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Voices from Maine Fishing Communities, a Selection of Oral History Interviews

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Cover Page Footnote

This collection of oral histories is only available in the online version of this issue of Maine Policy Review.

Voices from Maine Fishing Communities:

A Selection of Oral History Interviews

Presented by Natalie Springuel

This collection for *Maine Policy Review* could not have been assembled without the help of numerous College of the Atlantic students and recent alumni who helped select, interview, and transcribe the works included here. They are Kaitlyn Clark, Emily Fortin, Elle Gilchrist, Ella Reilich Godino, Nora Hyman, Olivia Jolley, Ela Keegan Tess Moore, Celia Morton, and Johnny Robinson. Special thanks to Galen Koch and Molly Graham who help mentor our students in this important work. The interviews have been edited for brevity and clarity.

INTRODUCTION

Maine's commercial fisheries have long been considered a backbone of the state's coastal economy and culture. Mainers are proud of that fisheries heritage, sharing stories around the kitchen table and on the docks for generations. Since the 1970s and earlier, ever-evolving technology has allowed us to record some of these stories for posterity. Oral history interview tapes are hidden away in dozens of archives, libraries, historical societies, institutions, and attics throughout Maine and beyond. It is our hope that the snippets presented here will open a window into the lives of people who live and have lived in Maine's fishing communities and make their living on the ocean.

These selections are but a fraction of the oral history recordings scattered up

and down the coast that contain important knowledge about fisheries practices, ecology, history, and community. People's voices matter in helping to develop an understanding of coastal issues, but because stories are not generally viewed as scientific data, they often are overlooked. Several initiatives in Maine are trying to bring the voices of Maine fishing communities, past and present, into discussions about important Maine issues now and into the future.

Fifteen people are featured in these selections, representing a diverse array of people whose lives revolve around Maine's commercial fisheries. The oldest interview presented here was conducted more than 50 years ago and reflects living memory back to the early 1900s. One interview was conducted as recently as 2023. The ages of the interviewees range from twenties to nineties. Many people interviewed fish or have fished commercially for a living, targeting well known species such as cod, herring, lobster and clams. Others have fished for lesser-known species such as marine worms and slime eels. Some have captained lobster smacks, operated herring weirs, processed fish or hauled traps. And still others are the family members of fishermen, their wives, kids, grandparents and loved ones. What they all have in common in these selections is that they live, work and love in Maine's fishing communities.

ON SKIPPING SMACK VESSELS

Sid Sprague of Rockland captained lobster smack for most of his 46 years working for the A.C. McLoon Lobster Company until he retired in 1970.

Smacks were from 60 to 70 feet, the largest ones, the sail ones, but then they went from that, from what they call a sloop boat, right up to the two-masted sailing vessels. Those all had engines for auxiliary. Now that type of boat went to Nova Scotia and Boston. Oh, they were nice, they were nice boats all of them, for that type of boat.

Of course, each one of those well smacks had, for circulation, 2,500 holes right out through the bottom of them, in the center of the ship. For circulation.

They sold them by the pound. Before my time, course they sold them by the piece, but during my time it's all been by the pound. The *Silas McLoon* carried 18,000 and the other ones carried about 10, and the sailing vessels around 12,000.

We used to start, leave here [Rockland] Sunday morning, go to Machias Bay and pick up lobsters at Cutler, Cross Island, Buck's Harbor, Starboard's Creek, and Little Kennebec River. We made that trip down there once a week. That was for A.C. McLoon. At that time, of course we used to take the gasoline down there for the fisherman in barrels. Because no one was selling gas down in that area. We'd leave Rockland on Sunday morning, get down there Sunday night or Monday morning and pick up lobsters direct from the fishermen. Now at that time, you see, we put them in the smack wet and delivered them that way.

In the spring they had three smacks running to Nova Scotia and all the rest of them were running around the islands here, see because no island boats carried any lobsters. Course there weren't any trucks or anything at that time, everything was delivered by those lobster smacks. And, and course they had no dry smacks, no crates, it was all wet-well smacks. And McLoon had one stationed in Vinalhaven, one in Stonington, then he had one that run to Swan's Island, Long Island, then we took the eastern run, then we'd stop sometimes at Cranberry Island, pick up to Winter Harbor, Cape Split, Jonesport, and this Little Kennebec River, you know you might get confused with the Kennebec River but it's the one down to Machias, yeah.

Well I was on the *Silas McLoon*, the *Adele McLoon*, the *Pauline McLoon*, the *Louise McLoon*, all those boats during that time. Then in 1926, of course, he got the first oil boat. One that carried just oil, so that we wouldn't have to carry gasoline out to those fishermen. Then they started installing tanks down there so that the fishermen could get it without depending on a lobster smack bringing it all. That's how they started in oil and lobsters at the same time. They started the lobster business but they had to have the oil because the places we went, the fishermen had those little engines, but they had no gasoline, without going a long ways to get it. So we used to take it in, in 55 gallon barrels, six, eight barrels to a trip for the fishermen that we had.

