

*Interview recorded by Stacy Schaefer for the Humboldt Area Peoples Archive, October 20, 2023 at the Bear River Rancheria.*

[45:00]

Stacy: If you could please say your name.

Barry: Barry Brenard.

Stacy: And can you tell me a little bit about the salmon ceremony?

Barry: Oh yeah. Back in 1958, when we were terminated as a tribe, a lot of our ceremony fell away. And back in 1984 we were finally recognized again by the federal government, and so we started to formulate our government, our tribe back together. And with the time and energy and ethnographies that we had on hand, we did a lot of research. And from my upbringing, my brother's upbringing in the area, we had been taught these ceremonies that were vital for our tribe. So I was saying in 1984 we were recognized by the federal government. Me and my brother and a few other tribal members started getting involved in the culture. Coming from our memories and what we were doing from our ethnographies, we were coming to understand that the ceremonies are missing. One of the main ones is the jump dance ceremony. That led to the salmon ceremony we are doing today. I think this is the 5th year that we've revitalized it and reclaimed it.

Stacy: How many years?

Barry: Five. It hasn't been done, I think 160 years was the last time it was performed. Five years ago, we reclaimed it back thanks to all the efforts of all the community members here on the tribe. So far, we've had several families step in and take the leadership role in that and learn the songs. From my side of the family and from other families, songs were passed down through the wax recordings they have down in Berkeley. We have a lot of songs from down there that we were able to retrieve, and have been slowly but methodically learning now, relearning them. I have my great-grandmother Molly Brenard [49:06], her recording is on a CD.

Stacy: Molly Bernard?

Barry: Yes, she's a renowned shaman that lived in the area. Here in Eureka. She was what they call an indentured servant. Yeah she was an indentured servant to the Brenards.

Stacy: Oh, and that's how she got the last name.

Barry: Yeah. And then when her son was born, he needed to go on to the military. So they needed to spell his name in an easier fashion, so they changed it to Bernard. So there's that change to the spelling right in that era. He got to join the armed services and she, like I said she was shaman and living out on the annex out there they call the Brenard Annex, it's out in the

middle of Eureka and Arcata. There's a piece of land where the Brenard family lived. They were, I think, Portuguese. And they had several native indentured servants. That's where we came from. And so, it's like that with the ceremonies. The further we go back in history, the more progress we can make in the future.

Stacy: Yeah.

Barry: And with all the influences from, like, Berkeley, Humboldt State – it's now Cal-Poly– they have a good archive of the tribes in the area. Like I said, the ethnographies, ethnobotany. We are relearning the medicinal properties of the plants in the area. Hopefully with our classes and everything with the salmon ceremony, the younger kids will learn to appreciate the importance of what we've begun. Because this is the first of many ceremonies in the area. We would like for them to keep it up and relearn all the ceremonies they can, and develop their own songs in the meantime and pass it on to their relatives. It's a work in progress.

Last year in November, we had the most participation with our dance group in the ceremony. I think there were 25 or 26 participants. It was a pretty good crowd dancing. Spectators too, because spectators are part of the dance – they have to perform their part in order for the ceremony to be complete. We let them know that they're an integral part of the ceremony. Because without the community, there wouldn't be a ceremony. And so you know, the catalyst is yeah, the dancers, and then it moves up to the community, and then the other larger community. The salmon ceremony in particular came from a lot of ethnography. Because there's been a salmon ceremony for all the tribes up and down the coast. I think we were the first to revitalize the ceremony in the south. The Klamath people revitalized the salmon festival, which is different from a salmon ceremony.

Stacy: Oh, I haven't been to that one but I've driven through.

Barry: It's more of a street fair.

Stacy: Yeah, exactly.

Barry: And the one we have down there at the Mattole, we wait until that time of year either in the deep fall or in the early spring, when the salmon come in to spawn. At that time, the river breaks. It breaks the beach. And it goes and flows into the ocean, that's when the salmon can come in. As soon as that break happens, you'll see salmon coming in and going up the river.

Stacy: And they do it twice?

Barry: Twice. Once around April, early April, and then once in late November.

Stacy: And when do the hatchlings come back out?

