

This recording is an interview with Erling Olsen, a fisherman and former tugboat captain. The major themes of this interview are fishing and tugboat industries, as well as his experiences growing up in the Queensborough neighbourhood.

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Interviewee: Erling Olsen

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Date range of topics covered: 1950s to 2014

Sound Recording Length: 1:04:12

Erling Olsen grew up in Queensborough, and started gillnetting with his father when he was 7 or 8 years old. By the time he was 13, he had his own nets; by age 15, his own boat. He also worked in the tugboat industry, working his way up from a deckhand to captain. He also briefly tried his hand at millwork. His grandfather came to Queensborough from Norway and his family has a history in the fishing industry. He later moved to Delta and purchased several boats, as well as a fish processing plant. He discusses life in Queensborough, as well as the changes to his childhood neighbourhood and New Westminster.

0:00:00-0:03:32

Olsen describes fishing near Annacis Island as a teenager with kids from school. He tells a story of getting caught by a Fisheries official and fined \$12.50. He got his own boat at the age of 15, and started working as a deckhand on tugboats clearing wood in the late 1950s. He makes a brief mention of work in the mills but does not go into detail.

0:03:33-0:06:55

Olsen explains more about why he was fined for fishing – you had to be 16 to get a fishing licence, and he was underage. He recalls that everyone would go down to the river after school and play, but he feels it was a lot dirtier in the past compared to now, due to industry. He remembers a big Adams River salmon run in 1958, and says the industry didn't effect sizes of the runs. He got his first boat in 1958, and would fish alone or with a friend.

0:06:56-0:08:51

Describes fishing equipment of the recent past. There were no electronics or hydraulic steering, just a man and his gill-nets. He didn't consider it dangerous work, but he said it could occasionally be scary. After losing money on another fishing boat, he went back into the tugboat industry for nearly 10 years, and worked his way up to the position of captain. He mentions companies such as Valley Towing. They got paid "day for day," where they'd work a day then get a day off.

0:08:52- 0:12:07

Olsen describes the tugboats that docked under the Pattullo Bridge. He mentions his old boss Jack Bruno; Olsen now owns Jacks' old yacht. He describes the local towboat companies, as well as the work done on the boats, including describing the longshoreman and mills. He also

used to be a lifeguard for the guys working on the barges during the offseason, a job he got through a family friend. He doesn't remember ever having to rescue anyone.

0:12:08-0:14:59

In this section, Olsen describes working with his father, and how the family got into the fishing industry, starting with his grandfathers. He describes different fishing companies along the river, such as Nelson Brothers and Canadian Fish. The companies supplied nets, boat repairs, gas coupons, and more. He jokes "they'd never trust us with the cash." He says lots of the fish was sent to England or France; shipping to Japan started with the development of better freezing techniques. He reflects on the disappearance of canneries along the Fraser River.

0:15:00-0:16:06

Olsen describes the changes in the canning industries; he says they started to shrink in the 1940s and continued disappearing from there. He says in the 1960s/1970s there were maybe four companies left, and now there's only one cannery, in Prince George.

0:16:07-0:18:04

In this section, Olsen discusses competition between different users on the river. He says there used to be 50-100 boats fishing along the New Westminster waterfront at any given time. He blames the change to fishing further up the coast on politics. He talks about a particularly big run four years ago when he caught a million pounds of fish up the coast.

0:18:05- 0:20:57

Olsen describes the difference between gillnetting and seining, two methods of catching fish with nets. Only one man is needed to pick fish out of a gillnet, whereas seining needs more people, but brings in more fish. He talks about how it is hard to make money gillnetting, and so he did fishing in summer and tugboating in winter. After about 10 years, he went back to fishing full-time, and went tuna fishing in San Diego and Costa Rica, and later switched to fishing halibut in Alaska.

0:20:58 – 0:22:26

Olsen describes having his own boat built locally, which he used for around 10 years. He later moved to fishing salmon. He provides the years he got his various boats.

0:22:27- 0:23:20

In this section, Olsen says that the biggest changes to fishing over the years has been the increasing numbers of licences required, shortening of seasons, and the imposition of quotas.

0:23:21-0:25:46

According to Olsen the most difficult part of his job was fishing for halibut and black cod, because they were offshore, and fished in the wintertime. His favorite part was when he "had a full load heading in." He describes the safety equipment for offshore fishing, of which he says

there wasn't much. He would wear wool clothes, rain gear, and an insulated jacket to keep warm.

0:25:47- 0:27:16

In this section Olsen describes the gradual changes in fishing along the Fraser River. He says that they started cutting back the number of days they were allowed to fish starting in the 1970s. He talks about recent large salmon runs.

0:27:17-0:28:32

In this clip, Olsen describes the hours involved in both the towboating and fishing industries. The towboating industry worked him 28 days in a month at one point, and required certain amounts of hours off in-between shifts, to ensure a proper night of sleep before employees were back to work.

