

AN HOUR WITH Dave Harville

We have a story to tell and don't mind telling it," Dave Harville chuckles, his gravel voice booming over the phone line at 7:00 AM. It's a wet, gray morning in Kodiak, Labor Day fast approaching, and besides the mundane press of business at his office and adjacent gear store, Harville's house overflows with guests eager to go sport fishing. Yet he agrees, with alacrity, to the interview. "I only have an hour," he apologizes a short time later, ensconced, coffee cup in hand, in a windowed corner of the Westmark Hotel lounge. "What do you want to know?"

What about the life and times of Dave Harville, for openers—what brought him here? Glancing out at St. Paul's Harbor across the street, Harville begins, "I'm a 4th generation Californian, born October 26, 1934. I've a four-year-old daughter and three grown sons. I live in Kodiak and will as long as I'm in business here. In 1964 I walked out of a car showroom in California and bought a boat."

Harville jumped from car sales to a 40-foot landing barge to troll salmon out of Eureka, California, and moved up to a 56-foot boat to fish salmon and albacore three years later. "I could see what was happening with salmon," he says, "so I converted and began dragging in 1972. There were only 26 draggers between Fort Bragg and Crescent City (in northern California).

Now," he gruffs, "there are over 100." In 1977, flush with Magnuson Act spirit and promise, he built his first trawler, the *Linda Jeanne*. "In 1978 Jay Hammond said that 700 trawlers were needed in Alaska," he recollects, "so I moved my operation to Gibson Cove (a short distance outside the town of Kodiak) to do bottomfish—the great horizon, great future." He chuckles softly. "Nobody bottomfished in those days. Nobody wanted to—crab and shrimp were big."

Kodiakans first saw Dave Harville as "...a California hippie with bib overalls, pony tail and

feathered beads. Now," says an insider, "he's like a big frog in a small pond."


Harville built a second dragger, the *Hickory Wind*, in 1978 to fish in Alaska and laid the keel for a third, his flagship, the *Margaret Lyn*. Built as a combination vessel, one of the first designed for shrimp, crab, packing salmon and dragging bottomfish, the *Margaret Lyn* arrived in Alaska in spring, 1980. "We brought her to the New England Fish Company dock and said we're ready to fish," Harville says. "They said, 'We're ready to close the door.' We've fished through four bankruptcies of fish companies," he adds with a wry grin. "But we got Alaska product on the market and made enough to keep the business going." He wrote off his losses in the bankruptcies as dues paid.

FROM RELATIVE "RAGS TO RICHES," ONE OF THE MOST VISIBLE FISHING SUCCESS STORIES OF THE LAST FRONTIER, DAVE HARVILLE, TALKS ABOUT HIS PAST, AND THE FUTURE OF ALASKA'S FISHING INDUSTRY.

by D.B. Pleschner



Kodiak's downtown harbor



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"I also paid dues for not paying dues as a deckhand. I never was a deckhand, and that's not a good deal," Harville declares. "I have a deep and abiding respect for good crew. I am where I am because I hired 20 years of experience in Dennis Cox—he forgot more than I knew. Same with Don Johnson." Harville mentions other associates, proud that almost everyone who came to Alaska with him is still with him. As for Harville himself, from 1964 to 1981 he skippered boats and he learned.

Around 1979-80, Korea tried joint venturing and several boats got involved. "I lost more money fishing Korean joint ventures than I did in the four (fish company) bankruptcies," Harville comments. "Then in 1980 or 1981, Dennis Cox asked to work for the Marine Resources joint venture. Everyone had been burned so badly with the Koreans that nobody wanted to, but Cox prevailed and we joined Marine Resources in the second year. We joined an elite company." Harville names several industry giants, including Barry Fisher. "Most of us were pioneers because we were forced into it. Except Barry Fisher.

He was a pioneer because he likes it," Harville says. "Fisher did more for groundfish than any single person.

