

GUY C. POWELL  
ON  
KING CRAB INDUSTRY  
AND  
OTHER MEMORABLE EXPERIENCES

BY  
PAULINE Y. SHEPELUK  
November 26, 1994

History Of Alaska  
Oral History Project  
Gary Stevens

The following autobiographical interview was held on November 26, 1994, with Mr. Guy C. Powell retired, king crab research biologist with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. Mr. Powell is a graduate of Rutgers University, Colorado A+M and Brooks Institute of Undersea Photographic Technology. The interview was conducted in Mr. Powell's home on Kouskov Rd. in Kodiak, Alaska. The interviewer is Pauline V. Shebeluk.

PS: Where were you born?

GP: I was born in Ridgewood, New Jersey.

PS: Ridgewood, NJ? How did you go from Ridgewood, NJ-end up in Alaska?

GP: I migrated to Colorado and even in Colorado, there were too many no hunting and no trespassing signs, so it seemed logical to migrate further west to get away from all the signs and red lights and horns beeping. My mother moved to Colorado so when I graduated from high school, well even before I graduated, I was making trips out there. But I went to Colorado A+M for my master's degree and that would have been in 1955 after I graduated from high school. My graduate degree is in fisheries, undergraduate work in fisheries. It was wildlife conservation but most all the work I did was in fisheries.

PS: How does a boy in New Jersey get involved with a fisheries major - a little different for the East Coast. Was this a desire you were born with, where did it come from?

GP: New Jersey is covered with lakes and of course, kids growing up in New Jersey go down to the local pond and catch sunfish. There are a lot of streams, small rivers and creeks and it's very productive. Fish grow to be quite a large size and of course, there's a lot of difference with eastern Jersey and western Jersey and southern Jersey. I always did seem to prefer to spend my time in the woods and the fields.

PS: How did you come to Alaska?

GP: When I came to Alaska I came to accept a job with the territory of Alaska Fish & Game Dept. and it happened to be in Kodiak.

PS: Was this your first job right out of school?

GP: Right out of school. I started receiving my pay in Colorado. As I drove up the Alcan, I was being paid.

PS: What year was this?

GP: 1958. I didn't even graduate, Graduation was in May and they had written me to come right away. So I drove up to Kodiak and never left, stayed here the whole time.

PS: What was your first position?

GP: King Crab research and I stayed with King Crab the whole time.

PS: I was told you came to begin the whole fisheries and stayed through the end of it - 1958 through 1983?

GP: That's not true, actually Ed Heiser was here before I was and a guy named Reid Stevens. They were here for just a short while and in those days you almost had to work a year just to get to know your way around.

- PS: Was it an established fisheries by the time you got here?  
I was under the impression that you established it and began research on it.
- GP: When you mention fisheries, really a biologist doesn't have too much to do with starting a fishery or manipulating it or keeping it going. That's pretty much dependant on the individuals investing in it and other fisheries and diversifying and these types of things, plus the population of the animals and the ability to go out and catch them and harvest them. It did seem like the King Crab fishery was going to grow and I'm sure it had something to do with the Wakefields. The Wakefields were very instrumental in pioneering the King Crab fishery.
- PS: Who were the Wakefields?
- GP: Lowell Wakefield and his Dad and Howard Wakefield. They were basically processors but for years they advertised with big beautiful ads in Life Magazine and I'm sure people from all over the world got to know about King Crab through these advertisements. There was very, very little known about King Crab and our first Commissioner, Clarence Anderson, I guess he was the person I corresponded with initially, and they needed someone to study the growth and age of the king crab; that way you knew how fast they grew and to what age they lived, so that was my primary goal. The Federal government had actually made money available to the department through a Saltenstal/Kennedy grant to study the king crab.
- PS: When you first came to Kodiak was there any commercial fishing for king crab?

GP: Yes, there was what you'd call a small fishery, small boats, they were little salmon seiners. In fact, the boats that fished salmon in the summer would fish crab later on after salmon season closed.

