

Name of person Interviewed: Lars Vinjerud [LV]

Facts about this person:

Age (if known): 50

Sex: Male

Occupation: Owner & President of Fleet Fisheries  
Former fisherman and captain

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

Home port: New Bedfor

Hail Port (port fished from, which can be the same): New Bedford

Residence (Town where lives):

Ethnic background (if known): Norwegian and Irish

Interviewer: Marilyn Bellmore

Transcriber: Laura Orleans

Place interview took place: New Bedford Harbor Development  
Commission Office

Date and time of interview: September 26, 2009

Keywords:

Family; New Bedford; fishing; Alaska; company; vessel types; life on board; unusual catch; close calls; weather; scalloping; regulations;

MB: What is your name?

LV: Lars Vinjerud

MB: When and where you born?

LV: Hackensack New Jersey June 18 1959.

MB: Tell me a little bit about your neighborhood growing up.

LV: Um, neighborhood growing up, Bruce Springsteen was my neighbor in Freehold New Jersey and moved to New Bedford when I was around 9, 10 years old.

MB: Who were your role models?

LV: Role models, hmm. That's a good question [laughs] I don't know if I've thought too much about that. Geez role models

MB: As a child

LV: I can't think of any. Sorry. Walter Cronkite, I love him.

MB: Where you a child of immigrants or was it your grandparents that came?

LV: My father was from Norway or is still from Norway and my mother from Ireland.

MB: Ok do you have family who work in the fishing industry?

LV: Yes. My father worked it the fishing industry off and on as a carpenter and a fisherman.

MB: How and when did you get into fishing?

LV: Um, when I was like 10, 12 years old when we moved to New Bedford I was intrigued by the waterfront and I started hanging around down there after school and doing little jobs and that's how it started, just kept on working. I quit school in eighth grade and hitch hiked to Alaska and I was in Alaska for three years, '74, '75, '76, king crabbin' and salmon fishin' and then I came back to New Bedford when I was 18 and went on a scallop boat.

MB: What do you think attracts people to fishing?

LV: I think a big thing is the freedom. You leave the dock and there's no red lights, no stop signs, no phones ringing for couple weeks. You got sun rises and sun sets and do your job and everybody's happy.

MB: What is it like to be part of a fishing family?

LV: Well it's different. I mean you only get together once in awhile so when you do you appreciate it. Holidays.

MB: What is it like to be married to a fisherman?

LV: Married to a fisherman? My wife doesn't fish.

MB: Does she ever say what it's like?

LV: Oh what it's like for her. I gotcha! She liked it because what happened, I'd come in from fishing and she'd have all my clothes done, the house sparkling clean and then by the time I went fishing, the house was starting to fall apart so she had two weeks to clean it up while I was out.

MB: What was it like to be the child of a fisherman?

LV: It was ok. I mean you had to be good the last couple days of the trip. You could be a bad kid the first couple days he's out and your mother would forget about it by the time he came in. But it was fun, go down to the boats when they'd come in and watch 'em unload. Help 'em clean the engine room and the wheelhouse.

MB: How big of a family are you from?

LV: Four brothers and four sisters

MB: What is it like to be a fisherman with a family?

LV: Um, well that's when I quit fishing. I quit fishing when my kids were like 10, 12, 14 years old. They were starting to get rambunctious when I was out fishing. My wife couldn't control them, so I quit fishing and I started selling my own product, stayed ashore, to help with the kids.

MB: How and when did you get involved in the industry?

LV: Um, well like I said I went to Alaska I fished there for three years and came back and my father had friends, they were fishermen, their sons we hung around with them and they became fishermen so we just knew a lot of people that were fishermen.

MB: What types of fishing have you done, the specific fish and where?

LV: Alright, the first time I went fishing was lobstering when I was like 10, 12 years old, inshore. And then when I went to Alaska I went king crabbing, halibut fishing, salmon fishing, herring fishing, and scalloping. And then when I came back, I was mainly scalloping and went captain when I was 19 years old. I came back, I fished one year when I was 18 and then I became mate and then captain real quick because the captain quit the boat. And those are the ones I did.

MB: What types of boats have you fished on? The size, the type...

LV: Yeah, when I first started, I was on wooden boats, Eastern Rigs, they were built in Maine, Harvey Gamache Boats. And in the mid, I guess the early to mid-80s I got on the steel boats, there, Western Rig, and the biggest boat I was on, I think, was about a hundred and ten foot steel boat.

MB: What positions have you held?

LV: Right from the bottom to the top. On deck, engineer, mate, captain, owner.

