

KEVIN LYNCH

Boat Captain, scallop, tuna, elver, cod, and haddock fisherman

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Location of the Interview: Ellsworth High School Library

Student Interviewers: Pat Nabozny Grade 10

Shawna Lunch Grade 10

Janna Piazza Grade 10

School: Ellsworth High School

School Location: Ellsworth, Maine

Teacher or Parent Interviewer/Chaperone: None

Transcriber: Joyce Whitmore

PN: What kind of fishing are you involved in?

KL: I am involved in scallop fishing, dragging industry, I did some tuna fishing with a hand line. I also did some elver fishing.

SL: Was this all in Maine?

KL: No, some of this was in Maine as well as New Jersey.

SL: How long have you been involved in fishing?

KL: Well, pretty much fifteen years of consistent fishing. I have tried some elver fishing several years ago.

SL: What are elvers?

KL: Elver is a glass eel. A small, baby north American eel which breed along ways from here and they swim all the way back to Maine. These little tiny things you can barely see. They ship them off to Japan where they raise them to full size and they are considered a delicacy.

PN: And

KL: We catch them and keep them alive and ship them off to Japan where they grow them to full size because they like eels.

KL: They are not very good. Most people would not eat them if they saw them or had to clean them

KL: I spend most of my time fishing for cod and haddock...flat fish...

JP: Did you have to use bait for those fish? Or scoop them up?

KL: I scooped them up except when I went tuna fishing we had bait.

SL: What did you use for bait?

KL: We would bait with pretty much with what we could get. We tried blue fish which didn't work, and herring. We would buy boxes of herring frozen and thaw it out. Some people would put it into a meat grinder and hang it off the stern of the boat and grind it right into the water.

SL: And then you used nets?

KL: No, no, we used hook and line. A lot of other boats used harpoons. We tried that but our boat was too noisy. You have got to be real quiet and stealthy.

JP: How big were the hooks?

KL: Oh, about four inches. But we used special hooks with a special shape.

KL: We caught one tuna fish, it took us a whole summer to do it, and it dressed out at six hundred and eighty pounds. With its head on and its guts in it, it would probably have weighed close to nine hundred pounds. We were scalloping at the time and we decided we would spend a couple of days trying to tuna fish. We went out at 7:00 in the morning and by 7:30 we had a fish on. It took us about an hour to get him on board. We were able to put him on board because we had a boom.

JP: How exactly do you catch a scallop?

KL: Mostly with a steel drag?

PN: Are those the big things you drop off the back of the boat?

KL: We used on this particular boat one drag. One off the side. We would tow it in a circle. When we were scalloping off shore in bigger boats, we would fish a week at a time. We would use two drags. And that enabled us to tow in a straight line.

SL: Where would the fish go that you caught?

KL: Uh, we would bring them to a local buyer. He would put them on the auction. Circumstances were that they became unionized. They pretty much told us if we were going to buy ice and fuel right there from them we would have to join a union. We went to Boston where they didn't have a union. We had a designated buyer. Its still an auction but everybody had their own boats. So you could avoid bidding wars. But every once in a while somebody would try to buy a fish. It was a formality. Then you would have boats that would change the nature of the auction. But sometimes, you know, they would know what they wanted and what they needed, and even though it was still an auction and still legal...you know...They knew the other guy wanted x amount of fish so they would concede to that. Everything worked out for the most part pretty good.... Any excess would be divided up. A company would buy that lot and another this lot. Whereas in New Bedford, it was totally different. They would buy the whole boat. There was a real auction. They would bid on the boat. Once the bidding stopped, that boat of fish was sold. That was it. In other places there was no auction and we would just find a local buyer that we thought would treat us right. Of course, it is a perishable thing; you only have a limited amount of time to hang on to it and decide this is the best deal you can get. We tried several times to beat that...we scratched. When you sell the fish on the auction you don't have to sell it to them if you don't like the price you can go scratch and go try to find someone to buy the fish. Like I said it is perishable and you have been out in the boat for a week. You know. And then you really want to turn around quickly and get back out there and catch more fish. Downtime or layover time is losing money. Boats are made to fish and the only time you should ever be in board is when you are selling fish and preparing for the next trip.

SL: How many people worked on your boat?

KL: Initially when I first started we had six man crews. We would have like on the fish draggers and scallopers..Up to fourteen. On the scallopers we would do watches. We would have six on, six off, twenty-four hours a day. That would mean you would work for six hours, get off and sleep for six hours and rest and then be back on. You would work twelve-hour workdays. When you run into a lot of scallops you would have to break watches. The unfortunate one to be in the bunk on their off watch, when you ran into a lot of scallops - they would work twenty four hour days, thirty hour days. Sleep was not an option. You had a limited amount of time and a limited amount of weather to get the fish on board. And that was how you make your money. So sometimes you go for three days without sleep and that was too bad.