Then from there on it, there was more competition, and in 1945 was the last year that we run a smack for McLoon's down, we'll say, to Buck's Harbor and Machias Bay, because then there was fellows there handled the bait, and they had gasoline and they bought lobsters right from the dock. So a fisherman didn't have to keep

the lobsters a week waiting for the smack, they could sell them every day, which was better for the fishermen.

This archival interview was conducted in 1973 by David Littleton-Taylor as part of the Life of the Maine Lobsterman collection, preserved through the Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History, housed in the special collections of Fogler Library at University of Maine.

ON MAINE'S SARDINE HERITAGE

Peter and Sue Buxton live in Deer Isle-Stonington, where Sue is a seafood dealer and Peter is a boat builder who had odd jobs on the water as a kid and young adult.

Peter: What used to amaze me is the guys that used to run the sardine carriers here. When I was a kid, when I was doing the stop seining, all the sardine carriers were still around and still working and there were still factories. That whole industry was still going, and the early days, they'd have nothing but a compass and they would, in the fog and the night, run those big boats up in the little coves around all over the state and take off and go to Canada. It was amazing how they did that.

They were big boats; they were seventy, eighty, a hundred feet, usually. They would draw probably six feet light and nine feet loaded, but they would load until they were almost underwater. Their decks would be awash and they were smooth and quiet and they were usually fixed up pretty nice in the focsle in the cabin. You know, they had bunks. It was an interesting life.

Sue: The sardine carriers, sardines period, were a big part of the community also, with the fish factory running. My grandmother worked there a lot of her adult life. A lot of the older folks here did work there. I never did, but a lot of my

classmates worked there. It was kind of too bad to see that stop. That was big in all of Maine I think, or in quite a bit of Maine. And what did we have, the *Double Eagle*?

Peter: The *Double Eagle* is still going out of Rockland. They keep her up nice. Beautiful old sardine carrier, but most of them are gone.

This interview was conducted by Galen Koch in 2018 as part of The First Coast Deer Isle-Stonington collection, which is being archived for public access at Maine Sound and Story, a multimedia archive that helps tell the story of the state of Maine, its citizens, and ancestors.

ON HERRING, GROUND FISH AND BEING A FISHERMAN'S WIFE

Ernest Kelley and Marilyn Kelley are from a multigeneration fishing family in Jonesport. Ernest has fished his whole life, targeting lobster, mackerel, herring, codfish, haddock, pollock, shrimp, and periwinkles. Marilyn worked at the Three Rivers Processing Plant in Jonesport.

Ernest: The sardine boats were measured then. I don't remember whether the state measured them or whether it was the federal government, but all sardine boats had to have them measured, and every measure up, every five hogsheads, there would be a mark—five hogsheads, ten hogsheads. But now they go by the pound. Back then, see, we got \$20 a hogshead. And now they're \$20-odd—\$20 to \$25 for one measly little bucket. There's 34 buckets in a hogshead. And see how much they're making now for what we made?

One time, when I was with my brother, we were down back of the island. We took out 500 in one day, 500 hogshead. We had to pump her, and then we dipped them, and they hoisted the dip and dumped

them. I think it was Underwood's sardine boat. I'm not sure.

I was also catching codfish and haddock, pollock, with handlines. If they hadn't started the gillnetting and the draggers, there'd be plenty of fish today. Because I went dragging for two years, and you destroy almost as many as you catch. The small ones, they're dead. Up in that net and put in a boat and picked over. People used them for bait, small flounders and scad and all that stuff. The only thing you'd throw back was the lobsters. They passed that [new law] awful quick. You couldn't keep a lobster aboard.

Now my father, he never had a compass that I know of. He went with me in the boat to teach me what to do. He was always on the ocean and sailing vessels and everything. But he was down in the bay, down in this bay in thick fog when I started up the bay, and I thought I was going right. He says, "You keep going, and you're going over those islands." So, after a while, he taught me what to do with the wind and the sea and all that stuff.

Marilyn: When you've got a whole family working on the water, all it is is worry. I guess that's all it was, was worry. You all have your children, your grandchildren. One night they went aboard the boat, it was cold, way below zero. They had an old CB radio then, not like they got now where you talk back and forth, the old kind. Someone asked where they were. "He's gone out aboard the boat." A man come on, he says, "If those two are aboard that boat tonight," he said it was 24 below, "they'll freeze to death." Well, they got out there, and they couldn't get back on the mooring. Ice and blowing and everything. Finally, they got out far enough, so they got into someone else's wharf and got in all right. But what is five minutes seems like an hour when they're gone.

