

Name of person interviewed: Malvin Kvilhaug [MK]

Facts about this person:

Age 67 at time of interview

Sex Male

Occupation Fisherman, Boat Owner

If a fisherman (if retired, list the ports used when fishing),

Home port, New Bedford, MA

And Hail Port (port fished from, which can be the same)

New Bedford, MA

Residence (Town where lives) New Bedford, MA

Ethnic background (if known) Norwegian

Interviewer: Janice Fleuriel [JF]

Transcriber: Janice Fleuriel
Erin Heacock

Place interview took place: New Bedford Harbormaster House

Date and time of interview: Sept. 24, 2005

INDEX/KEYWORDS

KEYWORDS:

New Bedford; Massachusetts; Norway; Merchant Marine; Scallop; Dragger; Boat Building; Boat Names; Superstitions; GPS; Technological Changes; Crews; Christening; Attitude

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[Start of Audio]

[00:05] Tape introduction by interviewer

[00:24] Came from Norway; Fishing family in Norway; Lobstering on own by age 10 or 11

[02:10] Enlisted in the Merchant Marines and drafted into the Navy in Norway; Boat to New York with future brother-in-law; Married in Brooklyn; Came to New Bedford right away; First job scalloper *Midnight Sun* for 6 months; Boat later sank with all hands

[5:19] Picked up some English in Norway through school, Merchant Marine, music; Knew more Norwegians here than there when he came; People pendled—fish here summer, home winter, first by boat then by plane; Boat accommodations for trip back and forth pretty good

[8:02] Time scalloping, dragging; Another boat went down with all hands; Bought own scallop boat with partner '68; Bought a scallop boat because dragging was more of a gamble at the time; Old timers thought steel boats would ruin wires during hauling; Discusses maintenance differences between steel and wooden boats

[11:43] Discusses the process of boat building; Trips to Florida where later boats built; Boat names; Sailed boats back up and held christening parties up here on dock; Tells stories of superstitions held by fishermen

[16:35] Been in quite a few storms, doesn't dwell on it; Biggest technology changes in electronics, Loran to GPS; Various roles held on boats

[19:00] Ways to know good fishing spots; Hasn't been out on trip two years; Spends time overseeing boat maintenance, bills; Uses Solveig's Settlement House in Fairhaven

[21:57] 3 boats, 2 skippers/crews allows rotating them because of boat days at sea; Regulations seem to be working but has doubts, may just be cycles of nature

[25:35] Lean years after buying boat hard, and house was collateral; Festival visitors should know that fishermen hard-working and know their business, what they know you learn by experience not in school; Concluding remarks

[26:56]

[End of Audio/End of Interview]

TRANSCRIPT

[Start of Audio]

[00:50]

JF: Can I just have you say your name, and I'll test the level while you talk.

MK: Malvin Kvilhaug.

JF: Ok. And this is Janie Fleuriel, and today is September 24, 2005, at the Working Waterfront Festival in the Harbor Master's House.

[00:23]

JF: If you could just start by telling me where and when you were born?

MK: I was born in Norway, October 21st, 1938. Maybe 1838, I'm not sure...

JF: Well I'll go by 19 judging by how you look. So when did you end up coming over here?

MK: Uh, I came to the States in January 1961.

JF: So you were already a young man?

MK: I was 22 years old.

JF: Ok, and did you come by yourself?

MK: Uh yes. I had an uncle here that guaranteed for me. In those days you needed someone to.

JF: Where in Norway were you living, on the coast, or —

MK: Island called Karmoy.

JF: I knew you were going to say that. John was telling me about that. How do you spell Karmoy?

MK: K-A-R-M-O-Y.

JF: K-A-R-M-O-Y. Ok when we transcribe we'll know how to spell that out. Were you involved with fishing there?

MK: Yes. My father was a fisherman. And, his father, probably his father too.

JF: It was just traditional.

MK: My Father had boats. I guess I started fishing lobster 10, 11 years old. By myself!

JF: Wow! Was it very similar to how they did it here?

