

Interviewee Name: Steven Holler

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Interviewer(s) Name(s) and affiliations: Galen Koch (the First Coast), and Jenny (Intern)

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Interview Description:

Steven Holler

Boston, MA

Commercial Lobsterman

Interviewed by Galen Koch

Steven Holler, a lobsterman out of Boston, MA, begins by talking about the flooding that was happening in Boston at the time of the interview and its effects on the fishermen and his family. He speaks about his experiences fishing out of Boston since he was 14 years old and about the different fishing communities in Maine. Holler shares his thoughts about the current whale entanglement issues and explains why he has decided to lobster only in summer and fall. With his years of experience on the water, Holler shares some of the changes he has observed in the industry.

Collection Description:

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Transcription by: Natalie Springuel, Maine Sea Grant

STEVEN_HOLLER_VMFF2018_TRANSCRIPTION

SH = Steven Holler (Interviewee)

GK = Galen Koch (Interviewer)

J = Jenny (Intern)

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GK: ...this form, and that is just saying, we have Maine Sea Grant, my project The First Coast, NOAA

SH: yup, oh I love NOAA.

GK: yeah, I am sure you do right now.

SH: It is just, I am a Boston fisherman, so what is going on up here, we've been going through for years. And South Shore lobster fishermen, with the whales...

GK: Hold on, wait, I am going to have you stop, because we are going to record it. Jenny could you do me a favor and turn the little heater off. Careful that curtain kinda sometimes breaks.

SH: Today is the second. I am here with a heavy heart because, I am up here having fun and my children, my father, my mother are all living in separate houses and they have all been evacuated down in Massachusetts, it is total destruction. Worse than the '91 storm, worse than the blizzard of '78. They have never seen anything,

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SH: they are sending me pictures. My boat is out of the water. So I am feeling like, ok, I am safe. I just got a call, the roof of my boat is blown off, the doors are gone, and my 800 traps, that I have all stacked up, the wind just blew them all over, just looks like a giant went through and tossed blocks. And I am just like, there are sending me pictures. And I am just, you have got to be kidding me. They are using front-end loaders. The big ones, and they are just driving through people's yards, smashing their fences and hedges, putting the bucket on the front door, telling the people "get it" and they are driving them out in five feet of water in these front end loaders, and they are evacuating them. It is just, and I am like, I am 55, so the blizzard of '78 I was 14, and I lived through that. I was holding my father's boat off the house in a pair of chest waders. And they are saying it is worse than that, the flooding. I will show you pictures on my phone after this. It is just, the Boston Fish pier, it's been done over, it is a beautiful, it is the crown jewel of Boston Harbor now, that's what it has been called by the industry and normally, see

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SH: the draggers, and they are tied up in the lines go up to the pilings, and the chocks to tie them up, well someone just sent me a picture, looks like they are anchored in the water, just two buildings in the middle of the water, the pier, everything is under water. Boston is flooded. The financial district, all of it, it is flooded, it is under water. I am just, now I am, I am seeing all my, I just talked to my friend, I go "How did you make out in the storm in January?" Basement got flooded, just got everything fixed, blah blah, and now all over again, so it's just, you know, I want to go home but I am like, there is nothing I can do. Everyone is saying tonight is going to be worse, it is going to be a bigger tide with stronger winds. The sustained winds in Quincy right now is 7- miles an hours.

GK: Have they been getting rain, or is it just wind?

SH: They've had rain now for hours, They have had like 3 inches of rain, there is flooding, just everywhere. The way Quincy and Boston is, it is like a funnel without a spigot at the end, so that you got the big tide and the northeast winds, it just pushes and pushes and pushes, and the water has nowhere to go but inland. Like I said, I am looking at the pictures

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SH: going like "oh my gosh." But I called, everyone is safe and my friend called me, a fireman, he goes "the roof of your boat is gone, the doors are going, the electronics are getting soaked." He goes "it is too windy for us to do anything." I says "well there is nothing we can do." His boat is getting smashed up on the pier. He goes "there is nothing I can do." I go "that's why we have insurance, what are you going to do." And I am 55 now, and I say that now. If I was a younger man, I would be screaming and yelling up and down, probably risking my life trying to safe a damn boat, you know what I mean, you put things in perspective, when you get older. You kids are young, you will learn. [Laughter.]

