

ROSE COBIS, INTERVIEWER
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INTERVIEW WITH PEGGY J. SMITH

RC: Let's start with when you came to Alaska Peg.

PS: I came to Alaska in 1971 and worked at The Roxanne Cannery for King Crab for three months. Very long, hard hours. Didn't even know what a king crab was when I came up here. I came back the next year to work at the cannery once more. In fact, I did that till "74". Then in "75" I decided to go fishing myself. I'd see all these guys come in making all this money and having a good time in town, and I thought, well this can't be that hard. So I went out and got my first job on The Rough and Ready.

RC: That was a crabber?

PS: Yes that was a crabber. It was an old Bender boat, an old shrimper that they had converted to a crabber.

RC: Did you have to talk your way onto the boat? Being a woman, how did you get these guys to take you out?

PS: Well, first I went down and talked to the skipper. I was so nervous, I remember this. Very scared. And of course they were laughing and asking me all sorts of questions. He told me yes, he would think about it. Then that night I went to a girlfriends party and there was the skipper. He said, "Oh so you know this girl". I said, "Yes, very well" and he said, "Ok you're hired."

RC: Did you know this skipper from delivering to your cannery?

PS: No, he wasn't delivering to my cannery.

RC: You just picked The Rough and Ready then?

PS: I had asked around to see what good boat I might get a chance on. And this one was recommended.

RC: What were you asking to be on the boat?

PS: A cook, deck hand. I wanted to work on deck more than I wanted to cook, but since I was a woman cooking came with the job. So I went out on my first king crab trip. We fished for four days and loaded up the boat and I was on my knees the whole time. I couldn't get my sea legs.

RC: Literally on your knees?

PS: On my knees, crawling back and forth and the guys just thought that was hilarious.

RC: Where did you Fish that trip?

PS: We were down by Horse's Head at the south end of the island. We came back in and stayed for five days celebrating. That was in the days when you didn't have to turn right around and go back out again. King crab lasted for three or four months then. The second time we went out I had my sea legs a lot better, but the guys were always pulling jokes on me. One time we had a big storm and the waves were crashing over the bow of the boat, and one of the guys got his camera out and asked me to go stand back by one of the pots while I take a picture. So I said sure, whatever you say, and ran back there and hung on for dear life while these waves are hitting me in the face and all the men are standing there laughing. I soon learned. The second trip we went out and we were going down our string and I was helping the skipper find the buoys. You have to go up in the wheel house at night to look for the buoys. It was just getting dawn, I remember, and I looked up and in the horizon I could see this something. I thought it was a whale, except for it just stayed there. I asked the skipper, Mike Knox was his name, what's that? He said it looks like a boat. We went over and it was a boat that had tipped over without any time for a may day or anything. Luckily we saw these guys. It was The Caprice or The Creedance, I can't remember. It was the Creedance back then, now it's The Caprice. Owned by Paul Munch. So we come up and here's this brand new boat with only two king crab trips, and the hull was just beautiful, shiny brand new. The guys were in the life raft. Chako Pearman was on there. So we rescued those guys. It was quite an exciting first king crab for me.

RC: How did the guys treat you?

PS: I think at first they thought, Oh boy a woman, we're probably going to have a good time with this girl. And then after I started working, I worked very hard to prove myself. You have to work twice as hard, being a woman on a boat. They left me alone after that. In fact, they were very good to me all the time.

RC: What about money?

PS: I got a half crew share off that boat. And then it went down from there. Then I went out to The Bering Sea and started working. I worked on The Ocean Harvester. They decided to pay me one thousand dollars a trip instead of a crew share. At that time all I wanted to do was go fishing so I didn't care. I just wanted to go fishing and make the big money with those guys. Even a thousand dollars a trip, we would make two day trips to seven day trips, so that's still wasn't bad money for me. On the other hand, at the end of the season you are working right along with the guys. You stay up the same hours, in fact I stayed up longer because I used to take all the wheel watches so they could sleep. I was more physical than some men I worked with but not all of them. The male species does reign over physical strength. I was a very strong woman tho. There were a few men I could outwork easily. So by the end of that season we had made twelve trips. I had made twelve thousand dollars and those guys had made ninety thousand dollars. There was quite a difference there, especially when you're working right beside them the whole time. I was young and stupid then and all I wanted really

wanted to do was get in there and try to make the big bucks. I thought I was making the big bucks.

