

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

[8:30]

Stacy: Your name?

Ruth: Ruth Evelyn Wortman.

Stacy: OK. Now we were already talking about this last family that came in, they just sing praises to you about how you're bringing back the tradition and especially for the kids. Can you talk about that, and in particular the salmon ceremony?

Ruth: Yeah. My main focus is helping the kids find their cultural identity because there's strength in that. That's my hope and my goal every day. To reach another tribal youth or a tribal member and encourage them to practice in ceremony. We host ceremony protocols and we've partnered with a Karuk elder by the name of Amos Albert. He teaches us jump dance, brush dance and we learn a lot from him as goes the other tribes ceremonies and protocols. But we also do a Monday night ceremony protocol class which is the ceremony focus. We also teach Amos about the ceremony for the salmon because this is a ceremony that hadn't been practiced and not a lot of people knew about it. Just this past class, he asked, Why is it that when you come into your circle and you come in on the East, you leave that space between the East and the South open? And I explained to him that the Flint [10:34] who are the two women after the medicine woman, they are cutting the spiritual gap in between the physical world and the spiritual world. So they come in on the East, they do their ceremony and then they come back out and each person who exits the arena is actually sewing that doorway closed as they're coming out and going back to the South. It represents that doorway being open for the spirits and for us to interact on the spiritual side. That's an example of my goal: to teach the next generation, to lift them up and encourage them to embrace that spiritual unseen world. And in turn, I get to teach the elders as well.

Stacy: That is so cool. And how did you gain your knowledge?

Ruth: Elders. Elders. Other tribal Nations. The Karuk tribe have a salmon ceremony as well. Theirs is a little different. I'm not going to speak on theirs because I'm not a professional. I'm learning theirs as well. I'm hoping in the future to be invited to their salmon ceremony. There are some Nations down south that have their salmon ceremony, so it's not unheard of. Other tribes do it. But we're learning to do this salmon ceremony which is a Nongatl ceremony. The Bear River is a band of Nations and Nongatl is one of those Nations. That's why we practice it. We just are doing the best that we can with the knowledge that we have, reading stories and speaking to Elders. Actually the Bernald brothers are the ones who brought this to my attention. Hank Bernard was like, Hey, we have this ceremony, and they'd like us do it. That's

when I first got hired. I was like, Awesome, when do you need me to have this ready? When do you need this by? The women's cultural coordinator hired us. And he's like, Next month.

-All right. Do we have any dresses?

-I don't know, do we?

-I don't know. I literally just got hired.

So the very first ceremony, we had 11 dresses, none of them had anything on them. One dress had four Abalone shells on the dress and that was to represent the creator's eye and the north and the south and the east and the west. And the medicine person wore that. And that was me. It was really scary because, as the medicine woman, you're stepping into this role of spiritual responsibility, spiritual payment, so if there was an incident that happened or an ill will that took place, a payment needed to be made, that would have come from me. It would have come either with me knowing that it came and happened, or with me not knowing that it came and happened. So when you step into this person of the medicine woman, you're really putting yourself in a position to just accept whatever comes—the good and the bad. Being honored with that—I don't want to say the obligation, but by that time, I have to do this, it was my job. Now that I look back on it, I feel honored and blessed to be that person to step into this position. A lot of people are afraid of this position because you don't really know what's going to happen in the spiritual world, there's no way to say. Being that person and taking that first risk and showing my tribal community that you can do this position and honor this role, and honor your family and survive. You're not going to come down with sickness, Your family is not going to be hurt. Because you hear legends about people doing things in the spiritual world that are not in a good way, and then payment comes later down the road. I think that being that person and telling myself, If you weren't meant to do this, Ruth, you wouldn't be this person here. So it was really a matter of faith in me getting the position as the women's culture coordinator, and there's a big story behind that whole thing too. It just kind of became that after struggling for a year trying to get employment. This position was given to me, and then the ceremony landed in my lap within a matter of a month. It was just like everything was lined up. We're going there with good thoughts, good heart. Don't be afraid, just walk with faith. That's what I did. I feel honored that we have another tribal young lady and another tribal young man who – I'm going to start crying – who are stepping up into these leadership roles. My nephew Quincy led the men for the ceremony for 2 years and now we have Gage Sand who is willing to step up and lead them in too. So now we have two young men that are like, You can count on me to lead them in. It's just a blessing to see how this has grown in the last three years into community involvement, community strength. Having this young lady, Azalea Couchsand, who is a student at Cal Poly Humboldt, she's going to be doing the demonstration this year. I feel blessed. My sister Maggie who hopefully will be over here soon, she heads the ceremony, she runs the actual ceremony day. So yeah, it's awesome to have the demonstration day so that members who want to learn how to lead and practice can get in there and have a safe place to do it.

