

A genre all its own

As with many great endeavors, it began with the work of a single man.

"I made the first phone calls," said Jon Broderick, head of the FisherPoets planning committee.

A commercial salmon fisherman since the 1970s, Broderick conceived the idea for the first gathering in late 1997, after noticing that his favorite trade publication, the Alaska Fisherman's Journal, had started publishing verse alongside the usual industry news articles.

A former schoolteacher with a literary bent of his own — "my job was to encourage adequate writers to become good and good writers to become great," as he puts it — Broderick acquired a list of the journal's contributors, augmented it with a handful of former shipmates, and proceeded to cast his net to bring them together to share their work.

"I called 40 people, 39 of them said 'heck yeah,' and we packed the Wet Dog one night in February '98," he recalled.

The evening was a rousing, raucous success, and word of mouth traveled quickly. By the following year, there were already too many participants for a single venue, and the Gathering has only continued to expand in the two decades since.


In fact, it's become something of a floating cottage industry, with chapbooks, CDs, t-shirts and artwork bearing the FisherPoets imprimatur, and satellite "fisherpoetry" events held in locales from Alaska to Maine. "It's a genre all its own," Broderick said.

New blood, old salts

But nowhere is the growth more evident than here in Astoria. Every year sees new blood mingling with old salts, much to Broderick's delight and, he confesses, relief.

"I'm very pleased to see a lot of younger fishermen and women joining us. For a while I was afraid it'd just be us old people," he said. "The biggest thrill for me is to hear people telling their stories in a fresh way, whether they're newcomers or veterans. I've always said that a good piece of writing is three things: honest, fresh and effective. To hear people telling stories about our lives as commercial fishermen that are those three things is tremendously satisfying to me."

In the end, although the FisherPoets Gathering has garnered attention from the BBC to the New York Times and brings thousands of enthusiastic attendees every year, its mission remains the same as it did 20 years ago.

"This event was never really designed to bring people to town, it's designed to bring commercial fishermen together in a creative fashion," Broderick said. "People do seem to enjoy it even if they know nothing about the industry, which thrills and surprises us, but the focus will always be on the men and women of the fisheries enjoying each others' company and telling each others' stories. And if anyone else wants to share that with us, we're happy to have them." 



Gillnetters at work

PERRY BRODERICK PHOTO



PATRICK DIXON PHOTO

Fisherpoet Tele Aadsen, of Bellingham, Washington, will be reading and emceeing at this year's FisherPoets Gathering.



ALEX PAJUNAS PHOTO

Rob Seitz, of Astoria, performs during the 2013 FisherPoets Gathering at the Voodoo Room.



DANNY MILLER PHOTO

John Elliot from Saltspring Island, British Columbia reads a passage of his work at Fort George Brewery during last year's FisherPoets Gathering.