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This interview was conducted with Ellie Wright on Monday, July 6, 2015, in Western Libraries Special Collections on the campus of Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington. The interviewer is Tamara Belts.

**TB:** Today is Monday, July 6, 2014, and I'm here with Ellie Wright. My name is Tamara Belts, and we're going to do an oral history about her fly fishing experiences. So, our first question is always: How did you get started fly fishing?

**EW:** I've liked fishing since I was a child. I used to fish off the pier in Santa Barbara, where I grew up, catching perch and other things, and I've always wanted to learn to fly fish. And so probably about, oh, eight years ago or nine years ago, I didn't know where to go to learn or whatever. It's something I always wanted to learn.

And I was on a dating website looking for a man, and this fella had looked at my profile, and one of his things was that he fly fished. So I sent him an email and asked him if he could teach me to fly fish, and he told me he liked bold, audacious women, and yes, he would. So, there begins my learning to fly fish.

I met him, and he showed me all the equipment and what to do with it, and taught me to fly fish. I also saw—a friend of mine had seen in the local paper that there was a fly fishing class offered at the college, at Skagit Valley College, so I also, unbeknownst to him, signed up for that. And also went and took the class that Bruce Freet gave. And then I took fly tying classes from Danny Beatty. He had beginning classes and advance classes. My friend also taught me how to tie flies also. So I had a little up on the classes a little bit. But that's how I basically got into fly fishing.

**TB:** Okay, and do you want to tell me a little bit about even before you were fly fishing and what you did as a child? Did you maintain that from your childhood to your adulthood, or—

**EW:** Yes, I fished when I – I'm a retired nurse. I fished when I was working in Santa Barbara. One of the doctors liked to trout fish, so I would go up to Lake Cachuma and fish a little bit, not a whole lot because I didn't have – I worked there evenings, and I worked other shifts, so it wasn't conducive for me getting out to fish that much, plus the fact there's not a whole lot of water down there for fly fishing. I mean, if you want to go out in the ocean you're fine, but not much, everything's pretty dry in California.

**TB:** Okay, and so then, how did you get started in the club? How did you decide to join Fidalgo Fly Fishers?

**EW:** Through the class at Skagit, Bruce Freet had said that there was a fly fishing organization and invited any of us that wanted to come to a meeting to come, and so I went and enjoyed what I was learning. They had a restriction, I think you had to come at least three times, and then you would be eligible to join, and then you had to find sponsors. And so I joined that same year that I took the class.

**TB:** That's interesting, because I know that fly fishing clubs you have to have sponsors, but could you tell me a little bit more. I'm not a fly fisherman, so I've not joined a club, so I've not had to solicit a sponsor. How do you decide who your sponsor's going to be?

**EW:** Well they kind of pick you.

**TB:** Okay.

**EW:** I mean, they'll pick you, because as a sponsor you have to kind of arrange to show them something, either take them on an outing or help them with their casting or help them with fly tying, or do something so that you can enhance why they've come here to learn, so that it's more of a group effort.

**TB:** So they kind of mentor you.

**EW:** Yes.

**TB:** Yes. Okay. And then it sounds like as soon as you got involved in the club, you got very involved in the organizational structure, or you worked on the fundraiser and the dinner and—

**EW:** Well, I since I was just a beginner, I didn't feel I could go out and cast with them. I was a little hesitant to show off my casting in front of people. I wasn't really into taking someone out because I river fish. I don't go in a boat, and a lot of the ones around here do Pass Lake. The other ones where they all have boats, and I have no way of, even if I could carry a pontoon boat, I couldn't get it off my car, and I couldn't do much with it, so. I could not really take people out there or help doing some of that. I have helped with, some at the salmon festival and some of that, doing fly tying and that type of thing. They approached me to be on the board, and it was a three-year commitment, of which at my age I don't want to commit that long. I don't know where I'll be in three years. So I told them that if they – I would do the Christmas party if they'd leave me alone.

**TB:** Ah, okay.

**EW:** So, that's why I did the Christmas party for the last, I don't know, four or five years or something like that.

**TB:** So, I know that the club decided the money goes to the salmon enhancement. Can you elaborate on that, or even just what's involved in doing a fundraiser?