GK: I am going to have you, you launched right in, but can you just say and spell your name?

SH: My name is Steven Holler S-T-E-V-E-N with a V, H-O-L-L-E-R. I am the president of the Boston Harbor lobsterman's association. I am an executive committee member for the mass lobsterman's association. And I am the secretary for the Boston Harbor lobstermen's Co-op, in Boston.

GK: Wow.

SH. yeah, well, it is not really something to be, it is kind of like, you know, I was the one there, they nominated me and no one else wanted it so they gave it to me.

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GK: so you are lobstering? This is a lobster boat you are talking about?

SV: Yeah, my lobster boat is the November Gail. And it was built in 1986. My father had it built, and me and him went in fishing together, and then he retired now I think going on 14-15 years ago, but I started fishing at the age of 14, with an uncle. He was a retired Navy Seal and at 14 years old I was hanging on the corner with a bunch of my friends and out comes this gentlemen with a crew cut, and he was jacked, he's been out of the service for a couple months. He worked on lobster boats as a kid. So he got the GI bill, and he came over in front of my friends, and grabbed me by the collar, dragged me off the corner, and said, you are going fishing tomorrow, be at the dock at 5 in the morning. After a week, I was sunburned, every mussel on my body ached, and I had a pocket full of money and I go "I think I'll like this." So, and I have been doing it ever since.

GK: and what brings you to the Maine Fishermen's Forum?

SH: just to see what else is going on in different fisheries. I mean to be a, where I am from Boston, and we affectionately call it meatball fishing, it is like nothing else

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SH: you picture Maine, picturesque, buoys, and beautiful lobster boats and everything else, and then you come to Boston and we don't use buoys, we use bleach jugs because the ships run over all our buoys. We lose gear, we lose on average between 30 to 50 traps a year to ships and barges. Because of the brackish water, the boats are white but they turn out to be rust color after a couple of months. You know, its. But I come up here, you know, it's a camaraderie, we are all, for a corny term, brother fishermen. And you know, we have similar, not obstacles I guess you would call it, but you know, they are dealing now with the whale issues, and stuff like that, we have dealt with that for a long time. Not that we can offer them any kind of advice, I guess, it's you know, it's just, but it is good camaraderie, how was your year, how was year, and stuff like that. And now, I am talking to people up here, and of course

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SH: my face has been in my phone getting reports on the weather down there and I am showing them pictures, and I am like "where is this?" I go "it is four miles south, we are getting pounded down there." They are like, so. But yea, it is good, I mean you hang, you see what the different technologies and stuff like

that. Guys, you know, just friends from different coasts. You know, we are all in for the same thing, we are all independent lobster fishermen, we all want to do better than the guy next to us, but when you collectively come together, if there is an issue, you are a strong voice. You know, so I was. if there was anything that I could lend my voice to, my support, I would. Unfortunately I was not even able to make it into the meeting hall about the whale issues, so.

GK: yeah it was packed.

SH: It was very packed. It is a hot topic. You are dealing with 2 different entities. The environmentalists I guess I would say with a broad brush, people want to save the whales. Well, we are fishermen. The last thing in the world we want to do is to hurt a whale. We would do everything in our power to [inaudible] and sometimes we, you know, we, and I say it again with a broad brush, the whale people they have a lot of funding and a lot of backing and you know we're just you know, ourselves as fishermen, but we do come together

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SH to try and you know, again, we don't want to hurt whales. We just want to co-exist with whales. And we ourselves do come up with alternatives to some of the ideas they want to come with, so if we can work together. South Shore Lobster Fisherman's Association, south of Boston, they have come up with ideas, and unfortunately governmental entities work very slow, like we say, ok, let's do this. And they want testing, they want to get money for testing, and funding to come up with, you know, what is the word, statistics, does it work, does it not work. And sometimes, you just gotta say, hey, you know what, let's just do this. This certainly couldn't hurt, we think it might help. Let's do it, but then