0:28:33-0:30:30

Olsen describes his family's history in Norway in the fishing industry. In Norway, the men would fish and the women would dry and prepare the fish; he says they would make Bacalhau (salted cod).

0:30:31-0:32:06

Erling tells a story of how he was excited to have sold fish to the same island where his grandfather came from in Norway. He met an aunt in Sweden, and she had worked in the cannery where they made fish pudding from his fish. It would get to Sweden through the shipping line he worked for at the time.

0:32:07-0:34:07

In this section Olsen talks about a fish processing plant he bought in Port Alberni during the 1990's. He would bring in rockfish, halibut, and cod and process it into fillets or other products, freeze them, and ship them out in containers.

0:34:08-0:36:55

In this clip, Olsen discusses growing up in Queensborough, which is where his grandfather originally settled. They lived on the main road near where Queen Elizabeth School used to be. He talks about the mills that used to be in the area of the current Queensborough Bridge. He said that lots of his friends from Queensborough worked in the mills. He tried it himself when his job put him out for two months, as they were building a new tug. He claims "he wasn't much of a mill worker."

0:36:56-0:38:14

In this clip, Olsen says that many families in Queensborough had come from Norway, and jokes that everyone used to call it "the United Nations" because there so many different nationalities. He said everyone at school got along despite this; "I think later in life, then there got to be more groups; but when we were all younger, it didn't matter much."

0:38:15-0:39:50

Olsen describes the house he grew up in – a wood frame, two-story house they shared with his grandparents. He talks about how his current business partner’s grandfather had ties to his grandfather, pointing out the “small world” of Queensborough. The two men had worked together at Mercer Shipyard.

0:39:51-0:42:09

In this clip, Olsen gives his views on the changes along the river. “We’ve all gotta get used to change,” he jokes. He says the river used to be lined with businesses, and now there’s “not much of that left.” He says that “everything’s containers,” which he describes as more “big business.” He points out that the mills and shipyards have been replaced with homes.

0:42:10-0:42:40

Olsen did only recreational fishing in Queensborough “in ditches” as a child.

0:42:21-0:43:44

In this clip, Olsen considers whether there is any evidence of Queensborough’s industrial past visible today. He points out Annacis Island as a modern place of industry. He thinks that everything has gotten better over time. He says that everyone used to fight to get off the river, and jokes about how now people are fighting to get back on. He says it’s essentially guaranteed there won’t be commercial businesses along the river because they are charged too much to be there.

0:43:45-0:44:20

In this clip, Olsen talks about the change in the canneries, with the “sell-out” to BC Fish in the 1980s.

0:44:21-0:49:01

Olsen says that he enjoyed growing up in Queensborough. He says that as he got older, he wanted to make more money and move to a “more affluent” area. He talks about talking the bus over the bridge to junior and senior high school in New Westminster, located at 8th & 10th. He talks about the “old train bridge” and tells a story about skipping school and rowing a skiff around the river with a friend, but he was caught because his father had seen him from the bridge. He also tells a story about a cop chasing him and a friend out of New Westminster, telling them to take their two bits and pay their toll and go home.

0:49:02-0:50:55

In this clip, Olsen discusses the future of fishing. He thinks that opportunities will be there, but it will become more specialized. He thinks the new modern lifestyle is less geared towards fishing. He talks about how it is different in Norway compared to here.

0:50:56-0:53:50

In this clip, Olsen talks about the changes in Queensborough. He takes it as a fact of life and sees it as what the residents wanted. He has mixed feelings and is unsure which way was better. Olsen notes that he still has a few friends who are retired on the island. He says there is not much left to be nostalgic about or to preserve for the next generation. He says that the “mothers wouldn’t let their kids do that now,” referring to all the waterfront stories he has told thus far.

0:53:51-59:15

In this clip, Olsen gives his thoughts on the new community plan for Queensborough. “Used to be unique, would be more like it,” is his response. He says that the diversity used to be more pronounced in terms of culture; there was Italian bocce in the park, East Indian food, Norwegian traditional dinners, and so on. He used to go to Norwegian weddings, and to dances at Roma Hall, and remembers temples, pool halls and other halls. Olsen lists the variety of jobs held by people in Queensborough. There were millworkers, machinists, fishermen, and engineers on various ships. “For a rough upbringing,” he says most of his friends from there turned out okay.

59:16-1:01:37

In this clip, Olsen talks about the changes to the New Westminster waterfront, such as the changes at the quay. Most of his family lived in Queensborough, but the change affected him since he used to primarily tow barges in that area.

1:01:38-1:04:12

Erling talks about the work that he has done since moving to Delta, when he purchased his own boats. He also talks about the work done in shipyards, which employed many people along the waterfront, building boats from wood, aluminum and steel. He can remember Star Shipyard, Sailor Shipyard, Honour Shipyard, Shores Shipyard, and Nelson Brothers Shipyard.