that new global... *Global satellite navigation.* Yeah, now they got that and they can tell you exactly where you are.

I guess the charts are a lot better now than they were back in the thirties. Oh yes, the charts now, oh yeah.

You think it was any more dangerous to fish back in those days?

I don't guess you went out as far as you do now because you

didn't have the weather forecast, you didn't fish as hard because you had to pull in every thing by hand. Well, the dangers are always there regardless. But in them days you grew up in the fishing and I don't see that it was any more dangerous. In fact, its more dangerous now because the competition. That's what I was thinking because you've got all this big heavy machinery on the boat and they're pushing hard to fish as much as they can fish all day and all night long.

Back then you could buy a thirty footer, of course it had no electronics on it, for seven, eight hundred dollars. Now you try to buy a thirty foot boat. But the dangers weren't there because you weren't competing like you are now. Not only that now, so many people have so much invested now that they have to go out regardless of weather and in them days we fished in the bays, we didn't go out into the capes.

It's probably actually more dangerous now. The competition and going out further... Well, not only that. Today a lot of your boat owners will take green men because they give them a lesser share. But even so, they talk about how dangerous fishing is today. I don't know if you realize it, the lives weren't lost so much in the salmon industry. It was in the crab industry, in the drag industry where there was big boats going out in all kinds of weather. There's where more lives were lost. Not in the salmon industry, and percentage wise there was a lot more salmon fishermen but... But more lost in the crab fishing. Yeah. Fishing, it's so competitive. And the halibut, I remember back years ago the halibut fishermen, they used to come up here. Take

a week to come up here, and then they'd take at least a week to load up and then they'd run back to Seattle, and you didn't hear of the accidents they have now. Your boats are over powered, some people don't have sense enough to slow down in tough weather.

Did they have the 24 hour season back then? No, no. In the halibut, you would fish every day of the season, but it started changing as they got more fishermen. But like I say, the fishing was just so much more dangerous now because your overpowered boats and so many unqualified people aboard the boats. That's what made it dangerous. But the fact that the high price of boats, the high interest, high insurance. You have to go out there and just beat your head against the bulkhead. That's to say you come out on it.

We were talking once before how you thought you think that now there's more fish versus back in the thirties there were less fish because of the colder winters. Well, you had your big years then. You had your real slow years then. It's really hard for me to say. I have noticed that, as I see it, that way back when we used to have the real cold winters, bad winters, I'd say you have a freeze, real heavy freeze. Then it'd bring a sudden thaw where streams would wash out the eggs. To me I believe that was the biggest predator. But I noticed in the last twenty years it started warming up. I could tell there was more consistency in fish. It's the same way back when I was growing up. We were allowed only one deer and you had the bad winters, you had a lot of winter kill and in them days there were not that many people to hunt them.

There was a one deer limit back in those days? Yeah. I didn't even know they had limits back in those days. Well a lot of people back in them days, when there weren't that many people, if you went out and got a deer and you didn't say anything, the law ordinarily if they knew, they just ignored it long as it wasn't wasted and nobody complained to them. Then they would just ignore it. But since the weather has warmed up, well even when I moved to Kodiak when I just got out of the Army in forty six, we were allowed one deer. Then as the weather started warming up and there was more deer we were allowed five and then you have better conditions for the fish too. Then I remember we had some good years. There was some big years even then.

Back in the thirties when you were fishing, did you have to keep up with federal taxes? You had your federal tax, you had your city tax, That's about all. In Alaska we had a ten dollar school tax. We weren't a state then. That was about all the taxes you had.

It wasn't a big headache to keep up with? No, we were kind of in the back woods too. You'd be surprised at how little was known of Alaska. It would really shock you.

It surprises me that you were taxed and you had a one deer limit. We still had to pay tax, we were still in America. We had no voice, we were a territory, It was still a good life. People are too crazy now.

The steamships would come up once a month in the winter time. We got boat service in the winter time. And one boat a week in summer.

Everybody saved parts from their old engines. Nuts and bolts, anything, we saved in them days. I guess we were a lot like the farmers, always helped one another. If you needed a part for your boat and somebody told you I had a part, you'd come and ask me even if we were total strangers to one another. I'd tell you where my shop was and you'd look left hand side going in or whatever location, it's there. It wasn't, how much you want for it. Everybody needed something and it was a circle that went around. Maybe you didn't help me, I'd help you if you didn't help me. But Joe Blow back there, I needed a part that he had, and you saved your parts, and eventually you helped somebody. That was the life-style.