**EW:** Well, the fundraiser is the major fundraiser for the club, and it is strictly—it's a silent and live auction, strictly done with donations. So we ask the club members to donate something, either something they have that they no longer want, or some of them donate like a trip. A couple of the doctors flew, so they would take people over to the Selway and fly in, and we had another one of our members had a nice cabin on the Methow, so you could, bid on the cabin on the Methow. I did a quilt one year for them to raise money. Sometimes, a bottle of liquor, a cup, or, you know, the talking bass that keeps getting passed around every year and stuff. But each year it's gotten more and more people bringing donations into it.

**TB:** Could you tell me a little bit more about the talking bass, is that, since you said it got passed around.

**EW:** Well it's one of those ones that was "as seen on TV." You push the button and it makes noise or something.

**TB:** Well, is it wrapped, so people don't know what they're getting when they get it?

**EW:** No, no.

**TB:** Somebody actually bids to get it.

**EW:** Well, you're given—you buy tickets, and it's a bag auction for the silent auction. It's kind of just a bag auction. So you just go and tear your tickets and put them in whichever bags of the items that you would like to win.

**TB:** And some people actually try to get that.

**EW:** It usually disappears, and then you have some people that come up – since I always bought like a hundred dollars worth of tickets, and another one of the guys would buy a hundred dollars worth of tickets, and we'd be at the same table, and we would win all these things, and we'd have stacks. And I had one woman, wife, come up to me and say, How come you won so much? How many tickets did you buy? I said, A hundred dollars. And she goes, Oh. You know, and he bought a hundred, and we were embarrassed because we had these stacks of all the things that we had won. And a lot of times what I do on a lot of the stuff that I won, I'll turn around and I then use it as prizes for Project Healing Waters. I re-donate it.

**TB:** Okay, sounds good.

**EW:** And you had asked about where the monies go. The monies that are raised there are the funds that carry the club for the next year. So as far as going into the other areas, they allot a certain amount to go to, like you said, what was it, salmon restoration—

**TB:** Salmon enhancement, yes.

**EW:** Yes, so there's different things that we put money towards, but the monies that are raised there run the club and go to whatever projects that we want.

**TB:** Nice. So can we go back a little bit to, well, do you want to talk about the annual, while we're still talking about the club, do you want to talk about what is your annual outing to the Yakima River.

**EW:** The Yakima annual outing is Project Healing Waters.

**TB:** Oh, okay, okay. So all your club's involved in that then, kind of?

**EW:** No.

**TB:** Okay, just some people like you are involved in that.

**EW:** Right.

**TB:** Okay. So do you want to then talk about that experience, and both maybe explain how some of the auction items go to support that too.

**EW:** Yes, Project Healing Waters, let me get my little [notes]. Anyway, Chuck Tye is the coordinator of Project Healing Waters. He's a retired United States marine. He has the western [region], he does Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Alaska. He's in charge of that. They base out of, he's down in Olympia, they base out of Joint Base Lewis-McChord. And Project Healing Waters fly fishing is dedicated to the physical and emotional rehabilitation of disabled, active military service personnel and disabled veterans, through fly fishing and associated activities, education and outings. So it's kind of a rehab for the people coming back that they have. It was started at Walter Reed originally, and it's now got branches, all over the United States. And it teaches them. We work a lot with the returning veterans that have been injured. We have a lot of PTSD. It's amazing, since I've been working with Healing Waters now for five years, each year, some of the guys, the young guys, that have finished up and gotten out of the military, they have a job, they return every year, if they possibly can, to take the trip. And the difference in a PTSD-er when you see them arriving, being uptight, things really bother them, you get them on the water, and the same thing with ones that are disabled. We have a blind one that fishes.

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We have Les Johnson, who is a noted fly fisher in this area, who's written a number of books, he has come every year.

**TB:** Really?

**EW:** He's had a stroke.

**TB:** Yes.

**EW:** We get him in and out of the boat. His wife comes with him, and they fish with us every year. He didn't come last year because it was too warm. But he has come in previous years to that and comes to the fly fishing for that.

But it's put on, the 2-Fly is put on every year on the Yakima, until this year which we had to cancel. We almost got burned out a couple years ago. Then we had really high waters, so everything went too fast. And this year there's no water. So we're hoping for next year to have some snowpack.

