Interview: Des Nobels (DN)
Interviewer: Rod Mickleburgh (RM)
Date: September 6, 2019
Location: Prince Rupert, B.C.
Transcription: Donna Sacuta

RM [00:00:06] So just to pick up what you're talking about. Tell me about Dodge Cove.

DN [00:00:14] Well, it's in—

RM [00:00:15] And the fishing industry.

DN [00:00:16] It was a fishing community. It was a community of fishermen and shipwrights, men who fished in the summertime and built boats in the wintertime. There was a small mill there at one time and a number of shipyards and The Wall yard being the prominent one, and they built the northern fleet—both cannery vessels, trawlers and longliners.

RM [00:00:41] What was that like?

DN [00:00:43] Oh God, from 'Turn of the Century' until the last one 'Legacy', which was Larry Wall's boat, was built by he and his father. That would have been the late '80s, I believe.

RM [00:00:55] They went that long.

DN [00:00:55] Well, the shipyard wasn't going. This was just a special project. The Wahl Shipyard itself probably shut down in the—oh, I'd say probably mid '70s. Somewhere in that timeframe. The Wahl Brothers out of Washington. Wall Brothers out of Vancouver. H-That's that's all the same family. It started in Rupert here, actually in Dodge Cove and then they built a shipyard in Prince Rupert right across from the Fishermen's Co-op or adjacent to it where the container port is now.

RM [00:01:27] Oh, interesting. Okay, so Des, what's your story? I mean, (laughter), we'll come back tomorrow to finish it. No, no. So are you Prince Rupert born?

DN [00:01:39] No, I'm an immigrant. I immigrated to Canada in 1957 with my parents from Holland, and we immigrated to Canada. It was one of the places my parents were offered and it shows it, and thank God they did. At any rate, we came here, arrived by airplane via Iceland and Montreal and then by train crossed Canada to Edmonton where my father had an opportunity at some work in a minimal labour job and basically a slaughterhouse doing

DN [00:02:17] Doing very horrible work.

RM [00:02:20] They worked in that. In fact they were from Holland, in fact that's probably why he was there. This guy came from Holland and went to Edmonton and worked in the slaughterhouses.

DN [00:02:30] But my father was a man of numbers. He was being trained as an accountant. So at any rate, that's that's my story in terms of how I came to Canada. Prince Rupert I came to Prince Rupert in the early '70s. I had a choice of going back to school. I

just finished high school and university was the next step or the supposed the next step. Many of my friends were heading to Vancouver. I took a look at a map and went, 'Wow, it's a straight line from Edmonton to this place called Prince Rupert. Let's go check that out. So my girlfriend and I hitchhiked out here in 1972, late '71, and went from Terrace to Prince Rupert in the back of a pickup truck in the pouring rain. That was my introduction to Prince Rupert. Spent two days in a hotel here drying out and meeting a host of really incredible people over the course of basically three or four days that we were here. And then I went back to Alberta and came back out again. Just decided, 'No, this was the place I wanted to be.' I wasn't interested in going back to school, spending another five to seven years for something that probably I was never really going to employ. I love the people out here. I love the land.

DN [00:03:46] It was just a part of my heritage.

DN [00:03:50] Oh, God, yeah. I mean, my heritage is being Dutch is water-related. My people were part of the sea at one time, and did function in that capacity. So there was that draw there and I just I fell in love with the place and people. It was extremely free and open in those days. Rupert was a really cosmopolitan place, far more cosmopolitan than it is now. You had people from every conceivable class frame or structure employed within the industry, fishing industry I'm talking now and making decent wages and providing for their families and mingling with doctors, lawyers, you name it. It was very, very cosmopolitan, that's the only way I can describe it, I found that extremely liberating, having come from Edmonton, which was a fairly conservative place, even though it was the liberalist place in Alberta, it was still rather confined and constricting in a lot of ways. This place was not. There wasn't yet the land claim structure, that's presently underway. Most of the territory outside of Prince Rupert itself was Crown Provincial land and open to explore and enjoy. That's what I did. I came back here and got involved in the fishing industry.

RM [00:05:02] Right off the bat.

DN [00:05:04] Pretty well. Yeah.

RM [00:05:04] Why the fishing industry?

DN [00:05:07] First of all, I love boats. And if you're if you're going to spend any time on the water, you're going to have to provide some income to ensure that you can continue to stay on the water. It's not for free. So at any rate, that was a way of basically bankrolling much of my endeavours. It was pretty seasonal in those days. When I first started, it was the odd herring season here, or a halibut trip or two—

RM [00:05:30] Were you crew or—

DN [00:05:32] Just crew on those days.

RM [00:05:33] What kind of boats were you on?

DN [00:05:34] Longlining, fishing halibut. All right. And the odd gillnet trip and the odd troll trip. And it was just something that I did to basically earn a few dollars that would keep me going through the rest of the year. I had a small sailboat at that time and was basically puddle-jumping all around the coast. Gunkholing, getting into all sorts of spots and fishing was just another way to sort of further that along. But over time, I settled down, met a

woman, we became partners, had children, raised a family, and that required a whole set of other needs and requirements. So that brought me to Dodge Cove. We were originally living west of here, at Stephens Island in a place called Skiakl Bay, and my wife and I homesteaded there for about 10 years. And so I would come in in the spring and go do a couple of halibut trips, and then I would go back out there—

RM [00:06:30] Still crewing?

DN [00:06:31] Just still crewing. And then when our first daughter was born, that facilitated the need for a little more capital in terms of just provisioning over the course of a year. So that was the case. And then a couple of years later, when we were expecting another child, we moved into Rupert to have that child and in the process had twins, and remained in Dodge Cove where we knew people and basically bought into the community 35 years ago now and have been there ever since. We raised our kids there.

RM [00:07:03] So you never owned your own boat?

DN [00:07:04] Yes, I did. I owned my own vessel, the Vonny Dee, and I bought her in the—.

RM [00:07:09] Is that a fish boat?

DN [00:07:10] Yeah, it's a gillnetter. 34-foot—

RM [00:07:13] When did you buy that?