MORE ABOUT THE ORAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS AND ARCHIVES CONTAINED IN THIS SERIES

- **Special Collections at Fogler Library at the University of Maine**
 - Home to a treasure trove of historical Maine collections, including The Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History, which includes The Life of the Maine Lobsterman project. (Sidney Sprague)
 - <https://archives.library.umaine.edu/repositories>
- **NOAA Fisheries Voices Oral History Archives**
 - An enormous repository for fisheries related oral histories around the country. Two Maine High Schools were among the first to submit interviews for this archive, including the Jonesport-Beals High School Students Local Fisheries Knowledge project. (Adelmar "Tuddy" Urquhart)
 - <https://voices.nmfs.noaa.gov/>
- **Maine Sound and Story**
 - A growing repository for oral history collections, including Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum (Herb Carter) and The First Coast Jonesport and Beals Project (Ernest and Marilyn Kelley). In the coming months, The First Coast Deer Isle Stonington Project will also be added to Maine Sound and Story. (Peter and Sue Buxton, Mary Mixer, Bernice "Bunnie" Quinne, Renee Sewel)
 - <https://mainesoundandstory.com/>
- **Swan's Island Historical Society**
 - The historical society is home to the Women in Lobstering Oral History Collection and subsequent exhibit Maritime Women of Swan's Island at the Burnt Coat Harbor Lighthouse (Leah and Lesley Ann Ranquist)
 - <https://www.swanislandhistory.org/>
- **The Mapping Ocean Stories Project**
 - A partnership between College of the Atlantic, Island Institute, Maine Sea Grant and The First Coast, the Mapping Ocean Stories Project supports student oral history work in the form of internships, research, and senior projects. (Fred Johnson, Jonathan Renwick, Tim Belanceau)
 - <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/e995dc9497384195b0765f-ce1a77c47a>

When our oldest son first got his boat, he and his brother decided they wanted a boat, so of course, whatever they wanted, we let them try. They went by themselves, shut down, thick fog. When they got back they said "Well, Papa [his grandfather] told me you couldn't get lost up in that bay." He says, "All you have to do is shut your motor down and listen." He says, "So we listened for the seagulls on the rocks.

We knew when we heard the seagulls there was a rock close by." Then they'd listen and use their senses.

This interview was conducted by Galen Koch in 2018 as part of The First Coast Jonesport and Beals Collection archived at Maine Sound and Story, a multimedia archive that helps tell the story of the state of Maine, its citizens, and ancestors.

ON CHILDHOOD IN A FISHING COMMUNITY

Bernice “Bunnie” Quinne was in her nineties at the time of this interview in 2018. She grew up in Oceanville, on Deer Isle, where her family lived their lives close to the sea.

As far as the water and everything itself, that was our playground. We played under the bridge and laid on the rocks during the day. It was beautiful. Just beautiful. We just played in the water all summer, and we’d take a rowboat and row out to the cove, we called it, where they moored the big boats, if there were any, and go fishing. Flounder, is what we got then. And we could get lots of flounders, there was no limit to anything at that time. And when the smelts were in, we could go smelting, cause there was no limit to that either. Now you can’t even take a child and dig a clam in the clam flats, you’ve gotta have a license.

I went to school in Stonington. Bus picked us up. I went with my brother. We started school together, but he never stayed. I graduated and he went fishing, clamming, stuff like that, when he got old enough, make a living. He’s always worked. Yep. My dad cut wood. He went clamming, he went lobstering. For quite a while he went as a cook on one of the fishing boats down in Stonington, and then he went to Rockland, and went to O’Hara fishing boats over there. As a cook. For a long time. In fact, there was three or four of the men from Stonington that went onto the boats and went over to Rockland.

For a long time, I was a Girl Scout leader. In fact, the last group I had designed and wrote requirements for their own badge. And that had to be approved by the Headquarters. So those girls were the only Girl Scouts that went scalloping, they

went clamming, lobstering, baiting it and everything. Maybe picking out crabmeat. All this stuff, they had to do it. On the boats and everything, and they had to do every part of it, and they did it all. They were very smart, those kids.

This interview was conducted by Galen Koch in 2018 as part of The First Coast Deer Isle–Stonington collection, which is being archived for public access at Maine Sound and Story, a multimedia archive that helps tell the story of the state of Maine, its citizens, and ancestors.

ON SCRAPING BY

Renee Sewell is from Stonington. In her 50s at the time of this interview in 2018, Renee grew up in fishing family and now works construction on the island.