RC: For woman it was tho, there was nothing you could really do on shore that would have been making a thousand dollars a week.

PS: Right . Exactly. Sometimes the trips would be two days long before we'd fill up, sometimes seven. You had to come in cause your crab would start dying. That was the only thing that saved me a few times. On The Ocean Harvester we put in 980,000 lbs. Almost a million pounds.

RC: Was this the peak of The King Crab Seasons?

PS: This was high but not quite peak. Then I got on The Airdale. With Richard Ovenberg as skipper. He was a wonderful man. We'd come into town and he would say I didn't have to cook. It was still a thousand dollars a trip. I worked for him for six years and it stayed a thousand dollars a trip.

RC: Is this all in The Bering Sea?

PS: Yes. I was out in The Bering Sea while I was on The Ocean Harvester as well. We went into Dutch Harbor and there was one bar, The Elbow Room. They have about five there now. In 1976 there was one bar and I remember walking in there the first night and there was about an inch of mud on the floor and about a fourth of an inch of blood on top of that.

RC: How many women were in there Peg?

PS: Oh maybe four, and the place was packed. Hundreds of people.

RC: Were you running into more women in the fishing fleet since when you began? Was it picking up?

PS: In "75" when I started I knew three other women out of the fishing fleet in Kodiak and I think there were about 100 boats. When I went out to Dutch Harbor there was 150 or 175 boats and I knew seven women on the boats. That year we had a seven week strike so they brought in no cannery workers which should have made more women so needless to say I was treated like Miss Universe 1976. Of all my crew members there was never any sexual harassment after they saw that I wanted to work twice as hard as they did. The most sexual harassment I saw with women was when they didn't go out and work. It seemed they felt they could physically and mentally abuse someone because she's not trying. They were pretty fair minded once they saw you work hard. Well, fair minded enough to leave you alone sexually but not to pay you.

In 1982 I got on the cream of the crop, The Sea Wolf, to go dragging. No I guess it was "83" because king crab has stopped. The peak came in "81" or "82". We had put one hundred and forty million pounds in, out in Dutch Harbor. We just raped the ocean floor. There was no king crab left the next year. In "82" I finally got a three percent crew share but with 200 and some boats we couldn't even put seventeen million pounds in, because there was

no crab. So of course they wanted me to pay food and fuel and bait out of my 3% . So I didn't make any money!!!!

RC: How about the Thanksgiving story?

PS: One of my roughest times on a boat , I'll never forget. It was 1977 and I had gone out for a few trips on The Scorpio a 110' Martinolage boat. It was Thanksgiving Day and this storm came up. They come up so fast out there, within an hour you can go from 5' seas to 20'. This storm was outrageous. We had 40' seas, by then you know everyone has stopped fishing, we were jogging with it and we'd go down into the sea and both the waves behind you and in front of you would be above the boat completely. I felt like we were a little wine cork bobbing in the trough. We had two green guys on the boat. One of the green guys was on wheelwatch and went to turn the boat. You usually try to keep it about 4 knots when your doing this because the seas are so terrible. When you turn you have to go a little bit faster, and this guy put it full speed and turned it and we hit this wave that knocked our spinner window back twenty feet and imbedded the glass of that window into the shower. I was in the lounge and saw this thing go flying by, not knowing what it was. and knocked the boat house back so you could see daylight. The water was just rushing under the house of the boat. So I run in there and this boy is sitting in his underwear and his t-shirt still going full speed. We're headed 10 knots into these waves and he's just dumbfounded. He doesn't know what to do. I start yelling slow it down, slow it down. He finally pulled it back and there is glass, and there's water, about 7 inches all over the wheelhouse. The skipper comes in and yells turn it around and everybody's getting excited. It was a frantic mess. So I run down to the galley and I had the turkey for Thanksgiving in the oven, well the turkey is out of the oven and I had to chase it around on the galley floor. That was kinda hilarious. There was water every where. It had come in the wheelhouse and down the stairs into the galley.

