

**Washington Women's Heritage Project, Center for Pacific Northwest Studies**  
**Interview with Katrina Jez**

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Interviewer: Carole Teshima Morris

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[TAPE 1. SIDE A]

MORRIS: Okay, Katrina. Why don't we start with how old you are, a little bit about your background, where you were born and how long you've been in Whatcom County?

JEZ: Okay. Um, I'm thirty-five. I was born in Texas. I've been in Whatcom County about seven years and I started fishing when I arrived here and fished for about six years.

MORRIS: So did you fish here in the county?

JEZ: I fished in Alaska, mostly around Craig and Ketchikan – the southeast.

MORRIS: Did you have any previous experience with fishing? How did you get into that?

JEZ: I got into it because of [Fred?]. He ran the boat and I went with him and learned. It's pretty common in purse-seining to take on new people anyway.

MORRIS: So your whole experience was in purse-seining?

JEZ: Mmm hmm.

MORRIS: And that involves kind of a larger crew than gillnetting, right?

JEZ: Purse-seiners carry a crew of about five or six people.

MORRIS: And so were you the only woman on the crew?

JEZ: The only woman.

MORRIS: And can you describe maybe a typical season? How many times did you go up?

JEZ: Okay. You leave at the end of June to go up north. But the actual fishing season starts in May because you start working on the gear, getting the boat ready, putting the sand in the boat, painting the boat, stocking the boat with groceries, working on the nets. Then you leave at the end of June when the salmon start running toward the coast of Alaska. It takes 72 hours to get up there and you run the boat continually, day and night, until you get there. The first stop is Ketchikan. Um, the seasons are regulated by the State

– the fishing times and the areas. Every area is numbered and, um, mostly they work a two-day-on, two-day-off now. When I first started about six years ago there were times when you'd have four days in a row fishing. You'd be off two days and they you'd get three days to fish, depending on what the stocks are – the level of fish.

MORRIS: What year was it when you started fishing?

JEZ: '86 was the first year.

MORRIS: And how many did you say again? How many years did you fish?

JEZ: Six years.

MORRIS: Does the whole crew usually go up when you run the boat up?

JEZ: Usually. Sometimes you'll have a crew member join you from another area, come down and fly into Ketchikan from Bristol Bay or some of the areas finishing up. But for the most part the whole crew travels up together.

MORRIS: Is it usually the same crew or do you switch other crew members?

JEZ: Depends a lot on the boat. Um, the better boats with higher yields generally will have the same crew more often than not and the boats that, for some reason, either have some problem on them because they don't like the skipper or because they jump to a boat and make a higher annual salary will go to different boats.

MORRIS: So how many different boats have you fished on?

JEZ: I just fished on the one.

MORRIS: What's the name of it?

JEZ: It's *Elaine B*. Actually, I fished on two boats with the same skipper. The *Juliette* first, which is a wooden seiner owned by a cannery and then Scott, the skipper, purchased a steel boat a couple years into my fishing career and we started working on that boat.

MORRIS: So how big is the boat?

JEZ: Um, a limit seiner is 58 feet. You'll find most of the seiners to be 58 feet or 56 feet. It won't be any more than 58 feet or else it's not allowed to up to Alaska. Here in, um, Puget Sound they don't have that footage limit and then there's also a grandfather clause so you will see some boats that are over 58 feet going up to Alaska fishing because traditionally they had been there before.

MORRIS: Do you feel like you've had equal opportunities fishing as far as salary? Let's start with salary.

JEZ: Salary yes. No problem there. Um, each crew member gets a share which, depending on the skipper, how much you get can range between eight percent and ten percent.

MORRIS: Does it matter how long you've fished what your percent is?

JEZ: That varies by what the skipper wants to do. Um, like, a seventeen-year-old, eighteen-year-old, when they start out they only get a half-share. But then they're given certain compensations. They'll get to sleep in a little later in the morning and may not have to stay up as late at night or do as many night watches just because they're younger.

MORRIS: Do you want to talk some about what you do on a boat, what your duties are?

JEZ: Okay. Um, well in the six years I was able to do just about everything on the boat. Um, three people are on the back deck at the standard piling gear. One piles web, one piles corks, and the other person piles the lead. I did everything except pile the lead because they were heavy and I didn't want to have to do that anyway [chuckles]. Um, another crew member runs the skiff, which hauls the end of the net out and the boat is on one of the net and the skiff is on the other and the two are joined together and that's how the fishing process works. Um, when you work with six on the boat, not only is the skipper on the deck, but then also there's a deck person and they run around and hook up parts of the net, help bring the bag of fish at the end hydraulically into the hatch and dump it. Um, along with just the hauling in of the gear, there's the duty of engineer, which also runs refrigeration in the new boats. Um, there's cooks. And then the other people do other jobs like certain repairs or more net work. Or they'll do more watches. Everybody splits up the work.

