

ALASKA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

By Keith Edmonds
April 17, 1993

This paper is the result of interviews conducted to research the fishing industry in Alaska, find out how it works, and how it has changed.

Donna Smith

4\14\93 This first interview is taking place around two o'clock p.m., in the Kodiak Island Borough building.

K.E. - When did you get into the fishing business?

D.S. - 1984

K.E. - How did you get into the fishing business?

D.S. - We had bought into a partnership with some friends on a grazing lease, and before we moved here, they had bought a fishing permit (salmon seining permit) and a boat, and so we came into the partnership because that was added to the partnership.

K.E. - How much did all of that cost just to get started?

D.S. - I have no idea.

K.E. - Why did you get into the fishing business?

D.S. - Because it was in with the grazing lease.

K.E. - What is a grazing lease?

D.S. - The Saltery Cove grazing lease is for cattle, and the people that moved up here that we were in partnership with bought a fishing boat, and the salmon seine permit, and included it in the partnership.

K.E. - How have the profits been since you've started?

D.S. - Well, the first year was the beginning year for all of us. Then we split the partnership, and when we split the partnership, we took the fishing part of it and they took the farming part of it. Basically, we haven't had a really exceptional year. Last year we had a good year in crab, before that was the salmon, because we bought another boat and crab fished it last year, but before that was the salmon permit; they were just average years. Of course, eighty nine nobody fished.

K.E. - When was your best year?

D.S. - Nineteen ninety two, because we started crabbing.

K.E. - What do you think makes up a good season?

D.S. - Price.

K.E. - That's it?

D.S. - Price and the number of fish that come in. You can have a good price and not very many fish or you can have real low prices and a whole lot of fish, but there's no way you're going to make money unless you're diversified and

that's what we've done is we've diversified, so in addition to the salmon, we tender, and we fish crab, black cod, and halibut.

K.E. - Has tendering been the same over the years?

D.S. - Yes, it's been the same. The tendering prices have stayed the same.

K.E. - How does the tender make it's money?

D.S. - The boat gets paid so much a day, and the canneries pay for the fuel. The crew buys their own food, and then sells food to smaller fishing boats. So many times they can recoup some of the cost of their food. You sign a contract to fish for two months or thirty days or for how ever long. Out of that, you pay your skipper, and your crew., then the upkeep and maintenance on the boat.

K.E. - What kinds of fishing do you have going?

D.S. - With one boat, we fish halibut and salmon. The other boat tenders and it also fishes black cod, halibut, and crab.

K.E. - What kinds of costs do you go through to keep your fishing going?

D.S. - Hundreds of thousands of dollars.

K.E. - For what!?

D.S. - All of the upkeep and maintenance of the boat. Anything that breaks down has to be replaced. We replaced reduction gear last year to the tune of fourteen thousand dollars, that type of cost. Life rafts have to be replaced every so often, and engines are only so good for a certain length of time then they need to be replaced or overhauled, and then all of the little stuff that goes with it, lights and the different hydraulic gears can go out and need to be fixed. Then if you do any improvements, for instance, this year we're lengthening the TAMMI by four feet so that's a big expense, just to add four feet on to the length of the boat.

K.E. - That won't even increase the capacity will it?

D.S. - No, it makes it more sea worthy.

K.E. - Has the fishing been profitable for you?

D.S. - Yes, I don't know if we could make a living at it, that's really hard to say since we both work a second job. The money all goes into one pot; we don't separate it out.

K.E. - Would it be rude of me to ask how much you've made on average from the two boats?

D.S. - Last year, when we did our taxes, that's with all expenses, and that's with depreciation, and everything else, we made nineteen thousand from both boats.

K.E. - And that's just for owning them.

D.S. - Yes, that's our clear profit. That's after we've paid everything, and we've depreciated out what we could depreciate out, so that's all repairs and maintenance, fuel, groceries, bait, wages to the crew, and then whatever we've bought, we paid for it, but it's on a depreciation scale now. So that's our income that shows on our income tax form, so if we didn't have our other

incomes to supplement that, we couldn't live off of twenty thousand dollars a year.

K.E. - How much do you have invested in fishing?

D.S. - Probably with the boats and the shop and all of the fishing equipment, pots, seines, hooks and everything, we probably have close to a million dollars.

K.E. - Why don't you just liquidate it all and take the money and run?

D.S. - Because we like to do something.

K.E. - So, it's fun and it's profitable?

D.S. - Yea, it's putting our money into something.

K.E. - Do you think it's a wise investment?