RC: Why would a skipper have a green guy at the wheel in such a storm?

PS: That is a good question. Because we were working very hard and everybody takes their wheelwatches. Many times I would try to tell the green guys how things were done. Skippers often wouldn't take the time to tell these guys what to do in case of emergencies, like if your bucking into a wave don't go full force.

RC: Did you find that skippers gave you your fair share of opportunities to handle all kinds of responsibilities.

PS: Yes, most certainly. In fact I took more of the wheelwatches than the guys because I could run a Loran. At that time we had lorans and we didn't have plotters like they have now that just take you to the string. At that time you had to run the loran to pinpoint the buoys. I knew how to get us right on the buoys. So they liked me doing wheelwatch and they could get some sleep. I'd wake them up and we'd be right on the buoy, and I'd have their coffee ready. Then I got on the Sea Wolf and that was a beautiful Marco boat. Bob Watson was my skipper. A very good skipper, very

strict, could melt anyone with a stare, yar, yar. What a fisherman. He was outstanding and this boat was the cream of the crop, and I was very lucky to be on it. I had never dragged before. Dragging is so easy. We were joint venturing with the Japanese. We'd have a 40 ton cod end after you'd dragged, we'd cinch up the bag untie it from the rest of the net and then hook it on to a line that would trail it behind the boat. Then the Japanese would come up beside you and pull up the cod end. We never even touched a fish. They would pull it up on the back of their stern and process it all.

RC: Were you making a crew share on this boat?

PS: No. I was mainly just cooking on that boat, until a guy got hurt. I looked at Bob and said you know were number one boat. You want to stay number one? He was very competitive so I knew right where to hit him. He said "Oh come on Peg go on the back deck until I can get our rotation guy here. At the end of the month we would switch crews. The first time somebody got hurt it was around the 6th of the month. So we had a long ways to go till rotation. For him to stop and go into town and get another fisherman he would surely lose first place. Sure will go back on deck for a full crew share I said. That was when I really started making the money. My first full crew share. I was on there five years. Sometimes we iced up so bad we'd have seven inches of ice on the boat. Then you'd have to go out and chop ice the whole time. Thats when the work came in on a dragger. Otherwise you didn't do much work on a dragger. We were on The Shelikoff and a storm came up, must have been about thirty foot waves. When your dragging and the storms come up and you have three hours before you can deliver you have to run thru the storm with this bag behind the boat no matter what. Then you deliver to the mother ship. We delivered right before The Alert did which was a boat that went down that year. We started into Bumble Bay on the southend of the island and it was terrible. We were listening to the Alert on the radio and the skipper decided to go to the mainland to anchor up. It was closer, but your were going against the storm and you ice up more when you go against it. The wind was coming right off those glaciers on the mainland. He just got to much ice and then decided to turn around and go with it and come back over to Bumble Bay but then all of a sudden the radio went dead. They lost all the men. There was just silence on the radio as we all listened and hoping everything was going to be ok and then he wouldn't come back to anybody on the radio. The mother ship, which is like a 700 foot Japanese boat, couldn't find them, nobody could find them. We lost those guys. That was sad.

RC: Was that your last big boat?

PS: Yes. The next year I got off the boat May 1st. I had done 96 days straight and only saw land once for 6hrs. I got off the boat and spent two days at The Unisea Bar, and The Elbow Room. Those were the "before children" years. Work hard, party hard. I flew to Togiak to get on my first small boat. I had never been on anything smaller than eighty or ninety feet. Here I was Herring fishing in Togiak with an all woman crew. My dream of dreams.

RC: Who was on this all woman crew?