MB: Can you describe a typical trip in your early years of fishing?

LV: Typical trip would be you have a gear work day where you go down and fix all the gear to go fishing. And then you have the next day you grub up the boat, put the food away, everybody get their gloves, their cigarettes, whatever they needed. You'd go out and you'd fish 8, 9 days, normally 8 hours on, four hours off, round the clock. You'd come in and go in the auction. Somebody would buy the trip. You'd go unload and you'd have a couple beers, then go home.

MB: How long would you go out for at a time?

LV: 8 to 10 days.

MB: Who decided where to fish and how did that person decide?

LV: The captain always decided and he decided from history, where he was the year before at that same time. He decided by talking to other fishermen, what they've caught, where they caught it.

MB: What responsibilities did you have?

LV: Well they change as you go up the ladder. You know, you start out you're on deck you just take care of your work and everybody stays happy. But when you were engineer, now you gotta take care of your work and take care of the engines, make sure the filters are clean, the fuel, the oil is changed. And then you go to the wheelhouse, you got more responsibilities. You go captain, then you gotta worry about the crew, the first thing is safety, your most important thing and your second most important thing is

making a living for everyone. And then you buy a boat, like I did and then your responsibilities go up. You gotta pay the bills.

MB: Have you ever pulled up anything unusual?

LV: Yeah quite a few unusual things. One time we pulled up a whole case of champagne in a wooden box that said 1912 on it. It was all in good condition.

MB: What did you do with it?

LV: [Laughs] We drank half of it and brought the other half in and split it between the crew. We caught some bombs, some torpedos.

MB: Where was that?

LV: That was off of Nantucket. And Martha's Vineyard. And down off of Virginia we picked up some bombs from World War II.

MB: And where was the champagne?

LV: That was off of Hudson Canyon, off of New York.

MB: What kinds of close calls have you had at sea?

LV: I had several. I was on the Navigator in 1977, the end of '77 and I was on there for about six months and I took the Thanksgiving trip off and the boat never came back, thirteen men went down. They never found anyone. And then another close call was, I was captain on a boat and it was thick with fog and the mate woke me up. For some reason, I got up quick that time and I got into the wheelhouse. It was thick with fog and he stepped out of the wheelhouse. I looked in the radar, something didn't look right. I saw two targets and I started hauling back the gear real fast and these two targets came right at us and what ended up happening when I got up we were in between a tugboat and a barge. And we cut the hawser in half with the cables. And if I laid in the bunk what would have happened was that you know the cables would have, the hawser would have run around us and I don't know what would have happened.

MB: What year was that?

LV: That was in 1980. And the funny part of that, the tug boat never knew he lost the barge. He steamed, that happened at 12:30 at night and this tugboat steamed for another 8 hours before he knew that he lost the barge and the Coast Guard notified him and he couldn't believe it. He had to steam all the way back to get the barge. There's been a lot of close calls. Those are probably the closest.

MB: What kinds of experiences have you had in stormy weather?

LV: Been in a lot of bad weather, a lot of icing conditions, probably the one that everybody remembers and that's when I quit fishing right after that was the "Perfect Storm". We were out during that trip and we fished the whole trip, never came in and that trip what I remember was, I've been in worse weather, but it never lasted for ten days. It was bad the whole trip, anywhere from 20 to 30, 40 foot seas and 40 to 65 mile an hour winds. The only other trip I can remember that was almost as bad as that was a northeaster in the wintertime with like ten below zero wind and icing conditions.

MB: Both times where were you fishing?

LV: Fishing out of New Bedford. Fishing on George's Banks.

MB: How has the industry changed over the years?

LV: Oh it's changed a lot. It's become a little more civilized, a little more businesslike. A lot safer. Now you do safety drills, the captain and the mate have to take CPR courses every year, um first aid classes. We have fibrillators on the boats. My boats we do, we record safety drills every trip. The life rafts are better. When I first started, we had wooden life rafts, like a dory on the stern of the boat. Now we have, you know, the big rubber life rafts with equipment in them. They have to be checked every year. How have things changed? Well, when I first started, we had to go to the bathroom in a bucket and dump it overboard and now we've got showers and couple bathrooms and microwaves and t.v.s on the boats.

MB: What advice would you give someone starting out today?

LV: Just work hard and pay attention and speak when you're spoken to.

MB: Do you have children in the industry?

LV: I have three kids and one, one of my daughters she does the paperwork settling up boats. And my oldest son is a shore engineer on the boats taking care of while the boat's ashore he's changing the oil and fixing what has to be fixed on the boats. And my younger son is going to Mass Maritime to get his captains license.