Well, my father was a fisherman and we had it hard. We had it rough because fishing then was horrible. You know, he’d barely scrape by. He would lobster in the summer and go scalloping in the winter. But we, you know, we had just enough money to get by. We didn’t have anything extra.

When I got older, I would go with him in the summer lobstering. And it was a long, hard day. There were wooden traps then, and it just was hard work. You’d spend all summer. Lifted on these heavy wooden traps, and then my dad would spend his whole winter fixing all the wooden traps so he could fish them again the next summer. I mean, you catch 100 pounds. And the price was basically the same as it is now.

But, you know, it was it was hard. I think back and my mother would say to me, Don’t you ever marry a fisherman! I’m thinking, “Huh, You’re going to have to worry about that.” There were very few fishermen because nobody wanted to do

it. The people that did it were because it was the only thing they knew how to do. And there were maybe a handful of fishing boats moored out there. Not very many at all.

But now, wow. I mean, there are boats everywhere out there. My father had 300 traps. That was the most he ever had. Now they have 800 traps. And they go full bore. And so how do I tell a kid that’s making a thousand bucks a day lobstering that she needs to go to school to get a job that’s going to pay her \$25 an hour or whatever, an hour, you know, 30, \$40,000 starting out a year. You just, the younger generation, they don’t know what it’s like to be poor. And I don’t mean poor, but I mean to have to kind of scrape to get by, to learn, to make a living. They have new boats and new houses and new trucks. They have toys at age 25 and money in the bank. They had never had to learn to sell. Well, a lot of them. And they’ve not had to learn how to pull your sleeves up and really figure it out. It’s just kind of fallen in their lap because of the timing. But. If the industry turns around, they’re going to be sunk because they have no idea what it’s like to have to scrape by.

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ON COD FISHING WITH WHALES AND FISHING WITH WEIRS

Adelmar “Tuddy” Urquhart was in his 80s at the time of this interview in 2003, recounting memories of fishing multiple species throughout the second half of the 20th century.

I think the most thrilling experience was one time I was offshore fishing for cod

fish, and I had three of my brothers with me, and it was thick of fog, and next thing I know I heard this whale blow. So I tell my brother, “get up on the bow and haul the anchor up, I heard a whale blow.” I didn’t want to get up there. He said, “Oh no!” He said we was catching fish by the pail and that’s just what those whales were there after, the cod fish. So he said, “Let’s just fish, we can’t go home.” The water all around us was full of cod and there was more than one whale, there were several whales. There was one that come straight for us, straight to the side and come right on top of us, on top of the water and when it got almost to us he lowered down and went right underneath the keel, right up on the other side. I told the boys, I said, “haul the anchor. We are getting out of here!” And we did. That is the greatest experience I think I have ever had.

But that was years ago and we was catching two to three thousand pounds. We only got three or four cents a pound for them, some weren’t hardly worth going for, but we just went for the fun of it, more or less. Now, well, I guess it was the draggers and such, you know, with the new technology, the fish don’t stand no chance, they can find a herring or a codfish and they got the equipment to get them in, whether they are in deep water or shallow water.

I think one of the things that I did that was interesting, was when Ernest and I used to be in the weir business. We owned the weir up to the bar and it was fun to go up there in the Morning. We used to go up there in the evenings too and watch for the herring to come in and some nights you could see the herring come right up in the weir. But the next morning there was nothing in the weir and we couldn’t figure out why. So Ernest says, “Let’s go right up in the night and we will snag them right in the night”. I said alright—so we went up

and snagged her. We rowed up in the dory and there was 99% mackerel!

What was going on was the mackerel was going in there and driving the fish out. Well, we didn’t know what we was gonna do with the mackerel so we called up Roy Ray in Milbridge, and he said, “you bring them over I’ll pack em.”

This archival interview was conducted in 2003 by Jonesport-Beals High School Students for the Local Fisheries Knowledge project. It is archived in the NOAA Fisheries Voices Oral History Archives.

ON CHANGES IN THE LOBSTER FISHERY

Further interview with Adelmar “Tuddy” Urquhart.

There is something I dislike about lobstering and that is the way we are operating it today [2003], too much gear in the water and they are not as honest today as they used to be years ago. When I first started lobstering, if you lost a trap somewhere, someone would find the trap and return it back to its owner. It works the other way around now, if they find it they will just cut it off. I have lost about 50 traps this year. Someone finding it and cutting them off.

The traps we used to fish have changed since I started. All wooden traps, and the heads that was in the material, only lasted about a season, so we had to head them every year. The buoys, and the rope was – it didn’t last like it does today. I’ve had rope 10 years old and still was fishing it, but rope then, it wouldn’t last like that. Today you buy a trap, you buy a wire trap and the head. You never have to head them again. I never have a problem with wire traps or spongy buoys. Those spongy buoys don’t like as much paint when you paint them. You take a glob of paint and paint two or three hundred, where with

the wooden buoys, fifty would take a lot of paint.

