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Gloucester, Mass

Capt. John J. Pentacost

Interviewed by William Wakeham and Hugh M. Smith

Nov. 18, 1893

Aged 47. Has had 27 years experience as a fisherman. A great part of that time in the mackerel fishery. Name of vessel Schooner Mystery. Did not go mackerel fishing in her this year. Went fishing for mackerel but went in the Marguerite Harkin.

Has been master of a vessel mackerel fishing 5 or 6 years. In 1882 was master of a vessel mackerel fishing

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in the North Bay. Was in the Flying Send(?).

Used to go south to get mackerel a good deal. Generally looked for the fish off the Capes of Virginia, about 35 or 40 miles off shore. Been down there the 1st of April. Look for them about that time. Has been vessels go there earlier, but did not get many fish. Has been there before fish were caught there.

Does not

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know what direction they came from and when he meets them. They are generally heading about N.N.E.

Has followed those spring bodies from off the Capes of Virginia clear to Gaspe. Has never been to the 7 Islands.

The further north the fish get on our coast the nearer they come in shore. Never look for fish within 6 or 7 miles of land along southward of Delaware, and often they get up by

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Barnegat and New York, catch them within a mile of land.

Spring mackerel go south of Georges. Strike about Cape Sable. The fish strike the Nova Scotia shore before we get them in the Bay of Fundy. About the 10th to 15th of May begin to catch scattering ones along about Cape Sable. Do not catch many fish on the Cape Shore until the first of June. Get them

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right along the shore.

Those that come to the south of Georges strike the Cape and follow the shore down. Schools split at the Cape and go in to separate bodies. No difference in the size of these bodies of fish. One day get 17 and 18 inch mackerel and another day, right in the same place, 10 to 13 inch. The earliest fish are the largest. Will find large bodies of these small mackerel,

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but did not see as many as usual this spring.

The fish this spring at the south were in deeper water than I have ever known them to be – in 60 and 70 fathoms of water.

The fish south this spring did not seem to be so very shy, but they were scarcer; were not so many schools.

When we find these fish at the south they are poor and full of spawn. The spawn seems not be very

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far advanced, but it gets riper all the time. The last fish caught there, sometimes the spawn is running right out of them. The last we got this spring about 70 miles from Barnegat, had ripe spawn in them. That was about the 15th or 16th of May. The spawn would run from them when we threw them on the deck. They were most all male fish. Were full of milk.

The first fish

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we caught this year were off White Head, the 1st of 2nd of June.

Has followed mackerel in the fall no farther than Block Island. None of our vessels go any further than that. Does not know why they give up the fishing at Block Island then, except that it is getting late and the weather bad, and do not find but few fish.

Give up mackerel fishing on this shore about

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the 15th of November. Have caught them up to about Thanksgiving, and at Provincetown Harbor nearly as late as Christmas.

Mackerel take the same course when leaving the coast that they do when coming on the coast.

The only difference he can notice in the habits of mackerel since he has been fishing is that they do not take the hook as they used to. Occasionally try them with

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the hook.

When we used to go to the Bay, left here in June. Has been in the Bay, in 1865, on the 11th of June, and caught a barrel of mackerel himself off North Cape, P.E.I., but then the fleet used to go in the Bay early, and would get to heaving lots of bait. Probably the heaving of so much bait has a tendency to stop the fish. Now there is so little bait that they do not pay

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any attention to it; at least they do not bite as they used to.

Does not think the Bay mackerel spawn as early as they do on this shore. Thinks they keep going until they get ready to spawn, and wherever they are at that time, there they stop and spawn. None of the fish they catch on their early spring voyage have spawned. Some of them are as fat as any we catch during the year. They are barren fish. Only get very few of such fish. Thinks

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they spawn in the Bay about the last of June.

Generally get to the Cape Shore about the 1st of June. The best fishing on the Cape Shore is from the 1st to the 10th of June. They follow the fish as far as Cape North and there they lose them.

Pretty hard to tell about the habits of mackerel. Was master of a vessel in the Bay hooking 22 years ago, and has seen it right through his life that you would have bait for

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mackerel and perhaps catch half a dozen just as fast as you could haul a line, and then they would be gone all at once.

We call their feed cayenne, all-eyes and sand fleas. See more live feed now than we did 10 years ago.

In the old times when he went hand line fishing did not see the fish schooling so much as they do now. Has been in the Bay and caught a number of trips of mackerel, and never saw a school

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during the whole season. Never saw but one school at the Magdalen's come to the surface for heaving bait.