MK: More in shore, lobstering. Rowboats and dories.

JF: So you rowed—

MK: Row and pulled by hand.

JF: And how many traps would you set out?

MK: Probably 20, 30 traps. It was fun.

[2:10]

JF: So did you know pretty early on that fishing would be your life?

MK: Uh yes. There was not much else to do. You know, this was right after World War Two. Nothing was built up yet. No industry around. Uh, either fishing or Merchant Marine. I had enlisted as a Merchant Marine too for a couple of years, two or three years. As a matter of fact I went into the Merchant Marine 16 years old.

JF: And then you came back and stayed in Norway for —

MK: Yeah, I had come back and then I went into the Navy. Uh I was drafted in the Navy at the age of 18.

- JF: Did you travel with the Navy?
- MK: Uh yeah. Not very much. It was, I was in PT boats and we couldn't go very far. Along the coast, onto Denmark, way up north in Norway.
- JF: So when you came here, did you come right to New Bedford?
- MK: Yes I did. Landed by boat in New York.
- JF: At Ellis Island?
- MK: No, we stopped at Ellis Island, because you had to go through checks and the passport was—and I remember they were dragging a big x-ray; make sure that we didn't have TB because in those days they were afraid. So I remember that. Had to take that way ahead. Quite a process to get immigration papers and all that.
- JF: And you did all that in New York?
- MK: That was done in Norway. So I carried that with me for a month, I think. I don't know if they could read it after that.
- JF: How did you get from New York up here?
- MK: I was engaged at time. And my Mother-in-law came down, drove down to New York to pick me up, because I was together with my brother-in-law. We came on the same boat. So they came up and I got a ride with them.
- JF: And your fiancée was already over here?
- MK: No she was in Norway. She came over here and we got married here in Brooklyn, New York, in the summer of '61.
- JF: So then you came to New Bedford. Did you get a fishing job right away?
- MK: Yes. I got a job right away.
- JF: What kind of boat?
- MK: Uh that was a scallop boat named the *Midnight Sun*. I was on her for about 6 months. Fortunate for me, unfortunate for boat, it sank after that, with all hands.
- JF: With people you know?
- MK: Yes, I knew almost everyone.
- JF: Was it a storm or something?
- MK: It was a storm, yes. Probably a hurricane. It was in the fall of the year.
- JF: By then had you gone to a different boat?
- MK: Yes.
- JF: So how – Do you remember your first trip? Very different from what done in Norway?
- [5:19]
- MK: Not very. You know, you had, it was different fishing gear. But you drag on the bottom like you do. It was not that different.
- JF: Now what about language? Were you speaking English at that point?
- MK: Picked up a little. Of course in Norway, we have English in school starting at—well the last couple years I went to school, in grade school. Then I went into the Merchant Marine. And of course all the music we had in those days was in English. Like Elvis Presley.
- JF: So even life on the island you were able to pick up—
- MK: Oh yeah.
- JF: Interesting. So it wasn't all foreign to you.