MB: What makes a good fisherman?

LV: Well, a strong back and a lot of patience where you go off shore and not worry about what's happening ashore, relax, read a book on your off watch and just be happy with yourself, be a patient person. Someone who likes themselves. If you don't like yourself, when you go fishing you're gonna have problems with the crew. You know you have to be, have a good personality.

MB: Who are the people you have worked with that you most respect.

LV: Oh, probably my father. He was always a hard worker and very fair. The first captain I went fishing with out of New Bedford, Timmy Furtado, was always a highliner, always ran a tight ship, never put up with drugs or alcohol, was very fair with everyone. They were treated the same. I'd say that's about it.

MB: How did you learn the skills you needed for the job?

LV: Just working up, from like I say, from deckhand to engineer and every trip you learn something. It's like people say, you learn something every day. Well it's the same with fishing. Every trip you see something different and you learn something different.

MB: In your opinion, what years were the best for the fishing industry?

LV: Well, it depends what kind of fishing your talking about. Scalloping has been up and down. In the '70s, it was very good, the '80s and '90s were bad. But it's very good now. Groundfish is very bad now, but was good in the '80s and '90s. Lobstering, it all has its' cycles that goes up and down.

MB: What kind of affect do you think the present regulations have on the fishing industry and how are families and the community being affected?

LV: Well, I think most of the regulations are helping. They hurt for a little while, but you can't overfish or you're gonna, you'll run out of fish. I mean, for instance, no my scallop boats fish four months a year with seven men aboard. When I started fishing, we fished 365 days a year with 13 men aboard. We make more money now than we did then because our expenses are cut by 60% because we're not wearing out gear, wearing out engines. Our insurance is cheaper 'cause we're sitting at the dock for 8 months a year and our production has tripled, because the biomass is there so we're staying busy and it's going well.

MB: Would you want to be fishing today with the current regulations?

LV: Yes. I'd love to fish today.

MB: Why is that?

LV: Well, you're fishing shorter and making more money. It's safer like I said before.

MB: You're the owner of Fleet Fisheries?

LV: Yes.

MB: Where is that located?

LV: 20 Blackmere Street New Bedford, Mass. And it's 70,000 square foot building that I built three years ago and we sell lobsters, swordfish, tuna fish, mainly scallops though

about 70% scallops and we own 14 boats, 8 scallop boats, 2 off-shore lobster boats, one shrimp boat and three long-line sword and tuna boats.

Tech Talk 17:16 - 18:01

MB: You stopped fishing commercially in the early '90s?

LV: Early '90s, uh 1992.

MB: What did you do between then and opening your business?

LV: I opened it right away, but it has just grown. When I got off the boat, honestly, I got off the boat for two reasons, I couldn't make a living because fishing was horrible, I couldn't pay the bills and my kids were getting into their teens and they were a handful. So I quit the boat and I started, I had one boat at the time. And I started selling my own product. I let the mate take the boat. When the boat came in, I sold the product and then I saw the fishing regulations that the feds were puttin' in, I believed they were gonna work and most fishermen thought they weren't gonna work. So I ended up buying some more boats at very reasonable prices and what happened was fishing came back and it was a good move.

MB: How many employees do you have?

LV: About 200.

MB: And do you have day boats or does the fleet make overnight trips?

LV: Yeah, they're all full time boats that make overnight trips, no day boats. Got about a hundred and sixty fishermen that work for me and about 40 people at the fish plant and in Alabama. I have about ten people that are workin' on building boats and down on the docks to take care of the boats. There are another four guys and we have a repair shop called Marine Propeller Service where we do the shafts and the propellers and rebuilding engines and things like that, there's five guys there.

MB: What is the average length of a trip?

LV: About 8 to 10 days.

MB: What are the target species?

LV: Same as I said, we have scallop boats, lobster boats, sword and tuna boats and I have one shrimp boat.

MB: What are the affects of tourism on the community?



LV: Tourism, well, I think the more tourism, the better. That's for sure. We have a short summer so June, July, August maybe part of September then we're done, but the more people learn about commercial fishing, I think the better it is for the fishermen and better it is people understand and maybe enjoy seafood a little more.

MB: How can they do that?

LV: Well, I watch that Perfect Storm on TV, watch that Deadliest Catch on the Discovery Channel, all those things, shows how hard fishermen work and they're just honest people trying to make a living.

MB: Are residents sympathetic to the needs of the industry?

LV: I think a good percentage of them are. A good percentage of them realize that fishermen are hard workers and honest people. I think mainly are respected.

