

Name of person interviewed: Randall Hillier [RH]

Facts about this person:

Age 79

Sex Male

Occupation Retired fisherman (scallop)

If a fisherman,

Home port, New Bedford/Fairhaven, MA

and Hail Port New Bedford/Fairhaven, MA

Residence (Town where lives) Fairhaven, MA

Ethnic background (if known) Newfoundlander

Interviewer: Millie Rahn [MR] and Kirsten Bendikson [KB]

Transcriber: Azure Dee Westwood [ADW]

Place interview took place: Working Waterfront Festival

Date and time of interview: Nov. 28, 2006

INDEX/KEYWORDS**KEYWORDS**

Newfoundland; retired fisherman; farm in Newfoundland; St. John's; retiree's club; meet for coffee every day; changes in technology; changes in boats; cribbage; scalloping; shrimping in Florida in winter; torpedo; salt cod in Newfoundland; moose stories; regulations; future of fishing.

INDEX

- [00:00] Introductions and basic demographic info; RH fishing history.
- [03:30] Brother teaching fishing; association with KB father; no big close calls; first in his class (class of two people).
- [06:23] Friend who died; Louis Deucette interview; differences between now and then fishing; born into fishing.
- [09:19] Learned from his father; net mending as an art; Marine Institute in Newfoundland; Florida in the winters; ethnically diverse crew.
- [12:45] Used to have fun fishing; playing cribbage; weekly trips; some superstitions.
- [15:21] One crew played accordion while in new ports; RH missed fishing; changes with watch schedules after Union ended.
- [18:18] Electronics technology on boats; back-up techniques if electronics fail; pulled up an inactive torpedo on Hudson Canyon.
- [21:35] Has daughters who are not in fishing; scalloping has better future than groundfishing; throwing large volumes as cod overboard due to regulations.
- [24:23] Fish farming as wave of the future; discussion of RH paintings around the room.
- [27:25] Retired fishermen meet everyday at McDonald's; RH loves to eat fish; grew up with seven other siblings on farm in Newfoundland; raised own food; salted own codfish; salt cod exported too.
- [30:26] Came to New Bedford to meet other family that was there in 1950 after Confederation in Newfoundland; uncle owned boat; discussion of St. John's.
- [33:39] More discussion of St. John's and moose incidents there; common friends.
- [36:32] Discussion of people to interview and common names; RH nephew is tug boating now; don't know people at the docks anymore; RH attends the Festival.
- [38:35] [End of interview]
- [39:14] [End of recording]

TRANSCRIPT

[Start of Audio]

[00:00]

[RH]: ...They died, what they didn't catch. That might have had an effect. Then the Japanese came over there and they started catching squid; that's another boat fish. And they caught these by the millions of pounds, with their automatic jiggers. They caught the capelin, another bait fish. And all they saved was the female, that had the spawn, and threw the rest of them over. So between, you know, that and fishing, a lot of fishing, something has to break somewhere. Well, we had it out here – we had a thousand fishing boats out off our coast, the Russians were here, Romanians, Polish, everybody else.

[JF]: Yeah, I used to see the Russian fleet come in to St. John's.

[RH]: You better believe it. Factory ships.

[JF]: Ok, great. Today is Tuesday, November 28, 2006. My name is Millie Rahn and I am here with Kirsten Bendikson [KB] and we are doing an Oral History interview with Mr. Hillier. Could you tell me your full name please and a little bit about where and when you were born, how you got into fishing, and how you ended up in New Bedford and Fairhaven.

[RH]: Yeah, my name is Randall Hillier, (street address), Fairhaven. I came from Lamaline [?], Newfoundland. Born 1927 in Lamaline. I grew up in a fishing family; my father had a 36 foot boat and used a cod trap to catch fish. I left home 18 years old and went to St. John's and worked in St. John's for a couple of years and then I went to Ontario, Canada. I stayed in Ontario for a year. I had a brother and a sister in Fairhaven. I came to visit them and decided that I would come here to stay. I came here in 1950. I worked the shore for a year; we weren't allowed to go fishing at that time without a permit. And at the end of the year I went fishing, in 1951. I went scalloping for three years. I went dragging for one year and in 1956, myself and my brother bought a boat, a small dragger, the *Barbara M*. We had that, *Barbara M* for about four years, and we decided to buy another boat so we bought the *Invader*, in 1959.