PN: Was there a season?

KL: No, now they have a lot of closed areas and some season fishing. In shore lobstering, you would not catch any lobsters in shore during the winter. In our trips you could go anywhere legally. You could go close to shore, you could go two hundred miles out or you could go out to the Grand Banks. I did that one trip...the Grand Banks. We spent four and half days getting there and four and a half days getting back.

JP: Did you ever run into any huge storms?

KL: Quite a few, yeah, especially during the winter. A lot of people on shore don't know that there is a storm out there. They may be getting some of the wind from it and some of the snow but the real wind and the real big seas out there, it is scary. You really have to have a good boat.

SL: Did you ever lose anybody?

KL: Not on any boat I have been on. I've known several people that didn't make it. Some of them had fished all their lives and just had that one unfortunate time and were swept overboard. If you were there, you would realize if the wind is howling and the waves are coming over the boat and you can hardly maneuver and it is dark. A lot of times it is at night and all you have is a little search light and whatever deck lights you have got. It's not so much boat sense, sinking ...a wave hits you and you are gone.

I usually did not stay long on boats I considered unsafe. I would make one trip if I thought it was an unsafe boat, I would not go back on it.

SL: What are the different jobs you can have on a boat?

KL: Well, first of all there is a captain. He is pretty much was God out there.

SL: Is that you?

KL: Not really. I really tried to be a little more sensitive. You have to understand the severity, dangerous situations. There is really no time for long explanations and feelings being hurt. The job needs to be done then you have got the mate. He switches off with the captain. His job is to make sure everything is prepared for the trip. Safety wise, food wise, ice, fuel, uh, and that he has got a crew. . Hopefully that you can depend on. The crew is always changing. There is a big turn over. He would pretty much plot out where we were going to go fishing, how long we would stay there, decide whether we are catching a certain amount of fish or would we do better somewhere else...Then there was the easy choice if there was no fish at all, we would have to go somewhere else.

JP: How would you track those fish?

KL: Usually by knowing what their habitat is. They have habits; they pretty much do the same routine. They feed in different areas; they migrate quite a bit. Thus a captain keeps a pretty good log in their head. It's instinctive. They grew up fishing. They watch. It's just like a good hunter. A good hunter knows where to go. A good fisherman knows where to go. A lot of it is good luck. Sometimes the places you have been year after year don't produce, so you say what do we do now. And you try somewhere else. Bang, there is a lot of them. You load up, hopefully...

JP: Have you ever caught anything interesting you did not expect too?

KL: Yeah, oh, yeah. All sorts of things. The more interesting one was a bomb.

PN: A bomb!

KL: Yeah, we caught a bomb. We pulled up the net and dumped it on the deck and we saw the fins of this bomb sticking out of this pile of fish. We pretty much panicked.

PN: Like a land mine?

KL: An ariel bomb. It was probably two hundred pound. So, we called the Coast Guard. They came out. One of their men jumped on board and said, "Yeah, that is a bomb." Then he jumped back on his boat and they took off. They stayed x amount of yards from us. (I guess about a hundred yards away) They called down to an air force base on Cape Cod. They had some ordinance experts sent out.

JP: So you kept it on your deck!

KL: Yeah. Right there. You are the crew. You need a crew on the boat; we didn't abandon the ship. Well, anyways, we waited several hours for the navy ordinance guys to come on. They came out on a different Coast Guard Boat. They jumped on the boat and one of them walked right over and grabbed it and pulled it right out of the pile. It scared me half to death. As it turned out, it was a practice bomb.

JP: That's good.

KL: Made me feel like a wimp. They were laughing. They thought it was pretty funny. I think they ripped it out of the pile and knew immediately what it was. They knew they were going to get a rise out of us.

SL: Did you get any other interesting things?

KL: Well, whale bones. We got a whole net-full of whalebones once. They really tore up the netback. They were gnarled right into the net. It took us about five hours to cut them all out. They were rib bones, vertebrae...The thing I noticed most was that they really smelled really bad, decay. I didn't throw up but I almost did. I couldn't wait to get them back over board.

SL: So, did you make your own nets?

KL: Yes, some people bought them. I graduated from the University of Rhode Island. I got an Associates Degree in Commercial Fisheries and Marine Technology. They taught us how to build nets. Any good fishing boat would if it had a good crew. They would use one style net. Yankee nets, they called them.

