

Interview with an Alewife Agent at the Ellsworth Dam in Maine

Date: May 27, 2004
Time: 2:30 pm
Location of the Interview: Ellsworth Dam

Student Interviewers: Brandon Lane **Grade: 10**
 Anna Briggs **Grade: 10**
School: Ellsworth High School
School Location: Ellsworth, Maine

Teacher or Parent Interviewers/Chaperones: None
Title: -----

Transcribers: Brandon Lane, Anna Briggs

AA = Alewife Agent

BL: We're interviewing ----. He's the Alewife Agent for Ellsworth. So I heard an alewife is like a fat herring, is that what it's been called?

AA: It's a member of a herring family.

BL: The fish come up swimming up here, right?

AA: Yea ,the adult fish. Trying to get to where they were born..

BL: And how do you truck them up there? Do they swim through here or...?

AA: Well, the state and federal government built this fish way in 1973, 74 primarily for salmon. It was built under the Anadromous Fish Act. which include smelts, alewives, salmon, anything that spends most of their life in the ocean to returns to the fresh water to spawn but primarily was built for salmon. It turned out to be a better alewife river than it was a salmon river. So that's why the alewives are built up, we've built it up.

BL: Now, you do this for your own personal delight or...

AA: I'm a contactor for the city. The city has the rights for this river and for the alewives and I'm just contracted to the city to harvest for them..

BL: Then where do you sell your alewives?

AA: They come right here. People come right here and buy them.

AB: So you can eat alewives?

AA: No, they use them for lobster bait.

AB: Lobster bait. So do any people eat them? Or no?

AA: Not so much now. They used to smoke them. Back... years back. People that did it are old and dying off now, and its just a dying act, they don't really do it anymore.

AB: So they don't really taste good, they're not like the other fish?

AA: It's an acquired taste I guess anybody will eat anything but...

AB: Are they expensive to buy like for fishing bait?

AA: No actually the market right now for bait is all over the place. But the alewives are actually cheaper than anything else. \$10 a bushel is what we get for them. They pay; they were paying up to forty dollars for a bushel this spring for suckers.

AB: For fishing bait?

BL: Is that what they use for suckers?

AA: Yep.

AB: Now are they so cheap because there are so many of them?

AA: Well, it's a combination of things. Its that and the fact that a lot of the fisherman aren't set out for fishing because they haven't put the traps in the water and the alewives seem to come all at once in a short period of time. If you don't get ride of them in a short period of time, they want them fresh every day and they very well can't hold them and get a higher price for them like with the herring or something like that. Its pretty much what the bank gets there they wont pay a lot of money for alewives.

AB: So do companies buy the fish, like do they come here and buy them or is it more of just like personal fishers?

AA: Its both, we have a 50 bushel limit on it right now until they start really coming fast.

BL: So its been slow this year?

AA: It's been slow really slow. Been very slow. With the 50 bushel limit you don't get a lot of bait dealers. Usually bait dealer pay, you know, a couple hundred bushels, so if you do that then you don't have very many fish and the little guys get discouraged because they end up waiting all day and they don't get any fish. I try to keep down top a 50 bushels so everybody gets fish.

BL: so they swim right through

AA: This, this is, ah, what the state has created here is an artificial current is all it is. The fish feel the water coming out of the fish way, the fish trap. They think it's a way to get up stream. We just pump water into this tank and run it down to the fish way and they think it's a way to get up stream and their instinct is to fight the current to get back to where they came from.

AB: So they actually swim into the cage because they're fighting against the current?

AA: They come up through the maze of compartments and then to the trap that has a funnel on it just like the rubber bait trap. When we think there is enough in there we pull it up on a hoist. We kick it right up and bring it out this way and dump it right into the fish hatchery.

BL: And they're alive, right, when you put 'em in the truck?

AA: Yep they don't stay that way long, but they are alive.

BL: So, uh, how big is an alewife?

AA: They run anywhere from the smaller ones probably 9 inches in width, 14 inches.

BL: Are there different kinds of them?

AA: No they're all the same, they're just different sizes, probably depending on how old they are or how soon they got out of a lake when they were juveniles. They seem to grow a lot faster when they get to the ocean than they do in fresh water.

BL: Do you catch like other things, like you said you travel and...

AA: Well, once in a while we'll get a perch in there, maybe a bass,

BL: But it's not common, for other people to get any of the...

