

## Living on the edge—harvesting the sea

Growing up on Alki Beach, Washington, Bob Earl had the ocean as his playground. Naturally his career would be on or under the sea. At the Coastal School of Deep Sea Diving in Oakland, he learned underwater construction work. Diving jobs in dam construction, underwater pipelines and welding, atomic plant construction on the Columbia River, oil well platforms, and sunken ships followed.

Bob soon wanted his own business. He visited an old friend in Santa Barbara who had become a commercial abalone diver. Under-sea harvesting off Catalina Island was it! A diver could work hard for ten months, then vacation for two months during abalone spawning season. Bob met and married English-born Jenny, who had lived on the Isle of



Man, had a sailboat, and loved the ocean. Life seemed perfect, but popularity of abalone led to commercial over harvesting. Divers had to go 130 feet, instead of 50, for the harvest, and at this depth the dangers increased—inept airline tenders, instrument failure, and "divers' bends," which Bob got twice. Soon Jenny learned to be a "tender," and Bob felt much safer.

The Washington Fisheries Department summoned Bob at an opportune time. Huge beds of gooey ducks off Puget Sound were dying off because they were not harvested. Bob was interested, invented an instrument that could follow the very long neck to the 2-3 pound clam, and he and Jenny had a new business. They had to convince the public that gooey duck tasted like abalone, but soon the Japanese market craved the gooey duck clam meat, and U.S. restaurants served delicious "clam steaks." The Earls built a business with eight dive boats and 22 divers who worked year round.

Bob and Jenny had the largest diver operation in the Pacific Northwest when sea urchins were added to their harvest. Sea urchins are treasured for their eggs and sold well at the auction block in Tokyo, the largest in the world. Then, Bob learned that sea cucumber is delicious. Bob had seen "wall to wall" of these repulsive looking slug-like creatures on the bottom of the ocean. They added them to the business harvest and sold to Asian markets.

The Japanese craved the U.S. underwater resources, and wanted to buy the Earls' business. "It was an offer I could not refuse," says Bob, and he then became the Japanese owner's business consultant. Changing from the "go-go-go" mentality of American business to the "think about it" mentality of Japanese

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mentality of Japanese business was an adjustment for Bob, but he says that it paid off business-wise.

Bob Earl's reputation in undersea harvesting recommended him to the Oregon Fisheries Department for horse clam harvesting which required him to invent a trough tool since these one-pound horse clams are close to the surface. In Canada the government wanted to develop undersea harvesting around Vancouver Island. In Alaska Bob had free reign to dive anywhere and locate resources. Jenny ran the boat and did the cooking for dive crews. They loved Alaska's wild beauty—on the land, and in the ocean.

After four years, Bob retired from diving and he and Jenny turned the boat into an offshore Alaska commercial salmon boat. "Admiral Jenny" gained the respect of even the toughest fisherman as she ran the boat, and Bob worked on deck with the crews. Commercial fishing was a seven-day a week job; the season was short, with orders to fill, and crews at the cannery depending on a job. Imagine the excitement of standing knee deep in King and Coho Salmon and catching a 200-300 pound halibut, the dangers of fishing during violent storms and finding a safe harbor on a remote island. After one of these terrible storms Jenny said to Bob, "You know, we've been 'living on the edge' for thirty years." Bob responded, "You are right, it is time that we stop and smell the roses." The Earls sold the boat, the fishing permit, and other property, and headed back to Port Townsend on Puget Sound, Washington. Bob notes, "I am most proud that in my thirty years of diving and fishing, none of the divers or crew were injured or killed."

Bob and Jenny knew their next step in life: their Alaska winter "get-away" at VO. They had been coming to Arizona for several years to visit Bob's stepfather, Roy Bryant, who was one of the original VO owners and taught the rock shop at the resort. During one of these visits, the Earls bought their own place. And Venture Out has provided them with opportunities they never had time to enjoy. For Jenny it is computers, drawing, silversmithing, and stained glass. Jenny got Bob interested in silversmithing and his talents with silver decorated vases and mirrors and with cloisonné have produced several awards. The Earls have "hooked" many ocean creatures, but they are definitely "hooked" on VO.

Next time that you walk past 319 Navajo look for Bob's other hobby, his maroon Zimmer. It may have a car cover, or you may see him driving this "Big Boy's Toy"—a 1936 Deussen design on a Lincoln Towncar chassis. The gas tank is personalized with his silversmithing design. It has been a long haul from "living on the edge" and harvesting the sea to "harvesting" the treasures available at VO. Bob and Jenny Earl appreciate an adventurous and good life. And, according to Bob Earl, "Real love stories never have endings."

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