[03:30]

[RH]: We used that boat up into the '60's and then my brother, he came to shore and was teaching kids to mend twine, to make nets. Eventually, he went to the University of Rhode Island where he was an instructor for ten years in fishing. Meanwhile I went on other boats, different boats; the *Pauline H*, the *Pioneer*, the *Tempest*, several other boats. I ended up, in 1988, I retired.

[KB]: So you were with my dad, that's right, you said you were with my dad, on the *Pioneer*?

[RH]: Yeah. Who was that?

[KB]: Arna Edvitson [?]

[RH]: Oh yes! I didn't know; how do you like that?!

[KB]: Small world?

[RH]: Yeah, yeah. I didn't know that. Dick died this year or the year before.

[KB]: I heard that, yeah.

[MR]: So, did you have any close calls while you were out?

[RH]: Well, every fisherman has close calls but nothing spectacular. I was never shipwrecked; we got towed in a few times, but that only goes with the territory. I was out in a hurricane

on the *Nancy Jane* and we lost the mast, but we got in OK, we got towed in. I can't say I was in any big danger.

[MR]: I heard that when you were in school, you were the head of your class when you graduated. Can you tell us about that?

[RH]: Yeah, that's a big joke with the grandchildren. I've used that all my life [laughs]; I was head of my class, being only two [laughs].

[MR]: Was this is Lamaline?

[RH]: Yeah. And the other guy, my friend, he always said he was second in class, so he was pretty high up there too.

[MR]: Sounds like a fish tale to me.

[06:23]

[RH]: Oh, by the way I have another friend that died, he was in the paper today, Wally Jaggard [?], he was cook with me on the *Pauline H.*

[KB]: Oh, Wally Jaggard [?] died, huh?

[RH]: I didn't know where he was; he lived down here in Fairhaven on 4th Street, and I've been trying to find him and I couldn't find where he was. And today I looked in the paper and he's dead. So I'll be going to the funeral tomorrow. I had two friends die last week. Phil Smith and Louis Doucette [?].

[MR]: Louis Doucette[?] was the first person that I interviewed for this project in the first year, two years ago.

[RH]: He was great, because he had a hell of a memory. I forgot guys I was with ten years ago but he remembered 50 years ago. And he could name then and name the boats. He was something else. And Woody, Woody Bowers.

[MR]: We interviewed him; he's a great raconteur. He's been at the Festival as well.

[RH]: We have a club, you know a retirees club, so we had the last meeting there was only about 30 people there. So we're dying off pretty fast.

[MR]: What are some of your perspectives on the differences between your day when you were out fishing and what you hear going on now. What were some of the... what's better, what's worse?

[RH]: Well the 40 years that I fished, when I came here, there were smaller boats. And they were all wooden boats; there were no steel boats in New Bedford when I came; they were wooden boats. And most of them, well there were some 11 man boats but then they cut down the crews to 6 men, 5 men, 4 men, and now I understand they are 7 man boats, no matter what size the boats. It's certainly changed, but the boats are bigger and more power.

[MR]: What do you think makes a good fisherman?

[RH]: Well, I don't know. It helps if you were born into it, you know what I mean. Because when we were growing up, we spent more time in boats than we did in cars or trucks or anything else. That's how we got by; if you were going any place, you went by boat. So you were more or less born to it.

[09:19]

[MR]: Did you learn a lot from your father?

[RH]: Yes, you learn how to handle fish and you could tie knots or mend twine. You did learn as you went along. My brother was a real expert on nets; he taught in schools and he died.

[KB]: That's an art.

[RH]: Oh, that's quite an art. And I was in Newfoundland one time and someone invited me – they have a school there for fishermen, I don't know what it is now, but then it was top notch. They have a huge tank where they test nets and doors...

[KB]: They do. We've had a net go up there.