MORRIS: Do you feel like you ever were treated differently by crew members because you were a woman?

JEZ: Well, in my case I was the skipper's girlfriend so the first year I felt I had to work harder to, uh, prove that I could be there. But then after – maybe that's just a fact of what you call 'being green' - you're ended up given more rotten work to do just because you haven't been on the boat as long. Um, I think it really depends on the age of the people you're working with and their experience with women. In my case, I didn't have a lot of problems. Some women had had problems on boats because it's just the quality of men they were working with, they didn't have respect for women. But, I think that's, um, very independent [sic] upon what boat you're on.

MORRIS: Were there ever any problems with your own privacy or - ?

JEZ: No.

MORRIS: - anything like that?

JEZ: As far as that goes, I think the men were really quite polite. Boats are fairly big. Um, in my case there was a state room upstairs and there's two bunks there and then downstairs there's a bulk hold but I never had to stay in the bulk hold. But women who have, you know, report no problems.

MORRIS: Do you know of many other women out there who fish on purse-seiners as crew members?

JEZ: More and more women are fishing for purse-seiners. Um, first it was either wives or girlfriends but now there's women who are just joining in as a crewmember. And, um, I think it's a pretty good way to make a living if you like that type of, uh, work.

MORRIS: And why do you think that? What makes it a good living?

JEZ: What makes it a good living? Um, it's a short season – it's July and August, part of September and you're through. You can make- almost, if you want to live frugally- you could make a living doin' it. If you, um, want to pursue something else – like some of the people, uh, do ski instructing – so then you have a summer season and you have a winter season of work. A lot of people travel. You get the opportunity to travel in the winter and go wherever you want. Um, you put in a lot of hours, like there are days where you work seventeen, eighteen, nineteen hours days. So if you stop and add up the hours that you put in, for your year of work in the two months, you've actually almost put in as much as somebody who works eight hours a day at a regular job.

MORRIS: Have you noticed any changes over the six years? Maybe in the resources? Fishing time? Regulations?

JEZ: I think the biggest changes I've seen are more in the boats. The market has demanded refrigerated fish to be able to get a good price for your fish. And that, in a lot of ways, has made fishing a lot easier because you're delivering a colder product. You don't have to deliver every night to a tender where you had to before because the fish wouldn't be fresh enough. Now you can, you know, bring in your last net load for the day, go find a place, and anchor up and fish some the next morning without having to wait in line for a tender throughout the night and not get much sleep. So that has made things easier. And it's a little bit more expensive for the skippers to get into it and, you know, to keep up and keep competitive in the market.

MORRIS: Do you ever do any of the bookwork or financial planning?

JEZ: Nope. None of that.

MORRIS: Do you see this as an ongoing job for you?

JEZ: No, I don't [chuckles].

MORRIS: So are you done with it now?

JEZ: I think I'll be done with it, other than just goin' up maybe for one month or something like that during our peak season.

MORRIS: Did you feel like this was a good way to spend time with your boyfriend more than a real job? How did you feel when you first started it?

JEZ: I actually thought it was a good way to earn a living. It was nice that, you know, we didn't have to be apart during that time.

MORRIS: Have you ever felt like there was any danger or that kind of thing with fishing?

JEZ: Um, fishing can be very dangerous. Um, fortunately the person I worked for was very cautious about keeping his equipment in good working order so that things wouldn't be breaking. But you're dealing a lot of hydraulics. You're dealing with lots of speed. You're dealing with a lot of, um, weight. And when lines come tight they can snap. When they snap they can fly into you, into your face, push you overboard. Uh, seining is not one of the most dangerous fisheries. I think crabbing is the most dangerous fisheries. Plus, you're working in all the icy conditions. In seining you're working in the summers. The water's a little bit calmer, but you do get some windy days. Um, as far as safety goes, I guess it depends on your mind. It's part of the stress of fishing – you need to be watching to make sure of what other crewmembers are doing and where they are in the boat, so that you don't hurt someone else and that someone isn't neglectful and send something flying your way.

MORRIS: Did you ever experience a feeling of community with the fishermen?

JEZ: Very strong. I think that's one of the most important things I like about it. There's a strong sense of community. A lot of people will stop fishing to come help someone out whose net is caught or whose engine is down, even though they've only got, you know, maybe thirteen hours to fish that day. Maybe they're only getting 20 days to fish the whole season. They'll stop to help someone out.

