Alone in a Crowd
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Alone in a Crowd: Women in the Trades Tell Their Stories.

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Like many people, Sylvia Lange leads a dual life. Hers is split between an apartment in Seattle and salmon fishing in Alaska. She calls it a lifestyle, especially for native people, but is watching smaller runs and limited entry destroy it.

One of my grandmothers was Aleut. The other was Tlingit. My grandfathers were Swedish and German. That is the way Cordoba is—a real mixture. There’s Norwegians, Swedes, Germans, Aleuts, Greeks. When the Alaska Native Land Claim Act was passed in nineteen seventy-one it cleaned up the prior treaties—and it worked, so in Cordoba we don’t have the same kind of hostility towards natives that you find down here in Seattle. There has always been discrimination in Alaska toward natives. It’s something you don’t see on the whole, but twenty years ago it was real apparent. In my adult life we’ve had some discrimination, but nothing serious and now, with ANCSA [Alaska Native Land Claim Act], the natives have real economic power, so the relationship is more on a business level than anything else.

I’ve never done anything but fish, so I just don’t have any kind of employment history at all. I worked in a cannery one year when our boat broke down and as a waitress for seven hours out of an eight-hour shift.

When I was fishing, I didn’t think I was doing it for a living. You know, I did it because it was a lifestyle. Cordoba’s a town that everyone fishes. That is, except for the women. But my mother did, and we’re a real close family, so it was just some-
the thing I did. The fishing grounds were a ways from town, so as a girl I either stayed in town with a babysitter or went fishing. I wasn’t interested in hanging out in town so I went out with my folks.

You had to be licensed to have a net. Fourteen was the earliest you could get a license. As soon as I turned fourteen I got my license and went out in a twenty-two-foot-long open boat, a skiff with an outboard motor on it. The skiff was as old as I was, because my mom and dad had found it on the beach and salvaged it about fourteen years earlier. It was low-sided and wide, probably about six foot wide and made out of plywood. There was a rattly, old, twenty-five-horsepower outboard motor on it. The roller with the net came up over the transom, over the stern of the boat. I had to put a plastic bucket over the propeller of the outboard motor so it wouldn’t catch the net as it came up. It was a pretty rinky-dink set-up.

I remember being in a complete tizzy about setting my net in the water for the first time. I didn’t know where to put it or what to do or anything. And my father’s not somebody who would tell me either. He’d say, “Do it, even if it’s wrong, just do it.” That’s something I still do. You can’t learn anything unless you do something. You can fail, but big deal. So there I was without any real distinct ideas of what it was going to be like. You have a net with floats on the top and leads on the bottom so it lies vertically in the water. The fish swim into it and tangle up in it. It’s a real fine nylon net. Aboard the boat, you have a drum to reel it in and that’s called the reel. As the net is reeled in, you take the fish out and then set it back out.

I put my net in the water and didn’t know when I was supposed to bring it in. I hadn’t been paying attention. I saw what my mother did when I’d gone out with her, but I didn’t know how long the net should be in the water, and I didn’t know what the tides were doing, and it was getting dark and I’d have to bring it in pretty soon. So I started reeling it in, and I had a lot of
fish—ninety-seven red salmon and seven king salmon. I was little when I was fourteen and the king salmon were practically as big as I was. Some of them weighed eighty pounds. I didn’t know how to pick the fish out of the net, which is something you have to learn. They come in a great, tangled glob and you don’t really know what to do with it. All I could do was sit there and cry. I’d untangle them and cry. It was getting dark and I had no idea where I was, couldn’t see what I was doing, and my boat was getting full of fish. I thought I was going to sink.

Finally my mother caught up with me, and she was really mad, because I was quite a ways inside the marker, which was illegal. I had drifted with the tide a mile up river where you’re not allowed to fish. You know, I was just sobbing by the time she reached me. I told her I didn’t know how to get the fish out of the net, so she tied her skiff up to mine and hopped aboard and helped me take ‘em out and showed me the way back down. I remember that real distinctly, but I don’t remember much beyond that.

Let me explain in more detail what it was like getting a big king salmon out of the net. They were huge fish. One was so gigantic it fit between the ribs of the boat, just fit there tight. The salmon would come up over the roller and I didn’t know what to do with them; they’d be thrashing about and they’d plop right down on the deck of the skiff, and all I could do was sit there and pound on them with my gaffhook. A gaffhook is a real menacing-looking thing. The modern ones look like baseball bats with a big stainless steel hook on the end. The hook is just like a meat hook. If a king salmon is just barely tangled in your net as you see it coming out of the water, you gaff it on the head and haul it in. But as a girl, I couldn’t have hauled one aboard if I tried. What I usually did if I saw it just hanging there, I’d try to roll it up in the net and then let the reel haul it in. But then I’m faced with trying to get it out of the net and they’re too big for me to move. So all I’d do was slam it in the head with the
gaffhook until it was stunned and then I could unroll it. They were still too heavy for me to move, so when I continued picking my net I'd have king salmon in the way. I'd just drag 'em around until I was done.

