

Interview with Dick Powell

By Michael Dugan

Mr. Powell is a Kodiak fisherman turned businessman. He owns the PATRICIA LEE a 130 foot crabber, and holds intrests in two other vessels. He arrived at Kodiak in July of 1964 after the earthquake, and the tsunami that followed.

The interview took place at his home in Kodiak on April 7th 1993.

MD: What brought you to Kodiak?

DP: I came here to fish in July of 1964 to fish dungeness crab.

MD: So you got here right after the earthquake.

DP: Yah, right after the earthquake.

MD: Was Harold (Richard's father) here before that?

DP: No, he was here same time, the same day.

MD: So you came here with him. What spured him to come to Kodiak after an earthquake?

DP: We were gearing up to come here when the earthquake happened. That almost made us not come up here. but we decided to go anyway. We stayed in the southeastern and fish dungeness till July, and then we came over here. then we fished dungeness crab around here.

MD: In the Ketchikan and...

DP: Fished around Juneau, that's where we spent the first couple of months after we left Oregon. Then we came here and dungeness fished, then worked in the king crab.

MD: Were you working for a cannery and did the cannery own the boat?

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DP: No. Dad owned the boat. We had basically come up that time for the summer, and wound up staying like for a year. Then he sold the boat and went back to Oregon. I got a job, and stayed here. I stayed with the boat when he sold the boat, and I got a job with the new owner.

MD: What was the name of the boat?

DP: The Elvia V, It was here for quite a few years. It sank... Im not sure when, but a few years back. It stayed here and fished dungeness for a long time.

MD: You were fishing the southeast for what just a few months?

DP: Just a couple of months, out of Juneau, but the crabbing was slow there so we came here. We thought it would be better

MD: The intent initially was to come here?

DP: No, just to come to Alaska for the summer, where ever the best fishing was.

MD: Had you been fishing for crabs down off the coast of Washington waters before that?

DP: Down in Oregon. Yah. Dad had been to Ketchikan a few years prior, and there was good fishing when he was younger. Then when he had come back to Oregon. He went up with somebody else the first time.

MD: Was it just you and he on the boat?

DP: There was just him and I, well Mom was there to for a while. Then when we got up here there was two guys on deck to work. Once you get fishing it takes two guys.

MD: Was this a daily thing or did you guys go out for a few days?

DP: It was a few days, a week maybe. A week was about the longest. Down to Ugat bay.

MD: Now thats just out of the port where you'd go to buy your groceries and that. You'er not talking about being gone underway for that week.

DP: No you'd be out of town, just anchor up at night and fish four or five days. Then come back to town, and deliver.

MD: How big was the boat?

DP: 50 foot, with 3 people, two crew and the skipper.

MD: 50 foots a big sized boat for three people, of course most of its accomidating crab pots.

DP: Right, its not a lot of room after a week goes by.

MD: Now crab pots aren't the seven by seven footers?

DP: No, they're 36 inch. 36 inches around. they're round pots. We did that for just that first year. He went back to Oregon, I stayed there, and got a job. I stayed with that boat till he sold it after a year or so then got another job. Then progressed into the king crab fishery.

MD: You hired on to another crabber?

DP: I went to work for Jerry Googel on the Wigger a 58 footer here in town, its not here any more. Hes still around I have'nt seen him in a while, and he may live over in Port Lions. I fished with him for a couple of years. Started out king crabbing. Then did some shrimp fishing, and got to run a boat for a cannery. The cannery owned the boat.

MD: Thats conciderably different fishing than crab, you're net fishing right?

DP: Right, I started that, switched over in 68, and ran a cannery boat, fishing for shrimp for a couple of years then went to Alabama and got a new boat for the cannery and brought it back.

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MD: When you started working for the cannery did they require any kind of licensing? How did you get in the door there?

DP: I was on boats fishing for the cannery, so they already knew me. I worked my way into where I got to run one and thats how I got to go south and get him a new one. After I did that for a few years I went south and got my own new one in 1973. Saving and tring harder, and got a 100 footer. I came back up here, and shrimp fished a year or so. Then shrimping kind of went to pot, and there wasn't any more shrimp. So I went King crabbing.

MD: King crabbing really took off, I'm sure they were doing it before, but it took off in the 70s right.?

DP: Well, when I fished it in 66, 67. we were doing good, but the price was like 9 cents. I remember we went on strike to get 11 cents a pound. The cannery was offering 9 cents. As far as shrimp fishing goes we were only getting 3 cents a pound for shrimp.

MD: Well there must have been something wrong there. When you guys went to the store, and you saw them getting two dollars a pound when you sold it he day before for 9 cents.

DP: It sold for a while at 2 cents. Then when it went from that first time that we worked so hard to get eleven cents, and then it was up to twenty and thirty then it went right on up.