Do not notice any difference in the size of the fish now from what they were 10 years ago. There are large and small ones. Some years more large fish than small ones; other years vice versa.

Never remembers fish being so scarce on this shore as they were this year; and they are all large fish,

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Never knew them to run so large. All he caught on the Cape Shore this year were 1s and 2s. Got 46 barrels in the Bay this year, and they were all large fish – nearly all 1s.

Those fish we get in the Bay are hardly as fat as those we get on this shore. Sometimes get what we call white bellied fish. In the Bay get dark bellied fish. Get both kinds at the south, both dark and light. Get better fish

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on the north side of Magdalen's than on the south side. Does not know the reason. No difference in the marking between the dark fish and the light ones.

About the spawning time thinks the fish are more lopy and sluggish. No trouble to catch them then. They seem to disappear about the time they spawn. They stay down about 10 to 15 days to spawn. Sometimes will catch fish with half the

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spawn out of them. Do not extrude the whole of their spawn at one time. When they get through spawning and come up you will find them in small bunches; perhaps a barrel in a school. Keep increasing until they get to be a big school. When they all get through spawning they get in a big body.

Did not used to begin fishing as early as we do now. Never used to go south until along in May, and never went

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so far south as we do now. Along about the 1st or 15th of May were off New York.

Did not do any fishing on the Cape Shore in those days; not until 12 or 15 years ago. The heaviest fleets would leave for the Bay about the 4th of July. A few vessels would go in the Bay instead of going south.

For the last 3 or 4 years mackerel have been scarce everywhere; that is,

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nobody could find them. Mackerel were as plenty 10 or 12 years ago on this shore as they were in the remembrance of anybody. Cannot account for the decrease in their abundance, unless it is that they have taken some other course.

Does not think too many fish have been caught. Thinks there are more caught now before the spawning season than there used to be in old times. The fish that were caught

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in the Bay in hooking days had all spawned, except the ones we caught in June. Always a dull time in the Bay about the 16th to 20th of July, on account of the spawning. The hooking lasted in the Bay in those days until about the 10th of November, and sometimes later.

Never went seining with the purse seine until about 1864, and since then the fish have been as plenty along this shore as they were before, so does not think it hurts them any. Thinks 1 trap or

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pound is worse than 25 seines. Of course the seines break up the schools. Frequently catch every fish in a school with the seines. The traps and pounds along the shore are worse than anything else. If they are going to do away with anything, he would do away with the traps before he would the purse seines. The traps catch the young fish as well as the big ones.

Never but one or two years that they caught fish at the south

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and had to throw them away. One year vessels caught small mackerel at the south (He went in the Ellen M. Adams) and took them into New York, and there were other vessels there from the north with large ones, and we had to heave about all our fish overboard. That was about 9 or 10 years ago. Sold \$2.50 and threw the rest overboard. In those days could not sell small fish, but now can sell any kind.

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Does not think the close season amounted to anything. Fish were no more plenty south this year than the last year we were there, if anything not so plenty. The object was, that it would be a

good law to stop the vessels from going south, and they would not have to fit up any vessels for that voyage. It was not a paying voyage. That was the principal reason for passing the close law.

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This law was first started in Portland, ME. Does not think it affected the fish at all. This spring we landed about 240 or 250 barrels at the south, that is not salted. One time we had about 22,000; another time 5,000 fish. Sold them all the way from 10 to 20 cents a piece.

Would not be in favor of regulating the purse seine fishery in any way that he knows of. Thinks the only way to

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regulate the seine fishery is for every man to destroy his seines. Does not think it has been any advantage to anybody, all things considered. Some of those men who did well hooking, when they went to seining, lost every dollar they had. Some gained and others lost by the purse seine. He has done very well with it. It is a nice way to catch fish. They are saved in just as good order as with the hook and

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line fishing. Very seldom have any bad fish. It is like this – you go out and set your seine and get 100 barrels of mackerel in one school. You have 16 or 17 men, and in 3 or 4 hours the men have these fish all dressed. In hooking you may lay 3 or 4 hours catching them. Can take care of fish much quicker now than formerly.

The poorest fish that come into these markets are

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caught in boats around Prince Edward Island and Magdalen Islands.

If the purse seine was given up, might possibly educate the mackerel to take the hook as they used to do; but would have to educate the fishermen also. If they would go into the Bay and heave as much bait as they used to do, 300 and 400 barrels, it would attract the attention of the fish, and they might bite like

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they used to do. These men who have always done well seining would not sanction anything to stop it.

Fish school just according to the feed. If it is on the top of the water, the fish will be on top of the water. If on the bottom, the fish will be on the bottom.