Stacy: So I'm just learning about the Rancheria here, and it's a combination of tribes so where is your connection and also to the salmon ceremony?

Ruth: OK, so my connection is, I am part of the Keysner [17:43] family, which is the Dinsmore? I can't remember, let me look at my family tree. OK, let's see. My connection is through my family that had sites out there... Barry would remember, I can't remember off the top of my head. My family had sites all over on Prosper Ridge I think is what it's called. They had sites there. And then on the other side of the Mattole, my uncle had a site there. So that's where my family is from. My grandparents are Nora and Chief Coonskin, they're my grandparents and they're Bear River. My connection to the salmon ceremony, I think is just it's where I'm from like it's my home and that's how I feel. You know where the zebras are?

Stacy: No.

Ruth: If you're going out to the Mattole, when you come to that cemetery where all the eucalyptus trees are, it's before that. You come around this bend, there's this huge field to your right. They're in there, so once I hit that spot, the beach out there, Cape Town, I start to feel like I'm home. I'm back. I have a spot that I always stop and sing at. They're more than just our food source, they're more than just nutrients to the environment, they're relatives. It's important for me and I talk to them for a long time. When my partner goes fishing I say 'Put her back, she needs to live.' But it's more than just a ceremony for me, it's me connecting with my ancestors that are on the other side, because I'm a descendant of the Tolowa nation, the Yurok nation, the Karuk nation, the Mattole, Bear River, Wiyot. It's hard for me to really pick a place. My non-native blood too, the German and the Irish and all that, they all intertwine. For me, I don't really feel like there's any one place for me to be. I feel like my place is to support all nations, native and non-native, because we all have that inner generational trauma, that history that our ancestors survived. I don't think there's a people out there that don't have some kind of trauma that they are healing from. I feel like when it comes to my connection to the salmon, it's a lot like my connection to anything and anyone: it's my duty to protect and support, be mindful of the unseen that people don't think about.

I saw one of my cousins' posts, and he was just talking about how he knows some unkind customers. Having to deal with people like that on a regular basis. And that's the reality of it, when people go to a different location, they're not thinking about the habitat that they are interacting with. That's where I'm at. My journey is to just be mindful and teach my kids. When you go there, you go there in a good way and you be mindful that there could be a real live lying there under that rock that you just picked up. So I always tell the kids when we're out picking huckleberries – right here there's some huckleberry plants – there was this big pumpkin spider underneath just trying to hide, he probably saw us coming and tried hiding, but he was just bulging out. This is a good opportunity, and I told my 3 year old, you got to be mindful, you see all these little spider webs and all the spiders? So I pointed at that big pumpkin spider: This is their home. You have to be mindful that when you're picking these berries, make sure you're not picking their home away. It's hard to answer a question when I think about where I'm from and my connection to the salmon, because it's so much more than just a historical connection, it's an honoring of some sort.

Stacy: And I understand from the family that came before you (Sarah Sand and her kids Abi and Ace), that they're just so in awe of all that you're doing for the kids and the community. I mean they didn't really talk about specifics, but what is some of the stuff you're doing?

Ruth: I guess what I do is, I would call it kind of clowning. I would say I clown around. I try to make cultural fun. You talk to elders and they're real serious about it. They'll show you, This is how you do it. They won't do it with you and because their hands hurt, their eyes aren't good, so they're not in that position to sit with you. A lot of them don't have patience no more, their patience is gone. So I do my best to put myself in their shoes, which is what I always try to go with. I meet them where they're at, which is what a lot of people will say: You have to meet them where they're at in order to help them along. So if they're in a place where they're just not comfortable yet, I'll respect that. A good example is Azalea Couchsand. This used to be my office. Azalea would be in the library looking for the librarian, Trista. She'd be in there quietly doing whatever task it was. I would pop my head in the door and I'd be, Hey I'm going to go do this, you want to come with me? And she'll be, No that's okay. And I'd be, Okay, I'll see you later. So I was this weird person who was like, Hey, do you want to do this? For 6 months I did that, and eventually she was, Okay. And then boom, she's singing songs, she's dancing in the ceremony, she's making a dress. And it was just me continuing to be goofy and show her that it's OK. No judgement, free judgement zone here.

