

**Washington Women's Heritage Project, Center for Pacific Northwest Studies**  
**Interview with Lynn Dennis**

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Interviewer: Carole Teshima Morris

Location:

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[TAPE 1. SIDE A]

MORRIS: This is February 11<sup>th</sup>, 1993 and I am interviewing Lynn Dennis. Okay, Lynn, for the record, how old are you?

DENNIS: Oh, I'm 31 years old.

MORRIS: And you were born where?

DENNIS: In Bellingham, Washington.

MORRIS: Lynn, when did you start fishing?

DENNIS: Oh, about ten years ago.

MORRIS: On your own, or...?

DENNIS: Well, actually I got into fishing through my, he was my boyfriend at the time and he was a fisherman and so I went out fishing with him and got my first taste of fishing and thought to myself, "Well, gee, I can probably do this on my own." So I ventured out and started in the Nooksack River with a little 12-foot boat.

MORRIS: How long was it before you got your own boat?

DENNIS: Well probably- I'd say I went fishing a couple of years as a crewmember and then decided to get my own boat, and so I began in the Nooksack River with the 12-footer and then began getting bigger skiffs- open skiffs- and then working my way up to a small gill-netter, which I have today; it's about a 21-foot gill-netter with a reel on it, and I fish mainly up at Point Roberts for Sockeye salmon.

MORRIS: So, can you explain about the tribal fisheries, can anybody in the tribe start going fishing, or...?

DENNIS: Well, you have to be a tribally enrolled- well, I shouldn't say tribal- you have to be an enrolled tribal member and you have to get a number through the tribe and once you get enrolled and get that number then you are eligible to get a treaty license to commercial fish. And also that would include getting clams and also crab.

MORRIS: And so you don't fish in the river at all anymore?

DENNIS: Not anymore, not anymore.

MORRIS: You've moved on to bigger things?

DENNIS: Well, I shouldn't say that, I don't think it's really a way of looking at it, but I really enjoy the openness of the water rather than- to me it seems, I feel more refined when I'm in the river, although it's kind of fun to go fishing in the river. I haven't been fishing in the river for years, but it's kind of fun because you get in line at a drift and you wait, wait your turn to drift, and then during the time that you're waiting for your drift then you can visit with the other fishermen and fisherwomen, so that's kinda nice, but I don't really miss it. I like the openness of Point Roberts, for example.

MORRIS: Does your boat have a name?

DENNIS: It sure does! The *Humdinger* [laughter], named by my mother.

MORRIS: And you bought this new, right?

DENNIS: Yes. In fact I ordered the boat and had it built and paid it off and went fishing-salmon season.

MORRIS: Alright. This is a growler boat, is that right?

DENNIS: Mm hmm, yes. And it has a ["wahouse"] on it.

MORRIS: Oh, it does. So you stay on your boat when you're...?

DENNIS: Well, I normally don't, I usually have my crewmember that I hire sleep in the boat and watch over my boat and I'll sleep in the camper with my parents.

MORRIS: Well that's nice. Who do you usually take as a crewmember?

DENNIS: Somebody who's strong and- [laughter] strong and has a good background in terms of mechanical abilities and somebody that has some fishing experience. Not too excited about taking-we call them "greenhorns"- out fishing.

MORRIS: So does this mean you usually have a man or a woman?

DENNIS: Well, I usually have a man just because of the mechanical abilities, but I've had women fish with me too in the past.

MORRIS: How many women do you estimate are in the [inaudible]?

DENNIS: Well, I would say that the number has increased, for example for the Lummi tribe, I would say that roughly 25% are women that fish.

MORRIS: Wow, that many.

DENNIS: I'd say so. Or that might be even a little high, maybe more like 20%.

MORRIS: What are your estimates as far as the total fleet?

DENNIS: I don't know. I've been told we have approximately 3200 tribal members. I've been told there's about 800 who commercial fish, and that would include purse-seiners, gill-netters, and skiff fishermen, fisherwomen.

MORRIS: Do you do your own gear work?

DENNIS: No, I don't. I probably-- I know I should learn how, but I don't. What I do normally is I'm very busy in my other work and other jobs that I do that I haven't taken the time out to learn how to repair gear. I do know how to hang net, but generally what I do is I take it to a friend of mine and I have her hang my net. I pay her to hang my net. In fact, I got ran over last year really bad by a big pleasure boat and had to get the net repaired, I had to drive my boat from Point Roberts down to Bellingham and take the net off the boat and run it and have- her name is Rachel Manlove- have her repair the net and once she got that done- it probably took her about two days- then I had to load it back on the truck and then load it back on the boat and so it was quite a process, but generally I don't hang my gear.

MORRIS: So, it's pretty expensive to have backup gear, right?