One thing about the wooden buoys you could tell where you were at all times because the wooden buoys weren’t identical. Those ones you buy, unless you put a number on them you can’t tell where you are as far as buoy goes, and you don’t want to get lost in the fog. Back when I started fishing, all you had was a compass. Today they have such equipment that anyone can get into the business, no learning to it ‘cause it’s all done by machinery for you. Did you see the new one they have out; that new machine that can see all the rocks and ridges for ya? It’s just like a radar only it’s underwater.

There’s more lobsters today than when I started. There has to be, compared to the amount of lobster fishermen and the traps in the water, and everyone in the last few years have been into it.

It’s almost impossible to get around and set traps. I think next year I am going to have to put a cage over the boat [over the motor prop to avoid entangling in trap lines]. If I had my way I would cut back from 800 traps for each fisherman, and I think people at the end of the year would have just as much money in their pockets. Instead of going into the wharf and getting 25 cans of bait, you could cut that rate in half and you wouldn’t have that extra expense in the traps. There would be more boats that would sit, that wouldn’t be fishing all the time. Now there are so many traps they have to put them somewhere, everywhere is covered at once.

ON CHANGES IN THE MUDFLATS

Herb Carter Jr. is a commercial shellfish harvester from Deer Isle.

My father used to tell me that some days I’d go clamming and he’d give me an

onion sack and he'd say fill this. What that was to be filled with was scallops and so I'd go out, 12 years old with my sneakers on and doing my clamming and take this bag and put it on my mud sled and tow it out. No snorkel no nothing and walk out and pick up a bag of scallops and bring them in. My dad, the only time he'd come get my clams if I had a bag of scallops. He'd come down and help me put my clams on the truck and there lugged them up South Deer Isle.

But the scallops in there, the fishermen would go out, single man, everyday there was 35 fishermen in that cove in the whole of South Deer Isle. They all towed together, they never bothered anybody and they would tow and the scallops were like the bottom size of a coca cola bottle. Every one. They didn't take small ones. They didn't touch them, they didn't need to, they couldn't shell 'em.

Today, in South Deer Isle, I would love to have them at the College of the Atlantic and University of Maine, come down in South Deer Isle, one of the finest places for them to do their testing on what is happened to the fisheries. It can prove all stories right there. On the ocean floor what I found snorkeling, diving down in 10 feet of water and inside of this is where I used to pick the scallops up, it was sand, it was red sand. Today, there is zero sand in South Deer Isle anywhere. The scallops have gone from the best to zero. There is zero scallops in South Deer Isle.

There's two pieces in the intertidal zone, you have a flat and a bed. A flat is where clams, worms, everything lives. A bed is a mussel bed. A bed has been there for centuries, hundreds of centuries, from the beginning of time. In South Deer Isle right now there is zero. There was millions of bushels and there was 50 mussel beds that are gone, there is zero. There's soot

that comes off of mussel boats, 50 to 60 feet from each boat and the fish cannot swim in the water from the soot that comes off that bed. Every time a boat goes by. South Deer Isle we don't have fish. There's none. Hasn't been since 1980 and then from then on it's been depletion all the time right up through now there is none. There is no scallops, there is no sea urchins, there is no periwinkles. We have snails, we have green crabs. The fact is that we have no smelt, we have no tomcods we have nothing that goes to a brook.

It's a shame what's happening that they don't stop and do something, turn this whole can of worms around. You're never going to put that cover on what they've done, that's not going back.

This interview was conducted in 2019 as part of the Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum project. The full collection (60+ interviews) can be found at Maine Sound and Story, a multimedia archive that helps tell the story of the state of Maine, its citizens, and ancestors.

ON THE MAINE MARINE WORM INDUSTRY—INTERVIEW 1¹

Fred B. Johnson II is a bloodworm harvester from Steuben. Fred was president of the Downeast Chapter of the Independent Maine Marine Worm Harvesters Association at the time of this interview. Fred often fishes with Jonathan Renwick whose interview is also included here.

My older brother started when he was a junior in high school. And my dad worked at S. D. Warren in Westbrook, ME at the time. And we had moved up there from Winter Harbor. And my brother got on the phone to him and he said, "Dad, I'm making about 25, 30 dollars a tide." He said, "You and the boys oughta come down over Memorial Day and, you know, try it. We'll meet in Waldoboro and we'll

go from there." So into the car we got and me and my two other brothers and my father got into the car and down to Waldoboro we went. And believe it or not, I dug 150 worms that day at seven years old. And I sold them. I got a cent and three-quarters a piece for them. So I made about two dollars and a half. But that was good money in 1958. You know. Yeah. And I dug probably 10 or 15 tides that year. The next year, I bought my school clothes. And that was pretty good for a kid eight years old. And my brothers did too. But my parents, I mean, there was eight of us. My parents had a large family, and, you know, so anything we could kick in to help, that was extra income for the family. So we thought it was a big deal to buy our school clothes.