I don't pretend to not see what I see. I let them know that I know what's going on, and I'm willing to wait for them to talk to me. I had an incident while I was taking two young men, and I think we were going to a brush dance, and I took a group of young boys to brush dance. I came out of the store. I knew something was up and I looked at the young man and I looked at the other young man. What's going on? They're both just looking at each other. Well, I know something is going on and this is why I know something is going on. I tell them, This is what I think happened but I'll let you guys tell me what happened. So I let that sit, I just let it sit. I let them know that whatever it is it's fine, but they do need to talk to me, they need to tell me what's going on. So I got with them after we got to the ceremony thing set up. I talked to one and I talked to the other, and I found out what was going on but I didn't judge them for it. I just understood what happened and why it happened. I explained to them that certain things don't happen when you're going to ceremony. From the time you decide to go, you should start mentally preparing yourself, spiritually preparing yourself, physically preparing yourself. Ceremony is not just going to a classroom and participating in an activity. It's mentally straining, it's physically straining, spiritually straining and emotionally straining. If you're going to ceremony and you're already straining yourself because you're trying to keep secrets or hide something, then it's not going to be a good outcome in the end. If that's what you're going there with, you shouldn't even go. Because that in turn goes into that person who's putting on that ceremony. You're going to that ceremony and you're bringing what potentially we call bad medicine – that lie, that sneaky thing – to the ceremony. And that person who is stepping up to be that spiritual person, they're going to have to come out of there somehow, some way. So we encourage, and it's good that they're learning that. But that's what I do. I don't try to say, Oh, I didn't see anything. I just called them on it, let them know what I think is going on. So it's not meant to deter them. And that was my fear. I'm not an easy person but I'm fair.

If I'm talking about something sacred like a [? 30:10] or a prayer pipe, I don't want people over here chitchatting or having fun, I really want them to pay attention. I will ask them to sit over here because it's serious. To have those things is important. You really got to know what you're doing with them. That's what I do. Barry Hill, he doesn't agree with my teaching methods. He told me, You shouldn't, you need to learn this, you need to learn that, because you're going to lose your audience. And I I looked and I just kind of ... Thank you Barry. But I didn't have their attention in the first place because they were playing. By separating them, this one might have gotten their feelings hurt or might have shut down but the other one didn't. I got one out of two, and that's better than not getting either one of them. A lot of times, it's girls. I'm sure you could understand why. But sometimes, it's young boys, So depending on that and the incident, I would be here to go talk to them. And just tell them thank you for listening, I appreciate it. I don't mean to make you stick out or anything. Or if they're shy, I'll just go over and be like, Don't be shy.

One young lady and she, oh my God, she was so cute. She just turned beet red, she was like Oh my god. I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to embarrass you. I was still embarrassing her. I'll just be quiet now. She was so cute, she was, poof! Red! I just do my best to make them feel fine. With emphasis on the importance of it. You're not going to get something the first time around. It's important that we pay attention every opportunity we get. Because each time, we're going to learn a little bit more.

I try to learn with them and let them see my mistakes, let them see that I'm not perfect. I had a young man tell somebody yesterday, Just ask Ruthie, she knows everything. I looked at him. Oh my God, okay, what is going on? I just walked into this conversation. That's a bad sign, you're relying on me. We're all in trouble. But thank goodness, he was just joking. But oh my god, it gives me the chills. I hope that people don't make that assumption. A lot of the times when I'm learning from an elder I'll have another elder come over and tell me, We can't listen to him, or You can't listen to her, because of this, because of that. Or I'll have people: You shouldn't let her teach this, or You shouldn't let him teach that because of this, because of that. And I think that is kind of an example of what I'm up against, what the brick wall actually looks like. Because you're not giving each other the respect and the space to give what you have, because of whatever the past or the history might be. I think that is a big brick wall for our tribal communities' growth. If we're not teaching each other and we're not supporting each other in their learning, then we're not going to be growing very quickly. And I think that that's important with the salmon ceremony. Because it's an all people's ceremony, it's not just Bear River or Nongatl, every nation should be dancing in there, and I try to teach that.

When I do demonstrations at school I'll pull in students and ask, Do you want to dance? All you guys want to dance? Because the more people we have out there doing the ceremony, the more medicine is going to be put out there, the more of that prayer is going to be pushed out as far and as down and as high up. So I'm hoping this year to have more people.

We do three days. We only do one day of actual ceremony, and the reason for that is a lot of the ceremony, we still aren't ready to do. Like the canoe day, we're not ready for that, we don't have

a canoe made. We can't go harvest the fish out of the river like we would in the ceremony. We do have a few men who are going to go fish for one fish but there is a day during that ceremony where the men would go fishing and the women would prepare the camp, and it would be a whole part of the ceremony, that honoring of the food source and the history.