DN [00:07:14] That was 1987, '86-'87.

RM [00:07:17] So it took you a while to finally make the big plunge.

DN [00:07:19] Oh, yeah. Yeah, definitely. I mean a boat is a significant commitment, all right. Not just in terms of cost, but in terms of time as well. And it was a wooden vessel, it was a Japanese-built vessel. It was built here in Rupert by George Karamoto. And it was at one time the fastest boat in the Skeena River. It had a series of names over the years, Jade Falcon, Bonnie Lass, and lastly, the Vonny Dee. I purchased it from one of my neighbours who had it, and I ran it for him for a couple of seasons on a share basis and then at the end of the second year, I made an offer on the vessel. He was amenable to that and then I became the owner of a vessel. Off I went gillnetting.

RM [00:08:02] And lost your shirt.

DN [00:08:04] No, not at all.

RM [00:08:05] So what was fishing like in those days, as the owner of a gillnetter?

DN [00:08:09] Well, to be honest. In those days, fishing was actually good. There was a very significant period of time for gillnetters. Prior to that, the '70s and the '60s were pretty low-key for most gillnetters. They weren't massive years at all. They weren't big runs. But in that mid- late-'80s, we started to see a lot of significant returns coming back and some fairly good production in all the systems. Plus, as well, you were still able to run coast-wide at that time with your licencing.

RM [00:08:39] So you'd go south?

DN [00:08:40] That's on occasion I did. Very seldom did I leave here to go south. I relished when the southern fleet left here in August.

RM [00:08:48] And they'd come up and—

DN [00:08:49] We had, I mean, up until about '92, there wasn't a huge southern fleet here. But around '92, when you saw things starting to close down on the central coast, rivers and (unclear) had been had been curtailed. A range of things had happened to drive guys out of their traditional spots and territories into the north. It wasn't something they chose to do. They were driven. And of course, that always creates conflict because we're all spot fishermen here have been for years. And now all of a sudden, these other people horning in on these spots. It was an interesting time, shall we say, because these guys were learning the area, and made a big nuisance of themselves quite often. I fished on the outside, on the Hecate Strait side. And that was an area that not many people fished. I started my fishing career as a Co-op fisherman, so I—

RM [00:09:43] When was that?

DN [00:09:44] Oh, God, say the early '80s. Well, I'd done a couple of gillnet trips in the late '70s, and then in the early '80s, '81 on from there, I was gillnetting quite steadily every summer, but with the Co-op guys and the Co-op fleet, and I got involved at that time with an organization called the North Gillnetters' Association, which was essentially Co-op fishermen who had organized themselves under that banner to provide advice through what was then the North Coast Advisory structure on net fishing.

RM [00:10:19] And as you don't need me to tell you, there was tension with the union fishermen, right?

DN [00:10:23] Hey, always, always. I mean, that was one of the first things that I did as I became the Secretary-Treasurer for the Northern Gillnetters' Association at that time and over a period of a year or so, also became spokesperson. I'd write letters—I'd become the front person for that. So that just necessitated my working with the union and approaching me on a number of issues to see if there was a possibility to collaborate. And there were at that time. Garth Mirau was working out of the office here. He was also seining at the time. Joy was here. Christine was here. All these folks that are here.

RM [00:11:02] And there were bad feelings from the '67 strike.

DN [00:11:05] Yeah, not on my part.

RM [00:11:07] You weren't part of it. But you know that really.

DN [00:11:10] They still existed. But you know what, most of us were trying to get past that. There was a lot of hard feelings over a lot of things. That was the thing about the fishing industry is that we had a lot of hard feelings. Everybody's an asshole (laughs). If he's on your side doesn't make any difference. So you know, I tried very hard—the strike of '87 I think it was—there were a number of things that we came together on. And I tried very hard to build a relationship with the union.

RM [00:11:39] You guys fished?

DN [00:11:42] I didn't fish. Those who chose to fish fished. Yeah, the Co-op fishermen had the ability to fish, but not all the guys did.

RM [00:11:50] That's interesting. Why didn't you fish?

DN [00:11:54] Because I felt some solidarity with the union and with just fishermen in general in terms of what was going on. I actually was out fishing. I came in with a trip when everything went down and I gave away and got rid of my fish at the dock.

RM [00:12:10] Really? Wow.

DN [00:12:11] And then I came up to the office here and had a discussion with Joy about what and how I would approach the union for clearance, if that was the case, and when and how that time would come.

RM [00:12:22] How many Co-op fishermen did that?

DN [00:12:23] Just a handful of us. Like everyone else, it's, 'I can fish, so I go fishing.'

RM [00:12:28] Yeah, exactly.

DN [00:12:29] And so it was, you know, one of those things. Anyway, that being said, shortly after that, Garth Mirau who was seining and was one of the officers with the union at the time I was here having discussions with Joy, he approached me and challenged me to join the union. He was quite adamant that I shouldn't be talking to the union people unless I was a union member. And so I took up the challenge and said, "Fine, I'll join the union. There's no reason I can't join the union and be part of the Northern Gillnetters' Association. There's nothing prohibiting that."

RM [00:12:57] Not not many fishermen did that though.

DN [00:12:59] No. But over a period of time, the membership that I had, or portions thereof did become or contribute to the UFAWU. So because as the Co-op came into disrepair over a period of time there and then finally basically folded in on itself, there were a number of things that were done there that most of us were once supportive of, but brought us to the point where we were. At that point, I just came over to the union completely and that became my representative.

RM [00:13:36] Because there's this interesting conflict between the interests of the union and the interests of the Co-op in some ways, because the Co-op is still in the marketplace and don't want restrictions, whereas the union is basically fighting the marketplace and trying to get the best deal it can for its members. So they sometimes come into conflict.

DN [00:13:54] They did, but in turn, we as Co-op members also saw ourselves as being an initiating arbiter in discussions in terms of how payment was made and who got what. Because our fishermen—or we as fishermen—usually ended up with anywhere from 25 cents to 50 cents, depending over the course of the year—more on our fish at the end of the year. We were part of what was holding the companies to continue to pay decently as well. So there was a bit of give and take from our side—at least our perspective.

