

MAY 2014

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Souls of the Sea play for the gathering at Oregon's Astoria Event Center.

# Seafolk tales

Astoria's 17th annual FisherPoets Gathering explores the heart of fishing

By Sierra Golden

**A**s Jane Kinegal tells it, she was 11 when she started working in her father's salmon cannery on the British Columbia coast. At the time, union rules required that all the women hand-packing the cans be at least 16 years of age, but as daughter of the plant manager, she had already been practicing that careful art for eight years. She wanted nothing more than to join the singing teenagers and wizened women on the production line. Now, decades later, sitting in the darkened hall of the

Astoria Event Center, she imitates the poking and patting motion of putting salmon in a can and concludes her story by saying that she learned more from those women than pretty much anyone else in her life.

The inheritance of wisdom is an important theme every year at the FisherPoets Gathering in Astoria, Ore. Yet this year at the February gathering, when Kinegal and four other women from fisheries around the world sat on stage for the first all-female Story Circle in the gathering's 17-year history, they spoke with some desperation in their voices about losing tradition, dwindling fish stocks, disappearing towns and a fisherman's undying hope. In short, they wanted to know how to protect the industry and culture they love in

a rapidly changing world. In truth, their very words and the FisherPoets Gathering as a whole are a step toward saving both the culture and industry of which they speak.

The FisherPoets Gathering is the 1998 brainchild of Astoria resident and longtime commercial salmon fisherman Jon Broderick, though he is quick to brush off the founder title saying, "I take credit only for making the first phone call because I never met anyone who didn't think it was a good idea." That call was to John van Amerongen, then editor of *Alaska Fisherman's Journal*, which published several fisheries-related poems in each issue of the magazine before the regional publication was folded into *National Fish-*





## Get hooked!

FisherPoets is always looking for new performers and volunteers. As FisherPoet Joel Brady Power notes, it's "an incredibly welcoming group of people. It's just amazing how supportive everybody is. It's so similar to the way we are when we are fishing." If you'd like to watch, participate in, volunteer at, or support the next FisherPoets Gathering visit [www.fisherpoets.org](http://www.fisherpoets.org) for details. The 18th annual FisherPoets Gathering will take place Feb. 27-March 1, 2015, in Astoria, Ore. — S.G.

erman in 2006. Broderick explains, van Amerongen "had a sense of fisherpoetry before such a thing existed. I called him and asked if I could have the names for some of his poets... he gave me 40 addresses, and I wrote to all 40." Of the 40 invitees, 39 fisherpoets showed up to the inaugural gathering at the spacious and raucous Wet Dog Café. An unexpected 200 spectators contributed to the roar, and the FisherPoets Gathering was born.

Like any healthy baby, the gathering has grown every year since, and in February 2014 featured nearly 80 performers from 14 states, including Florida, New Jersey, Virginia, Minnesota, Alaska, Washington and Hawaii. Countries represented included Canada and the United Kingdom. Close to a thousand fans gathered at what has spread to six venues — ranging from dive bars to art galleries to event centers — to cheer on poets, storytellers, songwriters, filmmakers, artists and photographers. All are welcome to watch, and so long as you are connected to commercial fishing, you are welcome to perform. As Broderick notes, "Anyone who has worked in the fishing community can participate — greenhorns, guys who have been retired for 20 years, guys who are still fishing now... and you don't even have to be great, just authentic."

FisherPoets' authenticity is what makes the event so important to the cultural and industrial history of fishing. It's both a way for the public to interact with an often hidden, or more recently Hollywood-glazed (think "Deadliest Catch") icon of Americana and a way for fishermen themselves to celebrate, pass on and even improve tradition. Fisherpoets like Dave Densmore, Meez-

ie Hermansen and Erin Fristad exemplify the broad range of subjects explored in the creative milieu that is The Gathering.