D.S. - For us, yes, I don't know if it would be for any one else, and there's many people that make a living at it. Because we have other income we can invest more, maybe sooner, than they would be able to. For instance, to buy another boat instead of just upgrading your boat, and buying land and putting a shop on it.

K.E. - What percentage do you get out of what's made from each boat?

D.S. - We get fifty five percent because we are the owners of the boat, and out of that we pay fifty five percent of the bait for halibut and for cod; we pay fifty five percent of the fuel for the fisheries; we pay all of the maintenance. The other forty five percent is to split between the crew. The skipper usually gets twenty or twenty five percent. That leaves the rest of it to split between the three crew members. The crew pays their percentage of the fuel. For instance, if you got nine percent then you would pay nine percent of the fuel cost. For halibut, there's a bait cost and the same rules apply. The crew buys their own food; we don't pay for their food. So all of the food you eat on the boat is divided between the four crew members.

K.E. - Do you pay to sell the fish to the canneries?

D.S. - No, we don't pay them to sell the fish to them.

K.E. - There's no permit to sell to canneries?

D.S. - No, it's a verbal contract that they'll buy your fish from you, and that's all it is.

K.E. - So, I could go out with a rod and reel and catch a bunch of fish and sell it to the canneries.

D.S. - No, because you don't have a salmon permit. A salmon permit you buy from an individual and they're issued by the state and there's only so many of them. You have to pay for that permit. So in salmon in addition to paying for the boat and all of the gear, you have to buy the permit. There's the seine permit which we have one of these. There's a beach seine permit which we have one of those(that's where you fish from the beach you don't go out into the open water. Then there's a set netters permit, and there may be a couple of other ones that I'm not aware of. So you have the cost of the permit, that is just a cost for

a piece of paper, basically, it's just something that says you can fish for salmon. So, it's pretty risky to pay for this because if salmon prices are low and you wanted to sell it there's no way your going to sell it maybe for what you bought it for, or if salmon prices are good and it looks good for the future, then you stand a chance of selling it and making some money on it. So it's real risky to buy just that piece of paper because that's all you have to show for it, it doesn't come with the gear, anything, it's a separate entity.

K.E. - So, buying a permit is like buying stock?

D.S. - Basically it is.

K.E. - Stock in Alaska.

D.S. - The only real contract you sign with a cannery is a tender. The cannery pays you so much a day for so many days to tender so if you decided that you wanted to go out and fish halibut commercially, you would have to purchase a commercial halibut permit, and that you purchase just in the state of Alaska. It's not a permit that you have to pay a lot of cash for, like you do a salmon permit. You go out in a boat and catch a hundred pounds of halibut, sure you could go into a cannery and sell them, but you would have needed to talk to a cannery first so you could see if they would buy the fish from you. There's been many times, it has not happened to us, knock on wood, that canneries have been plugged with fish. They don't have someone in particular they're selling to, just who ever is taking fish at the time, that's who they'll sell it to, and they come in and nobody will take their fish. Then they've got a boatload of fish. So, you need to, before you get into this or anything like this, you need to set it up with a cannery that they'll buy your fish and for the most part that's a verbal agreement, and if they get plugged with fish, they can just as easily tell you, no. That's why a lot of times, these tenders will tender for one cannery, and then that cannery will buy fish from certain boats. For instance when the ZACHARY R goes out tendering, there's certain boats that they say are fishing for CPI, and so they'll go to those boats in their area and pluck the fish to buy the fish from those boats. A lot of tenders won't take them from any other boat, unless that's a boat that's been designated by CPI as fishing for them. So there's a lot to get into it, it's not just a matter of buying the boat and the gear and a permit or license or what have you, and running out there and fishing, you need to have some kind of agreement with a cannery, or some place where you can sell those fish

K.E. - What if the tender takes fish from a boat that's not fishing for the same cannery?

D.S. - They don't unless they've been told to. They refuse to take it, and there's some canneries that will tell their tenders they can take fish from other boats, if, maybe their boats haven't done as well, so they aren't filled up, then they can go ahead so there can be a couple of canneries out in there, that have tenders out that have been told they can take fish from other boats.

Steve Bundy

4\14\93 The second interview of Steve Bundy took place at about three o'clock, at Fuller's Boat Yard in Kodiak.

K.E. - How did you get into the fishing business?

S.B. - A friend, a new adventure, I was young, had to try something new.

K.E. - How have the profits varied, since you started?

S.B. - Getting better and better.

K.E. - When did you start?

S.B. - Nineteen seventy four.

K.E. - When was your best year?

S.B. - Nineteen eighty eight.

K.E. - Why was that?