AA: No. No, not really, no we've got, we've actually caught everything but it's not, it's very rare.

BL: Do you have to like pick 'em out, so you can just...

AA: Oh yeah, we put 'em back in the river. Yeah, we don't, we only deal with alewives, nothing else, if we get a salmon we have another tank inside of the truck that we put the salmon in if they want to keep it, if not, we throw 'me back in the lake. The salmon sometimes come three feet long, we caught one morning that was three feet. See that shag

right there, it just swallowed an alewife. See how big his neck is? You watch it, you'll see him quivering.

They swallow 'um whole. Like that! (Snaps his fingers).

BL: How many times a day do you empty that trap?

AA: It depends on how fast the fish are running.

BL: But like today how many times have you emptied it?

AA: I haven't even picked it up yet, there's nothing in there, not a thing.

BL: Not a thing? Really?

AA: Nah, there might be a couple in there but it's not worth it.

AB: How much do they usually sell for?

AA: We get ten dollars a bushel.

AB: Ten dollars?

AA: Yep.

BL: When you say we, do you mean the city or you?

AA: Well, it's a city business and I run it for them. I set the price, all they do is take care of their share of the money.

AB: How much is a bushel?

AA: Ten, ten dollars. Oh, how many fish? About 2 five gallon buckets that you rake blueberries in? Yeah, it's two of those.

AB: That's quite a lot of fish.

AA: Yea, it's about a 135 fish a bushel. Our biggest year is back in, ah, 1985. One day we sold over eleven hundred bushels. That's a lot of fish.

AB: How long have you been doing this?

AA: I've been a Contractor for seven years, and I did it with the other guy for fifteen.

BL: So what does Albert do?

AA: Albert? Albert, he's my partner.

BL: Have you ever worked at any other place or have you always been here?

AA: No, I worked for power companies, but I used to work here for 25 years.

BL: So you know this place in and out?

AA: Pretty well, I worked, I don't work for Bangor Hydro because they sold the dams to DP&L and, ah, I work out of Veazie now but I still run this via computer.

AB: Is this on during the night?

AA: This Alewives fishing? No. We shut it off. The fish won't come through that fish way when it starts to get dark. for some reason or other. We don't now why, they never have. It's pretty much, its usually 12 noon to 8 pm. Sometimes they'll run eight thirty if they are running hard. Sometimes they'll start at 10 in the morning, but not usually, the last four days they haven't started at all.

BL: So what's this contraption that you have right here?

AA: Well, that is the tank that we take the lake. In order to keep this run going we have to set them out up at the and they lay their eggs up there to hatch and the ones that hatch come back in 4 years.

BL: So they swim right down here or....

AA: Yeah, they drift right down here in July.

AB: So you bring the eggs back?

AA: No, we use another trap, inside, I will show it to you if you want to see it. That trap inside holds water in the bottom of it so we can pick the fish up and they stay in the water and don't dry out. We fill this tank with water and haul it back to the lake. (Loud buzzing sound)

BL That telephone is ringing (Loud buzzing sound)

AA: Well we stop on Saturdays. We can't sell fish on Saturdays.

AB: Why

AA: That is the way that I was set up. Most brooks don't have a trucking system where they haul the fish around. Most fish can run up naturally. Here they can't. The only way they are going to get up to Graham Lake is if we take them up there.

BL: Cause there is a big wall right there.

AA: Yeah they can't get any further this.

AB: How often do you bring a load to Graham Lake? :

AA: Saturdays, it will take up all day long. We have to put 750 bushel up there.

BL: So I'm guessing this doesn't hold 750 bushels.

AA: Ten bushels to a time, we have two of those tanks. We can make about 12-14 trips a day with each truck, so we can put about 300 bushel a day, on a good day. You'll see 'um going up to Little Webb Pond, Webb Pond.

BL: So why do you choose those ponds? Is it just because they have good water quality...

AA: No, that's where they come from. We don't choose them, they just choose them. There's always been a small run of alewives in the river here, and I imagine back down where the dam was put in there was probably some really good runs here. But a lot of the people doing it, stopped them.

BL: So, you said you started this, you sort of fell into do it, or did your parents do it?