RM [00:14:22] (unclear) fishermen as free riders.

DN [00:14:24] No, not at all. I mean—.

RM [00:14:26] You helped keep the wages up.

DN [00:14:29] We certainly did, and I don't think anyone would disavow that. It would have been nice had that been able to be done in a far more congenial fashion than it was There were a lot of hard feelings over the years. But that being said, I became a member of the union and began to work.

RM [00:14:49] Do you mind saying what year you joined the union?

DN [00:14:51] Oh, '87 I think.

RM [00:14:52] '87. Same year. Yeah. Yeah.

DN [00:14:55] Well, when Garth challenged me. That was it. I signed my voucher and away we went.

RM [00:15:00] So you were part of the 1989 strike?

DN [00:15:03] Yes.

RM [00:15:04] What can you tell me about that?

DN [00:15:06] Not a lot. Because it was tough.

DN [00:15:08] Not a lot. I just tied up like everyone else, and we went through it as best we could. You know, you were talking about shoreworkers and fishermen and source of conflicts, conflict that existed there. A lot of fishermen always believe that without them, shoreworkers wouldn't have a job. So all of these things quite often, even if you were a union member, tended to gall you, that 'why couldn't I be fishing? Because these guys are—'

RM [00:15:36] Because it was mostly a shoreworkers' strike, right? Because it was all about fish processing and free trade.

DN [00:15:40] Yeah, yeah. So there were those bits and pieces that were out there. But for the most part, the rest of us said, 'No, this is not about one or the other. This is about our community as a whole. Are we as workers able to continue to function with our community and provide what the community needs to exist and remain flexible and sustainable?' You look at this community now in light of the grandiose wealth that's being spouted down there in the port structure. That is the grandest facade and the biggest farce on the planet. Here we sit. This town is half closed. Half of the retail district here is shut down. 50 percent is no longer able to function. Why? Because people don't shop here, in part because either they can't or they won't. A lot of the port employees spend their money elsewhere. They go out of town to spend their money or they drive out of town. And it's created quite a disparity with those who used to actually earn a living in the town that are no longer able to because they're not part of that port structure. The port doesn't provide money in terms of taxation from infrastructure to the town the way the fishing industry did. It allowed for the building of a convention centre, the building of a performing arts centre, the building of a recreation

centre. All those things were provided for by the fishing industry, the pulp mill that was here, the infrastructure that was taxable. These guys are exempt.

RM [00:17:04] Really?

DN [00:17:05] Yeah.

RM [00:17:05] The port?

DN [00:17:06] The port is exempt. It pays what's called the PILT–Payment In Lieu of Taxes it provides, and that was only after a massive fight by the town here with the port for a number of years. They're paying two and a half million dollars annually on billions of dollars worth of infrastructure. It's a joke. It really is.

RM [00:17:25] There's still a lot of good paying jobs down there.

DN [00:17:27] Oh, granted, good paying jobs are wonderful, but the people are paying exorbitant taxes to cover off what minimal costs the city can extract from them. They're already at a maximum. When we have a huge infrastructure out here that should be, in my mind, paying taxes. All ports should be taxed, just as any other industry is. Why are we providing DP World Dubai with tax incentives? Why? To create a thousand jobs here? Well, that's nice, but they're going to automate so that thousand jobs is going to be zip in five years. All right. What have they done for us? They've left us no infrastructure that's of any value. As a matter of fact, it's going to cost us in the end because that's usually what happens. They divest themselves and we end up cleaning up the messes. We've seen that with every large industrial structure in this country. The taxpayer bears the bill. And so that's a real galling piece. The fishing industry, which at one time provided a significant return to the community in terms of assets and capital no longer exists. It's on its way out. This other piece isn't really fulfilling its obligation socially, in my mind, at any rate other than providing some jobs. But it hasn't provided jobs to necessarily those people that lost their jobs from the rest, it's like everything else. People get displaced. They're no longer cared for. This building is a tribute to those people, Arnie and the folks that we have working here. This is what they do. They deal with all these people that have been left out. Those have been marginalized, disenfranchised. They're the people left holding the ball, trying to make life bearable for these people. And it's not an easy job. We've watched our memberships literally move to the streets. And that's disgusting.

RM [00:19:09] So when did you notice it going bad for you? From your—when the commercial fishing season, just, you know, you just couldn't make it go.

DN [00:19:19] When we saw Mifflin. When Mifflin first bore

DN [00:19:22] its ugly head in the mid '90s—between '94 and '96—the whole fleet restructuring piece that was being put forward in single-area licencing, single-gear licencing, all of these things. The writing was on the wall then that they had every intention of restricting our ability to continue to harvest fish in the fashion that we had previously. Much of that was predicated on the premise that we would be much better off, we wouldn't be travelling, spending all that money, we would be able to fish where we wanted, in the area where we wanted, all these things. But what it really did in the end was fracture what was then a coalescing body of fishermen, once more into tiny little enclaves that were now again battling over access and allocation and control. And that was basically it. They managed to basically destroy what cohesion we built over the last decade up through the

fleets—not just within the fleets—but through the fleets as well on a coast-wide basis. That was the beginning in my mind of the end and we saw it then. And so people who were forced out of the industry over the next two to five years, who were unable to fulfil obligations in terms of their debt, so they were carrying—and to be honest—this is where I give the co-op quite a bit of credit. Having fished for the co-op we were never coddled. We weren't given money to start up every year. We had to have our own money in the bank. We had to carry our own weights. So that served me in good stead over a period of time, because I was solvent, I was able to move companies who were not controlling my start up. Every year I had my money set aside for new nets, I had things down. So that was one good thing that did come from fishing for the co-op was that —I guess independence in part—and it allowed me to sort of keep moving through a period of time where a lot of guys weren't able to. A lot of guys would come in in the '90s who were paying anywhere between 16 and 28 percent on loans on boats. Companies had offered guys new boats. They'd financed them. I was offered numerous times, 'That boat's too small. You're filling it. Why don't you get another boat?' I said, "No, I own it. I can fill it. I'm real happy, right?" But there was always that push to do it, and a lot of people bought into it.