PS: When was the season?

GP: In those days, the season was almost 12 months of the year and there were alot of old shell skip molt crabs, so it was possible that during and right after molting, they could pick through the new crabs and pick out the old shells. It didn't take too long before we closed it during the mating season and the molting season and gradually it became a winter fishery at the time when the crabs were full of meat.

PS: What was the largest crab you ever saw?

GP: Largest crab in the world that was ever weighed (and we always went by weight) was 24lbs. 6 ounces and it came in on a tender. Emil Norton called me and some of his crew had found it. They never found a crab that would measure 6 ft. across, they were always looking for a crab 6 ft. from tip of leg to tip of leg but it seemed like heavier ones were stockier so they weren't as long.

PS: Could you tell me what a typical day was like back then as a biologist?

GP: Ah, a typical day - no such thing! Since I was a bachelor initially, I would work 7 days a week, 14-18 hour days. Whenever a fishing boat came into town I would go aboard the boat and I'd talk to the captain and I'd learn just as much as I could about his fishing trip -- what he caught, where he fished, how deep, whatever and as a result, I got to know

almost all the captains and the deck hands. It worked out really neat because they were really interested in the results of our work. I could share it with them eyeball to eyeball, person-to-person. The fishermen were intimately involved with the research program and they had a personal interest in it.

PS: Is this something you saw increase or wane over time?

GP: In order to manage a fishery, you have to have good data and it has to be accurate. What better person to obtain that data than from the fisherman, captain himself. Now they have the Observer Program where they actually have paid people aboard every ship. I think part of the reason for this is if you don't maintain a real close, personal relationship with each captain, you're not going to get information. Just picture this -- a stranger walks down to your boat **and** wants to know where you fished and what you caught and how much effort you gave into it. Well, he doesn't want to tell that guy the truth because that guy might be captain of a fishing boat. It would get to the point they wouldn't want to give their secrets away. So, for many years it was real personal but as the town grew and the fleet grew, things changed.

PS: How many in the fleet initially?

GP: Initially it started off small, some months you might only have 2-3 boats, but when I got here in '58, I guess there were 20 boats that caught 90% of the crab.

PS: Since you were with the department from the beginning of the crab industry to the end of it, can you outline some of the major changes you observed in that fishery over time?

GP: Of course the change was incredible. Initially there was no fishery at all, no knowledge of king crab. The question that

always comes up is historically, how long have king crab inhabited the waters around Kodiak Island or in and around Alaska waters. The first natural thought is if you look at the ancient people that lived 500-1000 years ago, you'd find pieces of king crabs just like you do cod fish over this, spines of sea urchins and fish bones and bird bones. To my knowledge, there's never been a piece of king crab found in any archeological dig in the history of Alaska. Well, that would tend to indicate that the native peoples were unable to catch crab or there were no crabs around. That doesn't sound natural that they wouldn't be able to catch them because there are times of the year when they are shallow and they would be able to reach down and get them with a stick. I've also heard people say they were superstitious and they'd never touch or eat crab. Well, I don't know if that's true. When you talked to the earliest fishermen that fished around Kodiak, the halibut fishermen, they never caught king crab, never. I had a guy tell me one day somewhere off Port Lock Banks, he brought up this great big crab on one of his halibut hooks. He had never seen anything like it before and he was on the radio telling people and trying to find out what it was he caught. It was king crab. It wasn't many years later that every single halibut fisherman was catching king crab. In fact, king crab was so abundant that it was hard for halibut fishermen to catch a halibut cause when the gear hit the bottom, the crab would run over and grab the bait. So there is a lot of evidence to show the king crab population just exploded from almost nothing to a real rich fishery. But like so many things, when you're dealing

with ocean resources, things happen so quickly, 20 to 30 years is quick, that by the time you get organized, it's over. So we'll never know. Now one thing that might help if the king crab population comes back again and it's as important and rich as it was in the peak years, '65, '66, then that might give us some insight into the cyclical nature. It certainly seems to have increased rapidly and decreased rapidly.