- MK: Oh no, no. Actually, when I came to New Bedford, I knew more Norwegians in New Bedford than in my town at the time. They pendled back and forth. They came here fished in summertime and went back in wintertime.
- JF: So they went back to the North Sea in the winter? Wow! You guys are tough.
- MK: Yeah, they didn't fish the North Sea. Ah, I shouldn't say maybe some did.
- JF: Just to get to go back home.
- MK: Yes, the money was good. The dollar was high. You could, in those few summer month months, you could practically make years wages those summer months.
- JF: And would they be going back and forth by boat?
- MK: Uh yes, most went by boat, up until probably mid-60s. After that, was plane. Before, mid- 60s, you couldn't afford to take the plane because it was so expensive. After that, you couldn't afford to take a boat because that was so expensive.
- JF: Interesting! To me, the concept of going somewhere like Europe by boat is so foreign because—
- MK: It was an 8-day trip. Today I pay big money to go on a cruise ship for 8 days [laughs].
- JF: You probably get slightly better accommodations [laughs]?
- MK: Well. For, in those days, the accommodations were pretty good. Plenty of food.
- JF: Now the first boat you were on, was that wooden—?
- MK: It was a wooden boat, yes.
- JF: So it would've been what they called an Eastern rig?
- MK: Yes.
- JF: How did your fishing involvement take off from there?
- [8:02]
- MK: Uh, well I was on a scalloper until probably '65, '66. Then I went dragging. Fishing for fish. Uh, I did that up until '68 when I bought my own boat. Dragging I was mostly on a dragger called *Navigator*.
- JF: Oh somebody else just mentioned that boat earlier.
- MK: Sad to say that boat went down with all hands, too. But that was a few years later. But in 1968 I bought my own scalloper. Course scalloping in '68 was probably down to lowest level it has ever had been.
- JF: So what made you decide scalloper vs. dragger?
- MK: Well, from what I saw, the 8 years I'd been here, scalloping has been the steadiest. Dragger was more a gamble. But, with that boat, I could do dragging and scalloping. So we did have dragging gear. We did a little dragging too, especially wintertime.
- JF: Did you have to set up the boat – Was it just a matter of a different net?
- MK: Well different—You have to retool a little bit.
- JF: But at that point what was your boat—eastern rig or western rig?
- MK: Western rig. It was an old Boston Bean trawler, if you're familiar with it. Just out of Boston. Steel vessel. Everybody was kind of leery if you could

fish scallops with steel vessel those days because I think I was the only one who had a steel boat.

JF: So you were the pioneer?

MK: Well I shouldn't call it pioneer. There were probably others. I heard mention the old timers in those days, 'Oh I'm sure that's gonna work.'

JF: What did they figure wouldn't work? Did they have anything specific?

MK: Well, for one thing, you have steel wires that is going on both sides. So every 35 minutes in those days we haul them back, and these are rubbing up against the hull. But it was things we overcame. Today you wouldn't see wooden scallopers, they're all steel.

JF: The steel – is it that the hulls are a lot easier to maintain? They don't have to be painted, do they?

MK: Steel? Oh yes, more so than wooden. But they're more durable. I don't know if anyone builds wooden boats today that size. It would probably be double the money, and half as good.

JF: Is that the boat you have today, or do you have a different boat?

MK: No. I sold the Michigan in '83. I built – I had the Concordia, which is also the same type of boat as the Michigan. But I bought the hull and refitted that with a new engine and pilot house. And I still have that. Plus I had 3 boats built in Florida, steel boats. One in Panama City, one in Jacksonville, and the other one was a little further down coast in [inaudible – location in Florida].

[11:43]

JF: Now I've heard a lot about Bayou LaBatrie, Alabama. But Florida's another place?

MK: Yes. I hear they use that a lot now. They were mostly shrimp boats down there. I don't know what happened, but I understand there's a lot of people building boats down there.

JF: Yeah, just whatever, it shifted. Now would you actually go to boatyard to talk about it?

MK: Oh yes. We, well of course, we had to discuss prices, constructions, blueprints you have to go by. I usually went down probably, during the time you built the boat, five times. With a surveyor, that would look and see they'd go by blueprint.

JF: So you'd hire somebody. How would the boat get up here?

MK: I took it. That was easy enough. You'd just go off shore, set a course. Almost north.

JF: True. And you're used to covering lots of ground, right?

MK: When you go scalloping, we almost down Florida. You fish all the way down to Cape Hatteras practically.

JF: Do they still do that now?

MK: Yes if there's scallops. But it hasn't paid to go all the way down now. But there's still boats fishing off Virginia and Carolina.

JF: So you have how many boats now?

MK: I have three boats.

JF: And what are their names?