[MR]: Yeah, the Marine Institute.

[RH]: Yeah, they are really experts at it. And they had a woman there from Scotland who was teaching how to mend the twine. They fastest human being ever I saw in my life. I don't think anyone could fill the needles for her, she was so fast. She was born to it. My brother used to visit up there a lot, testing out different nets. Well, it was a good life, we made good money and if you liked it, you got by fine.

[MR]: How far out did you ever go, what was the furthest out?

[RH]: The furthest out, well I've been, to Georges Bank; I never went beyond Georges Bank. Before I was married, I used to go to Florida and go fishing down in Florida in the winter time, went shrimping out of Florida. I was down there three years shrimping and I was down there two years yachting, on a yacht down there for a couple years. So I used to break it up a bit, a little different. We didn't make the money you made here but you got away from the bad weather.

[MR]: Who were the people on your crew, were they mostly Newfoundlanders out of New Bedford?

[RH]: Well, not really, They were split between the Norwegians, Newfoundlanders and lately, later on it was Portuguese. When I first started fishing it was mostly, scalloping was mostly state of Mainers and Norwegians and a few Newfoundlanders. But then they stopped coming here from Norway and Newfoundland because there is plenty of work at home, so they didn't come. And then more Portuguese, there's mostly Portuguese now I think.

[12:45]

[KB]: You used to have a lot of fun out there?

[RH]: Yeah, we used to have a lot of fun? [lots of laughing]

[MR]: There's a story there, I can tell.

[RH]: We didn't go to sin city. Some guy in Boston Globe called it Sin City.

[MR]: Did you do pranks and things like that?

[RH]: Oh yeah. Somebody would put a raw egg in your boot and you're getting up in a hurry.

[KB]: You had to have fun out there...

[MR]: You'd go nuts.

[RH]: Bad weather, we played cards, we played a lot of cribbage; cribbage was the game.

[MR]: How long were your trips out then, do you remember?

[RH]: Well, usually, mostly weekly trips. You couldn't keep the fish too long and the capacity of the boat, the fuel; after a week your fuel was getting shot. I was usually about a week.

[MR]: Did you have any superstitions?

[RH]: Well I've heard a lot about guys seeing sea monsters, but they were tired.

[KB]: No mermaids.

[RH]: But I've heard all these stories. I think that was too much whiskey! [laughs].

[KB]: Louis Doucette, Al was saying that Louis said you couldn't say pig or...

[RH]: Oh no, black bag, you couldn't come aboard with a black bag. I know one incident where somebody cut a picture out of a magazine, a picture of a pig, and stuck it up on the

foremast and I guess the skipper almost went crazy. Turn the hatch bottom up and you'd be fired.

[15:21]

[MR]: What about doing out on Friday or seeing a priest on the way to the boat.

[RH]: No, I've never encountered that, no. I can't say. I remember one time we persuaded the skipper not to go out because it was St. Patrick's Day. I well remember that.

[MR]: Did anybody play music or sing or do recitations?

[RH]: Not really. Although I have... we had a cook that used to play the accordion, used to take accordion lessons, but he used to do that to, if you went into another port – like you went into Newport or Nantucket, he'd go into the bar and do it in the bar.

[MR]: So, do you miss it?

[RH]: Yeah, I missed it at first especially. But I was sick of it, when the new regulations came in. You had to be lawyer really to go fishing; you could fish here but you couldn't fish there, and you had to report... ah come on; enough was enough.

[MR]: So some of the changes that you've seen. You were talking about the changes between the boats?

[RH]: One of the biggest changes... now I have friends that are still fishing. We had a pretty strong Union for years. And we were strictly... we adhered to a decent watch. First when I went fishing you had a 6 and 6 watch; you had 6 on and 6 off. But gradually as the crew... got less of a crew on the boat, you couldn't very well do that, so you had to go 8 and 4. Now I understand they have no watch at all; you just work until you drop. I was talking to a guy the other day, 60 years old, he made the trip and he told me he couldn't do it... you wouldn't expect him to, he's 60 years old and there's a guy 25 years old next to him. That was it, he couldn't do it anymore. But of course they make an awful lot more money. Guys are making \$5-6,000 a trip now, more than that in some cases.