S.B. - A lot of reds, prices were real high.

K.E. - What do you think goes into a good season?

S.B. - A skiff man, net, and boat, got to have everything top of the line stuff.

Troy Nowark

4\14\93 The interview of Troy Nowark took place at about four o'clock p.m., on board the SUSAN MARIE in Kodiak.

K.E. - When did you get into the fishing business?

T.N. - When did I get into the fishing business, back when I was seventeen.

K.E. - When was that?

T.N. - When was that, I don't know probably thirteen years ago.

K.E. - Why did you get into the fishing business?

T.N. - Because I like being on the water.

K.E. - So you don't do it at all for the money?

T.N. - No, not really, not at the time when I first started, I just like being outdoors.

K.E. - How have the profits varied since you started?

T.N. - Like you said it varies.

K.E. - What were the good years? What were the bad?

T.N. - Nineteen eighty five and eighty six were the good years for me; eighty seven was okay; eighty eight was mediocre. It just varies what boat you get on.

K.E. - What was your best year?

T.N. - Eighty five and eighty six.

K.E. - How much does it cost to keep doing it?

T.N. - Hardly nothing.

K.E. - What do you think goes into a good season?

T.N. - Being on a good boat, safe boat, a good skipper, I like Mr. Gilbert here. He's a real good guy, and the crew means a lot, maintenance and all of that good stuff.

K.E. - Do you think it matters how many fish are out there?

T.N. - No, if you keep grinding, do your ten to fifteen sets a day, it always adds up at the end of the season. Another thing that varies is the price. The price of fish is what counts.

K.E. - Okay, talk about anything that's involved in fishing.

T.N. - It's hard to say. You just go out and do what you got to do. I'm in the skiff so I've got my responsibility, and everybody's just got to work together. It's got to click. If you get on a boat that everyone works together and knows what they're doing, everything goes real smooth. You make your money and have fun while your doing it.

K.E. - What boat are you going to be on this year?

T.N. - For what? Out in the Bering? In the Winter time or summer time?

K.E. - Both

T.N. - In the summertime, I'll be on this boat, the SUSAN MARIE. In the winter time, I'll probably be going with Ron Tennasin on the DESTINY.

K.E. - Have you been on it before?

T.N. - Yes.

K.E. - How did you do?

T.N. - Did okay, not as good as like I said last year. Did real good last year.

K.E. - Isn't your life in danger when you go out in the Bering?

T.N. - Your life is always in danger when you're on the water.

K.E. - When you're seining, it's not as bad though?

T.N. - It can be because your in a littler boat. I'm in the little guy, the skiff.

K.E. - Yea, but seining, you're in shallower water.

T.N. - Depends on where you fish.

K.E. - There's only so deep a seine can go.

T.N. - We got a new seine this year, I think three and a half strips, so we can fish twelve, twenty four, seventy something feet. It doesn't matter where you fish, the fish don't travel deep, they travel shallow. So no matter where you're at, if we fished the Shelikof Straits and were going after Cook Inlet reds, you know the Shelikof Straits is the worst stretch of water known in the state of Alaska, because it comes up so quick. In this boat we fish in twelve maybe thirteen foot seas, in a big boat you fish in twenty, maybe thirty foot seas, but one hundred foot compared to thirty eight foot! The bigger boat can take a lot more so you can fish a lot more.

K.E. - Isn't halibut more dangerous because the hooks are flying out?

T.N. - Yea, did you know, I'm the stackman on the crab boat, or called the monkey. It's me and the crane operator. The crane operator is the guy I have to trust my life with. Basically being a stockman is the most dangerous job on a crab boat.

K.E. - What percentage do you get on the crab boat?

T.N. - On the big boat, you get six percent.

K.E. - Do you get more than the others because you're the monkey?

T.N. - Sometimes you do. On some crab boats, some guys pay like that, but most big boats, you just get between five and seven percent. On the boat I was on last year, I got seven percent.

K.E. - Is that the one you made all of that money on?

T.N. - Well sometimes on a crab-boat we're out for like six and a half months straight. Some guys get kind of tired so you're allowed to take a vacation and you get two weeks off. So you have a five man crew and one guy leaves and you have a four man crew and you usually do that for a month, and we went with four guys for the whole season just about. So I got basically seven percent for all of my trips except for two trips.

K.E. - On the first halibut opening. when you can catch as much as your boat can hold.,you don't sleep too much do you?

T.N. - It all depends on what the skipper wants to do. If you've got to have them butchered before you get to town, then you don't sleep. It takes a lot of time to butcher one hundred thousand pounds.

