

Interviewee Name: Merritt Carey

Project/Collection Title: Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum 2018

Interviewer(s) Name(s) and affiliations: Galen Koch (the First Coast), and Teagan White (College of the Atlantic intern)

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Interview Description:

Merritt Carey

Tennent's Harbor, ME

Member of the Maine Aquaculture Co-op

Interviewed by Galen Koch with Teagan White

Merritt Carey, from Tennent's Harbor, ME, grew up summering in Maine and is now a key member of the Maine Aquaculture Co-op. In this interview, she recounts her experiences working Maine, including delivering lobster, being a crew member in the second all-female crew to participate in an around-the-world sailing race, and buying a wharf and forming the Maine Aquaculture Co-op. Her goal is to make sure that aquaculture money stays at the shore.

Collection Description:

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Transcription by: Teagan White, College of the Atlantic intern

Start of MERRITT_CAREY_VMFF2018_AUDIO

MC: Merritt Carey (Interviewee)

GC: Gallen Koch (Interviewer)

SR: Steven Rappaport (reporter in for a few minutes)

TW: Teagan White

[Starts with chatter with reporter SR]

[0:00:59.5]

GC: Alright Merritt, so tell me again, your family owns...

MC: So my family is from, well, we've been summer residents in Tenants Harbor for about five generations. My kids are the 6th generation. Um, and we're on the southside of Tenants Harbor, here [points on map] so, and this back shore here so I spent last night, our house is right here, listening to the wind howl. Um, and then when my great, it was originally my great great grandfather who came to Tenants Harbor, they were from New York, and he bought a house and a little bit of property and then the next generation down, my great great grandfather, uh this was during the depression, and he basically went around and bought up fishermen's cottages and the way he did it was he would say, you know, "jeez, I'll buy this house off of you for, you know, twenty, you know, ten thousand dollars in cash now,

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MC: and you stay in it until you die, and then when you die, I'll" -

GC: Alright let's hold, yeah, and then Teagan will help you.

SR: Sounds good, yeah I was gonna say, I'll, I'll, thank you very much.

GC: Thank you Steve!

SR: I have your card, I'll call you if I have questions and I'll call you if I have questions and I'll probably come see you in Stonington.

GC: Perfect.

MC: Bye Steve!

SD: Bye Merritt!

MC: Nice to see you again!

SD: Take care.

MC: Yup, don't get blown away!

SD: See you on the scallop farm.

MC: We will see you very soon on the scallop farm.

TW: Here I'll take the handle from you, thanks!

MC: He is such a nice guy.

GC: Yeah. He is.

MC: Wow! We could be in the Wizard of Oz I feel like.

GC: Yup, we're up in the tornado here.

MC: Um,

GC: So he was buying up these houses..

MC: Yup, so he basically, that was his, it was hard, really hard times obviously, so that was how he managed it. He would say, you know, "I'll buy this off you now, I'll give you the money now and when you pass away the cottage will come to me." And so he really,

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MC: I couldn't, I couldn't tell you but, he bought up, you know, many many many houses here and then all the this land on this um, eastern side, sorta down to where, a little past Heart's Ledge. And then he bought a series of islands, he bought Graffam Island and Hen Island, which is Little Hen Island I think it's called which is further up in Penobscot Bay. That's been sold, I mean I don't even know where it is to be honest with you, it was sold when I was quite young. And every summer we would, so generationally, you know, we'd just, that's what we did. Um, and so for me, my father was a university professor and my mother was a teacher and we would come to our little cottage which was right in the harbor here, right on the dock and um, I would come up with my dad as soon as he got done in like, May. And I was an only child and, you know, I didn't exactly have doting parents

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MC: so I just logged a lot of time like, down on the shore in the skiff, just mucking around by myself on the water and we would spend from like, May till Labor Day there just, I never went to summer camp, nothing. I didn't do any of that stuff, that's just what we did and then throughout the summer my cousins would come and it would kinda be more fun and more social but I spent a lot of time by myself there just doing stuff. And very unattended. You know, my hair was like

wild, never wore shoes, I was like, wild. Like a feral child basically. Um, and that was kind of, that was my connection to Maine and then we would go back to Massachusetts every fall and I remember every time we would go back I felt like I was going into the jungle because it would be so lush and rich and overgrown, whereas the shore is just so expansive and open and

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MC: um... and then... do you want me... what do you want me to do? Do you want me to keep going? Do you want the narrative? You want to the Reader's Digest of my life?