That first year I made about six hundred dollars, enough for all my school clothes and things. I think my mom and dad absorbed all my costs so every fish I caught generated income for me. Later I kept my own books and got a social security number.

The fishing season runs from May until the end of September. Actually, there are three seasons. The first season is king salmon and red salmon. Then the summer season is mixed—king salmon, red salmon, and chum salmon. Later on you get the silver salmon—coho. Each species has their own value. King salmon can run up to eighty pounds apiece and sockeye salmon is usually only six pounds, but their values are pretty close—per pound. The pink and chum salmon are a lower-value fish, and the cohos are a high-value fish.

In nineteen seventy-one the legislature passed a law that limited the entry to fishing. It said anyone that fished prior to nineteen seventy-one could get a permit to fish if they accumulated a certain number of points. I think it was twenty-one or twenty-two points. The number of permits allowed was based on the maximum amount of people that had fished in the past. Because I had gotten my first license in nineteen sixty-seven, I was one of these individuals, but I had to prove that I had attained those points. When the state sent out their pre-printed form showing how many points they thought you should have, I got two points. And everybody else who had fished since nineteen sixty-seven was immediately given their permit.

So I had to go back and get all my old fish tickets and I hadn't kept good records. That was from the time I was fourteen to eighteen when fishing was just a lark to me. Suddenly it was business, and I had to go about proving I was a fisherman. In my
Sylvia Lange, gillnetter

mind's eye I was, but I still had to prove it to the state, so I went about finding all the fish tickets and what-not.

One of the heavy point things was economic need, and since I was a minor I couldn't prove economic need. Another of the points was how much you invested in fishing, and since everything had been given to me by my parents, I hadn't invested anything.

I was a real special case, so they sent out a state commissioner to interview me. And he said, "You can just tell me, on the level, what you're really doing here, you want this permit so that you can sell it, right?"

You see the licenses have a financial value to them. They're just like a liquor license or any other license. There's a finite number of them and it's an open market system on them. A couple years ago they were worth fifty thousand dollars. Then we had a couple bad years and they went down to twenty thousand. Now they're back up to forty to forty-five thousand. Anyhow, I asked the commissioner where he got off saying something like that. Even if I did want to sell the permit, it's certainly my right to do that since I've had it since sixty-seven. On the other hand, it was quite possible I might want to fish for the rest of my life.

The commissioner got real nasty about it. He couldn't believe I was serious about fishing. A lot of wives in the past had licenses so they could go out on the boats with their husbands. To even cut up fish you had to have a license. People who hadn't really fished in the past, but had fishing licenses, wanted to get permits because they had value. So I could understand to a degree why he was saying these things, but I wasn't somebody's wife. I was there by myself, and all the fish tickets had been made out to me personally, and I had my own gear, which saved me. Finally they gave me an interim permit which I fished on for three or four years.
Limited entry really affected the native lifestyle, especially in the Cordoba area. In the villages natives lived a subsistence life and knew nothing but fishing. When limited entry came along, only the heads of households were given permits. Consequently the children of these permit holders weren’t given permits, and the lifestyle was deeply affected. That’s the thing about fishing. It’s a lifestyle. It’s something that you just do.

During the fishing season, we have different regulated hours. They’re regulated by the State Department of Fish and Game or biologists, depending on where the fish are. In the spring season, the first period runs from Monday morning at six to six Wednesday morning, and then it’s closed period. It opens again on Thursday morning at six to six Saturday morning. It’s called a split week. You have forty-eight on, twenty-four off, and thirty-six on, or something like that. You spend that entire time out on your boat. The boats have all the amenities—bunk, sink, stove. During the off time you repair your net or fix your engine or whatever. The split week usually gives you just enough time to do some repairs on board. You leave town on Sunday evening and don’t get back until Saturday, so your boats have to be set up to live on. Your net’s in the water just as much as you can keep it there. The fishing grounds are anywhere from twenty to eighty miles away from town, so the canneries send out tenders that pick up the fish and bring us groceries and fuel.