Barry: They're on a periodical of three to seven year intervals. The ones that stay out for 3 years are coming in, and the ones that stay out for 7 years are not coming in yet. When they do, the yearlings from the 3-year olds are going out. So it's always a cycle of life there.

Stacy: Yeah.

Barry: Because when the yearlings have finally gotten the maturity to go out, and the ones out in the ocean come in, they're going out to feed out the ocean, and the older ones are coming in to feed the earth on land.

Stacy: But they don't spawn when they come back when they're old?

Barry: Yeah, they do. They yearlings mature when they're out in the ocean. And then they come back in. But when they come back in, some more of your yearlings are going back out. So it's an ever flowing cycle of life.

Stacy: Now I understand that the Mattole in the past was not in the greatest of health for salmon.

Barry: Yeah. I do believe that starting with the construction of not only dams but the invasive plants and everything and the logging and all that– that caused a great upheaval in mother nature and the way she was used to breathing. And when that happens, there's a great conflict within the balance of things. In that conflict, the Mattole wasn't so strong. Because of the erosion that was happening and all this other stuff from the logging, all the farmers up river taking water away from the flow of the river for their farms. In today's society, it's farmers again, you know, growers of marijuana who take the water out of the river. And by the time it gets down to the ocean it's not flowing as strongly, and it doesn't have the power it did to open the beach. Now we have to watch the rainfall and make sure that it's strong and there's a lot of rain. Lucky for us, the friends of the salmon coalition out there, and the Mattole people out there, people that live are really interested in keeping the natural beauty and everything alive. They did tremendous conservation with that for 20 years, which gave us time to settle in and become a tribe and start to reach out to them. So we've had pretty good communication with them out there

Stacy: That's great.

Barry: Yeah and they're really open-minded and willing to help out. We met a few people – Michael Evenson, Flora Brain, Thomas Duncan – all those people out there, They've been really activists in the environment out there. I want to commend them for the work they've done, while we were trying to regroup as a government and a people. Because we were on the property down there in Fortuna, but after we were reinstated we had to find another property. The tribal government re-established up here on Singley Hill. And it was just a small parcel across the street here, before we bought this whole area on this side of the road. Just like with the ceremony, especially the salmon ceremony, we had to go from a small group and now we got a

larger group. It's the same with the salmon ceremony, it's an ever evolving energy and cultural happening that's becoming more and more prevalent in the minds of tribal members.

Stacy: Now, you mentioned that there were some elders or families that spearheaded the salmon ceremony and the cultural traditions going. And who were those?

Barry: I could say their base names, but then I'd have to whittle it down to their names today. OK, the Keysners [61:38] was the base name, and they're a part of the Wortman clan, they have taken it upon themselves to lead on the women's side. Some of the Bernard clan, whose name is now Gannedon [62:07], Brenard, all those names, they finally started to step up. And more and more the other families are joining in, like the Sands. They're starting up and their base family, the Heckers [62:30], were highly involved in a lot of the base make-up of the tribe.

Stacy: I'm just learning.

Barry: Oh yeah, it's very complicated and profound and overwhelming at times.

Stacy: So, I understand that it's not just one original tribe, it's several that came together?

Barry: Yeah, it's a very diverse set of tribal members within the area, within the region. Because of the way that the US government rounded up a lot of the tribal members and put them at an agency where they were all put together. And one of the agencies was up at Hoopa, one of them was at Fort Humboldt, And so they be transferring tribal members back and forth and sending them away to boarding schools back in those days. The relocation stuff that they did, a lot of the tribal members were mixed. We have some Hoopas, we have some Yuroks, we have some Karuks, we have some Tolowa [64:13], so all of the tribes from up here in this region have been mixed into our band. When we reorganized as a tribe, they used a plan of distribution as the foundation of the families that lived on Rohnerville Rancheria at the time of termination.

Stacy: 1958

Barry: Yeah. 1958. One of them was my grandmother, one of them was Ruthie's grandmother, one of them was the Sands' grandfather and father. Several of them were McGinnisses people from here. Eileen Meyer, her family, the Moons –Charlie Moon I think it is – was married to a native, because he was from China.

Stacy: Right, I remember hearing about that.