PS: How many employees were with Fish and Game at the time you came?

GP: It was a territory and in Kodiak, Roy Ricky was here and that was it. Roy Ricky, myself and a secretary. Then it started growing. Snortfish biologist, Bob Simon came pretty soon, but entire Fish & Game Department there were 14 people in it. You see it was a territory and the federal government was supposed to be taking care of the fisheries. In the early years there were more Russians fishing off Kodiak than there were Americans. Seems like the whole fleet of Russian factory ships, tan<sup>g</sup>lenet fisheries were fishing right off the south end of the island. That was a major problem for years -- the foreign fleets fishing.

PS: Can you tell me a little more about that?

GP: The part I'm most familiar with are the Creatures of the Continental Shelf Convention which was part of the Geneva Convention and it dealt with animals that lived on and in constant contact with the ocean floor, so that would exclude salmon. Like all of your anadromous fish, like salmon, the treatise would have to be negotiated and worked out in meetings but what happened at the Geneva convention was that all king crabs belonged to the U.S. and where Alaska was across from Russia, well Russia would own out to the midpoint and the U.S. would own out to the midpoint. That

really helped because trying to manage a fishery that was available to harvest by any nation in the world is total chaos. That was one of the neatest things that happened. Then you had the 12 Mile Limit which helped also and meant no foreign nation could come within 12 mile limit and fish. All fish species within the 12 mile limit could be harvested by the nation contiguous to it. There was a while there, early fleets were drag fleets and tangle-net fleets. All your king crab were harvested tanglenets and trolls. Trolling was extremely damaging and even tanglenets were damaging in that it took both sexes. It did have large mesh so if they were fishing correctly, smaller crabs could pass through the net. I think that was one of the things that fishery biologists over time were able to get the fishery to convert to pots. The only damage pots do would be if the pot lands on the bottom of the ocean, land on a crab or two and could perhaps damage a crab or if the line breaks, then the pot is on bottom of the ocean.

PS: Did any Russian ships come into Kodiak and did you have any contact with Russian captains?

GP: No, the Russians during the years we were harvesting king crab never came to Kodiak. They weren't allowed to. I had far more contact with Japanese scientists. In fact, I think the first king crab research report ever written was in 1933 by a Japanese biologist around Hokito. We were trying to write back and forth and compare work and learn from one another. Kodiak was kind of a lonely outpost back then...very few people. That was really a disadvantage. It is difficult when you are working on a research project. When 6-7-8 other guys are involved in

different aspects of it, you can get together, share and talk and learn from one another. But for quite a few years, I was the only guy in Alaska Fish & Game. Then the Federal biologists started working in the Bering Sea. I found by studying the lobster fishery, the history of the fishery, the growth of the lobster fishery and the migration, I could learn a great deal from what they had done and that was helpful in my work with king crab.

PS: As more staff was added to the department and the bureaucracy grew, did that interfere with your work?

GP: Not really, Kodiak was pretty much by itself. Fisheries grew up in Cook Inlet, Southeastern, on the Peninsula and out on the Aleutian Chain and as they grew I'd be asked to help. Frequently, guys involved in those fisheries would come to Kodiak and talk to me and frequently I'd fly to them and help with a tagging program. Probably the biggest change was as fisheries grew out the Aleutian Chain, the work I was doing expanded out the chain. We started in 1971 doing population surveys, chartering vessels. Normally a boat would cost \$1,000 a day and we'd charter a boat for 40 days. That's \$40,000 just to charter the boat! We'd go out and fish and study populations. Those programs kept spreading west even to Norton Sound, off the coast of Nome. We found out by going and fishing in the ocean according to <sup>a</sup> statistically random sample, you could come up with a population estimate and we'd fish and tag crabs and liberate the tagged crabs. The commercial fishermen would capture the tagged crabs so we were able to get estimates of fishing mortality. This is really crucial not only to see how many crabs live on the ocean but when

fishermen go out there, what percentage of the crabs do they catch.

