

This recording is an interview with Michael Johnson, a retired commercial fisherman who worked on the Fraser River for 25 years. The major themes of the interview are his career trajectory as a fisherman, his experiences fishing along the coast of British Columbia, and his perspective on the Fraser River.

Interviewer: Oana Capota

Date: 11 February 2014

Date Range 1970s – present

Recording Time: 56:58

Michael Johnson is a retired commercial fisherman who has lived in Burnaby and New Westminister his whole life, and had his boat tied up in the Annieville Channel in North Delta. His father was also a fisherman, and Johnson got his introduction to the occupation through his father. At the age of 19, he got his own boat, and called it “The Rocky Way” after the popular song “Rocky Mountain Way” by Joe Walsh. He worked as a commercial fisherman for 25 years, and stopped when the federal government offered him a buyout in the late 1990s. For most of the year, Johnson would fish for salmon in Northern British Columbia (BC) and the average salmon at the time was six pounds.

Section 00:00 – 05:07

In this portion of the interview, Johnson describes the start of his work as a commercial fisherman on the waterfront. He started working for his father at the age of eight as an unpaid deckhand. Once he had his own boat, he would fish in the inlets in Northern BC from early June to late October, and not on the Fraser River.

Section 05:08 – 09:39

In this portion of the interview, Johnson talks about selling fish to BC Packers and sometimes Canadian Fish, but also privately. People who bought fish directly from his boat would pay a third of the store price. Johnson had no permanent crew, but sometimes a friend would come along to help. His boat was not refrigerated, but he later had ice on the boat to keep the fish cold. He states that the fishing industry did not change much.

Section 09:40 – 13:02

In this portion of the interview, Johnson talks about the fishing community at Annieville, and estimates that there were 200 boats along the docks during his time. He talks about the various places in Northern BC where he fished, and his favourite place Namu, between Bella Bella and Rivers Inlet. It was his favourite because it did not have that many boats. He tells a story about George Freeman, a friend of his father.

Section 13:03 – 17:23

In this portion of the interview, Johnson talks about how he would fish one day a week when fishing on the Fraser River, and four days a week in Northern BC. During the days off he would repair the nets and boats, wash his clothes, and rest in the fishing camps. Johnson describes the fishing camps, and difference between them. When fishing in Northern BC, Johnson was not lonely, because friends were fishing in the same area.

Section 17:24 – 21:19

In this portion of the interview, Johnson states that 99.9% of the fishermen were male, but there were a couple of women who had inherited their husband's boats. The women could do the same job because of the improved machinery. Johnson describes his first boat, the "Rocky Way," and how he named his and his father's boats.

Section 21:20 – 23:50

In this portion of the interview, Johnson talks about how the introduction of radar and radio changed the fishing industry. Before this equipment was introduced, accidents in fog or storms could be fatal. He tells getting lost in the fog, and driving onto a mudflat in the Gulf of Georgia.

Section 23:51 – 29:59

In this portion of the interview, Johnson says that he did not like fishing on the Fraser River. He estimates that there were 900 fishing boats on the river in his time. He describes conflict between fishermen and tugboat captains, and the one time the United States Navy visited New Westminster and the ship cut 20 fishing nets in half on its way out of port.

Section 30:00 – 34:49

In this portion of the interview, Johnson tells about BC packers and Canadian Fish boats that would pick up fish in the fishing camps and in Annieville. He returns to talk about equipment, and talks about the automated anchor, sounders, fish finders and autopilots.

Section 34:50 – 37:49

In this portion of the interview, Johnson talks about accidents involving fishermen. Most of them involved storms, but he never had an accident. He talks about how there was no quay in New Westminster during his time as a fisherman, but rather a place for boats to dock and to get fuel.

Section 37:50 – 43:26

In this portion of the interview, Johnson talks about taking university courses from October to May and was an aspiring writer. When he sold his boat, he did some work on Annacis Island, through a government re-training program.

Section 43:27 – 49:24

In this portion of the interview, Johnson states that he would not have become a fisherman if he had a choice. He liked that he was his own boss and could go where he wanted. However, he never made much money and the work was stressful. Johnson describes the difference between herring and gillnet fishing, and tells a story about working as a deckhand on a trawler.

Section 49:25 – 56:58

In this portion of the interview, Johnson describes the average fishing boat as 35 feet long, large enough to carry the fish, nets and drums. He describes how BC Packers and Canada Fish would pay the fishermen at the end of the year, but also in their own "money," which were coupons you could use in government stores in fishing camps. His best memory on the river was the day he caught 500 sockeye salmon.