AA: Well they, there was always a handful of alewives in here, not a lot. There might have been 20, 30 bushels in the river, you know, every year they come in, they might have spawn right here, some of them would hatch and there was enough to keep them right on going. When they built this fish trap they wanted to eliminate the alewives, so they figured, well, they could take out the alewives that are here. We'll take them to Graham Lake and dump them. They'll come through these turbines and probably get chewed up and that will probably be the end of the alewives. Well, they did it for four years, a four year cycle on the fish, and they had to do it for four years to eliminate them. The fifth year we had the biggest mess of alewives of our lives that any of you would have ever saw. Then they realized what they'd done, that they'd actually stopped. I think their actual intent were to get rid of the alewife run and make this a salmon run, but the salmon never really panned out.

BL: Do you see any boats come right up here? Any fishing boats or, guys from...

AA: No, they, there's a real strong current down in the back of us, you know on high tide they could probably get through. Every once in a while we'll see a small boat, but only on the high tide. We have all kinds of wildlife here, you got the bald eagles, we got the seals, ospreys, there's ospreys there just waiting for the fish to show up now.

AB: The people who buy the fish, do they usually use them right...

AA: Yes, they like them fresh, they'll come everyday.

AB: Oh, so they'll come everyday, then use them, then if they need more they'll come back?

AA: Yep, they'll show up now.

AB: Does anybody freeze them?

AA: No, some people do, some people will freeze them, some people salt them, but the majority of them like them fresh.

AB: You said they use them for lobster?

AA: Yeah.

AB: You said they use them for lobstering? So why use fish? Aren't they kind of big compared to the lobster?

AA: No, they cut them up, they usually cut them in half, some people break them in half, some people just put them in whole. They are a hard fish, unlike a little herring, they'll stay in the bait bag longer.

AA: They last longer just because it's a hard fish, you take a soft fish in a bait bag and see and it glues them up in the bag. The alewives stay in there longer, so the trap is actually trapping longer than it would be with other bait

BL: So is this like the slowest year you've had so far?

AA: It is. I expect we're going to have some really big days here pretty quick. It's getting late. This should be our peak right now, the next two or three days. We think the weather is probably working against us.

AB: The rain?

AA: Yea the rain is cold. They like the sun. If the sun would come up then they'd probably be running through here.

AB: When was your best year?

AA: '85. Yea we got, uh; I believe it was 6,000 bushels. Last year we took twenty one hundred.

AB: If the alewives are running slow, what is the next preferred bait fish?

AA: Herring if they could get them. But right now because there's so many people setting their traps out, getting started for the season, there's not a lot of bait around. The demand is up.

AB: But the lobster prefer alewives?

AA: Uh, I think lobster prefer a change in bait.. They'll feed real well on alewives for a while, and then they'll slack off. Change their bait to something else then the lobster catch will pick up again. It's just like anyone, if you eat steak every night, then someone offers you chicken after a couple months, you'd probably be quite pleased. But, I think it's a change of bait more than anything. They use numerous things for bait. It seems to be whenever they change the type of bait they will have better results.

AB: So does that affect the amount of alewives you sell?

AA: No, because we only have them for about three weeks anyway. So, when we have them, that is what the lobsters want. By the time the lobsters are sick of them, we're done anyway.

BL: When does the season start and end?

AA: Usually about the middle of May, through the middle of June, just about four weeks. Some years it may start a little earlier, but pretty much the same, around Mother's day or something like that.

AB: So when it gets warmer?

AA: They're like birds, they probably go by the sun to determine when they start and when they end. The water temperature can be anyway from 50 to 60 degrees.

AB: And where do they go when it's not in season?

AA: I guess, what few studies they've done of them, because they're a trash fish, nobody really pays too much attention to them, they think that they just go right off the Gulf of Maine. That's as far as they go.

AB: And they just stay there?

AA: And just stay there for four years. And from what I understand they don't school up in bunches, just spread out and they stay down pretty much on bottom.. When they're out dragging for other fish, they don't seem to catch any alewives.

BL: So with this fish trap, how do you put (the alewives) in there again?

AA: Oh, the cover heaves and the half of that opens right up. And uh.

BL: And that. That lifts them right up and dumps them in?

AA: And we got another trap inside to stop them, we lift it right out and bring it right out and set it over the top and we got a handle we pull on the bottom that dumps the water and the fish out there. We put some water in there to start with, and we circulate the water with a pump, and fill the tank with the pump and we can circulate at the same time.

AB: Why do you do that?

AA: Circulate the water?

AB: Yeah.