GC: You do not need to worry [MC laughs], you just keep going and I will direct you if I need to direct you.

MC: Alright, so I'll kinda give you the Reader's Digest on how I got where I am now.

GC: Okay.

MC: So, um, that was sorta my childhood, I, the other really significant part that will loop back to kinda where I am now is, um, when I was about... probably nine I would say if I had to guess, my father got me a little Boston Whaler, 13ft Boston Whaler and he, this is so my dad, he was like, "gonna get you this boat, but you're gonna do something with it." And around that time, so if I was nine it would have been 1979 and a few years earlier across the harbor, the Miller family, Mrs. Miller had opened up Cod End, which was one of the first sort of, you know, here's the fish right off the boat,

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MC: come and buy it. So it was a fish market.

GC: Where was it?

MC: Right, so that was on the northern side of the harbor, that's right up in here, so, you know, I was right here on the southern side and it just, I used to row, we used to get in little dinghies and row across the harbor, well, this is so classic 70's, this is like what the 70's childhood was like, we would collect the cans and the bottles from our parents cocktail parties the night before, put them in bags, lug down to the dock, put them in the skiff, row across the harbor, [MC laughs] it wasn't a long know, but it's like legit when you're like five, drag them up to the general store, get the money from the cans and the bottles, and then walk to down to Farmer's, which was like the kinda local pizza joint, and they had a penny candy, you know, case. And then like spend all the money from the booze bottles that your parents had left strewn about the house, blow all your two dollars on

[0:07:00.0]

MC: penny candy, and I was such a sugar fiend that by the time I had like, walked from the little pizza joint back down to the skiff to row back home the candy was gone. [MC laughs] There was no saving it, it was gone. Um, and so when my dad got me this boat, he was like “you’re going to do something with this” and he had gone along and talked to Mrs. Miller, and said, you know, “jeez I got” and I don’t know whether he came up with this idea or they came up with it together, but she was selling fresh lobster and cooked lobster at the market and at that time there was a lot of cruising recreational boat traffic that, you know, sailboats primarily like the New York yacht club would come in and my dad was a big sailor. We would spent every year, we would spend like two to three weeks sailing the whole coast in his, he had a wooden sailboat, a Concordia Yawl, the engine never worked and it had no navigation, like my dad was wild also. So they kinda

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MC: concocted this whole plan of, I would go out and solicit delivery for cooked lobster and clams, take the orders, bring them in, and they would cook them up at the market and I would then deliver them back out to the boats. So that was my first job. And uh, it was the best job. [MC laughs] Cause I was like, at that point like, ten years old, eleven, blond haired, you know, I’d show up in my little whaler, you know, I had a menu, cooked lobsters, clams, so on and so forth, would you like to order any? They’d be like “yeah, I’ll have a-” and it was all by pound - “I’ll have a pound and half,” blah blah. I’d go back in and Mrs. Miller and her daughter, Susan Miller, would cook them up and put them in these wax paper bags. I can still, you know, the steam would be in the big wax paper bags, staple them, they’d write the name of the boat on the bag, staple the receipt and I’d load them up, take them out and