PS: I hear you have some good stories/jokes about the tagging program?

GP: The pattern was so clear. If a fisherman had his chart upside-down and you asked him where he caught that tag and he'd point to the north end and you knew you had tagged in the south end-well, you knew he wasn't telling you the truth. Every time I talked to a captain, I'd ask who was fishing right next to you? You're in a good fishing area so someone must be fishing north to yours. The guy would say, "Oh, Oscar Dyson was right next to me and so-and-so was on the left, so I'd know. Then I'd interview Oscar Dyson or whomever in the next day or two and ask them where they had been fishing. If he tells me he's fishing off Tonke and the guy just told me Sitkanak, I was able to tell whether or not guys were lying to me. I had so many friends. I had a Norwegian friend on a boat and I went and asked the skipper if he was catching any tags and he said no. They had about 23 tagged crabs. The Norwegian guy called me up anonymously and said if you go and open up the kitchen cupboard, on the left there's a Worcestershire bottle and on the neck were 23 tags. So I went down on the boat and made believe I was looking for a coffee cup and found all those tags. I called the captain a liar and he knew he was. He didn't throw me off the boat or anything. If you were working hard, doing the best you could, people respected that and helped you out.

#### SECOND INTERVIEW

GP: One thing I thought of that was significant, was whenever one of governors would come to Kodiak and I can remember U.S. Senator Ernest Gruening, Governor Bill Egan, but occasionally these

men would come to town, to Kodiak in the early years, in the 50's. In the evening, people would go to the bars and drink and dance and eat. Before Merle and I were married, we always went to the 49 room in the Mecca Bar and we'd have a steak sandwich, which was a great big New York Steak for \$3.00. Ray Wilson would cook and they'd practically give away that beautiful steak dinner just to get you to come there. Most people would stick around and do their drinking and that's where they'd make their money. But the bars, you could walk into any bar, at any time and people would call you by your first name. I remember saying, the bars were much more friendly than the churches because they would call you by your first name and you always had this carefree attitude. Of course there were a lot of lives ruined in the bars as well. Getting back to Gov. Egan - I was in the Mecca in the 49 room and there was Gov. Bill Egan sitting at the bar and I would just go up and sit next to him and say "Hi, Bill" and here's the Governor of the State of Alaska. Well, I guess he must have talked to the Chamber, visited with some fishermen or something but that night he was by himself. Kodiak was growing in importance and the more the Governor knew about a major resource, it enabled him to make more intelligent decisions. I can remember Ernest Gruening, what an incredible guy he was. I ran into him at Anchorage airport and he said "Hello, Guy." Incredible! All the Governors, I knew Jay Hammond personally -- the last time I saw him was up in Lake Clark and he said he couldn't believe it cause he had heard I was dead, somebody told him I had gotten killed.

PS: You don't expect to have that sort of access or familiarity with

your Governor and yet you have to remember there weren't many people in the State.

GP: Well, that's it! I can remember I wrote him a letter and urged him to throw his hat in the ring to get involved and run for Governor. He wrote me back, I still have the letter, and thanked me for the letter and my confidence, I think he was seriously considering it, he hadn't decided at that time, as I recall. Then another time he called me to get a recommendation on a person. I didn't recommend the person and the person ended up getting the job anyhow. I think in Kodiak, working for Fish & Game, working on commercial fisheries, I didn't realize it at the time, I had a real important job. Months and years went by and I learned more and more aspects of the fishery and so it's just natural that people would look me up and talk to me. Senator Al Owen lived in Kodiak and he was incredible. Every time he would come back from a trip he'd come into my office and give me all the information he might have collected in his travels on king crab, that he might have gotten from the Japanese or the Russians. Course, it wasn't much, but he was involved with some of the treatise, getting together with people from other countries and he would meet with some of the scientists from other countries. I think he raised his family for quite a few years on Marmot Island which is about 30 miles from here out in the middle of the ocean.