RM [00:21:41] It was the nature of fisherman.

DN [00:21:43] Well, no I would say it was the nature of the social structure in which we were presently living. Prior to that, that didn't exist either. People had to pull their own weights. But or you were an indentured operator to a company one way or the other. So that really hit a lot of people hard in that that mid-90s to early 2000s. In 2000, when the last buyback was offered, my wife and I sat down and did some very serious soul-searching in terms of where things were going. Because of my involvement politically with the fishery, I was probably more cognizant of what was transpiring and where it was going to go and how that would impact us and the many. And I made the decision to sell my soul back to them that last year. I continued to fish halibut as a deckhand, which I've always done.

RM [00:22:34] Still doing that now?

DN [00:22:34] No, my last year was 2006.

RM [00:22:41] Oh wow. That's pretty—talk about being a deckhand on a halibut boat. What's that like? That kind of stormy weather and stuff? Don't you guys go out in the worst weather or something? What's the halibut season?

DN [00:22:50] Well, used to start around the 15th of April. And would go to about the 15th of September.

RM [00:22:58] Oh, for some reason I thought it was the winter.

DN [00:23:01] No. These days you're going into November, now. And starting in March, right under the quota structure. But how—depended—through my career halibut fishing we went through a series of regimes or schemes of limitation through either days off, trip limits, a range of things that went on over time. But it was still a derby open fishery and it was incredible to be in his town at the end of the herring season, the beginning of the halibut season. The halibut fleet would come in. You'd have, you know, anywhere between three and maybe 500 vessels gearing out for halibut. And it would be just—

RM [00:23:44] That many vessels.

DN [00:23:45] At sometimes, yes.

RM [00:23:46] Wow.

DN [00:23:47] So you have, because every little guy here who was licenced at one time was able to fish halibut as well. Your licence allows you that privilege. So everybody was a gillnetter or a trawler. He would do a little bit of a trip out to some jigging, whatever be coming in. So all of these guys would be congregating in Rupert here. This was the halibut capital of the world in those days. And there would be this huge camaraderie that would take place. Guys are—

RM [00:24:11] What years are you talking about?

DN [00:24:13] Oh, you're talking from again, 1980 onwards, alright? I think most of the last year we were allowed up in Alaska. I can't remember that anymore. That was in '79 or '78, something like that, just after. So at any rate, you had this huge camaraderie. Guys who were getting together, this was party central. Town was just a-bustling. So for a week prior to the opening of the fishery, boats would be getting all their gear together overhauling gear, sharpening hooks, getting things together.

RM [00:24:44] Going to the bar.

DN [00:24:45] Going to the bar. .

DN [00:24:46] Going to the restaurants. And this town was restaurant central. I don't think I'd ever been in a place where I'd seen so many and so many varied types of restaurants. It was pretty amazing in those days.

RM [00:24:56] Where were the boats from?

DN [00:24:59] Oh, from down south, they were boats coming through, not many Alaskan boats. They would stop in here on their way through heading up. So and that's actually where I came into contact with First Circle boats, the tuna boats that the Alaskans started using before we did. We were still fishing in old Jayhooks, which were really bad gear in terms of conservation.

RM [00:25:21] That is interesting.

DN [00:25:21] And the circle hook arrived here with an Alaska boat. We were tied up next to the one at Royal Fish in those days. And I was looking at his gear, and I went, "What the hell are those?" And I asked the deckhand, "Can you give me a couple of them?" And I took him up the bar that night with my skipper. I showed it to Johnny, I said, "Look at this. This is the hooks the Alaskans are using." He goes, 'Well that won't catch anything!' And he put it in his mouth. (laughter) It was the most amazing thing you ever saw. It was stuck. It had him, right?

DN [00:25:48] And the whole premise of that Circle Hook is pretty amazing. There's not a lot of set on it, but just the whole leverage was amazing. But it eliminated a lot of gullet hooks.

RM [00:25:57] He did get it out I hope!

DN [00:25:59] Oh, yeah, of course. He was quite shocked at how catchy it was. But so there were a few Alaskan boats coming through and we always chatted with each other.

RM [00:26:09] Then you guys all went to that hook too?

DN [00:26:11] We did, oh yeah. Many of us started with it just because it was so efficiently to begin with. But over time you realized just how well this hook worked in terms of sustainability and maintaining stock strength. So we weren't killing a lot of small fish with these hooks, through gullet hooks. Large fish could stave off a sea lice longer because they were alive on the gear. So, you know, sets that were a little longer in the water than you would have wanted them, you weren't getting as many dead fish back. It was probably one of the best things that ever developed in my mind at any rate, within the halibut fishery was the use of the tuna hook, or the circle hook. For conservation purposes.

RM [00:26:52] Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

DN [00:26:52] Something that again, I mean, as fishermen, you know, many people perceive us as sort of the rapers and pillagers of the ocean. And those people exist, don't get me wrong, they most certainly do. But for most of us who were community based fishermen, who small boat fishermen, our endeavours were always to maintain the strength of the stock in any way that we could to ensure that we could continue to harvest. I mean, we weren't looking to profit significantly. We just wanted to make a living. And so all of these things that we did as individuals or as collectives to create sustainability within the fishery, to endeavour to innovate, do a number of things, we very seldom, if ever were—

RM [00:27:35] And did you fish for halibut before you got rid of your boat?

DN [00:27:39] Before my gillnetter?

RM [00:27:41] Yeah, on your gillnetter.

DN [00:27:42] I didn't fish halibut with my gillnetter, no. What I did with my gillnetter is when they started restricting us, I went to trolling. So I had a— Many of the guys in the north here had combination vessels—

RM [00:27:54] What was the process involved? You had to convert, right, to trolling?

