

The following autobiographical interview was held on December 4, 1993 with Laurie Knapp. The interview was conducted at her home in Bell's Flats, Kodiak. The interviewer is Laurene Madsen, a student in Dr. Gary Stevens' Alaska History course at Kodiak College.

LM : It's December 4, 1993, I'm interviewing Laurie Knapp, at her home in Bell's Flats, Kodiak, Alaska and here to talk about how she came to Kodiak and how she was involved in fishing industry.

LM : How did you first come to Alaska?

LK : My sister and her husband came up here originally to work as an architect for an architectural firm in Anchorage and I came out of high school and flew up from Minnesota, and joined them up here, and worked for an outfit called Bering Sea Originals painting Alaskan scenes of pottery . I was getting anxious to see the rest of Alaska, so I put my backpack on and traveled around a bit and ended up in Seward, working for Seward Fisheries. Which, after two months of fraulein telling me, 'work with both hands, don't sing, do this, do that' I got real tired of that and the wages and realized how much money they were making on the boats, so I tried to get a job on boats, with no luck, out of Seward, so I found myself on the ferry one night on my way to Kodiak, because I was drinking in the bar and I had joined the King Crab Festival running one of the booths, that you through the balls and hit the little dolls, so that's how I ended up in Kodiak and from there, I worked in a couple of canneries around town, did a little beach seining a little setnetting for a summer out on Raspberry Island . Summer of 1976 I jumped on the Calista Sea, I asked a friend Toby Gillis if his skipper would need somebody, and he did, Gary Stewart hired me on the Calista Sea, owned by the Calista Corporation out of Anchorage and the skipper said, 'go pack a couple of things, go pack your bags', and I did, thought we were fishing around the island. As it turned out we left the end of the island, heading out to the Bering Sea. I asked, 'what bay are we fishing in?' and they all laughed got a big kick out of that. And they told me, 'it was a big one' so we ended up in the Bering Sea for the rest of the year and on my way out there I was cleaning out the forepeak and found a case of baseball bats, and that struck my curiosity, I thought, 'gee these guys must play a lot of baseball!' So they got a lot of laughs out of me that few trips, and I had to find out what they were all about, which I did.

LM : In those days, how long was the season, you were going out for King Crab?

LK : Crab began in the fall and lasted for two or three months, then that went right into tanner season and it lasted all through the winter, and quit in the spring. Although several years after that, I began fishing crab all year 'round. They had divided up the species into bairdis and opillio and we fished the opillios in the summer.

LM : Did you enjoy the work?

LK : Yes, it was still romantic to me, it was still just this big adventure and the money was fabulous, and the stories and the wildness and it was like something out of a novel.

LM : How long did you stay on the Calista Sea?

LK : I lasted with them for a couple of years, and the Calista Corporation got a new skipper and that's about the time I got together with my first husband Steve Ullage and we began running boats for Tom Fox out of Seattle, Blake Kinnear and we ran those boats, year 'round, the Lin J and the Andromeda.

LM : Were there very many women fishing in the 70's?

LK : No, hardly any at all, Peggy Smith, a girl named Crystal, I don't remember her last name, were the only two I knew other than a couple of Norwegian women who were relatives, on as cooks, and there weren't women on deck at that time.

LM : Were you on deck?

LK : I wasn't until i was working for my husband and finally had the nerve to. It's difficult, because there were times I'd go up to the rail and bring a crab pot aboard, on the first trip and people started to screaming, 'look out, look out'. I'd look all around 'There's a woman at the rail' I go 'oh jeez' and yet there were other men I worked for who were very supportive and in fact, let me run the boat and run crab gear, while they worked on deck.

LM : How much of a crewshare did you get?

LK : It was a wage of \$100 a day and then it worked into eight-nine percent.

LM : What was the most money you made, say in a season or on a trip?

LK : That was for Jock Bevis and that was a halibut fishery in Kodiak in '76 and that was \$6,000 in 48 hour opening.

LM : So you came back eventually and fished crab through the years, and fished other things?

LK : Yes, swordfish off the coast of Mexico, and herring in Southeast Alaska and shrimp and salmon most notably for Mary Jacobs which was probably the most fun summer I ever had I guess because it was all women and it was a lot of fun. You didn't have to put up with some of the stuff you have to put up with from men on boats.

LM : Did women who got jobs on boats, did they have to "put out" for the skipper to get the job?

LK : No, not that I know of, I was never asked, I was asked a few times when we were out there but they didn't get very far.

LM : Did you find that there was a lot of resentment or prejudice towards the women on the boats out there?

LK : Not resentment, definitely prejudice. Being threatened a lot. Because women are very good at running the controls, running the hydraulics and have a much steadier hand than men do and you don't have the brute force, but you can do the hydraulics and the running the boats, the electronics.

LM : Were there women on the boats who were wives and girlfriends, as the years went on, were there more and more women fishing?

LK : Yes a lot more, especially in the 80's word got around to the college people, that they could do this.