[MR]: In your day, the technology on the boats was different too, I'd imagine.

[18:18]

[RH]: Yeah, well you see, when I started the Loran's had just come in. You could tell where you were. But as it went along, it went better; the Loran C came along and that was a little... another step forward and you could be more accurate. And now of course they have the VB[M]S and that's exceptional; they know where they are every minute now with the new gadgets.

[MR]: Now if those fail, do they know where... if the gadgets fail, as they sometimes do, is there still the knowledge of knowing where you are?

[RH]: Well, you're more or less going by guess work there, if you have nothing. You could always sound. Say you're sounding machine went, you could throw a lead and find the depth of water you had. That's one way you could navigate. If you come west, you're going to hit shallower water and you can manage to get yourself home. I've come home several times – your generator goes, your battery goes – but you manage. Sometimes you have to follow somebody else, but you can still manage to get home.

[MR]: What's the strangest thing you've ever pulled up?

[RH]: In a net? I've pulled up a torpedo one time. But as it happened, it wasn't active; it was a practice torpedo.

[MR]: Where was that?

[RH]: That was out Hudson Canyon.

[MR]: And where is that?

[RH]: It's down southwest of Block Island. We were out there fluking and we hauled up – it was on the *Tempest* – and we hauled up this object and we realized it was a torpedo and everyone was scared. But because of the markings on it, we knew it was a practice torpedo. It wasn't supposed to be in the area we picked it up; it got astray somehow. They couldn't understand how it came to be in that... unless somebody else picked it up before and dumped it over. There's an area out there – they call it a torpedo run, for practice – and all the ones they lost would be in that area. But if somebody picked that up and then moved and dumped it again.... But it wasn't dangerous so we didn't worry about it.

[21:35]

[MR]: Did any of your children go fishing?

[RH]: No, I didn't have any sons.

[MR]: Where do you think the industry is going, where is it heading? Do you have any sense?

[RH]: I think that's a worldwide problem, Canada, Newfoundland; everywhere. It doesn't seem like the regulations are helping. That's what's puzzling everybody. Of course, with the scallops in New Bedford, they really did prove that closing areas helps. Because there's more scallops that came into New Bedford the last few years, and bigger price too, but as regards to groundfish, it doesn't look like the regulations are helping. Nobody knows the answer I guess to that one.

[KB]: I think the regulations are helping, but the authority doesn't want to accept that.

[RH]: Yeah, well that's it. You don't know. You don't know... if you're not getting the right facts from the surveyors who are doing this, then you don't know what's going on.

[MR]: What do you think? Do you think there are fish out there?

[RH]: According to the fishermen I've talked to... I talked to a guy last week that threw away 10,000 of codfish, that they couldn't keep.

[KB]: I knew one that threw away 25,000 over.

[RH]: One set he caught it. He already had his limit, what he was supposed to have. He made a set, looking for other fish and... it makes you almost believe that they are lying about the resource that is there.

[KB]: There's more out there than they are saying.

[MR]: Well that's what the fishermen say. Would you give any advice to anybody going out fishing today?

[RH]: Well, I'd be fishing myself if I was younger, to tell you the truth. I don't think there's a big – because of the regulations – I don't think there is a big future for the fishery, except for the scallops.

[KB]: Well, that could turn around too.

[24:23]

[RH]: Yeah, easily, very easily. I think the future of fishing is going to be in farming.

[KB]: I hope not.

[RH]: That's the way it looks.

[KB]: Well maybe that's what they want. The environmentalists think if you raise it and eat it, it's better than taking it from the wild, I guess – I don't know. It's not.

[RH]: They had a lot of problems at first when they started with salmon. They were dying; they were catching all kinds of diseases. But now, in the last few years, they seemed to have conquered that; I don't know if it was the food or what. Fish farming now is a prosperous business, it's all over. They even have it in Newfoundland now.

[KB]: I know in Norway too.

[RH]: Well Norway was one where it started, Norway and Scotland. Now it's South America; Peru it's a big deal down there.