DN [00:27:58] It was just a question of adding lines and a few odds and ends. I trolled off the drum. I trolled five lines off the drum. Right. But a lot of the northern boats were combination boats. So when single gear licensing came in, the impact was even more burdensome than the southern vessels who were very already gear specific. So guys who would start their season in April, troll for a few months, gillnet for the rest of the season then troll for the fall. And that made you a fairly significant season and you could make a living doing salmon. With the loss of that going to single gear licensing—that was extremely onerous on a lot of guys—cut out half of their season in terms of their incomes. So before that change took place I added trolling gear to the boat so I could troll in the fall, troll a little bit in the spring. Then when we were single gear licencing and they restricted us even further I went to longlining skates.

RM [00:29:02] Wow. What was that like?

DN [00:29:03] That was interesting. I did that for about two seasons before the draggers got in on the market and destroyed it. Originally built a market in Korea with a couple other guys and through Ocean Fish, and we were getting 30 cents a pound for large skate wings and we were getting 45 cents a pound for a long nose skate in the round. And so I targeted long nose skate, trying to stay away from the big skates and like winging and just dealing with that whole thing. And the thought of—

RM [00:29:34] Who knew there was a difference in skates.

DN [00:29:38] There's a whole series of different skates out there. If you fished the longline at all, you would have seen each and every one of those from the rosy skate up to the big skate. Is just incredible little animals. At any rate, I focused on long nose skate. One, it was in the round and two, it was it was a fairly nice fishery. I fished by myself six skates a gear, three strings and it was just a matter of setting haul. Night sets for better and you were fishing hard ground adjacent to an overfall. So you weren't out on the mudflats. That's where you get the big skates, but more along that flat, adjacent to a jumbo or a deep hard section. That's where you'd find the long nose skates there. That's what I was doing. And that worked really well until one, the draggers found out about my market and two, the whole requirement to monitor, enforce and count every bloody fish came in. So now for my trip I would go out and for a three-day trip I'd come in and I'd make a thousand dollars clear. Well, now, I had Archipelago sucking hard in on that very quickly. And then when the draggers came in, my price dropped down to virtually nothing. So it was like, okay, now what I'm making, I'm paying to Archipelago. That was the end of my career.

RM [00:30:54] Who was Archipelago?

DN [00:30:55] Archipelago Marine is a body that was put together to take advantage of the Department's decree that 'thou shalt be monitored.' So they were a consulting monitoring group that oversaw the fishing that was taking place with regards to some of the fisheries, and Archipelago Marine still exists. It's my understanding that it was originally put together by ex-DFO people who retired and then went into the consulting business and made a shit-load of money.

RM [00:31:29] So when you were doing this kind of all this, I mean, there was no contract, no fish prices or anything. The UFAWU wasn't negotiating on your behalf.

DN [00:31:37] No, no, no.

RM [00:31:39] And at a certain point, they were they weren't negotiating fish prices anymore—

DN [00:31:44] No it was very hard for the union in those early days.

RM [00:31:49] No, I'm not criticizing you, obviously. You know, it's just—

DN [00:31:51] It just was one of those things. I mean we didn't have a fleet structure that allowed for that type of—that was another thing as well—that whole fragmentation that took place through that really limited both the ability of fishermen and of the union itself to be able to maneuver in that. In that period of time I became president of Local 37 with the union, which is fish. I am still president of Local 37 basically because there's no one to hand this off to.

RM [00:32:19] And who do you—how many members do you have? Two?

DN [00:32:25] (laughs) You'll be talking to Bill shortly. So Bill might be my only—

RM [00:32:32] So what is Local 37?

DN [00:32:34] Local 37 was the gillnet fish—.

RM [00:32:38] From the old days.

DN [00:32:39] From the old days.

RM [00:32:43] Do you still charge dues?

DN [00:32:43] No, other than the union do itself, I mean we never charged dues as a local. That was always charged as your union membership fee.

DN [00:32:51] We were just the local representative for a body of fishermen in the region here.

RM [00:32:54] Yes.

DN [00:32:55] So at any rate, that—

RM [00:32:59] What do you do? Do you do anything on behalf of Local 37?

DN [00:33:02] These days?

DN [00:33:03] Yeah, not a hell

DN [00:33:03] Of a lot. I sit in on the Employment Action Centre here, which helps provide people assistance. I'm on that board. I got myself elected locally to the Regional District to help support local initiatives through community-based fisheries structures. I'm the chair of the Coastal Community Network that tries again, to focus primarily on community-based fishery structures, maintaining infrastructures, shore-side processing, that sort of thing. Let's see what else.

RM [00:33:39] Is this more of a title that gives you something to have, you know, because you don't spend any time representing your members, is I guess what I was trying to say.

DN [00:33:46] No now it's more specific to the industry as a whole, as opposed to the membership specific. So it still allows you to lend a voice in discussions. Knowing fully well, you may not have a significant body behind you. The reality is every other body sitting at that table has very few sitting behind it as well. So that's one of the things we've all come to understand is, all right, I'll tolerate you here, if you just tolerate me here—(laughter)

DN [00:34:12] We'll carry this conversation on, we've been having it for 30 years now. We're just going to carry on.

RM [00:34:16] All those years fishing, did you have, I mean, it's dangerous work fishing. Did you have any close calls?

DN [00:34:29] Of course. I fished black cod in the winters and rockfish as well. It's an (unclear) fisheries, west coast of Haida Gwaii in January, February, March. It's hell.

RM [00:34:42] Yeah.

DN [00:34:43] Right. 15 days at sea. Two and a half days of fishing. None of those were full days. They were all six hours here, four hours there, dump the gear out, haul it back around for the anchorage. Sort of thing. So, yeah, there's been a lot of close calls over the years. I recall one particular incident where we were out on the halibut and we decided to stay out on the ground that night and drift as opposed to running in and anchoring. And we were fishing out in Dixon Entrance. There wasn't a lot of places to go in a hurry. And the wind came up quite horribly in the middle of the night. And so we made towards the shore. It was quite obvious weren't going to be hauling any gear the next day and in the process encountered a fairly significant reef after being set by a hard tide well beyond our bearings. And this was you know, (unclear) it wasn't you didn't have GPS, that was just coming into being and plus you had ships in those days as well, right? You had, that was all military, (unclear) was still controlled by military. And there were times when you weren't where you thought you were because they had the ability to skip those numbers on occasion and things. But at any rate, we were coming in to an anchorage and had been set further to the west than we had originally anticipated and in the process found ourselves, you know, on a very significant reef structure with a lot of rock around us. And we bottomed out and the boat rolled on the rock and the next wave picked us up and shot us over the rock. And there we were. So in a matter of seconds, we were dead and we were—

RM [00:36:18] Oh, my God. What a thing!