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MC: deliver them. Meanwhile these guys had been like [pretends to drink], and then this little blond girl comes out with like “here’s your cooked lobster!” and, it was just like, tips like no one’s business so I just made, I mean I didn’t make, it seemed like milions at the time, it was so great, and then I kinda built on from that and I ended up in the mornings, I’d go around with coffee cake and news paper and I’d take people’s garbage in. So I did that, actually *Downeast Magazine* wrote a little piece about it, it’s called something like “the fastest lobster in the harbor,” and that’s actually what I was, [MC laughs], that’s actually what I was known for because I kept my whaler tied up at our little family dock, and I’d go, my relatives used to give me such a hard time because it was like zero to sixty. Like I’d go running down the dock, jump in the whaler, turn it on and just like [makes engine noise] full speed all the way across the harbor. Like I got pulled over by the Harbor Master who’s name was Crow Morris, he was this old, like cranky, you can imagine,

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MC: like so many times I was like [palms forehead] “oh God!” But I did that for, I don’t know, four, five summers. And then I actually started working on the wharf there, um, as well. So that would

be like boats would come in and they would tie up and I would give them gas or diesel and bring ice down and service them and whatever, other ways they, you know, the fish market was there. Sometimes I worked in the fish market but not so much, mostly I was down on the dock, I was like the dock girl. And um, it was great and I got to know the whole Miller family at that time and that plays back into, you know, sort of the relevant part of this narrative as far as fishing communities go. Um, and actually Mrs. Miller had gone to Northfield Mount Hemon School, which is a boarding school in Massachusetts, and I had applied as well and she wrote my letter of recommendation and I ended up going there and uh, I don't know. I'm convinced that her letter of recommendation

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MC: is the only reason I got in. [MC laughs] But anyways there are some really interesting synergies throughout. So um fast forward, I graduated and went to Brown, I graduated from Brown, um, terrible job market. It was like 1992 I think, and I really wanted to go into publishing, but I didn't want to move to New York, and there was like two publishing houses left in Boston and I couldn't get a job, and my parents were getting divorced and I remember I was living in Cambridge at the time, I think I was interning at Ink Magazine, and I was like, "I'm done. Like I need to go somewhere." I was out running and I was like "What can I do?" and I ended up getting on a boat that fall, which would have been the fall of '92 I think, and doing a delivery on a Swan Sailboat from Camden down to Antigua. I spent that season, that winter working down in the islands on various boats

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MC: and so and so forth, and one of the guys I was doing a lot of work with was a New Zealand, uh, he was from New Zealand and he had heard about a women's um, crew that was forming to do the, what was then called the Whip Right Around the World Race, which is a sailboat race around the world and now it's called the Volvo Ocean Challenge. And he was like "You gotta go up and see if you can get yourself on the boat." And that was like, so my style so I found out where they were. They were at Annapolis Maryland, you know this is like way before cell phones, there's no nothing. I just showed up at the boat one day and I was like "I wanna race with you guys." And I was, as it all sort of fleshed out, I was um the youngest by a long shot, well not a long shot, but I was considerably younger than anyone else and definitely the least experienced but I just did everything, like I would clean the bilge and I just like *worked*, and I think they were like [laughs]

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MC: we'll just take her so she'll do all the like, really gnarly work. She's not that great of a sailor - I knew how to sail pretty well but I wasn't like a racer or like, you know, I'd done some but I was by no means, anyways. Again, a long story short, I ended up doing the Round The World Race and, uh, we were the second all female crew to ever compete in the that race and um, and then on the final, so our second to last stop was in Fort Lauderdale Florida and from there we

would be sailing to England and that was the finish. And meanwhile during this whole time, this was '93-'94, there had been a push to form an all women's America cup sailing team. And the captain of the Around the World team was pretty instrumental in that because she had - anyways. So when we stopped in Fort Lauderdale for our layover, which was like a three week period, I was

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MC: flown out to San Diego to do the trials for the America's Cup team, and then I flew back, got on the boat and off we went to England for the last leg of the journey and I was going to be finding out whether I made the team on the trip across the Atlantic. And we had to check in every four hours and that's how we kinda got news and um, I remember I like made this deal. I was like "I don't care what happens, I just want to make that team." Like a little deal with the devil basically. And two nights later in the middle of a 50-60 knot blow, all of the sudden our boat, we just like lost all steering. Like all steering. And it's pitch dark out and we don't know what's going on, we have no idea what's going on. Well, come to find out our rudder had sheared off, like completely, like nothing left. We had no spare because everything is weight, right? Like