DENNIS: Oh, yes, yes, well, it's- gear is expensive. People think that fishing is all glorified, but it's not. They think that you make lots of money all the time, and that's not true. I could go out fishing one day and make just enough money for fuel and lunch, and then the next day I could do very well, so commercial fishing is definitely a gamble.

MORRIS: Like you said, you have other jobs: for the tribe you do public relations work. How much time do you actually spend fishing out of a year?

DENNIS: Well, generally I try to take the month of August off from the college and fish, because when I get into the fishing mode it's real exciting and I get to get out in the fresh air and have some time to myself. I don't have to dress up, I don't have to wear high heels or makeup or... I can just put on my jeans and boots and go out fishing, and I really like that a lot.

MORRIS: So it's not so much the money that attracts you?

DENNIS: Well, the money is attractive to me, but I think that just having that time to myself and I really enjoy the water, that the money is definitely a plus, but at the same time I enjoy the quietness and the serenity of when I'm out in the water.

MORRIS: What about bad weather?

DENNIS: Bad weather. Well, that's something that, that I've learned not to fool around with, because I've had a couple of close calls fishing, and I think that when- at least for me, when I've been fishing- I have the attitude that "Oh, I can do anything out in that water and I'll be okay." But after having a couple of close calls it's changed my attitude and made me more respectful of the weather and not to take any risks and- not that I have in the past a lot, but for example, one time I was leaving Sandy Point and I wanted to get up to Point Roberts that night- get my boat up there that night- and I knew it was blowing, but I didn't really realize how hard it was blowing, because I thought "Oh, it's only going to take me, oh, I'd say maybe a half hour to get up to Point Roberts from Sandy Point." Wrong. It took me a good two-and-a-half, three hours and it was rough out. My parents were really worried about me and thank goodness I had a CB on my boat, but they were really concerned and I didn't realize until I was about halfway there that I thought and realized, "It is really rough out here. Am I even going to make it?" And that was a scary feeling, and so I learned a very good lesson from that attempt to want to go against Mother Nature and still try to get to my destination and I realized that it really wasn't that important; I could have waited until morning and gone out fishing. Maybe I wouldn't have been where I wanted to fish but at least I wouldn't have been taking the chance that I took.

MORRIS: And you were by yourself, you didn't have your crew?

DENNIS: No, I had my crew with me, but... It's still, it can get pretty scary out there.

MORRIS: Does the fleet sort of stick together, do they kind of all move out to the point at the same time?

DENNIS: Well, not necessarily. Well, there's quite a few fishermen who head out to the salmon banks, which is right off the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and then there's fishermen who fish around this area, around Lummi Island, and then there's also fishermen up at Point Roberts, so all the fishermen have their own preferences to where they like to fish. Generally, it's places that they know how to fish, because they're certain- let's say for example up at Point Roberts, there's a reef up there. Depending on what the tide is doing, depending on how deep your net is, you can't just fish there, and so fishermen have their preference as to where they like to fish. Maybe they felt lucky at one area as compared to another area, and so it really varies. It just depends on the individual fisherman or fisherwoman.

MORRIS: Does anyone else in your family fish?

DENNIS: Yes, in fact everybody fishes in my family. My brothers have skiffs and gill-netters and my mother and father have a gill-netter, so everybody fishes. And it's fun too, because we can do something where we're making money and at the same time we're getting to spend time with each other. [Interruption- knock on door].

MORRIS: Do you think you're ever experienced discrimination or anything because you're a woman?

DENNIS: Of course [laughter]!

MORRIS: What, like what?

DENNIS: Well, when I first began fishing in the river nobody took me seriously, and I was made fun of and joked around about because I think the fishermen did not think I was serious about pursuing this fishing. Through time, they realized that I was serious and that I did mean business and that I was going to be fishing for a long time, and it's like in a sense earning my keep. And now I'm one of the guys, one of the fishermen, so to speak. When fishing comes around other fishermen ask me "Oh, so Lynn are you getting ready for fishing? How deep are you going, how deep is your net going to be?" Questions like that, so I've been accepted and they realize that I'm serious about it now, so they treat me differently.

MORRIS: Did it make you mad or anything?

DENNIS: Mm hmm, it made me mad. I think that it's probably difficult for men to see a woman get into an industry that they've been in all their lives. I mean, I'm sure it was difficult, but there's getting to be more and more women involved in the fishing industry that it's becoming very common for women to be fishing now and it's, though my eyes, quite acceptable by the men.

MORRIS: Do you think any of this was actual harassment, or more just of a...?

DENNIS: No, not at all harassment, I just think that many men were not used to seeing women fish, but I do have to say something that I think is very, very prevalent in that if any one of us gets in trouble on the water, there's plenty of help out there. If somebody breaks down, needs to be towed in, there's somebody there right away to help out, and so what I really like about it when I'm out fishing is that there's always somebody there to help out if you get in trouble, so it's very important to have a CB on your boat. But I think that says a lot. I'm very proud of my people in that sense, that when somebody's in trouble or in distress there's plenty of fishermen, fisherwomen who are willing to help out.