MORRIS: Did you ever get together with other women who were up there?

JEZ: Oh yeah [chuckles]. That's real important.

MORRIS: So you didn't have to miss that, being the only woman?

JEZ: No. Men couldn't stand that, though. There'd be six of us sitting together at a table talking and having nothing to do with all the men around us [laughter].

MORRIS: So there's a fun aspect to fishing?

JEZ: Well, seining yeah, because you're working two days on and two days off. When you go to town you dance, you know. You go out, you go hiking, you have your days off and you can play.

MORRIS: What about weather?

JEZ: Summer in Alaska isn't that bad, but I guess I probably have been in some twelve-foot seas, fifty mile per hour winds. Um, if you have your net out in anything over thirty knot winds, you're going to have a little trouble getting it back. I've been in out in swells on the coast where you're following a boat and you can't see the boat in front of you because it dips down into the bottom of a swell while you're in the bottom of another one.

MORRIS: Did you say you ran the skiff too?

JEZ: I ran the skiff in Puget Sound, not in Alaska. Well, just a few days in Alaska. That was my favorite job. I think that was probably the best job for a woman [laughter].

MORRIS: Oh really? Why is that?

JEZ: Because you're – uh - once you've learned fishing- because it's not physically demanding. But it is mentally demanding and, uh, it's because you're always working. But it gives you a lot of freedom to get out, away from the boat and you actually do proper fishing because you're watching the fish as they're coming in.

MORRIS: How long are you in the skiff when you - ?

JEZ: Uh, the net's out for about twenty minutes. So you're in the skiff for twenty minutes while the net's out and then the hauling-in gear takes about twenty, twenty-five minutes and you're in the skiff at that time and quite often you'll bring the skiff around to the back of the boat and the boat will go and make another stop. So you can end up in the skiff all day. Whereas other crewmembers, except for the skipper, other crewmembers get to rest for those twenty minutes while the net's out if they're not repairing something or cooing a meal or working in the engine room.

MORRIS: Did you run the boat, too?

JEZ: Uh, yeah when it's traveling.

MORRIS: What would you say is probably the best experience that you ever had fishing?

JEZ: I'd have to say, as we talked about the sense of community before, I think that, over and all, was a good experience. But then a day when you catch a lot of fish and you load a boat and, uh, you know, the crew did it together it's sort of a euphoric feeling that everyone worked together so well to have a wonderful, successful day.

MORRIS: What would you say is the worst?

JEZ: The worst experience? First year fishing, um, not really knowing what to expect the next day, the very beginning of the season, uh, finally delivering the catch for the day, thinking you're going to get to go to your bunk and sleep for a normal – what, six hours, eight hours?- but then finding the boat going out of the harbor and into the ocean and you're going to be setting the net into about fifteen minutes. That's probably the worst [laughter].

MORRIS: The lack of sleep [laughter]. Did you ever get used to that?

JEZ: Yeah. You know, you learn to develop – some people do, some people don't. I learned to fall asleep very quickly. And now, you know, if somebody calls me at three o'clock in the morning I don't get upset. I just wake up and talk to them. 'Cause it doesn't last that long. It's only for two months and it has to end.

MORRIS: What about Alaska? Did you like being up there?

JEZ: I have to say, Alaska is beautiful in the summer. There are days traveling where the – there's an area around Juneau where the glaciers float and, um, between the beautiful turquoise ice and the days when you'd see whales – all the sea life and the beautiful Alaska sunsets... It's a wonderful way to get to experience Alaska.

MORRIS: You went hiking you said?

JEZ: Mmm hmm. You know, you'd see brown bears on the beach, seeing all the eagles. I think, for the most part, a lot of fishermen are involved with the fishing because they do really appreciate – they are really involved with the natural world. You can't help but be because it's a great part of your life.

MORRIS: I've heard that there's a lot of efforts up in southeast [Alaska] to restock the fisheries and the fishermen are contributing to those efforts. Do you know anything about that?

JEZ: Um, I don't know about the new efforts. I do know that part of our, uh, income every year – three percent - goes to, um - what's the word for it? – fisheries management, basically, enhancement programs, to work towards getting the hatcheries more productive. I don't really want to get into the politics of fishing, though, because it is kind of complicated.

MORRIS: Is that just in Alaska – that program with the three percent?