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SH: on the government side of things, there's i's to dot and t's to cross and let's see if it works. So, here is what it is. In my fishing career, lobster fishing, I've seen many whales in my life when I want to go out and see them in my boat, I will take a trip, take the family out. Um the only time I have actually seen a whale in the area I fish, was actually last year and surprised the hell out of me, I have never seen a whale before in my life in where it was and it was in Boston Harbor. So to take a picture of a humpback whale with the Boston skyline right there was a phenomenal thing, it was exciting. I called the proper authorities, I didn't know exactly what to do, because I have never seen a whale here before. I said this whale is going into Boston Harbor, they told me call the Environmental Police, call the Coast Guard. They put out an alert to all high speed traffic, boom, boom, boom, and we didn't hear of a whale getting hit or anything so we assume he just went on his way.

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GK: yeah.

SH: co-existing with mother nature.

GK: And where are you fishing around Boston? Are you in the harbor or are you going way out.

SH: We fish in the harbor. We fish in Quincy Bay, we fish is what they call the Putter Islands, which is probably about 4 miles beyond Boston Harbor. It is a group of islands. It all falls under the Harbor Islands Park, Recreation, with the uh, what are they, gosh they changed the name so many times. You know the Parks and Recreation. They are all controlled under Boston, and yeah, we fish there, been fishing 40 years, going a little over that. And it is not just what I do, it is what I am. You know. I love it. Gentlemen I grew up with, they have gotten bigger boats, and they have gone further east, um, bigger boats, bigger problems, bigger expenses. You can catch more lobsters and what the Navy Seal I mentioned earlier, he said "you know what, when they all go east, you just hang back for a couple weeks," and sure enough, there is plenty of lobsters free and I am one of the only guys. Everyone goes East. And I just wait s a couple weeks and there are all the lobsters.

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SH: and I am in. I fish in water as shallow as three feet of water. Three feet of water. And I have caught some of the biggest lobster and some of the biggest numbers as far as per trap in about three feet of water. Deepest water I fish is probably 80 feet of water and that's shallow compared to some of the boys that are fishing 300 feet, or even 700 feet, it is crazy. So I fish, I fish from June 1st to oh, December 1st, and I take my gear out of the water, and thank goodness the boat's out of the water now, and I just, it is a money, it is a balance. You can fish during the winter, but you will be financing your sternman, you will be financing the fuel company, you will be financing the bait company. And at the end of fishing the winter, when you look at it, between the gear you've lost, the risks you are taking. Because in the winter, the lobsters are in the shallower water, and rocky bottom up in the Boston area, down in the Boston area, or up in Maine, if you get a storm, and the winter storms come like that, if you can't get your gear up off those rocks, it's gone. So you, it's a balance. And what

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SH: it comes down to is you virtually don't make any money but you, but the person that works for you made a week's pay, or a day's pay. The fuel company is getting paid for his fuel, the bait company is getting paid for his bait, and what did I get. I didn't make anything, I just, you know, worried about my boat, worried about my gear, you know, and then when you go fishing, if you have

children, you have to line up daycare. There, if you have two kids, there is two hundred dollars. So it just come down to the point where nope, I don't care if I am catching lobsters or not, December 1st, all the gear is going to start coming home. Put everything away, and by January 1st, everything is all set, it is all done. You manage your money, this is for the mortgage, this is for this, boom boom boom. I am going to work on traps. And then, just wait. Believe me, it is funny because when I fish, I can't wait for the season to get over, but how much money I have made, I need a break. My body is beat up. And you get the gear out of the water.

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SH: I take about a month off. And then it's like Ok, I am going to start working on gear. And they by come then end of April, beginning of May, I can't wait to go back fishing, I am going out of my mind. This is crazy. So it is kind of a good thing, you don't get bored. But everything is kinda like on a schedule.

GK: how did it change since you were 14?

SH: Yeah, I talk about that a lot with people, and even veterans and stuff like that. When I was 14 years old, we had wooden lobster traps, and you made, we made them all by hand, and you got a license and you went lobstering. That was it. You didn't worry about, oh my gosh, you didn't worry about anything. You know, and I don't want to come back, like it's the government, it's the government. It is just progress and life. There's a lot of things that you, pollution is a bigger issue now. The resource is a lot, and everything else. And sometimes, you know, people who have been in it for a long time, and you say, well it wasn't like that when we were younger, and now they just over-reaching, they are always wanting more statistics, how much did you catch, how much fuel did you burn.