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MC: you're trying to be as light as you can, but there was a Russian boat that was behind us. So we literally for two days spun in the sea, with no ability. It was the most sickening feeling. You know how they say "spinning like a top in the ocean?" It's true. It was awful because it was still really really rough. But this Russian boat that was behind us, they had a spare rudder so we coordinated with them by radio for them to come and um, give it to us but the crazy thing was, we couldn't steer our boat,

GC: Sorry, I see Katie coming, could you just like nod at her, and I know that Pat might be waiting out there too.

MC: Do you want me to come back?

GC: No, no, no. It's fine.

MC: You sure?

GC: Mhmm. I have some questions. I love this, I wanna get to the end of the sailing and then I'm going to ask you a few questions.

MC: So anyways, long story short, we got the rudder, it was totally crazy getting it. Got there, got to San Diego.

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MC: got [inaudible], I went on to do the America's Cup and a whole bunch of other sailing, I lived in New Zealand for awhile, started law school in New Zealand, got really homesick for Maine, came back to Maine, finished law school here, started practicing law, hated it. I was a terrible lawyer, went out on my own, started consulting, and just like, over the course of time, found my consulting work to be really focused on like, rural economic development, fisheries, agriculture, kind of like the small business world of Maine, ag. and fisheries based. I started going sterman and started working doing some blogging for the Maine Lobstering, Maine mark- Maine Lobster Marketing Collaborative, which led me, you know, and I was still going up to Tenants Harbor every summer and I wanted to do a piece on fishing with the Millers and so I went out fishing and then we started, that began the whole co-op discussion.

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GC: So when you came back, so you came back to Maine; did you know that you were going, I mean did you have this feeling like you were going to be a year-rounder in Maine, or when did that happen?

MC: Yeah. So in the interim, my father, my parents had gotten divorced. My father had relocated permanently in Tenants Harbor and I think, you know, one of the reasons I moved back from New Zealand was honestly like, I just really missed Maine. Like I *really*, I had been away for a long time, I knew I was gonna come back but that was what I missed. I missed Tenants Harbor and I missed Maine so that was a big draw for me to come back. And I think that I wasn't, when I came back I went to the University of Maine because I had only ever had a Maine license so I was actually able to get in state tuition even though I had never technically lived in Maine but I had never technically lived anywhere else because when I was 14 I went away to boarding school. Um, and I think pretty quickly realized that was where I wanted to be.

GC: And why? MC: Uh, well, I

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MC: have a really deep connection to Tenants Harbor, I just, it's, even, I don't even live there now, I live in Yarmouth. That's, you know, I'm raising my family in Yarmouth but I'm at home when I'm in Tenants Harbor and I'm at home when I'm on the water and those are the places, it's just like a draw, it's like I just get pulled back and I feel most oriented and most upright when I'm in and or around Tenants Harbor and when I'm working on the water. Those are the, that's where I feel the best and the most myself. It's probably the best way to put it.

GC: And it sounds like that like, jobs as a kid led you to, I mean you're working in the industry and in a sense. Can you talk a little bit about your work?