DN [00:36:21] Yeah, it was—

RM [00:36:23] Did you have time to think?

DN [00:36:24] Not really. That's what I'm saying. We had time to close the doors as the boat started to roll on the rock with—as the wash went out and as the boat rolled and settled, the next wash came in and picked her up and delivered her on the other side. And we scuttled away—

RM [00:36:41] That's unbelievable. And how unusual is that?

DN [00:36:44] I don't know. Most people don't talk about these things, so

RM [00:36:50] Superstitious.

DN [00:36:50] A whole series of things. It's just bad. You're embarrassed. There's a whole series of things—

RM [00:36:55] Yeah, right on.

DN [00:36:57] Really just aren't—

DN [00:36:58] Aren't part of the sort of milieu that you want to create for yourself. So, anyway we spent the next day anchored up and slept, shall we say, very solidly for a good stretch of time and major adrenalin. I don't think I've ever felt adrenalin like that in my life. I can recall another trip where we were crossing (unclear) black cod and they put up a hurricane wind warning as we were making down for the top end of Vancouver Island. And we were just north of the Rose peninsula and we had no choice but to get rid of all the gear, 300 traps on deck just started shooting them out as quickly as we could because there was no use going to go back to shore. That was quite a distance away. And you didn't want to have all this gear on deck when the weather came up. And we spent that evening,18 hours basically, jogging into significant hurricane force winds. So it was two men at the wheel and you just quartered it and spent all night in. It was pretty amazing because at times the spray is six or seven feet off the water. And if you go into that water, you're not going to survive it because the spray—

RM [00:38:05] You've got your suits—

DN [00:38:06] But the suit is a glorified body bag, it's a way of insurance companies fulfilling obligations and writing off things—

RM [00:38:14] Well sometimes it— I hear you.

DN [00:38:17] I've had friends who went missing and were never recovered and whose family sat for seven years waiting for estates to be released by the courts. Because things weren't in joint ownership, a whole series of things. So yeah, we've always viewed the survival suits as body bags although here are a number of occasions where they really save lives. But in those conditions you knew that if you went in, you weren't going to be breathing because there wasn't any air above the water. It was just water particles and yeah, just those sorts of things.

RM [00:38:47] But never anything that drove you out of the industry.

DN [00:38:50] No, no, no. I've never had anything that would put me off being on the water. I mean, I'm still on the water every day.

RM [00:38:57] What do you do?

DN [00:38:59] I live on the water. I have a waterfront property in Dodge Cove. I have a sailboat now and sail regularly. I started sailing years ago.

RM [00:39:05] Fishing for fun?

DN [00:39:07] I don't fish for fun. I'm not a recreational fisherman. Like my parents taught me not to play with my food. So I go to fish, I go to kill a fish.

RM [00:39:17] I think you've used that line before, I bet.

DN [00:39:18] Oh, yeah, you bet. But it's something that. No, I don't feel I have to recreate myself to try recreational fish.

DN [00:39:26] What do I like about commercial fishing?

RM [00:39:27] Yeah. What do you like about it?

DN [00:39:28] Oh, God. Being out on the

DN [00:39:31] water really is what it is, alright? This is the same thing that I'm sort of carrying on now without the fishing piece of it. Yeah, the places, the things that you see. I wrote a very long poem

DN [00:39:45] 2hen I

DN [00:39:46] finished with the industry and it outlined very clearly the sounds and the sights and the smells that would greet you at 3:30 in the morning when you're making your first set, you know, and just I miss that still. I really do. When I quit fishing every spring, I would watch what fleet was left, get together, and do its thing and boats would coming up at the yards in the Cove and getting painted. And I'd just be sitting there and it was it was hard. It was hard the first couple of summers, although I'll tell you, it was very nice having a summer holiday. Having a summer at home.

DN [00:40:23] Mowed the lawn for the first time in years on a consistent basis. Right. It wasn't a hay harvest. My girls, we have three daughters and all three of my girls fished with me on occasion. My one daughter fished with me quite regularly towards the end. And they were a little miffed actually when I sold them, when I didn't have a licence because they had enjoyed a fair bit of time on it and I think in some ways envisioned themselves as perhaps carrying on. But I didn't see that opportunity for them unfortunately. And as many fishermen world over, I told my kids, "No, this is not what you want to be doing right? This is a place you want to be, I agree." And my kids still spend a fair bit of time on the water when they can. But it was an industry that I knew would be just heartbreaking to try and make their way in. And I think for most of the guys left in the industry it is heartbreaking, whether they're making a living or not, just the fact that their comrades, their compatriots are no longer with them. And despite the mantra of 'thou shall be wealthy through quota and you'll be safer,' it's actually quite lonely out there now, and that is probably more unsafe than it ever has been on the water.

RM [00:41:37] It's is probably not coming back.

DN [00:41:39] No, not that I can see. I mean, many of us are still working and hoping that we can manage to convince government that community-based fishery structures need to be implemented if we're going to maintain any fishery at all and if there is economic opportunity to be derived from the marine environment, it should be through local community-based fishery structures. Small boat fisheries.

RM [00:42:04] Aren't some of the first nations going that way?