MORRIS: So, when you were growing up were your parents fishing, or not at that time?

DENNIS: Well, my dad always fished up Alaska, fished a purse-seiner throughout Alaska, so he would be gone for months at a time and fished up there.

MORRIS: So you knew about fishing but you never really had the opportunity of...?

DENNIS: Right, right.

MORRIS: So what do you think is going to be happening in this industry, do you think that, you know the management of the resources and the politics, what kind of effect do you think that's going to have?

DENNIS: Well, the US-Canada Treaty has had a devastating effect and impact for both Indian and non-Indian fishermen in the state of Washington in that the treaty that Regan has signed basically gave away all of our rights for that duration of that treaty because it's hurt a lot of us financially. We've gone from days of fishing during an opening to hours, and what's really difficult is that for example a father supporting his family of five children, goes out fishing the season opens up 5am Monday morning, closes Tuesday morning 9am. He goes out fishing, he's out there, has his nets set out at the beginning of the opening, then his motor breaks down. He can't get anybody to fix that motor and he loses out on that opening. And the way that the openings have been going we've only been getting- last year I think we got six, maybe five or six openings for the whole Sockeye salmon season. That's really scary. I don't have any children. I don't have a husband, so I don't have a family that I have to support, but it's been very devastating to many of our families here on the reservation because of the reduction of hours, because of our allocation of salmon has been decreasing each year whereas the allocation of salmon for the Canadians has been on the upswing. But I do know that the tribes are meeting about this treaty now, they're in Bellevue as we speak. I don't know what the outcome will be, but it's about time that we US citizens do something about this. And I do know that the tribes are working on it, I don't know how much the non-Indian fishermen are involved but I do know that it's a very important issue to the Washington state tribes.

MORRIS: Have you ever considered getting involved in political actions in that regard?

DENNIS: Well, I've considered it. I think that the kind of work that I do now, it's not focused on politics, but I end up being involved very much so with the tribal politics because I work at the casino and I work at the college and those are the two big agenda items to the Council. In terms of possibly getting involved politically in regards to the fisheries, I would definitely consider it. I feel- I always go when it feels right, when the timing is there and... But we'll see what happens in the future. My brother is involved- Bobby is involved- with the Lummi Indian Fish and Game Commission and he attends a lot of these types of meetings and is a representative of the tribe, so I feel very good about that because whenever I have any questions I can go and ask him and I feel good that there is somebody else in my family that's involved, because I feel that in order for us to have control of our destiny, and have control of our future through education, plus having our tribal members be involved in important issues such as fishing.

MORRIS: Um, did you tell me a few days ago that you were getting into the crab?

DENNIS: Well, I am in the crab business and I don't know why, but I am [giggling]. I have 50 crab pots and I commercial crab them.

MORRIS: When did you start that?

DENNIS: I bought them about 3, 4 months ago.

MORRIS: So how often do you go out?

DENNIS: Well, I actually don't go out, I have my brother watch over my crab pots, and we've worked out a percentage.

MORRIS: So you're a crab pot despot? [laughter]

DENNIS: I wouldn't say that. We're allowed to have up to a hundred pots, tribal members. But I have 50, you have to have 50 in order to get a crab license here.

MORRIS: So is that out in Sandy Point, that area?

DENNIS: We have different areas, Sandy Point, right out here at Lummi Bay, down by the Fisherman's Cove, so there's various- there's different areas to crab, Lummi Island, so-- Just depends on where you want to crab, but we have boundaries that we have to adhere to.

MORRIS: So this is something that, since your brother's actually doing the work, you just wanted to diversify a little bit?

DENNIS: Yeah I wanted to diversify a little. There's not many women who have invested and have crab pots so I guess I'm just somebody who likes to be out in the front tier, I guess, so to speak, and I think what's really good about the way I was brought up was that my father taught me to realize that even if I am a female that I am just as capable as other males, so I tend to delve out into areas that the traditional woman doesn't get involved in such as investing. I've taken some risks in terms of fishing in terms of crabbing, in terms of investing and I'm glad that I've taken those risks because they've turned out to be financially smart moves, but, at the same time, it's been kind of scary, and scary too in the sense that there's not many other women that are involved in like let's say fishing or crabbing. So I guess I like to be out in front and doing something innovative and creative.

MORRIS: So part of the challenge is the management, it's not just the work?

DENNIS: Oh, yes, definitely, and I like challenges. That's why I've opted to get into the fishing industry and the crabbing. I think it makes me more of a well-rounded person to understand the other areas of being a tribal member, learning about fishing, learning about crabbing. I don't know very much about crabbing, I'm learning, but I think it's good to be a well-rounded person, to be able to talk to a fisherman, be able to talk to