MC: Yeah, so, when I came back and I was doing this work with the Maine Lobster Marketing Collaborative I went out hauling one day with Peter Miller to write a piece for the Collaborative

and at the time that little market that I had been talking

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MC: to had been closed for two years and Mrs. Miller had passed away and her daughter had been running it and she closed it and I said to Peter, I was like, "what are you guys gonna do with the restaurant?" cause I knew the four brothers owned the wharf and he with his very dry sense of humor was like "oh well we were just waiting for you to come back and run it," right? Cause he, all those guys knew me since I was little. And one thing led to another and I learned that they were potentially thinking about selling it because it's so hard. They're, it's like the only family owned wharf left and like Linda Bean is the next wharf down and then, and I just knew enough about rural economic development to know like, it would really be great if there could be a locally owned wharf. One at least, left in the - so I got in touch with Luke Holden and we began talking about, you know, what could we do, like what are the solutions here and, you know, I knew Luke was trying to connect more to the, directly to the source and develop those relationships,

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MC: so again, this is a really truncated version of the turn of events, and there's lots of funny stories but, that's how we formed the Tenants Harbor Fishermen's Co-op. And the only reason we were able to do that is because when I came in a started talking to the Millers there was an innate trust because they'd known me for so long. If I had just been, you know, like some well-intended person, it never would have flown. Ever. In a million years. And it was really challenging to pull the whole thing together, um and we had to get a handful of other fishermen to come and join the co-op to make sure our landings were high enough, because it's all a volume business. But what spun from that was, and we did really well both our first and second year in operation, we returned a higher dividend than any of the other wharfs that are local to us, which is, you know, that's the mark of success as far as lobstering goes. And we just been able to do really innovative and creative things to bring more

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MC: money back to the shore and that's been the whole point of everything that I've been involved in. And then I, I knew about the scallop aquaculture stuff through some work, consulting work that I had been doing with CEI, and um, I started talking to some of the guys about it, partially because I was like, I want to make some money working on the water and I don't have a damn lobster license and I can't get one, and I like going stern man but it's like, you know, I can't support myself doing that, that's for sure! And scallops are, you know, a high value product, um and so we just kinda started chatting and one thing led to another and I, I got to meet Marsden and there were some guys doing some scallop aquaculture on Pleasant Island which is right out here, right next to Graffam, and I think it's... and uh, and I actually was conceived on Pleasant Island too, a little known fact.

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MC: Um, so I connected in with them and very very quickly we formed the Maine Aquaculture Co-op as an entity to pull all these, and then you know Marsden is on the other side of the Bay up in Stonington, he, and he's the real expert on the scallop aquaculture stuff. And we've just got this incredible group of guys and it's, it's fishermen led, um, and it's extraordinary in it's, you know, we're in diapers. Everyone doing scallop aquaculture in Maine is in diapers. I mean people might tell you otherwise but it's, that's the truth. But it feels really exciting and there are guys that are genuinely interested. And they just know how to do this shit [laughs], and that's the bottom line, and you write these grants and you talk to some of the entities that are like, trying to promote aquaculture and stuff and they're, their way of thinking, this is my own take, their way of thinking, fishermen's way of thinking is so different. The fishermen are like, "we're just gonna

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MC: do it, we'll figure it out. We can figure this out, we know how to do this type of stuff." And, you know, it's sorta the more corporate approach is more like, "well what's the long term plan and what's the viability, and what's the cost," and I'm much more of a like "let's just go do it," and so it works really well and we have, you know, on the Maine Aquaculture Co-op, the board is mostly fishermen, myself, and then Luke Holden is kinda like a downstream distribution partner, potentially. Um, but it's, and it just works really well cause I can write the grants and I can go and do board presentations, whatever. I can like, do a really pretty polished pitched when I need to, but I can also get on the back of the boat and help there and I just really appreciate um, and really enjoy working within the fishing community and I think um, my end goal with all this, there's so much money flowing around in aquaculture and there's so much like, it's gonna be

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MC: the next big thing for Maine. Well that's what people said about groundfishing in the '70's and now there's like one groundfisherman in all of Maine and none of that money is at the shore and the only reason any money has stayed at the shore is because of lobstering, and it's the owner operator. So I'm trying really hard to figure out ways to make sure aquaculture money stays at the shore and that it doesn't become completely consolidated and corporatized cause I think there is a potential. And the co-op is a way to make sure that it doesn't, so...

GC: That's awesome. [MC laughs]. I'm gonna stop us and follow up with you because you have, cause I know

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END