K.E. - How do you do each type of fishing?

T.N. - Well, you have a seine, right now herring is starting up so we have a one hundred fathom seine, because that's all you're allowed is one hundred fathoms, and it's four and one half strips deep.

K.E. - How long is a strip?

T.N. - I don't quite remember, I want to say twelve feet per strip, I'm not too sure. But anyway, I'm the skiff man so when Danny(skipper) sees a school of herring he sets us on the herring then he tells me when to cut loose. They cut me loose(the guys on deck) and I just sit there, do a little hook with the boat, and Danny does a round haul, a round haul around the school, then we just close up, and he purses up, then we get to wait until the tender shows up. Then he comes along side the seine, picks up the corks, drops his pump in the seine and starts pumping our herring off. That's about it. Say we go salmon, there's three ways, you can hold a hook, you can do a round haul, and tow haul, is where you go and find a tide rift and tow haul for twenty five minutes or so.

K.E. - How do you do cod and halibut and things like that?

T.N. - Now there's a new type of fishing for cod, you know like how you crab fish with pots, you can pot fish for cod. Which is a lot easier, and doesn't damage the fish as much, I guess you get paid a more good price.

K.E. - What do you do just drop cages in the water?

T.N. - Not cages, pots, it's just like crab fishing, but instead of catching crab you catch cod.

K.E. - How big is each pot?

T.N. - It varies, some people use five byes, six and one half byes, seven byes. We fished seven byes last year.

K.E. - Seven by what?

T.N. - Seven by seven by, three and one half is I think how wide it is.

K.E. - How do you fish halibut?

T.N. - Long line, you've got hooks, you've got snap on gear which has got the reel, and then you've got diaper gear, I've never done diaper gear, that's a new one to me, and tub gear which is all I've been doing. I've done tub gear for four years and I've done snap on for one season. I like tub gear a lot better, it's a lot faster. Then you've got your dragging, I'm not too familiar with dragging, I just know it's an easy fishery. Crabbers don't like the draggers and the draggers don't like the crabbers, that's all I know.

K.E. - What's the legal size for herring?

T.N. - It all depends on what the canneries want. Herring in Togiak, four hundred and seventy five grams herring, big herring and the stuff on the Island, one hundred and ten grams. The canneries will take one ten or bigger, anything smaller than that they won't take them.

K.E. - What about crab, what's the legal size, ten years?

T.N. - The legal size you're allowed to put down a fish hole, it varies. King crab is five point five inches, beridy is six point five, pilio, Fish and Game says, three point two, but the processors and canneries won't take anything less than four.

Pete Holm

4/15/93 I was given the opportunity to interview Pete Holm at three o'clock p.m., at Kodiak Community College.

K.E. - How did you get into the fishing business?

P.H. - Well I started out at Raspberry Island and at that time nobody even thought about limited entry. We just went out and fished. We bought a commercial fishing license you didn't have to renew, entry permit fee every year. Things were a lot simpler back in those days. We didn't have to worry about the Marine Mammal Protection Act, like we do now. We didn't get very much for our fish then, I think I only made about seven thousand dollars in that first year, back then money was worth something. It was just a real different experience from what we're doing now. In a lot of ways things were a lot better than they are now because you didn't have a lot of rules and laws and regulations that you have to put up with now. We didn't have to get the Remammated Exception Certificate now, and we didn't have the threat of being put on the marine mammals endangered species list and if that happens then commercial fishing is going to be in serious trouble.

K.E. - How much did it cost for your permit?

P.H. - It didn't cost anything. Anybody that had fished for a certain number of years filled out some paperwork on an application and they gave you a certain number of points for gear ownership, participation, and fish, fisheries and you sent the paperwork into Juneau and they analyzed it. If you got enough points, I think I had got thirty two out of forty points possible, so I sent my paperwork into Juneau and they sent me back a permit, a limited entry permit certificate.

K.E. - Is that like a commercial fishing permit, like a seining permit?

P.H. - Yes, mine was a limited entry set net permit.

K.E. - Do you still use that today?

P.H. - I still use it today.

K.E. - Could you sell that ?

P.H. - The original permit that I got in nineteen seventy three or nineteen seventy four, I could sell for whatever it's worth now if I wanted to. Right now the market conditions are down, but there is a pretty big demand for set net permits.

K.E. - Why did you ever start fishing?