Densmore is an annual crowd favorite. Born and raised in Alaska, he earned his first full crew share at the age of 12 and skippered his first king crab boat at the ripe old age of 23. The now retired fisherman spent most of his life working up and down the West Coast, crabbing and tuna trolling. In the Tote.com, an online archive of fisherpoetry, story and song, explains that Densmore writes "to capture the spirit of a way of life that is disappearing, to show the general public that fishermen are simply harvesters of the resource and not the greedy marauders that he feels they have been portrayed as." His poems are both adventure stories and heartbreaking accounts of the fisheries the way they really are. From his poem "Loser":

**The boat rolled away and  
he was gone!**

**I thought I'd heard him  
out in the night!**

**But though the skipper  
spun the boat around,**

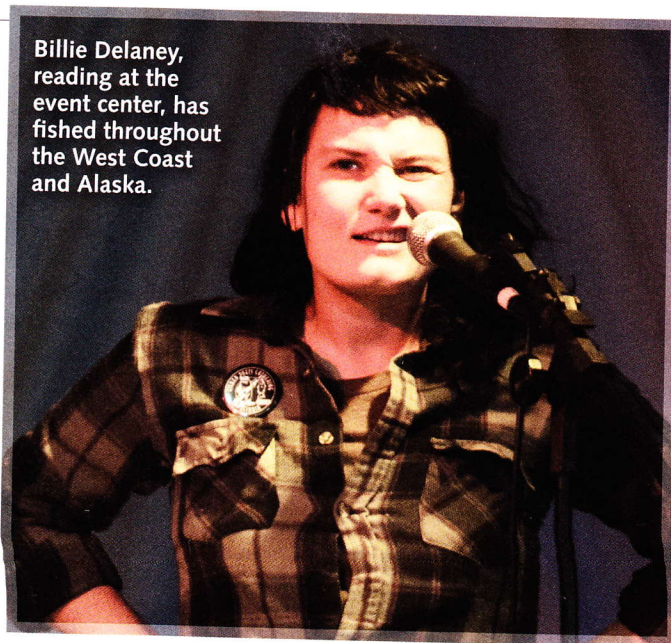
**There was nothing in the  
light!**

**The search was so intense,  
Everyone feels the  
horror of going overboard  
out there.**

**Though there was nothing to  
be seen,**

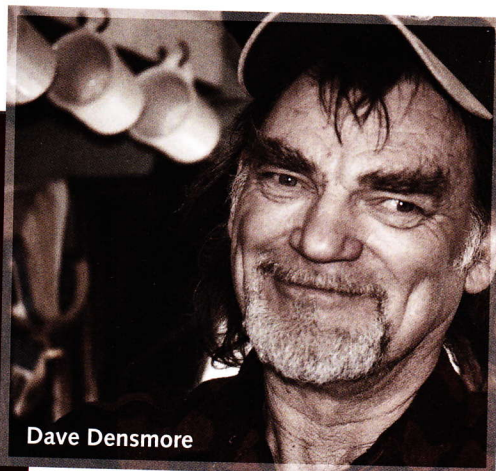
**I kept hearing Johnny calling  
me, I swear!**

Billie Delaney,  
reading at the  
event center, has  
fished throughout  
the West Coast  
and Alaska.



PATRICK DIXON

Meezie Hermansen is relatively new to FisherPoets, though she is a lifelong Cook Inlet East Side setnetter. She has fished every summer "since she could walk," and she calls performing at FisherPoets "an addicting kind of terror." Though her writing spans a broad range of subjects, many of her most striking poems focus on fisheries activism. Of her writing, she says political pieces are important, though she doesn't always know the best outlet for them. "A Board of Fish meeting is not the proper place to recite [poems]," but her words certainly make an effective political statement, and her poems against the Pebble mine have raised cheers at FisherPoets past. Though the EPA has



Dave Densmore

PATRICK DIXON

moved to ban Pebble, Hermansen said she is still worried about many small projects in Alaska. From her poem "O Chuitna," which she performed at FisherPoets 2014:



O Chuitna, I fear for you.  
Man seeks to strip mine your wild salmon  
streams.  
Outside interests bent once again on  
plundering the land.  
Jobs provided will little benefit Alaskans.  
Coal obtained will not benefit Alaskans.  
The mess left behind will be left for Alaskans.  
We will pay the price.  
You will pay the price.

She says projects like the Chuitna coal mine are “stepping stones to something like Pebble because they set precedence. And they do affect the habitat.”