SL: What is the difference between nets?

KL: The older nets, the flat nets, the Yankee nets have two seams - a top and a bottom, whereas the newer nets have four seams. They have two sides - a top and a bottom. And they have an upper rise and height. They have a float rope. It makes the top of the net float and they have a roller sweep or a chain sweep, whatever style they use. They are weighted down to the bottom. They also have otter boards or trawl boards that will spread the net apart. And, of course, they will towing this all by very long lengths of steel wire. But the four panel nets, pretty much, took over for a while there. There are probably plenty of people who are still using flat nets.

We use different types of sweeps for different types of bottom.

SL: What is a sweep?

KL: That's the part that drags off the bottom. It sweeps the fish up, it doesn't actually, it kicks them up. It touches them and they jump up. If they are a bottom fish or a flat fish - if they are a regular free swimming bottom fish like cod and haddock. Then they, you know, wouldn't hear it. It is just the noise, the dust cloud, the boards kick up corrals them and they eventually make their way back down into the trawl. They are packed in there pretty good. If you don't slow the boat down and let them all escape then you bring them up to the surface and dump them out on the deck.

KL: They have different types of sweeps. They have roller sweeps which are a bunch of tires; that is good for a rocky bottom. They have a chain sweep which is good for sand and then they have other ones that will hopefully go over mud. Mud is a real problem. I hated mud. It can take hours and hours to get mud off.

JP: How long does it take to make a net?

KL: It takes a couple of days to put one together. It depends on what style of net

you are going to make. The more seams, the more time it takes. A flat net you can bang together in half a day. A lot of times you have to rebuild a whole net right out on the boat. If you get into a shipwreck or something, it will tear the net to pieces.

SL: How many fish could you get in a day?

KL: It always varied. That's a tough one. Sometimes, you wouldn't get any. Sometimes you would get a couple hundred pounds; sometimes you would get fifty or sixty thousand pounds.

SL: What is the most you ever got?

KL: Well, I remember one trip that took five days; we had a hundred and six thousand pounds of fish.

SL: That is a lot.

KL: We were happy.

PN: Did that make it dangerous coming back, like cause you were weighted down so much..

KL: No, that didn't make a difference. It burned off the fuel. It makes you heavier, it makes you slower. What would make it more dangerous would be if you didn't balance your load. One trip I was on, the hole man. . Jan asked me earlier what different jobs there are. There is the captain, the mate, the cook, the deck hands. Out of those you have the hole man. You would have people designated to make sure the fish were put away right and with enough ice on them. You were taking the ice in the right place and you would have to balance the load. At the same time you would coordinate that with the captain and which tank he was burning fuel on. One trip we came in it really made the captain very, very angry that he had to come in listing to one side. The hole man was taking all the ice from one side and putting on the fish on the other side of the boat. They didn't coordinate it right. It makes it the laughing stock of the fleet when you come in and the boat is listing.

PN: Yeah.

KL: There is something wrong and naturally there is something wrong. You should never want the load unbalanced.. There are things like that. It is an ego thing. But it is a safety thing too; you never want to be caught doing that.

JP: Do you have any funny stories to tell?

KL: Actually, there isn't anything funny about it. I guess it depends on your

sense of humor. I guess one of the funny things is I was fishing on a scallop boat; the captain was very wild. He was a screamer. Twenty-four hours a day, every time he was awake you could hear him screaming at somebody. We had some really bad weather down off Cape Cod in what we call the Channel. There were a lot of rocks down there so along with the scallops you get drags full of rocks. It was rough and the water was coming over and the rocks made us heavy. We would set the drags back over, and it was rough, and the water was coming over and it made us very heavy. It was a dangerous situation. The very next day it was so beautiful and calm it was one of those times you just loved being out there. It was so beautiful, even when it is rough. We actually got to sit back and enjoy it, it was so calm. We were towing our drags back and the masts broke, it snapped in three places. I was in the shucking house, cutting scallops. The after mast pulled right through the top of the shucking house. It sounded like somebody had shot a shotgun. I was like panic stricken. All that rigging came crashing down. No one got hurt and thank god.. The captain said, "What is the matter with you?" I couldn't say anything. He said, "What, You never seen a mast come down before." He made some humor out of a serious situation. If it had happened the day before, we would have all drowned. That boat would never have stayed a float.

PN: Why do they have masts on fishing boats? What is the purpose?

KL: They are usually so you can attach booms to the boat, so you can lift the load. It makes it something you can attach too. Plus you can put your running lights on it. That is something you have to have.