P.H. - Well I'm kind of a risk taker, and adventuresome, and I like being out in the wilderness and just a real nice place. How I got started was a friend of mine, Mike Resoff, his dad helped me get started. He was working for American freezer ships at the time his company went bankrupt like many other

fish companies had. It just seemed like the thing to do at the time, and I didn't really have anything to do with my summers. I had been working for my dad salmon seining and I wanted to try something different and new. I had set netted before a little-bit with my brother. I wanted to do something on my own to see how it would be working out there in a totally new environment. I heard some good things about Raspberry Island, and I just wanted to do something new and different.

K.E. - How have the profits varied over the past?

P.H. - Well, from that first year nineteen seventy one, I made about seven thousand dollars, but it's up and down for us. We make more than that now, but it fluctuates. Nineteen eighty eight was our biggest year we ever had out there. That was our best year ever. The price of pinks was eighty five cents that year and reds were up to two dollars and seventy cents a pound. In contrast to that, now we're talking about, for the nineteen ninety three season, we're talking about the possibility of eighty or ninety cents a pound for reds and possibly fifteen to twenty cents for pinks. So you can see, there's a big fluctuation in market. I think what happened in nineteen eighty eight, the prices were so high that there was consumer resistance the next year. Of course we had the oil spill of eighty nine, which put a damper on the market, because a lot of the consumers in the lower forty eight were wondering if the salmon was caught during the oil spill. We didn't really even have a season during the oil spill which was in March. Fishing season doesn't start until June.

K.E. - Was the oil spill cleaned up by then?

P.H. - No, it wasn't. I was out there in eighty nine. I spent the whole summer out there waiting to go fishing. They had the zero tolerance policy which means that fishermen weren't allowed to fish because of the possibility, or even remote possibility, of someone getting oil.

K.E. - So they paid you for not fishing?

P.H. - Right, basically we just sat on the beach. We were supposed to be there ready to fish, but we never fished that whole summer. There were a few people on the south end that did, on the north end there on Coupeanos Strait, that's where they had it shut down, and most of the Island was shut down that summer as well. A few people did get on cleanup, but I never did. I put in several times to Exxon, that was the company that was responsible for cleanup, but I never got hired.

K.E. - Way back then when you first started, you said you made about seven thousand dollars, is that more than you made in eighty eight in contrast to how much the dollar had worth?

P.H. - No, it wasn't.

K.E. - So you caught more fish and got more money in comparison to eighty eight?

P.H. - Much more, even with inflation and the cost of living factors

K.E. - What prospects do you think go into a good season?

P.H. - Well, planning. Planning is number one. You have to have good gear, good equipment. You can't have equipment that's broken down and obsolete. For quite a few years I had o-pine wooden skiffs which were pretty much obsolete, now I don't have any wooden skiffs. Efficiency is the name of the game now, saving time, saving energy, and being very competitive.

K.E. - You don't think that the amount of fish that return is any factor?

P.H. - Definitely it is, you have to have a good average year. You can make money at still even if you have other things that are going against you.

K.E. - Like low prices?

P.H. - Yes, like low prices. This year they're expecting twenty one million pinks on the Island and roughly three million sock eyed salmon to return.

K.E. - Do you think you can trust Fish and Game?

P.H. - Well, after last summer I felt somewhat hesitant to rely totally on their predictions. I've seen other years that it was a poor forecast, and we came out alright. So, they're not on every year. So, I would say I think they're going to be pretty accurate this year, because we've had two years, ninety one and ninety two, that didn't pan out very well. I think this year we're going to see a lot of fish on the Island, but we're going to need the volume because the prices are going to be low.

K.E. - So, over all preparation is the main factor?

P.H. - Preparation, having a good crew, someone you can work with, because you're out there for three months and you have to get along real well with the people you hire, or work with. You see each other every day, it's kind of camp living. Everybody works together, it's kind of like a team effort.

K.E. - How does the set net operation operate, what do you do with the fish?

P.H. - Well, we have a line going to the beach, or going out from the beach with three anchors on it. I fish a hundred and fifty fathom net. Every day we go along, depending on the strength of the run, we fish at least three or four different times. We pick the net three or four different times, sometimes even more. Sometimes we'll go out and pick the net and then a few minutes later there'll be a white wall of fish again, so we'll have to go through and do it all over, and load up the skiff and then call a tender or wait for a tender to come along to pick up our fish. They do that every day, sometimes twice a day.

K.E. - Do you keep them in a holding tank?

P.H. - We keep them in a holding skiff, we have some burlap we cover them up with, sometimes we have ice for them as well. In the fall when I was fishing late, we had ice put on the fish. I think the day and age is coming now where we're so concerned about quality, that will be a requirement even for the set

netters. There's a lot of the seine boats now have the champaign ice systems,
regurgitates sea water.