But it's continually grown. This last year was the first year that we had an all-girls boat. We have one gal who's come and rowed every single year. She's retired service. We have another gal. Normally the boats consist of a rower, and then one that's in it, and the rower—some of the rowers are not military. Most of them are retired military. The person that rides in the boat with them is military or usually retired military, and then we have an active duty normally that they take. So there's three to a boat. But this last year we were able to get actually, we had an active duty female, and then we had Michelle, who was our rower, and then another gal who's retired or out of the service, and she rides in that boat, so it was our first year to have an all-girl team.

**TB:** Who's teaching them to fly fish? Are they learning on that boat, so that one of these people that's in the boat—

**EW:** No, they're taught, like at this particular, we have different ones. We're getting them from the VA hospitals that come now, Spokane, the Seattle VA. We have groups that come up from Portland, Oregon, and that area. They're taught on the base when they come to the thing, that they're taught how to tie flies, they're taught how to build a rod, and they're taught casting. Then they take them on a lot of just small outings out to lakes, to rivers, to different things.

The 2-Fly is kind of a, it's a challenge where they can win something. I sent you pictures of all of the flies that are on like a board. It's on like a Styrofoam board—

**TB:** I think I only two pictures, but maybe I only looked at one, maybe there's some more that are attached to another email, because I saw two emails from you, but I only saw two pictures.

**EW:** No, I sent you about six or eight pictures.

**TB:** Okay.

**EW:** And there's like a large Styrofoam, and it has all kinds of things. And they're allowed to pick two different flies that they can use. And they can—they have to use those flies to fish with.

**TB:** Okay.

**EW:** And they have rules, I don't know all the rules right off, but they have rules as to, they have to use those flies and, continue to catch the fish off of whichever fly that they picked in order— And then they're measured. Then they keep track, because they give prizes for the active duty one. They give prizes to—the other ones can also. The

rower measures, the other two can fish. The volunteer and the active duty can fish. Then they've come in with their little charts, stating how many fish they caught and what sizes. And then that evening when we get everything in, there's an award given, a nice award, either a new rod or whatever, that someone's donated. That's one of the things that I did. I bid on a rod at our Christmas party, and I donated it to the fly fishing, and it was given to one of the fellows for the top, top award.

**TB:** Nice. So in a boat, you have a rower, then you have an active duty serviceman, and then you have a volunteer.

**EW:** Right.

**TB:** So is the active serviceman, he's the person who's been either injured or—

**EW:** Correct.

**TB:** So I didn't realize they were still on active duty. I thought once they were injured they were probably—

**EW:** Well, they may not be actually active duty--but they're still in the military.

**TB:** Okay, okay, okay. Somehow I didn't know that.

**EW:** Yes, I don't think they've been discharged yet. They're in rehab. So instead of doing your conventional rehab where you're going and you're working with all the other things, it's kind of more like, almost like a mental rehab--to get these guys back into society, feeling that there are things that is worthwhile to do.

**TB:** Right, right. Okay. So then, prior to going out, they've had this experience on the base. So some people that have participated in Healing Waters probably go to base and do these—

**EW:** Right.

**TB:** --things, and then you're part of the outing ones. And it's about 2-Fly, as in T-W-O and Fly.

**EW:** No, it's just a number 2 and Fly.

**TB:** Yes, because they get to pick two flies.

**EW:** Right.

**TB:** Okay, okay, very good. So, we can talk about some other aspects-- Have you found any aspects for your experience as a woman? I mean, is clothing difficult or—

**EW:** Clothing is called special made waders, is expensive. If you're short and round and your hips are big, you know, most of the things. I tried women's boots on, they didn't fit. They were too tight. So I actually wear men's boots but a smaller size. So, the women's waders I had specially made by Simms, which is one of the big wading companies. Special ordered those. Challenges are getting glasses which you can, those sunglasses that – I have the Smith wraparound sunglasses and I've put in the stick-on lenses for the bifocals, but then I found that I couldn't walk too well or anything, so I ordered new ones, and the optometrist said they'll cut them and fit them exactly where they need to be this time. So I'm hoping they come in the mail soon. But just kind of challenges like that.

I mean, as far as the hats and the shirts and that, that's all basic. But trying to get waders that fit. The first pair of waders I bought were the Neoprene, and I felt like a Tootsie Roll, rolled into it. You couldn't walk, I mean, you'd go to walk and it was like you had to grab the Neoprene and lift your legs because you just couldn't move. The first pair of the Simms that I ordered that I had to return, when you put them on and it traps around here, the legs blow. I looked like the Michelin man. You know, they just bent forward and you couldn't walk, and so those had to be –

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because they sent me the size, but they also didn't want, it's like clothing stores, they don't gear it towards your height. I mean, because your hips are longer, just like when you buy a large size, just because I'm rounder doesn't mean that my arms are any longer, doesn't mean that my legs did anything. So that when you buy some of the larger sizes, the sleeves are six inches longer, the pants are too long. So then I had to measure and send in and be able to get a pair that would actually fit.