MD: This was in the 70's?

DP: Yah, back in the mid 70's. It got up to where it was a buck and a half, something like that .

MD: Apparently the market hadn't caught on yet?

DP: No, either that or the canneries weren't doing real well. I know that some of them were, but fishermen were making big money too. If you can go out for a couple of days and fill your boat you didn't have to have a big high price.

MD: Do you get a lot of meat out of crab?

DP: 60 percent, you take a 10 pound crab, and you get about 6 pounds of meat.

MD: What do you think happened to the fishery?

DP: I think we over fished it. I don't think its as bad as they say it is.

MD: They were being over protective.

DP: I think they are being over protective, we did hit it pretty hard, we all know that. Now, I think they'er being over protective.

MD: Are they trying to let the crab get older. A good sized crab is five years old.

DP: Eight years on King crab, then they'er big, they'er market size.

MD: I found an artical about Hairy Crab, now your'er not fishing that. It shares the same waters that your Brown Crab does?

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DP: It does really, but they'er not very plentiful were we'er at. Where we'er at we'er fishing the Golden Crab the deep water crab.

MD: So you'er fishing south of the Chain?

DP: Both sides of the Chain. they'er all over out there. I mean (that sounds to good to be true), they'er not all over, but they'er on both sides of the chain in depths of 300 fathoms or so.

MD: Is the gear conciderably different?

DP: No, with the gear that we have we can fish for tanner carb, we fish King crab, Red King crab, Blue King carb, and Golden King crab, all with the same gear. Right now we'er pushing the Golden King crab. Its been good, but the same thing is likely to happen there that has happened to the others. But we've already hit that real heavy. I've been talking to fish and game about it, tring to get them to do some thing to save that fishery before we dont have it just like the one we dont have here.

We started out fishing where we were using 50 pots, we were pulling 50 pots a day. We had 150 pots out there total. We were catching the same amount of crab as we're catching right now for the same amount of time, except that now we pulling two hundred pots a day, and we have a thousand pots out there. That should tell somebody something. You don't pull the same ones every day they sit two or three days, but now we have a thousand of them out there, and we're pulling a hundred fifty to two hundred every day. So its going fine we'er a lot more efficient. We're doing things a lot different, we've learned a lot about it.

MD: Are you spread out?

DP: No, not much we're staying in the same spot. We're fishing the same spot we started ten years ago. We're not wiping the fishery out, but I think the potential to wipe it out is definitely there. Right now there's probably only four boats out there fishing. If we ever get fifteen or twenty boats that decided to go out there, and fish, we could damage that resource I'm sure. It wouldn't take long either. I'm sure that they're aware of it they know exactly what we're doing.

MD: In the hay day of the King crab fishery how many boats were out there?

DP: Out where we're at, we're in the hayday of that fishery. The most that's been out there has been about a dozen that fish for these kind of crab. It's a little bit more difficult to fish these than it is the Red King crab. It's because of the depth, and it's just not as easy, you've got to work at it a little more. A lot of guys just never invested the effort in getting geared up to do it, and we did. We haven't even been to the Bering Sea, and fished the easy fishery. We just go back out to Adak, because there's only two boats that will be there. Where there is no competition. We're not fighting over who is going to fish where. If you go to the Bering Sea there's three hundred boats up there that fish for King crab, for a week. Out where we're at there's only going to be two or three of us and we'll be there from November to August at a lot slower rate. You've got to work at it. It's not as fast a fishery as the Red King crab is.

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MD: When did you give up being an active fisherman, and concentrate the business end?

DP: About four years ago.

MD: Was there any particular reason?

DP: No, there was a number of reasons. A good friend of mine was lost on a boat that sank. They had come up from Seattle, and his wife was a good friend fo my wife, and my wife decided that I didn't need to fish any more. It hit pretty hard when they didn't find him. The boat sank and six guys were gone. There were two other guys that could run it, and they were taking turns. In the begining we were all three going to take turns. When my turn came they decided that they didn't want to take a trip off, so they'd take my turn too.

MD: Is there a certain talent to making this fishery work, from a skippers stand point I mean?

DP: Yah, it takes a,.. not everybody could do it. Fortunately I had a couple of guys that could do it. Thats why we've done so well. They stepped right in there. Its not easy to explain. there's a lot of times you can't pick out what it is. One guy can just do a lot better than the next. Not because they both don't work hard. One guy can just do it. I have guys running other boats that go out there. They do fine, but they don't do as well as the guys on the big boat, the Patrica Lee.

MD: Shes down in Adak right now?

DP: Yah shes down in Adak right now. She spends two months at Adak then back to Dutch Harbor for a week, then back to Adak. In August she'll go to the ship yards to do her general maintenance, and back in November for the season.

MD: You've got a crew of four on there?