DN [00:42:06] Of course they are. And constitutionally they're able to move those things forward. On the east coast of Canada, we've had confirmation recently of community-based fishery structures there, owner-operator principles, fleets separation. We've had the Standing Committee on Fisheries, House of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans that will provide direction to DFO to implement policies of the same nature on the west coast of Canada, due to the issues that quotas and transfer of quota structures have brought to us and have diminished in our communities. So those are things that some of us still believe are capable of attaining. They won't provide the fishery of the past, but at least what we do derive from the resource on our doorsteps will be ours, right? I'm not sure where those of us who are non-First Nations fit into that picture. Government, I

think in many ways is trying very much to use fisheries as their reconciliation piece for First Nations. And as much as I think that is reasonable, I'm not sure that what they're handing First Nations is a solid fishery anymore. All right. And that bothers me a lot. I'm also watching First Nations who are accessing licencing through (unclear) and some other initiatives not utilizing that licencing to the degree that it was meant. It's not employing people in their communities. It's being used by band councils as revenue generators through the quota structures. So rather than creating employment at minimum rates, they're charging the same rates, in some cases higher rates to access those licenses, which in my mind is abhorrent. It's an aberration of what was meant to be with those. And so in light of those things that I see and the conclusions that I've come to, even First Nations, I think are going to be hard pressed to be able to make a living off of what DFO has left us.

RM [00:44:07] All right. One last question, which reminds me, I mean, what were your relations? What your thoughts on the Native Brotherhood?

DN [00:44:13] Some of my best friends are Native Brotherhood members.

RM [00:44:17] Because there always used to be this sense of conflict, perhaps.

DN [00:44:20] For many years there was no sense of conflict in that. For a period of time, there was anger and hate and resentment. Most of those people are gone now, both in terms of bodily and mentally. So I think those times are over. The Brotherhood is no different than ourselves though. They are struggling as well, have probably got a far more limited membership than we have and far less cohesion. So I don't know where they're going. We still count them as our brothers. We meet with them regularly when we can, and where possible we incorporate them into any discussions that we have. And that has always been the premise of our organization is to encompass each and every individual there is within the industry to bring them to a common table and have a discussion. Need to have.

RM [00:45:06] One last question. The UFAWU. What's your view of the good old UFAWU and who do you like in that union and not like I?

DN [00:45:14] There's no one I don't like. It's unfortunate that many of them are gone. Not just in terms physically and have passed over, but have gone just in being a part of, even though they're retired. We have a lot of retired members who very seldom grace our doorstep and it would be very nice to see them come through on occasion. Just to have a chat. The two ladies that work in this office here, Christina and Joy, who is our president now. And Christina, who has been just a godsend for, for many, a lost soul. From licencing to benefits. So those are my heroes. I mean, Joy, when you interview her and I hope you do, Joy should be encased in bronze and stood up instead of the man we have standing in front of city hall right now. That carpetbagger.

RM [00:46:10] Went down with the Titanic.

DN [00:46:11] Thank God. That's my view, and I'm sorry I have a bias, but that is my bias. So these two ladies here are by and far my heroes and should be the hero of of anybody that is community-minded or people-centric.

RM [00:46:27] Okay. So talk about the blockade of the Alaska ferry.

DN [00:46:33] Well, that was an interesting chapter in my life and in the lives of many in this town. And it is in some ways coming to a head now with the Alaska Ferry Corporation finally announced that it no longer is going to be running out of Prince Rupert. That was something they threatened at the time or shortly thereafter as well was to pull out of the region. That being said, the Alaska ferry incident was something that I wouldn't say I'm particularly proud of, but I would say was something that was necessary. It sent a very clear message to both our governments and to the U.S. government.

RM [00:47:07] Just say what happened, because a lot of people—

DN [00:47:10] We as fishermen on the Canadian side were completely shut down by our government for conservation reasons, or at least that was the premise and we'd been sitting on the docks here in the middle of what was in our minds a very good sockeye season. There were lots of fish still coming. Steady.

RM [00:47:24] This is mid-'90s.

DN [00:47:26] That's right. '97, '96, '97. I'm not completely clear anymore on the exact year. And so we were quite miffed here to say the least. And then in turn, we had U.S. packers that were coming from Alaska into this town to the fish processors here and delivering significant amounts of fish. Within that was a huge portion of Canadian destined sockeye. These were Canadian sockeye. The ones we were conserving. So we as fishermen got together and said, 'you know, the only thing we can do is to place blockades within the harbour and stop boats coming in and check their bills of lading and see what they're carrying. If they're coming in and their bills suggested they're bringing chum and pink, not an issue. But if there is sockeye aboard that vessel, it would be embargoed and turned back.' And so that took place in both Metlakatla, (unclear) and the entrance to the harbour here were monitored and patrolled by gillnet vessels. And we had a number of vessels that were coming in and they provided their bills of lading and were let through. They were bringing chum and pink in and they were allowed to transit and deliver their product. And we had another vessel that came in from the south here, the Polar Star, I believe, was its name. And a number of us met it at the entrance to the harbour here and requested that they provide us their bill of lading and what they were carrying. And they refused and began to speed up. And so we escorted the vessel in and he was going full bore. There were a number of boats on his bow, and at one point he took a very significant turn to starboard and for all intents and purposes rammed one of the vessels that was escorting it in, one that was well known amongst the fleet and almost rolling over. I was directly behind him and witnessed that. And it was it was pretty scary, we thought was over. And at that point, the call went out for the fleet to join us and to stop this vessel. At that point, the harbourmaster and I believe it was the RCMP or it might have been the Coast Guard advised the Polar Star to turn around and leave, and they did at full-speed and that vessel did not return here. That being said, though, blood was boiling. People were extremely upset with both how the vessel conducted itself, the Alaskan vessel, and how our own authorities conducted themselves in terms of the incident. And that predicated, I guess, the movement the next morning to stop the Alaskan ferry. A number of boats had called in from outside saying the Alaska ferry was coming down. Talk was on that perhaps we should blockade it. I was tied up that night, actually down at B.C. Packers for the evening. I had a delivery at B.C. Packers, but in fact, I was tied up there with a number of other boats. That's where we ended up after our evening's patrol and a number of us went, 'we best get down there, this sounds like it's starting to heat up.' And so a number of vessels started coming into the harbour. Others continued to talk about the possibility of stopping the Alaskan ferry, surrounding it and cornering it off offshore and

others were in the belief that, 'No, if you're going to do that let it at least arrive, let it tie up, let it disengorge its passengers.' We were all of the belief that the ferry was carrying trucks as well, of fish destined for suppliers here. And it was. There were two truck loads of fish on board that vessel that we blockaded later that evening and held for two days. We let the vessel land, yes.