LM : Tell me again about when you went out to the Bering Sea how did you find out what the baseball bats were for?

LK : There were some pretty rugged storms that winter. During one storm I would hold myself in by the arms of the chair in the pilot house, as we were going down the wave and he would throttle down as we went down the wave. As we went up the wave, he would throttle up to keep the speed the same. I found out later that these were seventy foot waves. Boats had their windows knocked out, their overhangs bent down, rigging torn off; nobody was killed that I know of during that storm, but a lot of boats have losses in big storms like that . You get to the point where you have to turn and just have to go with the wind you can't fight it. If you're out in the middle there's nothing you can do nowhere to hide.

LM : So you just ride out the storm?

LK : Head for Nome, depending which way the wind was blowing.

LM : What was the worst storm you were in?

LK : That was it. I wasn't really scared, I was so young and really didn't know about the danger, you know when you're young you don't really think about dying.

LM : How old were you then?

LK : I was 20.

LM : I read the book by Spike Walker, Living on the Edge, and he mentioned as the progression of the king crab fishery through the years, into the mid 80's, pretty high times, were had by many people. Many people wasted money on their drug habits. How did that affect the fishery or the people who you knew who were fishing? How did that affect the fishery was there a different attitude or were people wild and crazy

LK : Oh yeah, a lot of people see so much money coming in, just incredible crew shares and it goes to their heads and also you get into the macho or wildness that goes on in the bars, and it's hard not to be involved, it's so much fun, and there were drugs and

some people would take them and have a good time, and having a good time, why not have a better time? One thing leads to another, and people just blew their money, with marijuana and cocaine. Fly off to Hawaii, spend all your money, come back, go fishing again, it looked endless.

LM : In his book, Spike Walker tells stories about people who go out with bowls of cocaine on the table, they thought they were superman or something. Were there times when you saw people going out of Dutch Harbor or Kodiak when you wondered, if the crew was so high, would they ever make it back?

LK : Not in boats that I was on. I saw that in port and there were times when most skipper set times when you had to be straight. All the skippers I worked with kept a pretty tight handle on that. There was some marijuana smoking, some of the boats I was on, but no heavy drug use. When you were fishing, you couldn't do it, it demanded all of your attention all of the time, all of your strength all the time on deck.

LM : Do you think there were a lot of myths or tales going around about wild and crazy time that were happening out at sea that weren't true?

LK : I don't know, I know a lot of young men did a lot of cocaine while they were working out there. I've seen a lot of them burnt out and ended up in de-tox centers or had lives ruined, or at least a lot of money go down the drain.

LM : You mentioned Mary Jacobs, was she other only female skipper that you worked for, and is she still fishing?

LK : Yes, all she does now is herring and she leases her boat out for salmon.

LM : Would you say there are more women in the fishery now than when you were fishing in the 70's and 80's?

LK : Oh yes, definitely.

LM : Why did you quit fishing and return to land?

LK : Well, I met Glen, and we decided to have a few kids, I don't know if it was a decision, it just sort of happened. So here I sit with my apron on.

LM : Does age enter into the picture?

LK : Well, I quit when I was 34, at that point I didn't feel old, I only felt old after I had kids.

LM : What advice would you give a woman who wanted to get into the fishing industry today?

LK : Be patient, and keep your eyes and ears open, if you've never fished before, never been out on the sea, During my first few years while I was out in the Bering Sea, I did a lot of standing against the bulkhead, out on deck, watching what was going on because it's very dangerous, things happen very fast, and it's always something different, nothing ever happens the same. You really need to keep your eyes open, have a good handle on knots, and how to handle gear, how to handle things on boats, tying up etc.

LM : The fishing industry has changed quite a bit in the last twenty years, and the money and the highliner days are over...

LK : I guess all those women have gone into other jobs had children, and there isn't the money in the fishery there used to be, pretty nip and tuck any more. Talk of the salmon season, twelve cents a pound for humpies, it's hardly worth fishing for that. They're still making some money dragging,

LM : What kind of money are they making out in the Bering Sea?

LK : I don't know. I haven't looked into it.

LM : The Bonanza Days are over

LK : For sure

LM : Did you ever fish in Bristol Bay?

LK : Yes

LM : For what?

LK : For salmon

LM : What kind of boat?

LK : A little gillnetter, a little high speed gillnetter. That was a wild and crazy fishery. It's a very simple fishery. Just throw the net out and the fish run into it. Lot of people up there who are Californians, people from out of state who think they're, and not just them, most people in that fishery think they're God's gift to the fishery and they're very very macho.

LM : Lots of men?

LK : Yes, very hot headed, fast pace fishery lots of money, you can make your year's wages in a couple months.

LM : So how were you accepted as a fisherwoman?

LK : Well you really don't see too many other people . My husband was running a tender. I got a job with a fellow who accepted me, 'as long as you can pick fish that's fine pick fish fast, you're in it.' That's all it takes up there. There's not much else, there's not the elitism that there was in the Bering Sea crab fishery. That was a very elite, snobby attitude.