"Remember, there were no markets for bottomfish then. The market never was there for Alaska product—the logistics weren't there. Part of what forced joint ventures," he continues, "banks goaded industry to modernize, to build fancy vessels. We couldn't see that we couldn't pay for them with existing fisheries. Of course," he leans back, smiling, "joint ventures became one of the glamour stories of U.S. fishing history. I hate to see them end, though we know they must."

In 1981 Harville acquired another boat; and when the *Linda Jeanne* sank he replaced it with the insurance proceeds. "By 1985 I was totally involved in joint ventures as a matter of necessity," he says. "Ever since we came to Alaska, we've kept the boats working about 10 months a year, by hook or crook. It's been tough." He formed a partnership with Kenai Fisheries in 1986 to joint venture, a halcyon union—"...the only joint

D.B. Pleschner



Spools of wire and line decorate front yard of Dave Harville's office and store, which is home of the Kodiak & Western Trawler group.

venture operation in Kodiak, and one of few continuing to operate out of Alaska." In 1987 he bought the steel schooner *Adgee* to longline and went into partnership to buy yet another dragger, at one point raising the count to six vessels. He also opened a gear store catering primarily to trawl but dealing with every segment of fishing.

"I haven't fished since 1981, I've managed the fleet. My job has become totally political," Harville remarks. Grinning, unabashed, he adds, "My little operation went up to a multi-million-dollar gross business. It all comes and goes real fast—like playing Monopoly. People see all the money and think you're a multi-millionaire. I've been a cash millionaire several times," he offers with a husky chuckle, "until I paid the bills."

In 1988, though, Harville sold his interest in the *Margaret Lyn* to Don Johnson, who had worked up to skipper. Why sell his flagship? "I don't have delusions of grandeur," he replies, blue eyes intent. "I don't want a big Cadillac. I have a nice big house—what else does a man need?"

Why stand in the way of giving another guy a chance?" Harville also is selling another of his draggers to the skipper, if the deal goes through. And he is expanding the *Hickory Wind* from its former 85x22-foot hull size to 100x29-foot, with new 100-ton capacity of RSW fish, to fish for Western Alaska's surimi plant, a dream he's had since 1978. "That's what it takes," he says. "It's a \$500,000 decision and if it's wrong, it's out of my pocket. But we never had a market able to support a boat before. Now they do. I'm tickled."

In the spring of 1987, Harville ran his entire operation out of his bedroom. "Now I have an office, an office manager, a store manager and employees in the yard," he ticks off. "That's why I sold. I got too big—too big. Bigness breeds bigness." Pausing for another swig of coffee, he studies the scene outside the window, row upon row of boats resting in their slips in the harbor and fishermen scurrying back and forth in the rain.

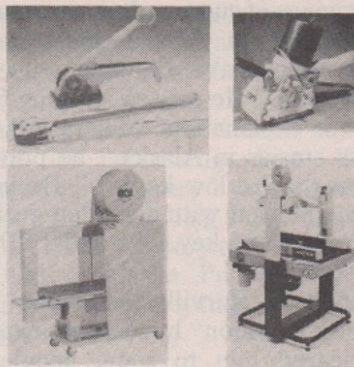
"I am a full-time Alaska resident," he blurts out, changing tack. "I believe if you take a living from an area, you should live in that area. But some-

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Aerial view of Kodiak shows both St. Paul and St. Herman harbors, and the Three Sisters mountains in the background.

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thing about Alaska discourages the trappings of success. It doesn't pay to be flashy in Alaska—most flashy operations leave. Big money doesn't stay here." He pauses, groping for a better explanation. "There are success stories in Alaska," he puts in, "but they're low key. . . ." He interrupts himself with a sudden guffaw. "I'm not low key," he adds. "Don't mistake me."