Barry: Yeah. And so it's all diversity in our tribe and that makes for a lot of growing pain. Because a lot of tribal people want to participate in this tradition, and a lot want to participate in that tradition. We, as the cultural department say, Okay, you can do that, but we want to revitalize the Bear River Band ceremonies. We've done our homework with the ethnography and the passing of wisdom from older generations to new generations and we're passing it on to the next generation. We are trying to keep that alive and breathing, because without that, we

would flounder and be misguided by a lot of things. So we try to make sure that everybody's wishes and desires, as diverse as they are, are welcomed. But we also want to keep in mind that as Bear River, we are open-minded to the diversity of everything, especially in today's modern world. Because a lot of traditions say, Oh woman shouldn't do this and man should only do this. We here at Bear River, from the guidance I've been getting from my elders and my understanding, is that we have to be open-minded. And accept everybody for who they are. So if a female wanted to do a certain thing, they would have to go through the channels to get their okay. And as far as the coordinators are concerned, we want them to feel welcome and do anything that they aspire to. And we don't want to hold back because that's like killing a plant, you know, it's just not good.

Stacy: And what is your title?

Barry: I'm the cultural coordinator for the men's group, and Ruthie Wortman is the cultural coordinator for the women's group. But we work together in unison and always keep that open mind. If somebody comes and wants to do something, we can accept them for what they are wanting and willing to do, regardless of whether they're part of the tribal roll. If they're a family member that's not on our roll, we still accept them in the cultural programs that we have. And support them in every way we can. And it's like that with all departments really, because that's the way the tribal council has seen fit to make sure that because of the diversity of the people, they don't ever want to close the door on one person because they don't believe something.

Stacy: Your family is from way back, what tribal affiliation?

Barry: The Wiyot, and Mattole. I'm full blooded, I think I'm one the last full blooded except for my elders here on the tribe that live here on the Rancheria.

Stacy: Full-blooded Wiyot.

Barry: Mattole.

Stacy: There's a lot of different groups.

Barry: There's different bands. The Bear River Band ancestral territory, there are 9 bands. So those in turn used to trade with Yuroks for wives, or kidnap them, or whatever they did. There was some mixed blood there and it's a cornucopia of Northern California regional tribes.

Stacy: OK. So I think you already touched upon a bit, but I'll ask again about the role and importance of the salmon ceremony and its future.

Barry: First, the salmon ceremony has been celebrated within the Northern California tribal region. And what it entails is the reproduction life and death of the salmon as they are naturally. And all the dance steps and intricate moves in the ceremony depict certain traditions that we want to keep alive, like being able to go from the materialistic world to the spiritual world and

back. Because when our lead medicine people lead the ceremony, which is a woman, she has to cut her way into the spiritual world. We don't cut our way in, she cuts our way in. And therefore opens that door for the procreation of life and helps us interact in that sense. The women dance in a particular manner that depicts the way the female salmon behaves in the river before she lays her eggs. And the men's dance steps depict what the males' behavior is in the same fashion according to their gender. So after the women spin, then the males come. The salmon lay their eggs, the men come in and apply the seeds. Therefore there's a binding of natural material that causes life. And then the mature male and female go out and die and give their bodies to the earth and to the animals. And, if you have ever seen the spawning methods of salmon, their nutrients accumulate around the river. So the whole system, the ecosystem, is benefited by their participation in life. And hopefully with our doing the salmon ceremony, we are doing the same for our families, and our communities. We want good healthy people in our system and the only way they're going to get it is through that cultural aspect. Especially with all the influences of today—so many messages bombarding people today, no matter whether you're old or young. This outside influential messaging that has become the norm is not healthy in some aspects. Some of it is healthy, some of it is not, just like everything in life. But we just want our people to realize that through the benefit of that ceremony, we're connected to it and keeping it alive, to realize and learn the values and beliefs in that ceremony and carry on those really good humanistic values and attributes and belief systems. And when we teach protocols and etiquette for ceremonies, we want the kids to be aware that it's important but we also want it to be enjoyable so they'll learn it. So far we've been doing a pretty good job. Like I said, at our last salmon ceremony, we had the most participants. We'll gain even better recognition, we're bringing this ceremony. We'll bring back the bear ceremony. A long time ago, we used to have it all the time up here, but it's lost, it's lost in translation. And we have our research and networking with other tribes that have the bear dance. We're collaborating with them to bring it back to Bear River here. And the eel ceremony, there's a ceremony for eels. And we carry on like that after each ceremony that we establish. The first four years of the salmon ceremony was to solidify the intricate protocols and dance steps for the next people learning. It was our adult women, and now it's the younger ones. I do believe Ruthie has worked with her sisters and is depending on one of the younger women to do the lead.