I did have a chance to go to China, Japan, Korea for People-To-People. This was a program put together by President Eisenhower. I was a fishing scientist so I traveled with a group of 40 from the U.S. all involved in fisheries. Tours were set up for us,

we'd go visit fish hatcheries and visit aquaculture facilities and universities and meet with the Japanese, Chinese or Koreans to go to their canneries and fish markets.

I'm also trying to think of how Kodiak was different in the earlier days. Kodiak was so, so much smaller - there were almost no roads paved whatsoever. The tidal wave and earthquake and urban renewal changed it so much you'd have to get old photos to get a handle on it. We took a lot of pictures in the late 50's and after the tidal wave we saw the tremendous change that took place.

I remember taking Tracy and Wendy, my two little daughters, and I would take my Skiff over to Near Island, cross the channel. I would let them off and they'd have a little lunch and they'd bring apples because they'd want to feed the ponies that Tommy Gallagher had. They'd have a watch and I'd say "Be back here in 3 or 4 hours." and those girls would go over there and that would be their island. They'd be the only humans on the island. They'd just wander around.

PS: What a wonderful way to grow up.

GP: It kind of broke your heart to see the Bridge and see all the building of roads and boat harbors.

Before Merle and I were married, I had a girlfriend in Cordova. She was born and raised in Saldovia. So, I had made arrangements to fly to Cordova to see her on a weekend. It's like an O'Henry story. She had been married before and divorced and her husband was a pretty famous painter, artist. I was in Cordova and when

I called her she said she didn't expect me this early and she had a date that night. So I went downtown to one of the bars and I'm at the bar and the guy waiting on the bar and I got in a conversation. There was a beautiful, black velvet picture on the wall and I asked the guy about it and come to find out, he painted it and you know what that means -- this guy was this gal's x-husband. I just walked in and there he is. Later that night, 12:00 midnight, I was walking down the boardwalk (all the streets in Cordova then were made of wood), feeling sorry for myself and there was this guy walking towards me, looking kind of weird at me. I just had that feeling. As we approached each other, we were walking slower and slower and pretty soon we're standing face-to-face to each other and he said, "I know you from somewhere?" "Where are you from?" I said I lived in Kodiak and asked him where he worked. "I'm an engineer with the oil company, I'm a petroleum engineer." We kept talking, "What do you do?" "I'm a biologist." "I can't believe it! You're the guy my date kept telling me about all night, this scuba diving biologist in Kodiak, Alaska." Well the guy had a terrible evening and I was so happy that he had a terrible evening. We kept talking and come to find out, he was my best buddy in Colorado. We used to eat liver and onions practically every night of the week cause that's the cheapest thing you could eat and we'd go to the cafe, Rodney Krantz. I didn't recognize him dressed up in a parker, walking in Cordova, 12:00 at night. So we went walking into the bar and there's this same guy, tending bar, the x-husband. Well Rodney had just been in there having dinner with his date. Well, the next night was my time for a date and we went in there, that same bar and her x-husband was tending bar

again. You can just imagine, in a tiny, small town like that. What are the chances of a good friend of mine ending up in Alaska.