- MK: *Concordia, Contender, and Sandra Jane.*
- JF: *Sandra Jane, who's that?*
- MK: My daughter and my partner's daughter.
- JF: Oh that's nice! It's fun to hear how people name boats. It's always neat! And I was asking someone else, I forget who it was now, who had a boat built up in Maine a while ago, but did you christen your boat? Did you have a little ceremony?
- MK: We christen after we came up here, had a party at the dock. Cakes and coffee. Good cheers.
- JF: Did you break the bottle?
- MK: My daughter broke the bottle.
- JF: The person I talked to about this too told me it's always a woman that broke the bottle.
- MK: Yeah.
- JF: Do you happen remember when people have sort of a connection, and old time fishermen too, they would always talk about the beliefs people have about good luck and bad luck. I know the hatch cover never be upside down is one. Are there others you know of?
- MK: Don't come on boat with a suitcase. Or an umbrella. No good.
- JF: Do you know why?
- MK: I dunno, Maybe sometime somebody at one time came on a boat, and the boat...it was bad luck. Who knows!
- JF: Or does it attract rain, and maybe you don't want that. Who knows!
- MK: Of course, can't talk about pork. Pork is—if you gonna have pork dinner, if someone dare, they call it a [inaudible – slang terminology?].
- JF: So they would bring it on and eat, but wouldn't mention the name?
- MK: Uh well, this goes way back. I don't think anyone cares now. Pork chops are standard!
- JF: And they don't mind talking about it?
- MK: Nah, and hatches, I don't think anybody today would care where the hatch is, or where the hatch was.
- JF: What about whistling? Had you heard about not whistling?
- MK: If you whistled, you gonna see rain. But who knows!
- JF: You were never too big into that?
- MK: No, never. And of course, if leave harbor, if you turn around have to go with the sun. That was a big deal. Don't run against the sun. If you're gonna turn the boat around, turn to your right, don't go other way.
- JF: That's fascinating! I can see why before all technology, that people would do whatever helped make them feel safe or comfortable.
- MK: I bet. You know, safer boats too. I would say today, I don't know what could do to make boats any safer then are.
- JF: The ocean is still the ocean, right?
- MK: Of course. Unless you teach us how to walk on water.
- JF: Not in this life I guess. Were you ever caught in any scary storms?
- [16:35]

- MK: Oh yeah. Yes. Oh, quite a few times. Do I remember? No. I don't dwell on it. I probably remember a few of them. But I don't dwell on it.
- JF: So what about all the changes because you've been doing this quite a while so you've sort of experienced all the technology changes.
- MK: The biggest changes is probably electronics. Because when we started, well up to mid '60s, we had these old surface Lorans used during World War Two. There were some dead areas, and there were usually some areas that weren't if not satisfactory, at least you had general idea of where you were. You probably depending more on sounding machine than on the Loran. There was the Loran A, then Loran C, it was a little bit better, digital, could read them out. Then of course GPS came along. I would say it is better but Loran C was pretty good, pretty accurate.
- JF: So over course of your time of fishing, did you hold pretty much every position on boats at some point?
- MK: Uh, no.
- JF: Oh, OK. Which ones did you hold?
- MK: When I bought my scalloper, I bought it together with another person, my partner, I was mate on a dragger. Never been skipper on a scalloper. So I went from mate to owner to skipper. On the scalloper, I've never been skipper or mate on a skipper. Engineer? No I've never been engineer. Cook? I can't boil water.
- JF: So you leave that to someone else. So the scalloper that you bought, was the first time you've ever been skipper, was when you had bought your own boat?
- [19:00]
- MK: Yes.
- JF: So what tricks, I'll call it, would you use to find good place to put down for scallops?
- MK: It's trial and error. Or talk to people. Of course, you hear where good fishing is after it's caught, after they've caught the fish [laughs].
- JF: I think it's fascinating because it clear that there's camaraderie but at the same time you've got to protect catch.
- MK: Sure. It's a very competitive business, very competitive, but if anyone needs help, everybody helps everybody. There's no...But you were talking about how we know where fish is. They do come—Scallops it's in beds. They come back year after year in the same general area.
- JF: At the same time of year?
- MK: Bottom dwellers, I think they sit there. But times of year where may dig selves down. There's times you don't catch certain places, come back in spring and you catch again. I don't think they move, but that's just my theory they dig themselves down, maybe we won't catch them, sweep right over them.
- JF: Hibernate or whatever. So what do you do now? You said you're on the boat every day. Do you still go out on trips?
- MK: I haven't been out in a couple of years. But I still own the boat. If a boat is floating in water, you see if water in bilge, if the is line secure. And plus

there's repair, you have to oversee repairs. When the boat is in the water, I have an engineer, mechanics coming down to look at engine. There's always something. Paying bills. That's a big one.