There's three things that happen when you're worming, okay? You get plenty of cardiovascular exercise, you're burning calories like it's going out of style. And I'm diabetic and I need to burn them. And you're out in the good, fresh air, getting plenty, you know, good sunshine, good fresh air. And you're also, you're seeing people that you can associate with. And that you can talk with. And sometimes you're seeing people that you can talk with other than worm harvesters. So it's a pretty good thing.

Back when I was a little kid, you could go about anywhere and park. And nobody gave you too much of a hassle. Once in a while, you'd get hassled. And some of the older diggers had a really, really rough reputation. And we've been trying to change that the last 10 years or so. Traditionally, we go ask a landowner. If he's decent to us, we'll bring in a bunch of lobsters and we'll make sure he gets 'em. Or, you know, if he needs help somehow, we'll make it right. You know, we'll try to help him out some way or another. It doesn't always work that way, but we try

the best we can to make it right. And, you know, I make sure, now that I'm the president of the Downeast chapter [of the Independent Maine Marine Worm Harvesters Association] that I let these people have my name. I said, "If somebody leaves a mess, you let me know, I'll come clean it up. I'll find out who did it and address it with him." I said, because, you know, to me, it's, it's a privilege.

Right now, you know, if somebody loses a job, they can always go worming. Or they can go clamming. Yeah, I mean, there's a lot of limitations on clamming. But they can still go. And they can go wrinkling. They can go seaweeding. Those are open industries. Those are something somebody can do where there's not much education. Just a will to work. And they can feed their families and pay their bills and heat their houses if they have to. And to me, we need that.

This interview was conducted by Kaitlyn Clark, whose 2019 senior project at College of the Atlantic included 21 oral history interviews with marine worm industry members, to document this little-known fishery.

ON THE MAINE MARINE WORM INDUSTRY—INTERVIEW 2

Johnathan C. Renwick is a bloodworm harvester from Birch Harbor, Maine, who learned the trade from his dad. Jonathan often fishes with Fred Johnson whose interview is also included here.

I've been completely focused on just bloodworms my entire life. That was what my father did. That was all. And so that was what I was taught. And as I got older, I'd say from 16 through 20 years old, my father actually helped train me to think on how to find worms and decide where to go and what the schedule should be for different areas. And he really did me a big favor that a lot of people didn't get.

Because worm crews, bunches of guys that work together, usually have a leader. And the leader decides all those things. And one year, my father said to me, "Well what do you think? Where do we oughta go? Where should we dig?" And I said, "Gee Dad, I don't know. You're the boss. That's your job." And he goes, "Yeah. But if I always tell you, how're you gonna know?" So that got me thinking. So then I had to decide what time the tide was, what size the tide was. I had to learn what flats drained on what size tides. And it was very good for me.

And when I was new at it, I would suggest an area that I liked just because I liked the mud. And he, instead of telling me no, he'd say, "Well, that's an idea. Let's think about this for a minute." He'd kind of guide my thought process. And that was that was a big favor my father did me. Because when he got done, I wasn't lost.

The worm digger or the clam digger that's been parking in this spot for 20 years can't understand why he can't park there anymore, and walk down through there anymore even though, you know, there used to be on the coast of Maine large areas of woodland that didn't have houses and, you know, there was little turn-out parking lots and people would walk down through the woods and nobody cared. Well then, you know, another house gets built, another house gets built, another house gets built. If some stranger's parking in their driveway, they wouldn't like it. It's common sense goes a long ways. And we advocate as the Worm Association for wormers to get to know landowners. Ask permission, you know. Say, "I'd like to walk down here. Where could I walk where I won't bother you?" And if it's no, then walk further. You know, say, "Well, I understand, thank you." And be polite and leave and the next time maybe they'll say yes. You know, next year. I've had

exclusive permission in many places. Just because of asking.

This interview was conducted by Kaitlyn Clark, whose 2019 senior project at College of the Atlantic included 21 oral history interviews with marine worm industry members, to document this little-known fishery

ON THE LITTLE-KNOWN MAINE SLIME EEL FISHERY²

Tim Belanceau is a slime eel fisherman from the Portland area who operated what was likely the last slime eel vessel in Maine. He sold his boat in 2022.