RM [00:51:13] And then wouldn't let it leave.

DN [00:51:15] That's correct. That's when the blockade itself was put up and there were two lines of vessels, roughly 300 vessels that partook. The seine fleet came in on the second day to join us as well. They were watching things take place up on the A-B line and were quite concerned about harassment from the U.S. Coast Guard. And so a number of them came in to join us. And so for three days we held a blockade here, held the ferry. Spent an awful lot of time at the RCMP station in town here through negotiations with the RCMP and others from Ottawa. And finally, the Fisheries Minister came out and talked to us. That was, god what was his name now? He's still in B.C. Dave—

DN [00:52:05] Oh.

RM [00:52:07] Minister?

DN [00:52:07] Yes. David. David.

DN [00:52:12] Anderson.

RM [00:52:13] Oh, was it David Anderson?

DN [00:52:13] He sent us a note saying, 'Release the vessel and I will come.' And we sent a note back saying "we will release the vessel when you come."

DN [00:52:25] And he came?

RM [00:52:25] Yeah.

DN [00:52:26] They flew in by helicopter, and we spent about 3 hours with the Minister and other dignitaries and had the discussion around it. And in the end, we released the vessel. And I believe that we were severely penalized for this because Mr. Anderson provided the U.S. a larger number of fish to intercept than what they were previously. So it went I believe from 18 percent to 23 percent. And that was how he paid for our transgression was by giving the U.S.more of our fish.

RM [00:52:58] Glen Clarke got involved too.

DN [00:53:00] Glen did. Glen got involved a little bit later on and that was actually with another piece altogether as well. Although he did go to bat for us with this piece and did make the overture to the Alaskan government to back off. Like how on earth could you go to take basically mom and pop operations to court for, you know, standing up for their livelihoods? So that was a great godsend from him. We really did appreciate the efforts that were made by the province at that time. And it did save us a lot of grief and in the end provided us with an opportunity to address some of the issues and the shortcomings that existed there.

RM [00:53:45] That must have been a wild time—

DN [00:53:47] It was extremely wild.

DN [00:53:48] That first night I had my daughter on board and there were two vessels tied inside me. I was the third vessel out, so I was the third on scene directly under the bow of the ferry itself. And the boats just started rafting up and it went from there. Anchors went down and that first night it was a full moon, I recall. And there was a lot of chatter on the phone, some of it not particularly adult in my estimation. And we had actually put out patrols. We had to go out and actually calm people down, take (unclear) boats. And there was one attempt to spray paint the side the ferry in the middle of the night. We had to circumvent that. So we had a lot of things to do, not just in terms of our own stresses, but in maintaining cohesion within the group and ensuring that no fool would produce a stunt that would put us in a very bad situation. It was our understanding that from the RCMP that Alaska had sent down state troopers. That Alaska ferry terminal is U.S. territory. And had we crossed into the ferry terminal, Alaska was of the opinion, the U.S. was of the opinion that they could sick their dogs on us. And I was told afterwards by some of the RCMP in town here that they intervened on our behalf and basically told them, 'No, this is our jurisdiction. You will not be doing anything here without our say-so.' The RCMP here were exemplary. They were just incredible to deal with. Very cool, calm and collected with regards to this. They understood the nature of it. And they also understood that we were not militant. We wanted just to get a message out that didn't seem to be arriving anywhere else. And I don't think any of us had ever expected not that we had intended to do this to begin with. It was something that organically happened. But it went better than many of us would have ever hoped for. It gave us an international arena in which to begin to discuss labour issues. The unfortunate thing is that government, rather senior levels of government, rather than taking this as a call for help, took it as a threat and proceeded to essentially kill us. That's what the rest of all of us— they told us they'd kill us with a thousand cuts and they did what they did to us

RM [00:56:14] So you think this backfired in the long run?

DN [00:56:17] I wouldn't say it backfired, but it provided us what we needed at the time. But governments have a tendency to be really vindictive.

RM [00:56:28] Because it embarrassed them, right?

DN [00:56:30] Exactly. But we had been dealing with these people for years prior to that, trying to come to some resolution for the issues that existed and what was developing in terms of our communities. We were watching our communities die. And we were telling government this and they were not listening to us. And then they shut us down for conservation when everyone else is fishing around us. There was a number of things that really brought us to that boiling point.

RM [00:56:59] Was it a tough decision to take it down?

DN [00:57:01] Very tough. I'd been asked several times as one of the spokespeople for the body. I'd been approached by civic leaders and others to shut it down, call off the hounds, move away. And I couldn't do that to the guys. The guys, I couldn't believe the way the guys had come together and their tenacity to stick to it, knowing fully well what conceivably could be the outcome. I think a lot of people felt that they were at a point where they they didn't have a whole lot of choice anymore. This was one thing they had to do. If this was

the last kick at the can, then let's make it a loud one. So that was it. So I backed off. I didn't go to the guys and say, "hey, you know, this is going on. We need to back off." I let it ride the course and so did the others that were a part of it. And so it went.

RM [00:57:57] At a certain point you felt you'd made your point.

DN [00:58:00] Most definitely. And when the threat of court action comes about, one does not want to find themselves on the opposite side of the court. They are your friends, so don't piss 'em off.

RM [00:58:11] What did the passengers do?

DN [00:58:13] Well, they were gone. I mean, they were allowed to come—

RM [00:58:15] Oh, that's right. They unloaded and they were allowed to—

DN [00:58:17] And this was one of the sort of the myths that was continue to fostered by others around this was that we were holding them hostage. Well, that was never the case. They were never held hostage.

DN [00:58:32] There were no kidnap people.

DN [00:58:34] There were none of those things going on. There were no threats to anyone. It was very orderly, very regulated and very tight. We wanted it to be that way. It had to be that way.

DN [00:58:46] But what an amazing event it was.

DN [00:58:48] It was it will be a pivotal moment in my life and probably many lives.