JEZ: The enhancements? I don't know what's being done down here. Puget Sound's a different area. There's not – you do see quite a lot of dwindling of the fish population here in the Puget Sound area. In Alaska it just kinda seems to come and go. You know, you get a cold winter and freeze some eggs and the next season, you know, down the line

that would match with that cold winter, you would see lots of fish. Um, it seemed like they would go up and down. What the fishermen talked most about is trying to get rid of the driftnet fishing because at this point there's driftnet fishing by Taiwanese, Koreans, um, Japanese, no matter what other flag they were flying their ship under- it may not be the Japanese flag but they'd be supported by Japanese. Um, they're catching silvers that are two pounds. Well, given another couple of months, those same silvers are going to be four to six pounds. It's a waste of a resource to catch something that in two months is going to be at least doubled in size.

MORRIS: So you're talking about the offshore, the big, giant - ?

JEZ: Yeah, the big thirty-mile-long nets stacked one on top of the other.

MORRIS: I guess part of my point is do you think that fishermen are still responsible for keeping that resource going? You didn't really want to get into politics, but - ?

JEZ: I don't know. As far as the most visible thing that I saw in six years, at the beginning in 1986 people just threw their garbage overboard. You'd see plastic – it was just common practice to throw plastic overboard because you just couldn't save all the stuff on the deck because it would be getting in the way of fishing. So you were just told to throw it overboard. And by the last year I was fishing, people were not even throwing cans overboard. Which, you know, cans in the ocean would probably only be there two or three years if they were exposed to enough salt. But, uh, very, very little garbage going overboard. And there are going to be those fishermen who are going to always throw garbage overboard but those that are in the middle range – I think those were the ones that were- a great deal of improvement. They were able to see that the beaches were littered with bottles.

MORRIS: So there's at least a raised consciousness about - ?

JEZ: Yeah, I think so.

MORRIS: Did you always work for the same cannery?

JEZ: The canner's name changed but it was basically the same cannery.

MORRIS: And which was that?

JEZ: Um, Whitney-Fidalgo changed to Far West changed to Trident.

MORRIS: Are there any words of wisdom you would want to give to somebody – especially a woman – who wanted to go fishing?

JEZ: To a woman who wanted to go fishing... Well, first of all, I guess if there's an opening on a boat and they act like they really want ya, be sure and check them out because there's a good chance there's a reason why there's an opening on a boat. The



really good boats are not going to have real easy openings. So the best advice is to find openings on the boats, go ahead and talk to people on the docks. That's a way to get the job is to spend time around the fishermen. But to, uh, once you find an opening, go talk to a couple of – at least a couple of skippers and ask them what they think of that person because, generally, everybody knows everybody.

MORRIS: When you say you've heard of women having problems on boats, what kind of problems?

JEZ: There's a case where the skipper on the boat didn't have a great deal of respect for women. Although he did tell her he respected her for being good at nets, he did tell her that he had ever had doing the nets – doing the repairs on the nets. As far as, uh, how she was treated, she was treated more like a servant for his boys in that she had to get up at four in the morning and cook breakfast and, uh, there wasn't a lot of sharing of the cleaning duties. It was kind of expected that she would do it. And being that that was her first year fishing, she didn't know the different ways that other boats worked. And when you went down there were different ways that everyone could cook and can clean up and, you know, not just that you're tied to the kitchen stove the whole duration of your summer. And, uh, I think that that would probably be the worse – a lack of respect and the fact that he was his own person, he was an alcoholic and that caused some problems, too.

MORRIS: Do you think, in general – you said there was raised consciousness about the environment and problems with that – do you think there's also more awareness of, like you said, drinking problems, and things that people traditionally have thought of when they think of fishermen in port?

JEZ: Yeah. Uh, that's a tough question. I think there are a lot of people who fish because there's a certain freedom – it's a short season and when you see fishermen in town and during the winter, they are different people than they are on the boats. They don't really know what they're like on the boats when they're working compared to what they see in town. They can be two different, very different, people. Um, insurance rates may be affecting the amount of time that skippers spend in town because of the problems that can happen in town and because of the laws that, as a skipper, you're covering your person no matter what they're doing while they're up in Alaska. If they're drunk and fall down on the dock you can be sued, for the rest of the season, if they break their leg – even if you told them not to get drunk. You know, maybe some skippers are not going to be spending as much time in town if they're having some problems with their crewmembers.

MORRIS: When you got together with other women up there what did you do? What did you talk about?

JEZ: Probably men [laughter].

MORRIS: How they behave, or - ?

JEZ: Yeah yeah. I think it's more of just a blowing off of steam a little bit. But just like any other fishermen, you talk about the good catches, a good day or the bad day, um, you talk about what you were doing during the winter, what you've learned, what you've read.

MORRIS: Did you often see the same women there every year?

JEZ: Yeah, there's probably a group of about five or six women that are on the boats that you see. You know, and then there are women who are the skipper's wives and they're older couples and you don't see them because the couple will tend to stay on the boat and just send their younger crew to town.