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SH: you almost feel like it is kind of like big brother encroaching on fishing. But when I was young, you just went fishing. I mean when I was 14-15 years old, go fishing, the end of the week, I came from a town that sadly being destroyed now by this storm, but it was a one road in for three miles. And it was a fishing community. We had a roller skating rink, we had corner stores. We had a little tiny movie theatre. Cuz where I came from in Howes Neck (?) it was Cape Cod before Cape Cod was Cape Cod. They used to bring people by ferry from Boston to just relax in lounge chairs on the shore, for the nice salt air, and the weather, to get better if they were sick. So to say that I was one of the most popular kid in town because I had a pocket full of money, there were no job opportunities in this little town. So the roller skating rink is where everyone went on a Friday night. We'll here is 14 of my friends, and it was only 1.50 to get in, but they don't have 1.50. Come on guys, we are going roller skating. I mean I am 14 - 15 years old, making 600 dollars a week. You know.

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SH: and now, I own the boat. And I have also owned homes and this and that and everything else. I wish it was making 600 dollars a week now. Because when it comes down to it, we got guys, young guys that have come up through the ranks and they have worked on back of boats for like 20 years. And for whatever the reasons, whether they have a family member that's got a house or whatever but a boat, a whole business will come up for sale. And it is going to cost them \$60,000. SO they, either if they can get a loan, if they can borrow something from their parents, so now they are going fishing and what they don't realize, it is not working on the back of the boat anymore, where you just have to show up, do your job, which is bait traps, take the lobsters out, stack the trap at the boat of the boat, then clean the boat at the end of the day. No you have to worry about the insurance, fuel, the engine running. You rent for the boat, everything. And I've seen many a people, they last about a year cuz the boat is confiscated because they don't realize, you gotta pay for the boat, and you gotta

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SH: you gotta pay for your rent, so to work in the back of a boat, is so, back when I was a kid, it was, we were heroes. It was like wow, that was the job. You can't get kids that want to work on the back of the boat. This is easy, wake up, be here, go out in the boat for the day, sure, it is not a killer job, it is not a job of strength, it is a job of ergonomics. Every move you make has gotta be a positive move to get the traps clean and baited like some guys come charging in and jamming their fingers. No you gotta be graceful and get to the traps and get the lobster, and boom, it is the easiest job in the world. But it is amazing how many people can't do it. My 17-year-old daughter does it. You know, granted she learned from me and everything else, and yeah, I have always been a hyper captain in that I will praise you for a job you did right. But if I see something that you did, I will go that's the way to do it, that's the way I like it. I am not the type of captain that screams. What are you doing you idiot, what are you stupid? I was brought up the way, through different people, no you get,

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SH: compliments for what you did properly, accolades. You know, don't tear a person down, let them know what they did right. Let them know they did wrong, but also tell them, you know, but you did this right. That is what I like to see. Stuff like that.

GK: you know, we hear in Maine so much about how the lobsters have migrated up here, like when I was a kid, is that also something you are contending with in terms of how

SH: when I was younger, and I will even go back ion the early /80's, I was in my teens and 20s, or mid-80's, I was in my mid 20s. We were catching phenomenal amounts of lobster and I would talk to Gerry Radsworth (?) from Friendship Trap because je would come down and try and sell his wares, and he used to tell me, cu we'd see the lobsters they were catching in Vinalhaven or Stonington. It's like my gosh the numbers. He goes "Steve, he goes 15-20 years ago, they were going fishing, they'd be lucky they'd catch 100 pounds. When we were catching 1000, 2000 pounds. And now it is flipped. You know

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SH: It's cycles; I mean you deal with it, you try and deal with it, again it is all economics. You have to balance it, you gotta make it work. If fishing gets bad. You just can't say well I am not going to do it anymore. I mean it you are a postal worker and you are doing fishing on the side, sure you can do that, and wait for the lobsters to come back, but you have got to work it out. You may have to let a guy go that is working on the boat. You might have to travel farther to where you might see more lobsters. Again I have been doing it for over 40 years and I am fishing 55 now, hopefully I will have another 10 years in this body, the doctors tell me no. I am so busted up it is ridiculous, but, you know, you just have to deal with what's going on. And like I said, we deal with the nature's of the business everything, Are the lobster going to be there. Weather. And then sometimes like now with the Whale issues up here in Maine, they have been going on with us for a long time. It is just more weight on your shoulders.