AA: Well they would probably suffocate if you didn't. You got to give them air it some what. Because its not that far to Graham Lake, they're pretty hardy fish anyway, they'll stand a lot, but the better shape they're in, the probably better results you'll get.

AB: How far is it from here to Graham Lake?

AA: About five miles. They put them in a boat ramp to the other side of the dam.

AB: Do you have to go slow, so you don't shake them up too much?

AA: No, they go along at the speed limit, you know, fairly quick trip. The power company built this for us. When they determined they wanted 750 bushels we told them we'd have to have two tanks to do it. So they had this tank built right here and between the two tanks we can do the 750 bushel.

AB: Are you, and the one other guy, the only people who do this?

AA: Yeah, I have a partner and his boys, Allen and Adam help me out when its real busy.

BL: So is there any way to catch them other than this fish trap?

AA: Not really. I mean if they were running thick. You could throw a fish hook out there and you'd probably smack one, there so thick, and they might bite a hook if it was a fly or something, but they're not up here to feed they're up here to spawn.

AB: Was there any training to go through to learn how to work the machines?

AA: You mean as far as alewife fishing? No, we built this stuff. We built the box, the hoist is in here because of the original trap that was built for the salmon. They did away with that because it was easier if you just get them in the pit and go down and meet them down there.

AB: You said the salmon used to be here? Where have they gone? Are they just not..

AA: They were here because they used to stock the river with them. They would dump them in here and they'd go to sea and come back three or four years later. Since they stopped stocking, they stopped coming back. It wasn't the dam because they're putting them in right here. If they're not coming back to the base of the dam, then the dams not the problem. And they have had some programs I'm sure; don't they have one at the high school where they've been raising salmon to put in muster ants on a small scale?

AB: Would it be at HCTC?

AA: Yeah, I thought they had some small scale program up there, but I think eventually they will start seeing if they start putting those fish up in North Branch, then we'll start seeing salmon back here again. But the percentages of fish that are coming back compared to those that we're putting in are just so small. If they put in 100,000 in here we'd be lucky to get three or four back.

AB: So is it just natural for them to find their way somewhere else?

AA: No, salmon are just the same as alewives, they go back to their place of origin, if they can get back there. If none were put in the lake, none will come back here. It's all nature's way of putting them back where they come from.

BL: What have you got for stories about alewives, catching them, releasing them...

AA: Pretty much all the same every day, you catch them, put them in a box and sell them. Some of the wildlife you've seen over here are most interesting. Take these fish hawks, they are natural fishers. They just caught a fish, that a person can not see. A lot of times, the ospreys and fish hawks go down there to go fishing, and the bald eagle will be sitting up in the tree waiting to steal it from them. The bald eagles will probably catch one too, but they'd rather steal it from the ospreys or the seagull. What they do is they'll sit up in the tree and wait for the osprey to catch it then they'll put chase to them. One day we watched them. They were flying, one was casing the other, and they just kept going up, up, up and they got up there quite a ways. Finally, the bald eagle let a screech out of him, and the fish hawk dropped the fish. The bald eagle folded up and turned upside down and went to a dive and caught the fish long before the fish even hit the water. Quite a sight. You figure a fish dropping, and a bird dropping faster than the fish, and catching it. It is quite a sight. We get seals up in here.

AB: Oh really?

AA: Yeah. We had three up in here. The day before yesterday I guess it was.

AB: So would you say this is the most interesting part of your job? Seeing nature? Because this wouldn't seem.... is it boring sometimes? And this comes right too the ocean doesn't it?

AA: Yeah, it's about 2, two and a half miles.

AA: Well it has been but when the fish are coming we can fill that box faster then we can bail them out

AB: So then during the busy time you are very busy

AA: Yes, yes this has been very boring the last four days but when the fish are coming like I say, 2 dips, we can fill that box; it might be six minutes, it might take us ten minutes to empty it so they are coming faster then we can take em.

AB: So when your filling the box up is there something that goes down to stop the fish from coming back there.

AA: Well, this is just a box. We got a shoot on the other end to close the door, fill the box up and then when we get ready to fill the trays. We just open up the gate and the fish come out and we stop it and we fill it.

AB: Are there more than one compartmeant

AA: No

BL: That is our last question, thank you .

Then we went in and looked at the transporting trap and the salmon truck. If they catch a salmon they put it in a tank on the back of a truck. That concludes the interview.