Stacy: Yeah, this is interesting.

Barry: Yeah. Azalea, from what I hear. And that's great. Because she was on the tribal council and she's really stepping up and being a good citizen for us. And she's really enthusiastic and innovative, and has that drive to learn herself, which is good. Like I said, she's part of the Hecker family. And so it'll go on to another part, somebody else, another family, hopefully, because they see her stepping up and they think, Oh, I have to step up too.

Stacy: And do you think that the ceremony is not only celebrating but also opening up more the health of the Mattole River?

Barry: Yeah. I truly do see that, because not this last ceremony but the time before, we had a drone out. There was a lady filming, taking pictures of the ceremony and everything, that we

allowed to come in and do that. She took a drone up in the sky, and we could see the actual breaking of the river.

Stacy: You saw it happen.

Barry: Yeah. And that just gave everybody... Oh this is so powerful. And that gave everybody goosebumps. She's come back time and time again to the Mattole area. To work with them down there and us here to get pictures and documentation. And all of that has contributed to the reclaiming of our cultural identity. That is given to the kids, and they see some benefits because the more and more they get involved, the more and more they feel good about themselves. We see that a lot in our kids. Because of the resources the casino has given us, it helps us build on those ceremonies, and it helps the kids. It's that cycle of life again.

Stacy: Is there anything else you'd like to say?

Barry: I can't think of anything. But I would like to thank you for being involved and helping us in the ways you can, because everybody needs to help everybody out. The more and more we can do that, the more and more everybody's going to profit.

Stacy: Thank you. I used to live in Chico, I was a professor there, and we did an exhibit on the Maidu people. In the early 2000s, they had revitalized their salmon ceremony. So I got to go in near Oroville, Berry Creek, they had just got permission to hunt them with spears. And because they have that fishery and so you'd see the salmon running, Feather River going up. I'd never seen so many, like these big masses. And yet they were all beat up along the way, and then they went up the steps of the ladder for the fishery and they were trying to flay themselves over the dam and they couldn't make it. It was so hard to see that.

Barry: That's part of the struggle that a lot of the tribes have: the influences of modern society not allowing the natural forces to help benefit our land. And I understand that people need to have power in their houses, but hopefully they'll come up with a new solution

Stacy: Yeah, I hope so. And what you all are doing gives hope for everybody.

Barry: And I think it was 2 years ago, I got permission from the State Wildlife Commission to put it in an MOU with our Wildlife Commission to take five ceremonial salmon out of the Mattole each year, which had never been done. And so we got that into an agreement with the governor's office and the state legislature. We're going to allow a tribal member to fish for the salmon, but he's got to understand he can't just throw a dip net in and catch 10 when they're only supposed to be 5. So we have to sit him down and talk to him and make sure he knows the parameters and abides by them. Because there's always that influence of society saying, Oh, I can have one, why can't I have two? And so we as a Wildlife Commission are going to have to sit down with him and explain to him, Yeah we'll give you permission but you can only do it this way, and this way only. We'll allow you to get a dip net out there and get 5 fish, but that's it. Five males because we don't want to take the females.

Stacy: Right. And when will that be, do you know?

Barry: I believe it will be in the next week that we'll talk to him, and he's going to be able to go down and do that.

Stacy: And that would be for this upcoming salmon ceremony?

Barry: Yeah. And he can't take them home to smoke them at his house and can them, because we want them to be part of the ceremony. Those are the parameters that we have to discuss with him. Because we want to keep it fair and equal to everybody. We don't want the influences of today's society to cloud the judgment, where they would say, Well, I didn't know. Okay we're going to lay down the law and let you know what you can and can't do. He's a good man, and he'll probably understand what we're doing, but he doesn't understand the system. We always have to have bureaucracy. Even our tribal government, we have to have it. So like with everything cultural, we got to adapt as we move on.

Stacy: Thank you so much.