MB: Are any of your employees newcomers?

LV: Yeah, as a matter of fact I just had someone move up here from Florida, relocated up here to be a maintenance man.

MB: What are the strengths of the community port here?

LV: The strengths are the infrastructure of, like if you come in and you need to haul the boat out you have shipyards, you need something welded, there's welders, there's electronics people, you have people, places who will overhaul your engines, you need gear to put on the boat to go, you need food, all of that's very easy to get here.

MB: How is fishing viewed in New Bedford in your opinion?

Tech Interruption 22:53-27:09

MB: You moved to New Bedford. Was it for your parents? Were they already fishing or what brought you up to New Bedford?

LV: Well, my father was chasing work and I mean, at that time the economy wasn't that good so you moved where the work was.

MB: You said as a teenager, 15 you went out to Kodiak, uh Alaska to fish.

LV: Yeah

MB: You just got up one day and said I'm not going to school? How did that...

LV: No, I was working down on the docks and I hated school and I met a guy that was a captain up in Alaska and he said if I ever got there he'd give me a job, so I ended up going there and he did give me a job.

MB: What town?

LV: I was in Seward.

MB: How did you like it up there?

LV: Oh I loved it up there. My plan was to stay there the rest of my life. But while I was up there for three years, I started getting some letters in the mail from a friend of mine's sister and we wrote letters back and forth for three years and when I came back to visit my mother and father I took her out on a date and I didn't go back. That's my wife,

MB: Did you marry her?

LV: And that's my wife, yeah.

MB: How is fishing viewed in New Bedford?

LV: Well, it's the biggest fishing port in the lower 48 and, you mean the people that live here?

MB: Yes

LV: Or nationwide?

MB: Both

LV: Well, nationwide I assume people know it's the biggest fishing port in the country and we struggle and we do good and we struggle and do good, but provide I think some good seafood. And locally, everyone I meet respect fishermen and wish that they could probably do better than they do for the hard work they do.

MB: What challenges, what are some of the challenges that the fishing community is facing here as far as pollution, the economy, development...

LV: I don't think there's much of a challenge on pollution. They've changed the engines; they burn less smoke. They've changed the fuel from, they've gone with a no, low sulfur fuel, diesel fuel. And they've changed, there's a lot of things. Pollution, I don't think we pollute too much. I don't think it's too bad. All plastics off-shore we bring back to the dock, we put in garbage bags and bring back.

MB: What do you see in the future for fishing here in New Bedford?

LV: What I see is a lot less boats. Right now, there's probably about 400 fishing boats in New Bedford. My opinion in 20 years maybe you'll see a hundred, but the hundred that will be here will be more efficient, be able to freeze at sea, process at sea, probably bring better quality seafood.

MB: And what are some of the names of your boats out here... they're painted orange, why are they painted orange?

LV: Well that's a good question. Years ago, there was a boat in New Bedford called the Viking and it was painted orange and I liked the boat. It was a beautiful boat and the boat left New Bedford and I needed my own color. There was a lot of black boats, white boats, green boats, just wanted my own color. And the names of the boats, I really struggle over names, every name has to mean something. And the ALASKA, the last one I built is because I went to Alaska to fish there. I'm building a boat right now, it'll be done at Christmas time, called the GROWLER and that's my nickname. I have the EXPLORER which is the first boat I went fishing on. And I had the COVE which is the first boat that I went captain on which the old one's not around anymore so I re-named my boats after those boats. And I have the LADY VIRGINIA named after my wife and then I have the SOUTHERN LADY, that boat is a long-line boat that fishing south. I have the OCEAN LADY and I can't remember the damn boats, the SAGA which everybody knows what a saga is, it just keeps going right.

MB: Who takes care of all of them?

FV: My son, yeah, my older son. I don't remember the damn boats.

MB: How do people when they go on to the port here perceive the sights, sounds and smells?

LV: I think most people like it except when they're processing you know fish that smell. Other than that, I think people like to be around the docks and see the boats and see the unloading.

MB: Have you ever met any interesting or any particular incident meeting an interesting person that came down to the docks?

LV: Well it's like a small world, you meet people and you start talking and then it seems like you know somebody that they know from another town or another state, met a lot of interesting people.

MB: At the festival, what would you like visitors to understand about the commercial fishing industry and the working waterfront?

LV: I think we're just trying to reach out and give people a chance to understand fishing and give them something to do on a nice weekend.

MB: Is there something I haven't asked you that you'd like to add to the record?

LV: No I don't think so.

End of Tape 33:92