

# The FisherPoets Gathering

By Cameron La Follette

Founded in 1998, the FisherPoets Gathering takes place every year in Astoria, Oregon, on the last weekend in February in celebration of commercial fishing. The Gathering attracts about a hundred fisherpoets, most of them from the Pacific Northwest, who share their poetry, songs, and other writing before an audience of about two thousand people. Audiences fill several venues, including the Liberty Theatre, to hear poetry written about a way of life that has helped shape the north Oregon Coast.

The Astoria FisherPoets Gathering was the first organization to initiate and catalyze the poetry of people in the commercial fishing community. In addition to commercial fishers and their families, the Gathering includes cannery workers and shipwrights and those who work with wooden boats or old sailing ships. Since the Gathering began, other groups of fishers have started events in locations such as Kodiak, Alaska, and Camden, Maine.

The initial organizer for the FisherPoets Gathering was Jon Broderick, who made the first phone calls in 1997 to see if poets in the commercial fishing community wanted to gather in Astoria to share their work. A commercial fisher since 1976, Broderick began as a deckhand, fishing salmon and herring out of Kodiak. In the early 1980s, he ran gillnetter in Southeast Alaska. He and his wife sold their gillnetter in 1986 and moved to Seaside, where he taught English and French at Seaside High School. Since then during the summers, he and his family have worked a commercial salmon set net operation in Bristol Bay, Alaska.

Broderick had read fisher poetry in the *Alaska Fisherman's Journal*, and he took his high school students to Linfield College in McMinnville, where he met Clem Starck, a poet and carpenter. "I had never heard anyone write creatively about work before," Broderick later remembered. "I knew of the cowboy tradition, but it encouraged me that other people were writing about work, it was worth doing and could be done well."

Broderick explained his idea to local writers and fishers, and the FisherPoets Gathering began to take shape. John van Amerongen of the *Alaska Fisherman's Journal* gave Broderick the contacts for about forty fishers, nearly all of whom showed up for the first Gathering in February 1998. He also collaborated with Julie Brown, a literature professor at Clatsop Community College (CCC) who had worked on a book of poetry by Ohio steelworkers, and Hobe Kytr, a songwriter who worked with the Ilwaco Heritage Museum (now the Columbia Pacific Heritage Museum). Florence Sage, a social sciences professor at CCC, was also an early organizer, and Jay Speakman, from Gearhart, joined the Gathering in about 2000 to help with planning and organizing.

The first Gathering was held in 1998 at Astoria's Wet Dog Café, where about two hundred people filled the brewpub for the first performance. So many performers showed up that the group reconvened at a fraternal temple the next night. The performers decided to gather again the following year, when the Gathering performed for two nights at the Wet Dog. Venues were added over the years as the event grew, and it went virtual in 2021 and 2022 during the pandemic. Poets meet for workshops during the day, in such varied places as the Pier 39 cannery museum and open fishing boats.

Broderick attended the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Nevada in 2001, where he met Charlie Seemann, director of the Western Folklife Center. Seemann's advice was helpful: focus on the poetry and the celebration of the community rather than getting bogged down with organizational details. Broderick and the other early organizers also decided to maintain the Gathering as a nonprofit organization.

For its first ten years, the FisherPoets Gathering was sponsored by Clatsop Community College, then moved under the umbrella of the Tillicum Foundation. The City of Astoria gave the Gathering a grant from the Arts Fund for Tourism, which is used to pay expenses, primarily sound equipment; the money that is left over is given to participating fisherpoets to help with their expenses. The *Daily Astorian* publishes the program each year, and public radio station KMUN broadcasts evening performances.

Performers at the Gathering have included Clem Starck, who was once a seaman; Wesley “Geno” Leech from Washington; Ed Edmo (Shoshone-Bannock), a performer and traditional storyteller from Portland; and Ron McDaniel from Sulphur Springs, Arkansas, who is the FisherPoets’ ambassador from the Cowboy poetry community. Shanghaied on the Willamette, a musical group in Portland, was a charter participant.

The Gathering has been featured in *Smithsonian* magazine, the *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal* and on BBC Radio. It is recognized as a Local Legacy Project by the Library of Congress.

## Sources

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