I used to do hagfish. Slime eel. I bought an 80-foot boat and started doing it myself, putting it together then got a crew together and went out there and started. Didn't even know how to do it at first. We use the olive or pickle barrels. We put cones in them and put them together and had 30, sometimes 40 on a string. Set them out there. Put some tuna and herring with it. We went out to places like Cod Ledges. I mean, quite a ways out. In the deeper water, deeper mud probably 80, 90 fathom. Yeah. We fished down inside the mud. You just had to jump around.

How I started was I had some friends, these Cambodian friends that did it. Yeah. So they said, "Go ahead and buy a boat Tim, and go do it, you know what I mean, try it." So I stopped my construction business and bought the boat and then me and my wife went out.

I stopped a couple years ago now. I stopped because of the Coronavirus and the crew, trying to get a good crew. Long days, two weeks at a time. I like doing it. Yeah. If I wanted to do it again. I'd probably do it again. Yeah. I mean, I'm 55 years old. I had enough, man. I been doing it probably, geez, over 10 years, maybe 10-15 years? Yeah. It was fun but it's a lot

of work. It's working steady. Not much sleep.

I fished the same spots. Same areas. From here [Portland] down to the Canadian border, from here down close to George's Bank. And all the way up, all the way towards Canada. Boothbay, Bar Harbor, all down around there. I fished up inside the Rock [Mount Desert Rock] where the mud is. A lot of people Downeast was catching them out in 100 fathom water. You got to get to the edges a little bit down there. Come to the edges where the mud and gravel meet. Sometimes right where the lobstermen fish.

Do you ever have any gear conflicts with lobstermen?

No, knock on wood, you know what I mean. You know, they liked it down there. Because as I'm fishing the eel, the eel wasn't going after the bait in the lobster traps. Some of the lobstermen were telling me that it was favoring them because if I'm down there fishing, their bait would stay down there longer, so it was keeping the eel away from their bait on their lobster traps. Yeah, the eels eat the bait. Yeah, I mean, they'll get right into lobster and eat a lobster too.

You work overnight. You set 'em today and pull 'em tomorrow. Yeah. You get 60, 70,000 pounds every two weeks. I mean, if you had a crew you can do it more, but you can do 24 hours. Tired, everybody gets tired. Sleep four hours. We get four hours sleep and then do it again. You are trying to work 24 hours because you had to be right on top of the eel to get the freshest eel. You had catch 'em and freeze 'em when they're live. You don't want them to sit on the boat too long because the heat and the wind and everything makes them rotten. You got to get them right out of the sun because the sun will burn them. And then the buyers don't like

that. Then you are putting them in a barrel with ice, you want to put them right on the ice and then separate them. You know what I mean, you don't want to pile them.

I usually have 30 barrels on one string. So you haul like 60, You haul two, three strings. And then you just keep pulling, pulling, pulling, pulling, pulling all day long. Stop. Pack that stuff first. Clean it, pack it, get in the freezer while it's alive. And then do again. The buyers will like it when it's nice and fresh. You gotta be right on top of it. Cleaning it, packing it, freezing it. And then once it's frozen, put it away.

Yeah, it's a lot of work. When I say it's a lot of work, it's a lot of work. Nobody wants to do it You tell them you're gonna stay out there a week, two weeks at a time they say "Oh!" But it is good money. Very good money. Yeah, so if you're catching sixty, seventy thousand pounds, it's \$1 each. A dollar per pound. We have about four or five people working. The guys I had were good at it and I had my son with me and my wife.

I mean, sometimes you don't have to go very far. Sometimes you can stay right next to land. The sea lanes, you know what I mean? Five miles into 10 miles and just do 10 miles. You just gotta read the bottom. If you don't read the bottom, you don't get the good eel. Some spots, you'll get in it and you get a lot of baby ones, you want to get out of there because you won't catch up. Babies come in here, eat it all. Some of them get out, some of them don't get out. They eat a lot of bait. A lot of bait.

We were using sometimes 60-70 barrels of bait, a lot of bait. We use tuna and herring. And sometimes pogies, whatever we can get. Now if you try to do it now the bait bill will be more than the eel bill. But you

can catch a lot of eel with tuna and herring, mixed together. If you take rotten bait and try to use rotten bait out there, the eels stink. It's the bait inside the body. It makes it smell. The buyers smell it and they think the eel's rotten. If you use fresh bait, real fresh bait, the eel's perfect.

We tried to keep the slime off the deck. You do step on slime, it's slippery. So we try to keep the deck clean. You want to keep everything clean. Keep the boat clean. There's all kinds of stories joking around with them [slime eels]. I mean, some of the guys had to joke around with the slime, you know, I mean play with the slime. I mean, we can make a gallon of slime into a lot of fun. We used to play with them on the boats, throw them at each other.

I was the last one. Yeah, it's a cool fishery. Real good fishery. But there's no domestic market for you. I don't know if the demand's still really out there or not? There is, but they ship it all to Korea and they ship wherever they ship it. You know what I mean. I was the last one in Maine.