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SH: you know, you are trying to go out, you are trying to make a living, and pay your bills. And then there is someone they're saying well you can't do that, because it might affect a whale. You know we will do everything we can, and in Massachusetts we have been, for a lack of better term, bowing to the whale people, you know coming out with the breakaway lines, marking our lines,

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SH: the closure areas now in in Cape Cod Bay. We, you know, the closure, I do not agree with, a bit. That was just kind of just jammed on the guys down south. But you know it's like the Navy Seals, adapt and overcome. You know, figure out what is going on or what is going on, and work around it. You know. Again, being raised, I was raised by this Navy Seal, he says, you cannot affect anything directly to you outside of you three foot area. You spin your arm around like that, that is all you can affect in your life. Everything else is going to be someone else doing it. So.

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GK: When you say there are cycles, do you see that, I mean do you imagine that lobsters will come back in your lifetime or what do you see?

SH: I mean.

GK: Is there hope?

SH: Well, when we talk about it like that there are a couple different things. IN Boston, in particular, back in the early 80's, the division of marine fisheries were trying to help maintain the resource. So we had a choice at one time in the early 80's. One they could take some of our tarps away, we had a trap limit. It was, I think it was 1200, then went to 900. Now it is at 800. And even going back earlier, no actually it was about 800, they were thinking about taking another 100 away from us. And a lot of the old timers, and it was the majority type of a vote, type of thing. They were either going to go up 1/16th of an inch or 1/32nd of an inch every, for the next 5 years, to get it up to a certain size, or we are going to take 100 if your traps away.

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SH: and the mentality back in the old timers, you are not going to take anything away from me. So they kind of went with the gauge increase and what happened in Boston if you look at Boston on a chart, it is kind of goes in like a funnel and we have some very shallow estuaries and mud flats and stuff like that. Well what happens in Boston is, the small lobsters come in, they shed their shell, they will breathe, they will mate, and then they leave, 90% of them don't ever come back. More small lobsters come in. Well the assumption was that if we keep going with these gauge increases it might be a bit a little thin on the fishing but after 4 or 5 years, you are going to have all of the bigger lobsters, you are going to get a better price. What we didn't realize is these lobsters leave and they do not come back. Now in the meantime, the gauge is increasing, or when it was down small we would have what they called spring fishing. We would catch some good counts, they'd be like two weeks of really good fishing, so that was spring. You made some money. Then it dropped down in the warmer summer months, and it picked up again in the fall.

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SH: well what happened is when we went up with that gauge, and the smaller lobsters came in, they were too small for us to take. They shed. We did catch some of them as they were leaving, and they left. The assumption was they will come back. They never come back. They call them, what I call, a super highway. They get out in the Gulf Stream, they go up and down, again, if you look at a chart, you look at the tip of Maine, you look at the tip of Cape Cod, you draw a straight line, they are on that super highway. And you take from that line, and go

towards Boston, there'd 25-30 miles, so in a sense, we are geographically challenged, because we are so far in. We are away from the super highway. It is kinda like that movie, my little kids, my girls were little, oh my gosh, was it Cars? Where they made the new highway and here is this little road, we are all waiting for the people to come. Well we are waiting for the lobsters to come on our little side street. And we kinda lost it, so. Again, and again you ask 100 different fishermen, you get a 100 different opinions, that's just my opinion on how fishing is, but again, I have been doing it for an awful long time. I have seen a lot of guys come and go, and I am just happy that I am still in it.