When you were in the fishing business in Cordova, were there any hard years where you struggled to get by? You always struggled to get by. You had bad years and you had good years. Some years you ate more beans than you wanted to. A lot of people put up gardens. If you went without, it was your fault. It wasn't steak and eggs the whole time. It was good, solid meals. No junk food then.

Was everybody in Cordova equal financially? Oh yeah. A lot of ways it was a tough life. If you came from a big family like I did, it was a lot of hand-me-downs. When my older brother got a new pair of overalls, by the time I got them they were pretty much patched up. Nobody thought anything of it though until we all started getting old enough to earn our own money and get our own clothes.

What were the schools like? Not like they are today. Children didn't have the rights then like they do today. I think that was one of the biggest disasters, children's rights. There was no smoking. You didn't ever smoke publicly, let alone in school. If you did smoke you went out somewhere and swiped cigarettes and smoked them. In them days it was the three R's and that was about it.

How many grades were there? Twelve.

What kind of churches in Cordova; Baptist, Russian Orthodox?

Yes.

Were you Baptist? No, my mother was Orthodox. I drifted away mainly because of the way things were then. For along time there the Orthodox church started dying off. There was Catholic church, Orthodox Church, Presbyterian Church, Episcopalian Church. I guess that's another reason I got away from the Orthodox Church, my mother used to send us to Sunday School at the Episcopal Church. It wasn't more than eight hundred feet from our home, and she'd send us to Sunday School every Sunday. I guess that was a big reason why I left the Orthodox Church. They had no priest then. They had a real nice theater.

The Cop River dumped out there. We had all kinds of ducks and geese. As a whole, Cordova was a real nice place to live.

Did you know anything about your mother's parents? No, I didn't. The village where my mother was born and raised, that village died off in 1918 - flu epidemic. By the time I got old enough to realize what was going on I never thought to ask her, and by then I left home so there wasn't much that I knew about. But at one time that was a big village too.

Did her parents die in that flu epidemic? I never thought to ask her. In fact, I wished I could have had a tape recorder and sat down and recorded her life history. But too little too late. She only had three years of Russian school. They had Russian School in them days.

Was that all she went to school, was three years? Yeah. That was pretty much a Russian village then. It was mixed Russian and Aleut.

Were there a lot of pure Russians in the village? That I don't know, because by the time I started getting old enough to know what was going on, be concerned, or realize the importance of that history, it was too late, and I left home, and I got in the Army, and then I got married, and I never went back home. 1940 was when I left home, and I only went back to visit off and on since then.

Do you know anything about your father's parents? No, I don't. He left home at a real early age. He was born in 1870, and he just never talked much about it. Why I don't know. He left home when he was around 14 on a sailing ship. He went home when he was 18, and then he left home and didn't know anymore whether he had relatives or not.

I can't imagine leaving home and going to a foreign country, especially Alaska. Yeah, Alaska was beyond the end of the world. But you see the beauty of it now. You know how much more beautiful it was then.

Going back to fishing, it has gotten so sophisticated, and now it's so important to get the fish while it's fresh to the market so everything is really speeded up.

Were the fish back then ever shipped out fresh or was everything canned? It was all canned. There was no way to ship it out fresh, had no cold storage. It was a totally different world. Even the halibut fishermen, they took a week to get up here in the sixty, seventy foot boats. They fished for a week to ten days. They iced them, then they went back to Seattle that way. Who were the people that worked in the canneries? Most of them were Chinese and then later on Filipinos. Their key people were specialist like machinist. The different mechanics, they were specialist that they would bring up, people that were highly qualified for the jobs. A lot of times when the machinery broke down they had to fix them right there the best way they could because in them days there was no way to get parts. Now if you need a part you can call down today and be on a late flight tonight. They couldn't afford breakdowns.

I wish there was more I could remember, but a lot of it I've forgotten. I just accidentally remember now and then. As a kid we made our skis out of barrel staves. We would make our skis and sleds out of that. But they were good days and many fond memories. Today's standards we were poor, but then when I look at our life-style we were rich. My dad back then would work for five dollars a day, eighty five cents an hour. No overtime. What job was that? Different jobs around town. He's the jack of all trades. He's done some carpentry and even some ditch digging, anything he could get to feed the family. Was five dollars a day OK pay? Well, you could live on it. Like I say, you bought your beans, rice, and coffee, canned vegetables, canned fruits. Then we had a garden.

This file is part of the Kodiak History Project.

For an index of other recordings in this collection see the index:

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