**TB:** Wow. Anything else? I guess I was just thinking like in the club, the men, have they been very welcoming to you or?

**EW:** Yes, I've had no problem with the men at all. They couldn't be nicer. There were three or four women when I first joined, and then there was one whole year that I was the token woman in the club. Now my neighbor, two of my neighbors took the class, and they're in it. And then we've had a couple of other women come back. So there are more women. We're getting a lot more with the classes.

We're getting a lot younger and new fly fisher people, and some that are younger because so many of ours are getting up there in age, and they're getting to the point where they themselves have problems with their back or their hip or whatever, which is limiting what they can do anymore.

**TB:** Okay. So, do you want to talk about some of your favorite places to fish? You said you like to fish a river, right? So you're like walking just on the side of the river?

**EW:** Yes, either drift boat—

**TB:** Okay, you do do a drift boat, okay.

**EW:** I either drift or I wade.

**TB:** So do you have a drift boat or?

**EW:** My friend does.

**TB:** Okay, okay. So do you want to talk about that, I mean—

**EW:** Okay. I've drifted on the John Day River, twice. The first time there was plenty of water. The second time we kind of bounced our way down, only to see a drift boat sitting on a rock totally empty, which was a little scary. The first time, no snakes. The second time, many, many rattlesnakes.

**TB:** Really?

**EW:** I saw one the first time just going across the water. I didn't know rattlesnakes swam, but I guess they do. But on that river, it's smallmouth bass, so it was fun for the first few days, and then we had rain and everything turned muddy. But it was beautiful to go down the John Day. So I've done that twice.

Fished Montana quite a bit, Kelly Creek, Watt Creek. I'm leaving Saturday to go for three-weeks to Wyoming--to fish where I've never fished before, so I'll do that. I've also drifted and waded the Yakima.

**TB:** What's kind of the difference between fishing in a drift boat and fishing on the side? When you are on the drift boat, are you just casting and then letting the boat drag it through the water, or?

**EW:** No, normally on a drift boat what we do is anchor somewhere--and then we fish. Now on the -- and the same thing like on the Yakima coming down, we usually, I mean, I can cast when he's rowing, but oftentimes we'll pull up and we'll just drop the anchor, and then fish an area that looks like it would be good. And also, there's oftentimes sandbars and stuff in the Yakima. And some of them have like a sandbar so you can pull up and drop the anchor, get out, and then fish off the sandbar. And depending upon, I've gone there in the winter, later in the year, and the water's low so you can actually wade out and fish.

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**TB:** Nice. So what's your favorite kind of fishing in terms of, I mean, the wet fly, the dry fly... Do you have a preference?

**EW:** I like the dry fly. I mean, I'll do nymphing and stuff, but I like the dry fly. Except I'm going to have to get the colors a little brighter so I can see them. You know, if you've got white or orange, you might spot them, but sometimes it's like, as you age so do your eyes.

**TB:** Right, right. So is there anything else I haven't asked you that we should be talking about? And I want you to brag. Even your experience, is it kind of transforming for you? I mean, we talked about how Healing Waters can really change—

**EW:** Oh yes, it's like I've read too, and this has been like a stressful year for me, so I'm really looking forward to getting out into the wilderness. Because they say, like to reset all your inside clocks, just go one day and spend it in the wilderness. I mean, it's always been, it's just totally relaxing. I mean, I can sit there whether I fish or whether I read, but it's like one with nature.

Now, you put this in or not put this in, but my goal in life is to be naked in the river at age 90 (*laughter*).

**TB:** I think it's great!

**EW:** That's my goal in life, to make it to age 90 and be able to be naked in the river. And if they want to look, go for it.