PN: Was it a lot of fun when you weren't working? Do people do a lot of drinking?

KL: No, no alcohol allowed.

PN: Not a good combination.

KL: You would do that when you were not on the boat. Then you would have about twelve to twenty four hours to sober up.

JP: What was the biggest fish you had caught?

KL: That tuna I told you about that weighed six hundred and eighty five pounds. That is a big fish, it is beautiful. If you have never seen one up close, it is a swimming machine. It is so hydrodynamic, it isn't funny. The dorsal fin fits into a pocket; you would not even know it was there. They have vinaigrettes going down their backbone between their dorsal fin and their tail fin. They have like little rudders that look like the tail wings on an airplane. They move up and down, I guess it gives them even more hydrodynamics. My brother was on a boat and he caught a whale. You know, they didn't want to catch any whale.

SL: Did they actually pull up the whale?



KL: Yeah, oh yeah.

SL: Did you ever catch any sharks?

KL: Yeah. You know there is another funny story, I guess. We were laying too, once.. Laying too means you are not going anywhere; you are just floating out there, doing nothing. We decided to do a little shark fishing. We used some of the fish that were not any good for sale, we used for bait. We had blue sharks all around the boat. One guy was putting this really big shark hook right in front of their faces, and they would swim right by it.. He was trying to lead them on, to get them to bite. And while doing that, he slipped. I caught him just by his feet as he was going overboard. He didn't say a thing. He acted like nothing had happened.

SL: Did you ever see any really, really big sharks? A great white or something?

KL: I have seen blue sharks. I have never seen any of the big whites. I have seen some makos that were twelve feet long. They are man-eaters. An eight-foot shark is a lot bigger than me. You look at their teeth and they are sharp. I have seen sea turtles out there. They are pretty cool. I have also see sun fish.

SL: Are they the flat ones?

KL: They are flat but they have one fin on the top. Their eyes are on one side. They swim on the surface. They are very strange. They don't seem to have any means of direction.

JP: I'm guessing you have had a lot of fish to eat on the boat.

KL: Oh, yeah. A lot of guys wouldn't eat fish. They hated it. They wanted steak and potatoes. I have been a cook on boats too. Everyone gets to take a turn as you go up the ranks. You try to cook anything fancy for them and they just wouldn't appreciate it. You have to understand, they weren't highly educated; they were fishermen and they did their job well. They had one thing they could be proud of in life is that they did their job well.

KL: Do you want to know the state of the fishery now?

JP: Yep.

KL: Limited licenses, closed area, x amount of days to get the job done regardless of what the weather is like, conservation measures, the Magnus Act. Uh, in my opinion it is always too little, too late. After they got rid of the foreign fishing boats that were devastating the fishing grounds, they should have enacted conservation measures back then. But hindsight is twenty twenty. But I think it will come back, it is a renewable resource. It is better for the fishermen that actually have licenses. They don't have to worry about a large influx of greenhorns which is what happened when the federal government gave

incentives to expand the fisheries.

SL: Why did you stop fishing?

KL: Mostly for economic reasons. I had a little girl and one of the things that other fishermen I talked too, the old timers, one of the things they said is if they had to do it all over again, They would stop fishing and have more time for their families and their, kids. They would spend more time at home. They never got to see their kids grow up. To see them four days out of the month and most of the time be gone.

SL: What is your favorite type of fishing?

KL: Catching a blue fish tuna. They can swim at sixty miles per hour. I'm thinking of buying a lobster boat now. I'm taking it into consideration.

SL: Have you ever caught lobsters?

KL: No, not with lobster traps. I used to drag them in Massachusetts. On every trip we would save every lobsters we caught. You were allowed to sell them. It wasn't illegal and there was no sense to throw them overboard. Maine was always closed to drag lobsters.

JP: What is the biggest boat you ever worked on?

KL: Eighty five feet.. We went to the Grand Banks on that. We had to put aluminum walls on the decks to keep the big waves from coming over and clobbering us. It was kind of hairy. You were on a boat that had to have special sides put on it to keep the waves from sweeping people overboard.

JP: Did you ever work in the winter?

KL: Yes, worst time. It was always rough, cold, and icy. The rigging would be covered with ice and you could feel the boat getting more tender. You would have to get out and take that ice off the rigging. Ice was the biggest problem. You would have arctic sea smoke. It would snow real heavy, you couldn't see anything.

SL: Would you get frostbite? Was that common?

KL: No, you would bundle up.

SL: I think that is it.

JP: Thank you

PN: Yeah, thanks a lot.