This interview was conducted by Tess Moore who documented this little-known fishery as part of a 2023 senior project at College of the Atlantic.

ON TRAP DENSITY AND CONSERVATION

Leah & Lesley Ann Ranquist are sisters who were in their twenties at the time of this interview in 2018. Both captain lobster boats out of Swan's Island, Maine.

LAR: We both started going with our grandfather when we were 5 or 6. He wanted to show us that you can do anything you want to do. It doesn't matter who you are or what issues you may have. So, we started going--I think really just for

fun at the beginning—but we baited the pockets.

LR: We learned a lot from our grandfather, Papa, when we were little, but we also have to give a lot of credit to our dad, for teaching us a lot of things that we didn't quite soak in when we went with Papa because we were young and, at that point, you're not paying attention to certain things.

LAR: Our dad, for our whole entire lives always told us both, he prepared us that lobsters will not always be there, just like every other fishery. And everything comes to an end at some point. They won't go away completely, but they will eventually get fished out of the environment. Something will happen.

LR: Just like it did with urchins and scallops and shrimp and everything.

LAR: So, our whole lives he's been telling us to have a back-up plan, make sure that you know this might not last forever. It might, it would be awesome if it did, 'cause we both love it so much. But we both believe that they're going to peter out at some point, and they might not go completely away. We might still be able to go. We just wouldn't catch even close to as many, and there would be a lot more rules and regulations, and, you know, it'd be a lot different.

LR: I've built up to 600 traps.

LAR: I have 250 and I'm hoping to get to 600 one day, but we'll see.

LR: For anyone who doesn't know, 600 traps is the Swan's Island limit, not the state of Maine limit. The state of Maine limit is 800 traps, but we're in a conservation area that only allows us to have 600 traps. Our limit used to be 475 traps at

one point, and it got upped and upped to 600. And there's push for 650.

LAR: But 600 is pushing it at this point. Certain areas are overfished because they let so many people in, in such a short period of time. And then, you know, we're a conservation area, which thank goodness for that because—

LR: They're pushing harder and harder to be up there with the rest of the state, but, that's controversial.

LAR: It's foolish. They should just leave it alone. It's very controversial, and I understand people want to make more money, but you have to think about the long-term effect on it.

LR: That's all we have out here on Swan's Island. It's not like you can go get a job that's replaced all the time. I'm not saying it's a bad job or anything, but for example, like at a gas station off island, people just move on from those kinds of jobs all the time and there's always somebody looking for one of those jobs. And you don't have those readily available jobs on Swan's Island.

LAR: And that's why the fishing has been good on Swan's Island for so long, because of the conservation area.

LR: There's a lot of argument that you can make just as good of a living tending 475 traps the proper way as you would just hauling and dumping, so to speak, 800 just to get through them quick.

LAR: And that's been proven by a few older people. They didn't fish quite as many, but they took the time to shift them every time, if a trap came up empty, they'd move it to where it wasn't coming up empty. Every single one. Haul and dump is a common term for people who don't tend to their gear intently. They just haul

it, pick it out, and throw it back over right where they are because they want to get to the next one.

LR: We need to save the conservation area for, if for anything else, the kids that are trying to get started. 'Cause there's a lot of traps there as it is with only 600 to a person.

The interview was conducted by Gwen May and Bev McAloon for the Swan's Island Historical Society project "Women in Lobstering, Oral History Collection and Exhibit."

NOTES

- 1 Along Maine's coastal mudflats, you might have noticed commercial worm harvesters digging for bloodworms and sandworms. The segmented and wriggly critters are used as fishing bait by recreational anglers, and Maine is one of the only states with a commercial marine worm fishery.]
- 2 Hagfish, also known as slime eel, is an unregulated deep-water species more closely related to the sea lamprey than to true eels. Slime eels possess a defense mechanism consisting of extruding thick slime. Despite the difficult and potentially dangerous fishing conditions that result, slime eel has been targeted in Maine since the 1990s (in the wake of the cod collapse) with fisheries sporadically popping up in ports from Milbridge to Portland. In recent years, the fishery has mostly consolidated to a few boats out of New Bedford and Gloucester, Massachusetts, which fish the whole Gulf of Maine and ship most of their catch frozen to South Korea.

Natalie Springuel assembled this collection for *Maine Policy Review*. She is marine extension program leader at the University of Maine Sea Grant program, where she supports marine science for Maine people through research, outreach and education. Springuel helps coordinate the Mapping Ocean Stories Project, a partnership between College of the Atlantic, Island Institute, Maine Sea Grant and The First Coast, that uses oral history as a tool to document and celebrate people's relationship to the sea.