MORRIS: So you were saying that on some boats the woman wouldn't realize that the cooking duties, the cleaning, et cetera could be shared? Is that the way it was then on your boat?

JEZ: Yeah, on our boat when I got to town – I didn't cook every year. I only cooked three years. And I purposefully didn't start out cooking because I wanted to learn the engineering and I wanted to learn the net work and if I was in the kitchen – I figured I knew how to cook, I knew I didn't have any problem with that [laughter]. But in the end it worked out to be – because I was more particular about what I ate – and where the guys, they'd just be cooking grease and gravy and I would be more conscientious about cooking vegetables and preparing food a little bit better because I think my own particular tastes led me to cooking more than the fact that the job was this or that.

MORRIS: But nobody expected you to - ?

JEZ: Well, that's the thing, too, you know. It helped a lot having people on the boat who had been on boats before, that they understood that, you know, at night each person took turns washing dishes and if you cooked you didn't have to wash dishes at night because you had washed dishes all day long. Um, in town, you know, people pretty much would go their separate ways. Maybe we'd barbeque a fish together. One person would make a salad, one would cook a fish and that was, you know, a nice way to work it. It made more of a family atmosphere.

MORRIS: Were all the crew members from Bellingham?

JEZ: Um, the ones that I worked with mostly, or the surrounding areas within an hour's drive of Bellingham.

MORRIS: So did you see them during the year other than - ?

JEZ: No, that's the thing about fishing is you rarely, um, see the people during the winter. We're like a moving city in the summer – you'd see people, you're friends with them. That's one of the things you do when you get back in the summer is you go around and see everybody, you know, you didn't see for eight months. So that's part of it. I guess

that's a little lonely because you get back and all these friendships you've developed you don't have until again the next year.

MORRIS: So it really wasn't a matter of having a tight friendship all along. It was definitely a fishing relationship.

JEZ: Mmm hmm. Um, I mean, you might see them. You know, maybe they'll have a party or a wedding and there'll be something that you go to but you wouldn't see them other than if you were around the docks working on the nets or at something that didn't involve fishing. Yeah, and then there's fall fishing but you only go out a couple of days a week. Then you go home. You're not staying out. It's a different kind of community because then there's Seattle people kind of fishing and everybody spreads out more whereas in Alaska you're more, as a group, together.

MORRIS: And that fall fishing you do where?

JEZ: Um, it's in Puget Sound, you know, around Edmonds, Kingston, Hood Canal. You can go up to Roberts Point up near Blaine.

MORRIS: Where do you keep your boat in the winter?

JEZ: Uh, in Bellingham. You'll find people with boats in Bellingham, Everett, Seattle.

[END OF SIDE A]

[SIDE B]

MORRIS: Was there anything else you wanted to say about being on boats?

JEZ: Well, I think, as far as – you had asked earlier about women being on boats and if they should do it as a job and I think physically, uh, a woman can do it. I don't think there's a problem there with the hydraulics and the changing – I don't think that's a problem. I think you need to look at yourself and decide whether you can be on a small boat with four or five other people for two months. That can be a real problem. I think all people, by the end of the season, are ready to go home and get away from their other crewmates. Um, and each boat's different, has different personalities. I think you should spend some time traveling around the dock, meeting the skippers, meeting the people and try to find a boat most closely suited to your likes and desires. The food can change, the attitudes toward women can change and I think it's important to find some people that you are comfortable working with because you are with them for so many hours and it makes your life a lot easier, it'd make for a much nicer summer experience.

MORRIS: And you said something about maybe fall fishing would be a good - ?

JEZ: Yeah, fall fishing would be a good way to get an idea of what the work is like. You could go out for two days with someone and you wouldn't be committed. And you could

just go out for two days and that would be it, you wouldn't need to go out again with them if you didn't want to. Could see how the net works, how the crew works, how the crew works together.

MORRIS: You know, in one of my previous interview someone made a comment about, um, work styles they thought of as women on boats where sometimes people fit in as stereotypes – “one of the boys”, the “mom”, or something like that. Do you feel like anything like that exists?

JEZ: Oh, I think so but I still think it's—you're who you are. Um, I mean they even tease skippers about being the dad and then they act like little kids sometimes as crewmembers. But I think if you just don't keep it up, like don't pick up after them and do the things that a mom would do then you don't fall into that stereotype so easily.

MORRIS: So act like yourself?

JEZ: Act like yourself and spend some time, like we do, talking to women on other boats, finding out how they're treated. It's really more about how to assert yourself and do your job.

MORRIS: Unless you have anything else, I think that will do it. Thank you!

[END OF TAPE]