DP: No, Its got a crew of twelve on a 130 foot boat, it varies from 10 to 14. Right now there's twelve for processing and everything.

MD: So, they set their thousand pots, and every day that they're out they pick up 200 of them.

DP: Yah, they pick up 200 of 'em. the pots wind up soaking five to six days before they see them again. Its just a big circle they've got. They just start, and go through 'em all. When they are done they start over. Everyday.. boring thing to do. They work 18 to 20 hours everyday.

MD: So, as soon as ther're finished with their set, ther're steaming on to the next set?

DP: No, its right there. They just keep moving right along.

MD: Then there isn't like a 12 hour break while you're getting to the next set?

DP: There's no 12 hour break. There is a couple of spots where they may have to run for two and a half hours.

(While going over some pictures of the devistation left in the wake of the tsunami.)

MD: In trying to picture what your dad may have been thinking. You got a crippled fleet up here in Alaska, and the town needs the money that comes from the fishing boats. The timing was extreemly oppertune for both you and he.

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DP: He had some doubts about it. In fact he almost didn't come because he didn't know what or whether the canneries weren't wiped out or that a good portion of them were. That's the reason we didn't come out here for the first couple of months. There wasn't a market. That's why we stayed down in the southeast, so we stayed there while he worked on putting together a market out here. That's when we came out here in July of 64.

MD: What was the town like then? Was it still a mess?

DP: Well it was a big mess. There was a big boat right down in the middle of town, The Mary Ruby an 80 foot boat, it was right up there were Krafts is. It was something to see. It took a long time to get things fixed up.

MD: So who was your Dad selling to just one of the floating processors?

DP: The King Crab cannery down there at King Crab Incorporated. They were still there, functioning.

MD: Was there ever a time when you were scared, afraid for your life?

DP: Not really, I've been scared a couple of times, but I didn't think about dying or anything like that. I thought about saving the boat, that's all. We did that so.. Most of the times that I had when I was concerned was when I first started shrimp fishing. But it was due to my own ignorance. Overloading the boat. I remember a few times we had to shovel part of the shrimp overboard coming home because the weather was bad. The first shrimp boat I ran it packed like 90,000 pounds. I made it to town with a hundred and thirty five thousand pounds on it once. It was decks awash, we was going for it. I can remember almost not making it, but we did her

every time. I wasn't thinking of dying I was just thinking of catching more. I think back on a few of those times, and I was very lucky. We did extremely well took a lot of chances.

We had headed out of Anchorage at about two o'clock in the morning. Me and another guy were sitting upstairs visiting, there was another boat crusing alongside of us. It was blowing about 40 knots. We were down at the south end of the island near the Semidi Islands. We came out on deck, we have those round hatches, and on that particular boat the whole side the boat was void there was nothing, just space. The main hold cover came off, the water was slopping in there filling that thing up. It took us an hour and a half to get where we were going to fish. When I slowed down why she just laid over on her side. There's a big blower that comes out of that void that blew air into the engine room and the water was just shooting in there. So I stuck her back in gear, and turned to keep that side up. The other guy ran down in the engine room and stuffed the thing full of rags. We got the pumps a going. The other boat that was standing by there, he told us that if he were on there he would get off. We kept her up right, and got her pumped out. We took the day off. We didn't fish that day. We didn't know. We thought everything was fine until we slowed down. Then the minute we slowed down, she laid right over so we turned into it, and kept it up enough to where we could get the thing pumped out.

MD: What boat was that?

DP: The Icелander, I still have that boat, its in the ship yard in Reedsport right now. Thats Fred Wahl's Marine Construction just above the bridge.

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MD: I spoke with Forrest Blau and he told me about an article on Golden King crab.

DP: He has a good article he wrote on that. Is that what you were going from him? Yah you should get that and read it then you'll know about that Golden crab. He is very knowledgeable about it and wrote a good article.

MD: The mating of King crabs is quite a thing to see. They get into this huge three to four foot stack of females called a pod. Boy, if you cash in on a couple of pods.

DP: That may be why we have such good fishing out at Adak there some times. You can put a pot down, and you can get 200 crabs. You can put 20 pots all around that pot, and the next day you'll still get 200 crabs out of that pot and you won't get any out of the rest. Sometimes they're concentrated.

MD: So you've got the Icелander and the Patricia Lee?

DP: The Icелander, I own 25 percent of, and the Echo Bell I own 20 percent of, the Patricia Lee I own a 100 percent of. The Katie S, Sam owns. Thats the 52 footer that Dad built for Sam. Have you seen that one? We brought it up here, and I've leased it out to somebody else. Dad would be a good one to talk to. Hes a good boat builder, good carpenter, working with wood. Thats what the Katie is. He went and cut the trees down took them to the saw mill help them to make lumber, took it home to dry, then started building a boat.

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