PS: Mary Jacobs was the skipper. She is also quite a skipper. She know her stuff, it's just amazing. Another competitive skipper. In the world of skippers you have to be competitive if you're going to make money. There was Jane Eisman, Laurie Knapp and Karen Lee. There was nobody there. I had just made all this money joint venturing jumped right off onto The Renisnace, which was the name of the new boat. Noone usually goes to Togiak til the end of May but Mary had found out they were going to come in early since we'd had such a nice winter. She put two and two together or whatever that is she does, which is amazing, and we went early. I'd been there before gill netting and you had to be aggressive and rude to put out a net there because there are a thousand other little boats putting out their nets. Purse seining is even worse. We had an aggressive skiff woman but some of the guys would plow right into your skiff and tip it over. So it was nice to have this huge beach, miles long, with just three other boats. Everyone had their own room to fish. We put in over one hundred thousand pounds of herring, which was good money. We were there for three days and left. Came back around stopped in Falls Pass , Sand Point, all these little places on the way back.

RC: If a man tried to hire on your boat were you nice?

PS: Sure we'd laugh and say "We need a cook". It was wonderful being with an all woman crew. What was strange was there was nothing to do. We had everything tip-top all the time. Never a line laying loose, there was never a tool out of place. Never, never a dirty floor. Guys will walk by something and notice something and let someone else do it. We went salmon fishing that year as well and did good. We were one of the top boats in Kodiak that year. We were interviewed by National Fisheries Magazine and Pacific Fisheries Magazine as well. We got interviewed quite a bit that year. It was fun and I'd love to work on an all woman crew again. The men do have the strength tho. I'd like to work on an all woman crew with an average age of 35 and hire a strapping twenty year old male cook, about 6' with large biceps and a respectful attitude. Oh yes and knows how to cook a good dish too!!

RC: How is the ratio with women in the fleet now?

PS: One thing about the women in the fleet now , when I talk to them they think I was crazy to work for less than a full crew share. Back then you couldn't have that attitude . You'd never even get on the boat. Now its changing but there still isn't that many women. On a day like today when there's a nice blizzard out there and the boats are icing up , and I think to myself, "How did I do that???" But it was exciting and challenging and I made a lot of good friends. I was only harassed sexually by one skipper who would get drunk and try to grab me but I would just side step him and stay away from him . Mental harassment could be the same with green guys. There was a few times we'd have a green guy come out and they'd get so seasick they would be literally orange and yellow. They would lock themselves in the stateroom. I would go in and try to feed them because you get dehydrated and thats really dangerous. The skippers won't take time to go in, not when they are crabbing.

RC: You got hit in the face with a crab pot once is that right?

PS: Yes. Sometimes when you are fishing in really rough seas the skipper will throw the grappling hook out , get the buoy, put it into the block and then the skipper goes into the wave so you're riding it instead of going into the trough. In the trough everything goes back and forth too much. Going up and down gives you a steadier grip and you can bring the pot in better and slow it down. This skipper was a gung-ho guy, he wanted to do 16 pots an hour which was a spectacular amount. He'd always go right to the next buoy not caring that we were in the trough killing ourselves. This wave came over and I was just closing the door on the pot with my back to it and the wave hit me and I hit the pot. The pot went off and was washing around the deck with two of the crew, and they almost got smashed by the pot. I was down on my hands and knees and my glasses were gone and I can't see a thing without my glasses. They were smashed. I got up and looked down at the deck and there was blood everywhere. The crew came over and took me into the galley and got a rag for my face and said don't look in the mirror Peg. Which I hadn't even thought of yet. I had 48 stitches around my eye. Came real close to losing my eye. All they had in Dutch Harbor at that time was a medic from Viet Nam. There was no doctor at all. It took us 16hrs just to get into town. The storm was real bad and we had to buck it all the way in. The guys kept bringing me popcicles. They tried not to look at me. We didn't have a medical kit then. Now most of the boats have medical kits. We didn't have any morphine or anything. Ice packs worked well. I was in shock too and don't really remember the pain that much. When we got into town they took me to the medic right away. His name was Arnie or Ernie. He took two and a half hours stitching me up cause he wanted it just right and didn't want it to scar badly. He really did a good job. He said he'd had a lot of practice in "Nam". There was few times we put on our survival suits. Like the time with The Alert. That was scary. We had 10 inches of ice on us by the time we got to Bumble Bay. It took 2 days to chop it all off. The wind would cut right thru you. You could only go out and work for a couple hours and then you had to go in and warm up. I lived thru it all and it was quite an adventure and I would do it all over again. Except next time I'd get a full crew share.