Indeed, Harville's reclame and ready opinion have not exactly endeared him to some people. A master of the "quotable quote," he tends not to mince words. So, with the rush to "Americanize" North Pacific groundfish stocks, how does he see the future—the world according to Harville?

"All the stuff I read says groundfish is the big thing. I don't see it, not yet—but the potential is there. Despite what you read, the groundfish

industry is sick. Processors are struggling—markets can't keep up with harvesting capability," he says. Still, the economic potential of groundfish in Alaska is enormous. "Groundfish offers stable employment 10 or 11 months a year working for the canneries," Harville points out. "No other fishery offers that—salmon goes on two months a year; halibut lasts 10 days; crab comes in fits and starts. Groundfish has the potential to be the stabilizing factor in Alaska fisheries—to assure continuity for the towns of Kodiak, Sand Point, Dutch Harbor, Sitka, Seward. . . . The fishing industry could put thousands of people to work." His finger stabs the tabletop, punctuating the argument. "We need groundfish and we need common sense.

"People believe the groundfish hype and are converting to groundfish. But there are no markets for them. People are trying to shop loads like crab or halibut—except ground-

fish is different. If you catch a load of groundfish, you'd better have it sold before you go. The trawl fleet at this time is badly overcapitalized. The advice I'd give a newcomer is 'Don't go in cold. Buy an existing operation that has a long-term market.' The most important thing in the trawl fishery is market."

Pausing to watch the waitress refill his cup, he opens fire in another direction. "The State of Alaska is letting the groundfish resource slip away," he says, shaking his head. "In all the rhetoric from Juneau, there's not enough done to encourage development. There's not enough action to *Alaskanize* the groundfish industry. We push the fish outside." Eyes glinting, voice gruff, he reiterates, "The state has pushed fish away by inaction. And it's grossly unfair to blame outside fishermen for it—they just saw opportunity and took it. There's



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not one member of the Board of Fish who really understands groundfish. In all the state advisory committees, there's only one groundfish person—a factory trawler—and he's not even a resident of the state."

The mention of factory trawlers, the burgeoning American offshore processing fleet, evokes reflagging, another heated issue. "I testified in favor of reflagging in Washington D.C." Harville states point-blank. "Had we been allowed to reflag 5 or 10 vessels, we could have provided work for 118 existing J/V trawlers. The factory trawl fleet would not have expanded so greatly. But they stopped reflagging, and now over 100 trawlers don't know where to go.

"The factory trawler fleet went to Congress and testified that by 1990 they'll need all two million metric tons of fish (in the North Pacific)," he goes on. "They're not going to get it. I

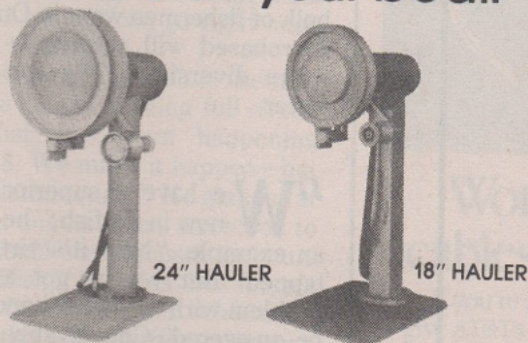
wrote to (Senator) Ted Stevens and asked, 'What are we going to do with these small vessels?' Both Stevens and (Senator) John Breaux promised in hearings that Congress wouldn't let the existing fleet down. But had reflagging been allowed, the fleet and industry would be stronger for it—not as much competition with shorebased vs. factory-trawler processing.

"We've done it all—fished J/V's with the Portuguese, shipped codfish to California, tried flying fish out," Harville recounts. "The logistics of doing groundfish in Kodiak are tough. But the future of Kodiak, of Dutch, of Alaska, lies in groundfish. There are 16 plants in town that want to do groundfish, and they'll be marginally successful until the factory trawl fleet..." He lets the thought slide, unfinished, then offers, "I've been involved in a lot of battles—all of politics. But none of the battles we've fought will have near the impact of shorebased vs. at-sea processing.