JF: And you must—Do you go through a settlement house.

MK: Yes. We have a settlement house in Fairhaven. Solveig's.

JF: I saw their name on a sign somewhere. Let's see I had one more question to ask you along those lines. Is there a certain person who always skippers boat for you?

MK: Now yes. My Son has one boat. Brother-in-law I mentioned earlier I'm partner with him in one.

[21:57]

MK: Now with restrictions we have, you're only allowed to go out so many days a year. It works out great to have 3 boats, 2 skippers. So they rotate. So we can have three crews and two boats. It's worked out great so far.

JF: Do you mind knowing your boat's out there and you're not. Or did you have enough of it?

MK: Oh, no. There's times when they call, 'Oh we've got all kinds of problems.' I think 'I could have fixed that.' Then I've said 'Probably not'. As you get older I think you always thought of the days that you could do things. But you don't think about things you couldn't do.

JF: True! So if one boat's out, probably there's another one in shore that you need to look at anyway, right?

MK: Yeah.

JF: So they keep you going. My only other question would be, unless there's something I didn't ask that you thought would be important. Oh actually, let me take that back, there's one more before I conclude. What do you feel about the way regulations have developed in recent years?

MK: Well, that is—Right now, it seems like its working but I do have my doubts. When I started fishing, when I bought the boat in '68—Let me go back. Two years before bought boat in '68, there about 75 scallopers in New Bedford. It went down, down by the time I bought my boat there was probably 50 left. Two years later, there were 16 of us. Sixteen boats left fishing scallops. And it varied between 16 and 20 for next five years, and the scallops didn't seem want to come back. But now all of a sudden, the scallops are all over place. Explain it? We couldn't possibly be overfishing with 16 boats dragging around for 5 years. Now there's probably 300 boats. I'm talking now scallopers from Canadian border all way down to Cape Hatteras. The whole east coast. There was 16 boats.

JF: And they're still doing well like that?

MK: No, we were struggling. It was – the prices down, we'd get \$1 a pound, and the most you could hope for was probably catching 1,000 pounds a day. So we were out, in those days, 8 days. So 8,000 pounds. They do that now in 2 or 3 days. Plus 8,000 pounds at \$1 a pound wasn't that much.

JF: So it seems like something made the difference and maybe it was the regulations?

MK: Yes. Now, before that, in the mid- 50s, or in the 50s, there were scallops everywhere. They were loaded up, there were scallops galore. When I came '61, anybody could go to almost anything, catch scallops. By end of '60s it seemed like the scallop disappeared. But it's probably nature. You have good years, bad years anywhere where Mother Nature is the boss.

[25:35]

JF: So right after bought boat, and you were having lean years was that pretty hard for you?

MK: It was hard. You couldn't afford to keep the boat up. Couldn't afford to hire people. You have to do all yourself. By the time you come in, you're supposed to rest ashore, but there wasn't much rest, you have to paint boat, do most work yourself.

JF: But you just figured one day it would probably...?

MK: I didn't have much choice! I had bought the damn thing, and I had a big mortgage, well I felt it was a big mortgage for those days, and I had my house as collateral. So I could have said 'What the hell!' and walk away from it. But, now what do you do?

JF: So my only other question is that I'm sort of ending with for everyone is, for the festival visitors, what would you want them to understand about the fishing industry?

MK: There's hard-working people, knows their business. Nobody can teach fisherman anything, because don't learn this in school. You learn by experience. They are good. They're damn good.

JF: Great!

MK: Ok.

JF: Alright well thank you so much!

MK: No problem!

[26:56]

[End of Audio/End of Interview]