**TB:** Okay, okay, very cool. So, at Healing Waters, you're kind of much more behind the scenes, just you—

**EW:** I do their—like they had given me a certificate a few years ago.

**TB:** Yes, I got that.

**EW:** I do their check-in, check-out. I check them all in. I get all their consents signed, and then on the day that they're fishing, I check them all in, and nothing gets started and nobody can have a drink, nobody can do anything, until I have every single person checked in. Then we go from that. So, I've handled that for Chuck for the last four or five years, so I just tell him what I need, and it frees him up to be able to go out and get the guys in and out. And you know, when they have an emergency, he can do that, and he doesn't have to worry about what's going on in camp.

**TB:** About how many people are involved? I mean, or how many people about come?

**EW:** About 250.

**TB:** Okay, wow. Awesome. Okay, and then I just have to ask you one another interest because you're very involved with the Humane Society.

**EW:** Yes, I am.

**TB:** So, I mean, you have a great love of animals, then, maybe.

**EW:** I always have.

**TB:** So is there anything more you can say about that, about the animals? Danny said you were involved with the Humane Society.

**EW:** I'm involved in two organizations. I'm on the board of the Skagit Valley Humane Society, have been for the last four years, five years, six years, something like that. I've handled their auctions for the last six years. We just raised enough money to put the cat wing in, in memory of Sandy Nelson, who was the director for 27 years, who lost her fight with breast cancer a few years ago. Her dream was to complete the rest of the cat wing. Saturday will be our first open house in our new cat wing.

**TB:** Nice.

**EW:** We got that built.

The other thing that is near and dear to my heart, as all of my dogs that I've had are Bassett Hounds. I work with Bassett Rescue of Puget Sound out of Woodinville. I do their Facebook page, and I do their webpage.

**TB:** Nice, nice. So how many Bassett Hounds do you have?

**EW:** I'm on number four. I only have one at the present time.

**TB:** Okay, okay. Awesome. Is there anything else we haven't talked about?

**EW:** I don't think so.

**TB:** Okay. I'm just kind of curious. Have you passed your fly fishing on to anybody else? Does anybody in your family fly fish or?

**EW:** No. My nephew would like to learn, and I've told him – he lives in Indiana. He likes to fish, and I've told him to check in to groups around there and check and see if any of the colleges are doing it, and that type of thing, because he likes to fish.

**TB:** Okay, okay. Well, if there's nothing else, I'll shut it off. Thank you.

### *End of Part One*

**TB:** So, you also mentioned that you had, for the... Christmas party you made a quilt. So tell me about your quilt, because you're a quilter and...

**EW:** Yes, I've been quilting since 1972, and I've had some of my quilts published in magazines--and books, and I did a fabric with salmon on it, all hand pieced, and then it was quilted by a friend, and it had salmon all around the outside edge. That was up for the auction. And I've done a huge king size biker quilt that the Humane Society used to raise money, for the Humane Society. Then, I did one with all the fishing can labels that I did up, and gave as a raffle to Project Healing Waters.

Both Chuck Tye and Jerry, who is a UPS driver, but who has worked forever, and he works with the camp chef. He puts on a meal every time. It's fantastic. Those two have done so much work. I made them each a quilt a couple of years ago. I have pictures of them with their quilts. Since he is the cook, his was all hamburger, sausages, etc. And then, Chuck Tye being retired Marine Corps, his was more of a patriotic red, white and blue on the front, and all in Marine Corps fabric on the back. So I gave those to them one year. And I actually saw the marine with a tear in his eye.





**TB:** Oh, sweet.

**EW:** So, they appreciated the fact that I went to that much trouble to make them a quilt. So now, I suggested last year, I said, if we get enough t-shirts for every one of these, you can make t-shirt quilts. So about a month later, he goes, You said you could do a quilt. I've got a whole box of t-shirts. So those are here, and I'm having two quilts done for each one of them out of the t-shirts.

**TB:** Nice, nice. So how did you get involved in quilting? I mean, you've been doing it a long time, but are you just a creative person or it just interested you or?

**EW:** I just had always liked quilting, wanted to learn how, and didn't realize until I was out of nursing school that our little neighbor around the corner was a quilter, and I could've learned all those years ago. But I took a class at an adult ed in Santa Barbara in 1972, and they didn't even have cotton. They were using polyester stuff to do it.

**TB:** Oh wow.

**EW:** But I started in '72, and I don't do as much as I used to, but I still have enough fabric to make probably 5000 quilts it seems like.

**TB:** I do know people collect fabric, right? Awesome. Okay. Anything else?

**EW:** Nope.

**TB:** Alright.

***End of recording***