[KB]: But they have a lot of problems with disease.

[RH]: I don't know; that's for the scientists to decide that I think.

[MR]: I'm noticing your paintings around your living room with all the maritime themes; they are lovely.

[KB]: That's Newfoundland, huh?

[RH]: No, not really, that could be anywhere, dear. My wife picked that up one time. I think that's probably, might be down on the Cape years ago.

[MR]: Its four guys in a boat hauling nets.

[RH]: The way we fished, that would pertain to that too. We had tow boats and the net was between us when you were hauling it back. So that could be a cod trap. The other boat would be out here, you see. And then when you brought it up, you had to fish in between the two boats, you scooped them aboard.

[KB]: Is that the pair trawling?

[RH]: Well, yeah, but the trap is permanent on the bottom. When you go out and you pull it up and you use both boats to pull it up. Or it could be a gillnet.

[KB]: It's a nice picture. Well, that one's a famous one, with the father. Benny had that one in his house, Benny Bendiksen. He had that picture.

[MR]: A father and a daughter in a dory.

[KB]: Isn't that sweet, that's nice. So you do miss it?

[27:25]

[RH]: Ah yeah. But we get together everyday, by the way I soon have to go. We go for coffee every day, a bunch of us.

[KB]: Oh good for you!

[MR]: Where do you go?

[RH]: We go to McDonald's, everyday at 3 o'clock. And then once in a while somebody comes in strange and sits with us. They are not all fishermen but most of them are.

[MR]: Well, we have to go over there one day.

[RH]: Yeah, why not. You know, talk to Les, Les Trott, he's one of the guys.

[KB]: He's going to go in for surgery now though right?

[RH]: He's going the 4th of December.

[KB]: He said to interview him after. That would be good. That's cool. So you'll see him today?

[RH]: Oh yes, everyday; we never miss.

[MR]: Do you eat fish?

[RH]: Oh I love fish. I had fish yesterday.

[MR]: I ask that of everybody. Most fishermen love it, but a few say, "Nope, I caught it, but I don't eat it."

[RH]: Well I love fish.

[RH]: Well, you grew up with it too, right?

[RH]: Well, that's it. But when we were growing up, we hated fish. I remember saying, "Not fish again!" But we were very lucky in a lot of ways. My father always listed himself as a fisherman/farmer. We had 3-4 cows, we had a couple dozen hens, we had a hog, we had a horse, we had an ox. We grew all our own potatoes, turnips, cabbage, carrots. So we didn't have much to buy.

[MR]: That's unusual.

[RH]: Of course we worked like hell. There were eight of us in family. Eight kids. We were never hungry; I can't say we were hungry.

[MR]: How did you have fish when you were growing up? How was it preserved when you were growing up?

[RH]: Actually what we did, we caught codfish, we salted it, it was under salt for a couple of months, we washed it out and dried it, you had to dry it in the sun. So the actual end product was dried codfish. That went all over; it went to Europe, it went to the West Indies, it was sold all over. They would leave Newfoundland with the boats and they would go over to Spain, Italy, Portugal, England.

[30:26]

[RH]: And then they would bring back – especially from Portugal and Spain, they'd bring back fruit and products from the other country. That was great, we loved that. The first banana I ever saw in my life I got aboard a boat. We didn't have that. Of course that all changed after the War, after the second World War. They live the same down there as we do here, more so. Nobody grows anything anymore, that's all out.

[MR]: You came down here, just after Confederation then?

[RH]: Right. I came here in '50 and Federation was '49.

[MR]: So you said you had family down here, were there a lot of other Newfoundlanders when you came down?

[RH]: Oh yes. A lot of Newfoundlanders in New Bedford when I came down here. Most of the fishermen, the draggers were mostly Newfoundlanders. I had an uncle here. He was the beginning of it, he came here in 1910.

[KB]: He fished?

[RH]: Yep.

[KB]: So 1910. What boat was he on?