Americans vs. Americans. It's the worst of all battles—big losers and big winners." Eyebrows raised, he adds, "I feel strongly that shorebased will come out major winners. Kodiak and Dutch will have (successful) shore-based fish processing plants. The form of limited entry I want to see," he bursts out, stubbing a finger on the table, "is keep factory trawlers out of the Gulf of Alaska. Put them in the Bering Sea, where they're needed, where they belong."

Harville flashes a quizzical grin. "If you write anything about me, you have to put on paper how I feel about limited entry. The time for limited entry in any fishery has passed—for any fishery," he says, emphatic. "The time to do it is before it's necessary. If there were to be limited entry, it should be for all fisheries. In groundfish, limited entry will be accomplished by the size of

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shorebased markets and the boats they can accommodate, plus time and area closures for at-sea processors.

"I am **NOT**," he underscores, "in favor of limited entry for the shore-based trawl fleet. And I feel very strongly that factory processors are going to consume themselves. Why haven't I built one? Over the long haul, small to medium size trawlers will be the ones to survive. I think the factory trawl fleet will go through upheavals you can't imagine," he declares, voice rising. "The trawl industry will go through upheaval, but when the dust settles, the boats 120 feet and smaller will be survivors. If a boat is 150 feet, the price of fish better go up!"

Pausing for the import of his words to sink in, he adds quietly, "When we came in 1978 to fish cod for New England Fish Company, we fished essentially the same gear as today, and we got 60,000 pounds of codfish in a three-day trip. Today, when a boat can't get 50 tons a day, the skipper considers himself a failure. The biomass has changed—but the problem isn't in the biomass, it's in the fleet, the harvesting capacity. That's the American way—that's how the bulk of fishermen want it. One reason shorebased will survive is because we're diversified. We can convert faster.

"**W**e have a superior product now in flatfish," he offers as an example. "Now it's virtually untapped. But you've got a bycatch problem with the fishery and it has to be answered. Conceivably, bycatch could shut down new industry. If you prosecute a trawl fishery," Harville asserts, "you're going to have bycatch. The decisions made by management are to shut down flatfish or give a larger chunk of the bycatch to the trawl fleet. Damn it," he stops short, grinning. "I'm not going to provide the answer to that one."

By the end of 1988, all the boats Harville owns or manages—now three and three—were involved in DAP fisheries, committed to shorebased

industry. "But Kenai Fisheries is wonderful," he qualifies. "I'll work with them as long as joint ventures last. I think there's a place for J/V's," he says. "Their future depends on the success of factory trawlers. If the factory trawl fleet fails, there'll be joint ventures forever. But I want the future of Gulf of Alaska groundfish to lie with shorebased industry. Alaska needs it.

"I want it made clear," he states, "the reason I live in Alaska is I feel the future lies in coastal communities. Kodiak is a town of survivors. I want this town to survive and I want groundfish to survive in this town. And if factory trawlers must be kicked out of the Gulf, so be it.

"**A**laska fishermen are survivors," Harville repeats, looking toward the harbor. "But no matter how well off, if a man stays in fishing, he is subject to bankruptcy. Managing fisheries you're always one step ahead of the wolf. You know," he says, "I have a 1932 Monterey clipper that I've restored completely sitting tied to the dock with a California troll permit. It's my link to the past. Anytime I want, I can go right back to where I started.

"People say groundfish is the new thing," he muses, coming full circle. "Groundfish has been happening since 1978. We made it happen—but it's been damn tough." He glances at his watch: one hour has stretched to three. "I could wax eloquent for hours on groundfish," he grins. But there's the store, the boom truck schedule—the logistics of shuffling people, machinery. And a houseful of guests waiting to go fishing. He waves and disappears down Rezanoff Drive in a cloud of spray, off, with inimitable elan, to greet the next challenge. **PF**