I had an elder tell me about the dots on the back of the salmon. There were elders that would decode messages from the salmon. And they said that the salmon, because they could go between the worlds, could bring back messages from our ancestors, So there were people in the village who could read those dots. That was a whole other day. So just hearing how connected and how the ancestors could do those types of things just gives me that inspiration. We were those people once, we can be those people again, it's just a matter of us allowing ourselves to be, right? Going to be like, Oh no you can't do that. Right off the bat, you're not going to do that. So I really try to teach the kids.

I had a teacher in high school— I went to Lawrence, Kansas, I can't remember the school but I had a teacher ask me a question once, and I said I don't know and he was like, I don't know: that means that I know. I was so scared. Oh my God, how does he know that I know? And it came down to, 'I don't' and then 'No.' Those two negatives cancel each other out, so I must know. I'm sorry I just kind of froze. Oh my God he knows what I know and I don't want to say anything. And then he said the answer, and I thought, I did know. I always think about that, because I hear kids say, I Don't know. And I want to say, But you do know! I try not to put kids on the spot too much, but I try to challenge them. Like, Okay, so nobody wants to say so tell me what you're thinking? What thoughts do you have right now? And they'll say something. I'll be like, OK, and now what's your thought? When I say this, what comes to your mind? And they'll say what they think. See, you guys are all thinking the same thing, but you're all afraid to say something. Don't be afraid to say something. Embrace that, embrace your individualism. Because that's your medicine ... Oh my goodness, I'll talk through your ear off.

Stacy: I've enjoyed this very much and if I may on another occasion continue to interview you. Because you were fascinating.

Ruth: I started the work with the kids because they're my good kids. I want to encourage them to be their goofy self. You know, allow them to have the space to express that, and not be told. Because our educational system is all, Pay attention. Be quiet. Only speak when you raise your hand. There's all these barriers to them being them. They have to learn how to control their ADHD self attention. I try to give them that space. What are the practices we just started? I told them, Now is the time to get all of your goofy, pushy Oh my gosh this, Oh my gosh that, out. Because when it comes time for the ceremony, you guys all have to be focused. Your prayer has to be centered. You have to look ahead. Because a lot of them always look down, and I'm just as bad, I look down. So I tell them, Don't let the butterfly distract you when it comes flying by. I'm here for a purpose, I'm here to say a prayer, I'm here to tell a story. Whatever your part is in the ceremony, you let that beautiful butterfly have that moment. Don't look at the butterfly. That's why we practice, so that they have that time to trip each other while they're walking, just to get it

out of their system. I know they need to. In turn, the elders come, and they want to see and they want to know, and that's just awesome

Stacy: That is really awesome. Are there any last words you'd like to say about the salmon ceremony?

Ruth: Yes. Come to practice, come learn and ask questions. Don't be don't be afraid to come. Don't be afraid to come because you show up, we'll welcome you. The only things that we don't allow at the dance grounds... but do you know what a moon cycle is?

Stacy: Yes.

Ruth: Awesome. So when a woman is on her moon cycle that's when we ask them to not be at the grounds. They can still come and be at the campsite and have food with us and be there, just can't come to the actual ceremonial grounds. And then dogs: we love our four legged relatives, they are best friends, but they can't come to the actual grounds. They are welcome to be up, having dinner or lunch with us. They're welcome to come, they just can't come to the grounds.

Stacy: OK, and what are the dates for this?

Ruth: We're potentially looking at the 18th and 19th of November, but those might change. It depends on the mouth. If the mouth opens or if it is still closed.

Stacy: The mouth of the Mattole.

Ruth: If it's still closed, we may have to rethink the dates. But if the mouth is open, potentially it's going to be the 18th and 19th. So the 18th will be a demonstration day, and that's when video recording is appropriate. The 19th, we'll be having the doorway to the spiritual realm open so there'll be no recording then.

Stacy: OK, great, I look forward to that. Anything else?

Ruth: This is my sister Maggie's regalia, and my niece's regalia.

Stacy: At the museum, here.

Ruth: I was just thinking, when Maggie does the ceremony on the 19th, it's appropriate to bring a gift for her for leading the ceremony. If anybody thinks about it, that would be a blessing to give her a shell or some seeds. I think somebody gifted her a bag of acorns one year. So that's appropriate if you come to the ceremony to bring a gift for the medicine woman. You can also bring gifts for the men leading men's camp. Also a plate to share, because we do a potluck. Potlucks, we do ask that everybody lets the dancers eat first because they're going to be fasting. I think we have six youths that are going to step up and practice. I get so excited when I

think about how much this has blossomed and how I can't wait to see what the next year looks like. If you think about a gift, that's always welcome.

Stacy: Is tobacco okay?

Ruth: Tobacco is appropriate. Really, whatever you can.

Stacy: OK, thank you so much.