[RH]: He owned the *Hope*, Nantucket. He came here and beam trawled in Boston you see and he worked a few years in Boston, it was a small boat but he made a good living on it. Then my sister came here and her husband, and he went on my uncles boat. That's how... and after the War, my brother came here, he was in the British Navy during the war, he visited here during the war and then when I went to Ontario Canada, I came over to visit and I saw the fishing and I said "I'm coming here" and I came right away.

[MR]: I had a friend in St. John's who said his father – how did it go – the batteries they had up around Signal Hill, he said his father in St. John's spent the war fighting the Canadians and the Americans.

[RH]: I don't doubt that. St. John's was a pretty rough place during the War. They had all these ships in there and fights. But I like St. John's; I lived in St. John's for a year.

[33:39]

[MR]: Oh, it's a great town.

[KB]: I heard St. John's has a big, big Supermarket?

[MR]: Sobies.

[KB]: You can roller skate in it?

[MR]: I think I probably told you that. There was what they called the Big Green one, which is over on Rope Walk Lane and when I lived there they had all their clerks on roller skates but they decided to put in electric doors - which was a big thing for St. John's – and one night, and they stayed open later at night, they were open until 10 or 11. And one night the doors open and a moose walks in and walks over... "Wow, here's supper!"

[RH]: Yeah, stupid moose.

[MR]: Those things happen in St. John's.

[RH]: I had, my friend's son was killed; the damn things get in the highway and they won't move. And he was going fast and he hit it and smashed the car up and killed him.

[MR]: When you drive at night, think moose, they have signs up on the highways.

[RH]: They have signs up, "Beware of Moose."

[MR]: When you drive at night... usually there is not a lot of traffic so you don't have to worry about traffic and you're supposed to be looking back and forth and there are signs everywhere on the highway.

[RH]: They issue so many hunting licenses every year, and according to the population – I guess they keep account of it – and the more moose the more licenses, that way they keep it controlled to a certain point.

[KB]: Do they come out during the day or is it mostly at night?

[RH]: No, mostly at night. But see they like to travel on the road, it's easier for them to go on the road.

[MR]: Especially when it's snowy. But for a lot of people, it's like hunting here; that's the food for the winter, now freeze it and there's your food for the winter. Well is there anything that we haven't asked you – I know there's lots of things that we haven't asked you – but is there anything you'd like to add?

[RH]: No, I think we've pretty much covered it. It's interesting.

[KB]: Things have changed, that's for sure.

[MR]: You seem like you've had a good life with it, and good memories, good buddies.

[KB]: Did you fish with Bill Feidler?

[RH]: Yeah, I was with him on the *Nancy Jane*.

[KB]: He had the *Tempest* didn't he? No, what did he have, the *Moonlight*?

[RH]: He had the *Moonlight*, he owned the *Moonlight*, yeah.

[KB]: My dad was on the *Moonlight* too, yeah.

[36:32]

[RH]: He only died a couple of years ago.

[KB]: So who are some of these old timers left who we can also interview?

[RH]: Well I don't know, to tell you the truth.

[KB]: I think I probably have all the names.

[RH]: Yeah, you probably do. Reidar would know more really than I would know, fishermen. I go down to the dock now and I don't see anybody I know, you know what I mean. I met Sherman the other day, he was telling me about how he had to throw the 10,000 pounds of codfish overboard, and Mike McDonald, he's the other guy I know around the waterfront.

[KB]: Now Sherman, is that Allan Sherman?

[RH]: Allan, yeah. Yeah, he's on the *Buzzard's Bay*. He's a good fisherman. I have a nephew that used to be with him, but he hurt his back so now he's tug boating. But he misses it; he calls once in a while, he was up in the canal the other day. And he called and wanted to know all the news so he came up here. So went over and toured the waterfront. But we couldn't find anybody we knew. Because he's been tug boating now for ten years and everybody is retired or changed their jobs.

[KB]: You know the last Festival we had a tug boat muster in the Harbor.

[MR]: Do you come to the Festival?

[RH]: Oh yeah, I go to the Festival.

[MR]: Well, if there's nothing to add, I will say thank you very much and turn this off.

[RH]: Glad to do it.

[38:35] [End of interview]

[39:14] [End of recording]