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SH: You know, I am going through a little bit of tough time right now. I have been listening to the biologist Bob Lend (?) from the environmental in Boston, and they are doing stock assessments, broad stock assessments, and it is very low the last three years they have taken it. So a chart was up here, and it crept down a bit, but the last three years hovering right at the ground lines, so it takes seven years for a lobster to become legal size, a pound, 3 1/4 inches, so we will see in a bout another couple three years if their assessments are correct. This here past summer I fished, the lobster weren't where I usually see them. But I used to get the big numbers. I was not getting the big numbers. I did ok all around but the places and times where I usually get some big numbers, you can put a little extra money in the bank, they weren't there. They weren't there. So I look at this this way

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SH: It is like gambling, it is like going to Foxwoods in Connecticut or whatever, every morning I wake up I take \$650 and I put it down and that pays for the fuel, the bait, the help, and I go out and I hope I catch over \$650 worth of lobsters. And then everything after than it is mine. Someday you win, someday the house wins.

GK: It is crazy to think about that amount of money.

SH: You talk to people and you go "wow, I only make \$650 a week" and I have had, I have done some interviews with reporters, and they actually got snide with me because I would say "yea we are making about \$1500 a day" and they don't understand that's like "well Jesus, you are making that much kind of money, blah blah blah why are you complaining about fuel prices." I go "this is only 5 months really out of the year." And forgive me when I say \$1500. June, July you are not doing \$1500. You are paying your expenses. The fall months are when we get to bank our money.

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SH: I mean, that's when you really put the money in the bank, and at the end of the year you go ok, this is for the mortgage, fuel estimates, oh, our little Sally wants to take soccer lessons. It's a shell game. It's a shell game and a money game. I have been increasing my supply of new lobster traps over the last 4 years. Buying 100-200 a year and now I realize my boat needs a new deck. Ok so we are talking \$10,000. That's 100 traps. SO I say ok, we are going to do the deck. And now I am getting a phone call that says "Steve the roof just blew off your boat." I go "well, maybe I am not getting a new deck. Maybe I am getting a new roof. And new electronics." It's, it's, you know it's every day, you know, every day, the '91 storm lost 485 traps. Boom, gone. Never seen again. I found some two miles away from where they were, totally destroyed. You know. That was scary. That was, I was out in that and the waves were, it was like a monster growling to see this wave come.

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SH Cuz when you fall down into the trough, you didn't hear anything, it was silent, you just heard the water, and then you got up to the top and then the winds blowing 70 miles an hour and it is just roaring. It was the most eeriest thing. And we got out, gosh, after 10 days, we got out. And we looked for the buoys. We couldn't find buoys, we were just driving around. Oh, there is one of our buoys and what came up was just this massive color of green. It looked like someone put, I don't know, spaghetti in a blender, dry spaghetti in a blender, just shattered everything. And that's what was hanging off the lines. It was, unlike anything I have seen before.

GK: Why were you out in it, where you offshore fishing?

SH: No, we were. We were kidding ourselves thinking maybe we can fish in it. So when everyone at our dock, we have 21 boats at our dock, they decided there is no way there is anyone going to get out in this, so a bunch of us, I was a sternman at the time for my father. So he had left and I says "guys," so there is 10 of us, all stern men. And we put like 15 tubs of bait on the boat to give it away. And we went out to go to the entrance of the harbor, to see how bad it was. We couldn't get to the entrance of the harbor, but we could go four miles down the coast behind the islands and then sneak out and we did, able to sneak out and once you get past the shallow water, it was just, it was just nothing I have ever seen before in my life and I haven't see it since. But it was, that, when they made that movie The Perfect Storm, whoever was the consultant on that movie did their job cuz it was, the waves were, that's what the waves looked like. It as just unbelievable. And it's black and grey. They were just gray, gray waves. It was just, just, it is amazing the life I have lived doing this job. You know, really you know, I just love it. Love it every day. [laughter.]

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GK: Wow. Well, thanks Steve. It is nearing the dinner hour.

SH: yeah, I am awful sorry, I hope you got what you needed. I am sorry I ramble on. I just love when people like what I do.

GK: No, it's great!

SH: and like I say, with, when I sell to the public, I drive my boat to a pier, every Friday and Saturday after I fish, and sell directly to customers off the pier, and I'll sell like 4-500 pounds in three hours, and people, they are just like, they are amazed when I tell them how to cook them. They are like "what? Really?" You know they didn't know this. Or they will want to come on the boat, come out on the boat. I've been robbed (?) tried to rob, people tried to rob me three times.

GK: Amazing.

SH: Yea.

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