LM : Of all the fishing you've done, you've said that fishing with Mary was the most fun, what was your worst experience?

LK : With Mary Jacobs. Tensions ran high, you get tired and Karen Lee and Mary were at each other's throats strangling each other that probably sticks in my mind the most. To go from being the perfect crew, the perfect situation, being happy, everybody vied to do the work for somebody else, which you don't find on boats with men, They expect you to carry all the menial jobs the cleaning up the mess.

LM : You had four or five people on that boat?

LK : Five

LM : Who were they?

LK : Mary Jacobs, Karen Lee, myself, Jane Eismann, a young girl I forgotten her name, and then Peggy came on to replace Karen Lee at one point. After reds, Peggy was on for pinks.

LM : That was here in Kodiak?

LK : That was here in Kodiak. and up and down the peninsula. At one point during the red season at Igvak, Mary and Karen had each others' hands around each others' throats,

LK : No, Mary had her hands around Karen's neck and all I could say was, 'Karen, Karen' hoping that Karen wouldn't slug her because I knew that Karen would probably knock her right off the boat. So yeah, tensions run high, and even with women ya get aggressive. The scariest thing that happened was tying yourself on a rail and taking those baseball bats and beating the ice off so you didn't roll over. Fighting for your life, minute by minute and never knowing if there's going to be an end to fighting for your life.

LM : That was in the seventy foot waves?

LK : No that wasn't in the seventy foot waves, fortunately it wasn't icing then, but when the icing conditions are bad and you have to go out and do that for fear of rolling over, just like the icebergs do Big metal boat and all that spray coming up.

LM : Did you ever worry about getting stuck in the ice up in the Bering Sea?

LK : We never fished up that high, although some boats did go that far north.

LM : How often did you go into port?

LK : Twelve hours in port, or however long it took to unload depending upon the backup was of other boats, twelve hours to get out to the gear, twenty four hours on the gear, running the gear nonstop, twelve hours back and then twelve hours to unload.

LM : When did you sleep?

LK : On the way to port, twelve hours.

LM : When you say port, where was that?

LK : Dutch Harbor or Akutan.

LM : Did you deliver to a processor?

LK : Yes a processor the cannery in Dutch Harbor. There were some wild times in that town, I can tell you.

LM : Well, why don't you, let's hear about some of those?

LK : Well let's see, the first night I came into Dutch Harbor Unisea had just opened, we chose to go to the other side, which is Unalaska to the Elbow Room which is a shoddy little one-room bar, actually had two rooms, the Blue Room, so we went and sat in the Blue Room with the crew off the Calista Sea with my skipper, Gary Stewart and the rest of the crew and a native fellow came up and ripped off Gary's shoe and poured his drink in it, and drank out of it, I had my jaw hanging open but there was all sorts of wild little things like that going on. There was a woman, Fat Helen who always came in and sat down next to some guy, some fisherman, she's a big fat, short, little native woman, and she would always choose her boyfriends. it was hilarious.

LM : Compare the Elbow Room to the size of a bar in Kodiak.

LK : Oh God, about ten times the size of a bathroom, it was pretty small.

LM : Oh so there was no elbow room? What did you do in your off time when the season closed or the skipper wanted to go home?

LK : Well, either I was cleaning up the galley because a lot of time you couldn't clean as

you were coming in because it was too rough or you were sleeping, or in the bars drinking , or preparing storm food, which is getting meals ready and freezing them so I did a lot of that so out there we could pull it out of the freezer, microwave it and have something to eat.

LM : Some people say that the microwave is the downfall of the health of the crab fishermen because they never got enough chance to rest.

LK : Oh, well, there were those skippers who drove their crews too and would just get new crews when they wore out the old crew and I can't remember any boats offhand, maybe if Peggy and I sat down and beat brains together we could come up with one. That could be.

LM : In the fishery now, some boats take two crews is that right, where one's on deck while the other sleeps?

LK : Well, they have a couple extra where they could sleep while the others were working on deck one or two extra so you could get another four hours of sleep. It's grueling

LM : Well, to get back to the present, you have two little girls, what are you doing, I see you're doing paper mache, do you have aspirations to get into your artwork?

LK : You know I probably keep that as a sideline, because I never wanted to initially get into art because I didn't want to depend upon something creative I didn't want to pressure that for money. It's something I'd love to do on the side. Right now with two little kids, you can't have too much expensive paper and everything because they get into it, but the paper mache, they can help me do that and that's fun, but my big goal in life is to have a sailing freighter. My last husband and I had a small sailboat we sailed on Puget Sound and I sailed an awful lot by myself, in through the ocean and San Juans and I fell in love with sailing. But going into a port and having nothing to deliver was boring for me, I couldn't do it anymore. I had to go back to fishing. I'd park the boat, go okay now I'm getting back on the boat now. I'd love to have a sailing freighter and I'd love to take troubled kids out and put them to work.

This file is part of the Kodiak History Project.

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

96-49-01_I01.pdf