I make a comfortable living from fishing, but I couldn’t support a family on what I make. Fishing is strictly a question of motivation. You can do whatever you set your mind to. You get out of it a lot of what you put into it and, because I just have myself to support, I don’t take some of the chances that other people do. Sometimes with your equipment and weather, you don’t have a choice and you do what you have to do. But I know a lot of fishermen who are very motivated, and they wanna be out there twenty-four hours a day giving it one hundred percent, and
I don't allow myself to do that. Life isn't long enough to be spending so much energy all at once. Every year somebody dies on the flats. It's a river delta right on the Gulf of Alaska, so it's unprotected. There's a bar line, and you either fish inside or outside the bars. But whichever you choose, you have to go over the bars to do it. On nice days that's no problem, but if you're out there fishing and the weather comes up, you have to go back into that bar through breakers. How long you wanna stay out there, and if you wanna go through at night or at the edge of the tides, where the conditions are very poor for crossing the bar, depends strictly on what kind of gamble you want to take. And I just don't want to take too many gambles because it's scary enough. All of this, then, is weighed against eventually how many fish you're gonna catch. I generally just keep myself alive and compete to where I feel respectable about it.

I really started competing with the other fishermen in nineteen seventy-six. I got my first good boat that year. It was an older skiff with a little cabin on it. For the first time I started going out by myself and staying out the whole week. Previous to that I had the open skiff and would go back to my parent's bigger boat at night. My mother would be on board and have dinner made. It was just like going home for the night.

That was a really good season, and I was able to get a bank loan for really good equipment over the winter. I had a boat shop build a boat just the way I wanted it. That boat changed my whole way of fishing. I didn't just putz around making do. I worked about a third as hard as I had in the past and caught three times as many fish. It was a real revelation the way people started treating me differently. Up until that time I was not exactly a mascot, but I think that's how I viewed myself. I was cute and unique—but when I got the bowpicker I had equipment that other people actually envied. I had better equipment than some of my brothers who had been fishing for years. It was
fun, it was different; I discovered in myself that I could do things I didn’t know I could do, and I became one of the boys, genuinely.

Some people weren’t really hostile, but were bewildered as to why I would want to fish in a serious manner. One fellow in particular thought I had no business doing it. One day I was mending my net when he came by and said I wasn’t doing it right and got into a conversation with me about why in the world was I doing this and didn’t I realize it was dangerous, and that I had no business fishing, because I was making other people concerned about my safety. It struck me very odd, and I laughed.

No one had ever said these kinds of things to me before. My dad had always encouraged me. In fact, when he saw my bow-picker, he ordered one just like it. But I do think it bothered him some that it looked like I was going to be a fisherman for the rest of my life. He really did want me to be a professional of some sort. Now I think he’s just as proud of me, even though I didn’t turn out to be a lawyer like he’d envisioned. One aunt of mine, who raised several boys, told my mother, not me, that if she had it to do all over again, she’d do it just like I’ve done. That was one of the nicest things I’ve heard. All of her life she’d fished some, but had to give up a lot of things.

I’m a true colleague with the other fishermen. They respect my opinions and know that when I talk about something, it’s because I know about it; I’ve lived it, and it’s not like I’m faking it. Generally I don’t have troubles, but I don’t think I will ever have another boy friend who’s a fisherman. It’s just too close. The fishing community is so small. Your livelihood is your life and it’s all intertwined and it’s really nice to get away from it—and not to be talking fishermen, fishing, and boats. Out of the five hundred and twenty permit holders in the Cordoba area, only two or three women actively compete. There’s no doubt
about it being male dominated. And I would like to have the companionship of more women. Like I said, then you wouldn’t be talking boats and fishing all the time.

But I guess I am pretty well accepted by the other fishermen. This last year I was elected to the board of directors of the marketing association. As independent businessmen, we’re not allowed to collectively bargain, so we do our price negotiation through the marketing association. It’s an old-fashioned system. The processors call up to talk price and the negotiating committee will meet with them. Prior to that we will have come up with what we think is fair price and will compare their offer to that. We’ll kick the offer around a bit and then present it to the membership with a recommendation to accept or reject it. If the membership doesn’t want it, then we will go back and forth. If by May fifteenth, our opening day, we don’t have a price, it’s considered a strike.

To circumvent this process last year, I was part of the getting together of a fishermen’s co-op to market our own fish. We don’t have processing capabilities, so we had to subcontract all of that. Our costs were astronomical and we didn’t meet the ground price which the other processors were paying, but this next year I think we will. This year we’re gonna probably lease a floating processor. Theoretically, with a co-op we should do really well because the profit will go back to the producers, but the six land-based processors are throwing chinks into the machinery, so to speak. They have the marketing areas all sewn up. We’re trying to develop new markets domestically, but mostly we have to rely on the Japanese. Japanese are the biggest buyers of salmon. Their whole culture is practically built around seafood. It is starting to come together.

I guess I’m just an activist at heart. It’s the politics of it, I think; I like to have a hand in the decision-making process of things which affect my life. I can’t turn a deaf ear to politics.