Flying from Kodiak, we had an airlines called PNA - Pacific Northern Airlines. We called it Practically None Airlines and the terminal was a 10 X 20 building. If you wanted to get to Anchorage, you had to go to Homer and land and when they opened the door, they left it open for cargo and you could freeze to death in that plane. Then you would land in Kenai, then Homer. Only way you could do it. There was no ferry then. Red Dodge was one of the pilots. If you lived here you got to know everybody and you got to know them well. I can remember, I was going to Anchorage and I was the only guy on the plane except the pilot and stewardess, so we flew about 500 feet over the Barren Islands looking at sea lions with that commercial airplane. But if you knew Red Dodge, he was just a total character. In the 50's I helped out a colleague study sea lions so we flew to Marmot Island. It was pretty tough to get in there. We flew into this little lake and Chuck Weir flew us in. We spent about a week on the island. We climbed up into a cliff and we were studying these sea lions. We had tagged alot of them on Barren Island and we wanted to see if any of the tagged ones showed up on Marmot Island. Anyway, we got stranded there. The wind came up and a week went by and we couldn't get out of there. Occassionally, Chuck would fly over and look at the situation and just leave. I can remember the only thing we had to eat for several days was salmonberries. I can remember we

found an old, broken down cabin and in the cabin was a jar with 100 beans in it. The tin lid of the jar had rusted and all the rust had fallen down on the beans. So we cleaned the beans up a little bit and boiled them for an hour or more and they were still hard as rocks. We found a dead ground squirrel and tried to cook that thing. It was all dehydrated, all hair. Chuck flew over us one day and made a quick circle and dropped us a package. We were really excited figuring he dropped us T-bone steaks or something. We ran over there and he dropped us four rolls of toilet paper. Four rolls of toilet paper!

Before I came to Alaska, I learned how to scuba dive. When I went to Rutgers, during spring break we went to Florida and in those days, you could get scuba gear, rent a skiff and go out without a license or anything. When I got to Kodiak, it seemed natural for studying the king crab. So, I got scuba gear. Gradually, I think the department bought scuba gear for me and they required that I take a course to go document and verify that I know what I'm doing.

PS: I read you were one of the few people that documented their research with photographs.

GP: That came alot later. Initially, I just did alot of diving. If you can go down to the bottom of the bay and see the crabs, you so much more quickly understand the beast. In order to do that, you needed to have someone with you. There were very, very few divers.

At King Crab Festival, what we did was we caught a bunch of king crab and put them in the harbor in a pot. At the right time during

the festival, the divers would come down to the boat harbor and we'd jump in off the dock and dive to the bottom and come up with king crab. Of course, the people didn't know they were down there in a pot. You could just go in the harbor and find king crab but we didn't want to take any chances they wouldn't be there. So when I swam over to the float, Governor Eagan was there and I handed him this great, big crab and they took a picture of it. So I have a picture of myself handing a big crab to Bill Eagan.

People wanted to learn how to dive and so I explored the possibility of teaching them how to dive. I found out you had to be a certified instructor and it took a great deal of work to get the certification. Then I became an instructor and started teaching local people how to dive. A lot of them were diving already but they had never learned or studied. There were a lot of divers in Kodiak who lost their lives. One of the biggest problems teaching was that students needed equipment and so the next logical step was to have a scuba shop. Merle and I actually started the first scuba diving shop that was ever in Kodiak. We called it Scuba Doo. We operated it for ten years. I was teaching scuba diving at the college. Many Coast Guard pilots took the course. In order to pass a scuba diving course, you have to go in the ocean and dive. To go in the ocean in Kodiak, you need a scuba suit and equipment. We started this business and we were known around the U.S. Everybody loved the name. The name was real catchy. It would be common - it's midnight, December 10th, blowing 40 and it's 20 degrees out - and the phone rings and they need a diver.

The Alaska steanship is on the dock and they need a diver.

That was common.

PS: What would they need a diver for?

GP: Either they hit a rock or a reef. So I got special permission from my boss - in the early years, I was the only one that could dive and here are commercial fishermen I was asking them every day to fill out log books and turn in tagged crabs and now they wanted me to dive and check their boat. I would say no I can't. Since I wasn't competing with any other business in town, they actually gave me permission to supply that service. We operated for years out of the house, then we moved it to a tiny shack in the back of the house. We finally sold the business to one of my students. It's still in existence and it is alot bigger now.

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