Erin Fristad fished for 15 years pursuing herring near Toigiak, crab off the Columbia River and salmon all over Alaska. Her poems and stories record the evolving perception of women in fisheries, and she has performed at FisherPoets for many years. When a fellow fisherwoman objected to her poem “Advice to Female Deckhands,” which begins “You will be the cook,” she wrote this:

“I want my stories, poems, experiences to offer insight. I want you to know *our* history. I want you to know where you’re coming from, who came before you, but like my first skipper I also want to stand back and let you figure out your own way. I can say that had I written ‘Advice to Female



Meezie Hermansen

PATRICK DIXON

she had fewer options. Maybe she couldn’t walk the docks in broad daylight looking for work, maybe she didn’t have a childhood friend who was already fishing. However she got there, her being there started breaking down a wall that kept women

Deckhands’ 10 years earlier it might have started: ‘You will sleep with the skipper.’ I’m proud that it didn’t and glad I didn’t have to, but I won’t judge a woman for whom that might have been true: maybe her desire to be on the ocean was more voracious than mine, maybe

## Commercial Fishing Under Attack



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## On the horizon

“**A**nchored in Deep Water” is a seven-volume anthology of fisherpoetry, stories and interviews, featuring 35 fisherpoets from the United States, Canada and Japan. It was the brainchild of fisheries and collaborative design student Chelsea Stephen. Fisherpoet Pat Dixon is

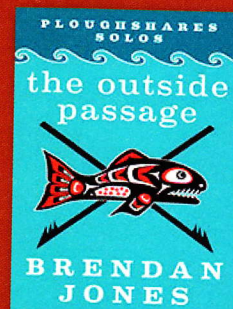
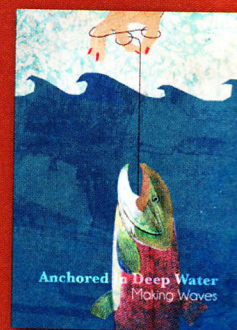
her collaborative partner. At press time, the pair was preparing to launch a 30-day Kickstarter campaign to publish the collection. Contact Pat at [dixonphoto@comcast.net](mailto:dixonphoto@comcast.net) or visit [www.inthetote.com](http://www.inthetote.com) for more information.

“The Alaskan Laundry” is the debut novel of longtime Sitka, Alaska, resident Brendan Jones, due out in late 2015. The book follows young Tara Marconi, a female boxer from South Philadelphia to Alaska, as she struggles to define a place for herself in the male-dominated fishing industry. Tara works hard to keep pace, as well as to determine her own version of home. Read an excerpt at Ploughshares.

“Hooked: a season of love, sex, and salmon” is Sitka troller Tele Aadsen’s debut memoir set to be published in 2015. Aadsen herself is hooked on FisherPoets, having performed several years in row. She says the book is “a story of what it means to be true... to another person, to a place, to yourself and finding that the answers... are not the ones that I expect them to be.”

Commercial Fishing Film Festival founder David Clark screened short fishing films at FisherPoets, but the action began and continues online. Videos from amateurs and professionals can be viewed year-round at [www.com-fishfilmfest.com](http://www.com-fishfilmfest.com). Each January the festival invites viewers to vote online for their favorite videos.

— S.G.





off fishing boats. Eighteen years ago, it wasn't possible for me to get off the jet in Petersburg [Alaska], walk down the dock and ask for a job as a deckhand. It was agreeing to cook that got me from the dock onto the deck. It was showing up and working hard for 15 years that contributed to the notion and general acceptance that women belong on fishing boats."

Bringing together old friends and new friends, cocktails and beer, protest and festivities, tradition and change, laughter, and sometimes even tears, FisherPoets is an authentic celebration of commercial fishing — past and future. It brings together and makes public the people and work of those who, as fisherpoet Tele Aadsen aptly said, have "this common way of viewing the world that is not common."

Jane Kinegal and her Story Circle are right to worry that this uncommon perspective might disappear, but with FisherPoets happening every year and spreading to festivals around the country, it's possible to hope — and as Karen Willis Ampsacher said during the Story Circle, "fishermen

live on hope more than money" that a piece of this culture will be preserved and shared. FisherPoets organizer Broderick had the last word at the end of this year's festival: "We're standing by. [We'll] see ya on down the road." **NF**

*Sierra Golden is a seiner deckhand and freelance writer in Seattle.*



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