

Interviewee Name: Butch Harris

Project/Collection Title: Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum 2019

Interviewer(s) Name(s) and Affiliation: Matt Frassica (Independent Producer) and Griffin Pollock (College of the Atlantic)

Interview Location: Rockland, Maine

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Interview Description:

Butch Harris, a fisherman and summertime charter captain from Eastport, ME, talks about the community in his hometown, how he grew up and decided to stay in Eastport, the impact of the growing tourist economy on his home, the changing landscape of Downeast fisheries, and the history of his family in the area.

Collection Description:

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Transcribed By: Griffin Pollock

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[0:23:02]

MF: Matt Frassica
GP: Griffin Pollock
BH: Butch Harris

[0:00:00.0]

MF: Can you just tell me your name?

BH: Um, Butch Harris

MF: And where are you from

BH: Eastport, Maine

MF: Great. And um and what's, what's, what's an issue, what's on your mind, what's an issue that you're concerned about?

[0:00:14.4]

BH: Ummm, this year I guess the bait for the fishermen, the lobstermen, everyone's wondering what's gonna happen with that deal.

MF: And what's your take?

BH: Uh depends if they bring fish in from other areas to fill the gap. Hopefully they can. Pogies, or whatever it takes. I heard maybe even Asian Carp.

MF: Really. And uh, do you, are you a lobsterman?

BH: Uh I fish a few traps, yeah.

MF: And what do you think would be the difference in uh would the type of bait make a difference to your business?

BH: Uh, some. Depends on what kind of fish, yeah.

MF: Cause some bait is better—

BH: Some is better than others, yeah. Herring and pogies seem to do the best job.

MF: And what's your feeling about, I mean I understand that the uh, the limits were kind of sprung all of a sudden.

BH: Yeah, just this spring.

MF: And what's your feeling about how all that went down?

BH: It would've been nice to have a little more notice. Aha, so that people could plan a little better.

MF: Yeah. And do you think that's, is that—Who's fault is that.

BH: I'd say the state. The state shoulda got more organized and um notified the fishermen I guess.

MF: You think they could've done a better job.

BH: I think so, yeah.

[0:01:43.2]

MF: Alright, we just have like, we just have kinda general questions. And you can talk about whatever you want to talk about because this is about like, you're—you're leading this. We don't have particular questions. We don't have particular pieces of information we wanna get, we just sorta want people to have a chance to talk about what issues are going on in their communities that they're concerned about.

BH: Yeah.

MF: So um, you know . . . we'll just start with um, what do you value? What do you value about your community?

BH: Uh, it's a small community, everyone knows everybody, everyone helps one another in my community. Ya know, real tight knit, someone's boat broke down or someone needs to replace an engine, pretty much everyone jumps in to help the guy.

MF: Do you have a time in your life when that, when you got that kind of help?

BH: Yeah. Yeah. I lost a boat one time. The town pier collapsed in Eastport and I had a 118-foot schooner that got destroyed. And everyone pitched in to help me keep it afloat, and get it out, and uh just keep it from sinking at least. So . . .

MF: Wow that was probably like a uh pretty huge—it would've been a pretty huge financial hit if you . . .

BH: It would've yeah, been a lot more of a headache if she would've went to bottom. Yeah.

MF: Yeah, that's great. Tell me about the people where you live.

[0:03:18.9]

BH: Um, mostly all fishermen. The people I'm around operate out of the Eastport town pier and it's mostly all fishermen. Lobster's become a big thing in Eastport which wasn't a big thing twenty years ago. Lobster seems to be moving farther north. People pretty much go from scalloping to urchining to lobstering in the summer then back into scalloping in the fall. Which years ago people had to scallop—scallop and urchin a little bit and then usually they'd go drive truck or do carpenter work or whatever to fill the summer in, but lobster's has really become a mainstay in Eastport.

MF: So there really wasn't the opportunity to go for lobsters—

BH: Well there was lobsters, but there just wasn't the numbers, uh years ago.

MF: Hm. And as that becomes a greater part of the mix, are, are you concerned at all about putting all the eggs in one basket?

[0:04:17.6]

BH: Uh, yeah. I think most people realize that. Most fishermen. Because you have up years and down years, so most fishermen realize—realize that I think.

MF: What do you think is kind of the long term forecast for that?

BH: Uh, I don't know if I'd wanna be 18 getting into the business, I don't know.

MF: Do you think it'll go down eventually?

BH: It's just so uncertain right now. With the bait, if they can figure out the bait problem, ya know. It's expensive buying a boat and maintaining a boat. That's uh, ya know, quite a bit of money.

MF: What about the uh, overall number of lobsters. Do you think they're gonna stay high or is it gonna decline?

BH: Uh, I think that depends on a couple of things, well the codfish coming back, they claim the codfish're coming back. So that could decline it because they eat a lot of small lobsters, so. And like they, like they talk about cutting traps back too to four or six hundred. So if they do that it could help the lobster industry more, as far as the number of lobsters.

MF: Right, but individual fishermen.

BH: Individual fisheries, lots of guys got big boats, big payments. So, ya know can they make it on four or six hundred traps?

MF: Yeah.

BH: You know, they've already got payments set up and you cut a guy's ya know, year's income in half or two thirds. Is he gonna make it?

MF: What got you into it, how did you get started?

[0:05:57.6]

BH: I grew up around commercial fishing, my father ran charter boats, we fished herring, seining. And uh, just grew up in the industry. Had scallop boats. Then I got into urchins when I was in high school, get into urchins so—diving and dragging.

MF: Was that common among your friends in high school?

BH: Uh, not real common. Just half a dozen in my class probably. Probably out of 50 in my class, maybe six went on to staying in Eastport and fishing.

MF: Yeah, and what—what kept you there? What did you like about it?

BH: Uh, just small community. I mean I used to travel up and down the Maine coast. Maine coast, east coast. My father built boats so—I travelled from Eastport to Florida delivering boats and uh pretty much seen everything on the east coast. I like Eastport, small community, and I like fishing, so . . .

MF: What kind of boats did he build, did he build schooners?

BH: Uh, no. He built 65-foot passenger boats. So, wood. And he built fiberglass boats. Anything from 12 to 35 feet.

MF: And uh—did you—so you were delivering them by truck?

BH: Truck, yeah. We'd build 'em and deliver 'em.

MF: You weren't—you wouldn't sail them down.

BH: No, very few we sailed, most of 'em was trailerable.

MF: Yeah and so from urchins, where did you go from there?

[0:07:26.1]

BH: I still do urchins, still do scallops, still do urchins uh—and a little lobstering. I mostly do tour business in the summertime, I do a whale watching trip so—I kinda get out of the lobstering to get more geared up for the tourist industry. And since 2002, I've been really geared up for taking whale watching.

MF: Have you seen more tourists come into Eastport?

BH: Definitely, yeah. More and more people coming our way.

MF: What do you think drives them?

BH: They could go to Bar Harbor and it's really crowded and busy, and some people eventually may get up to our way and they realize how laid back it is. Small community, not crowded, we get everything but the mountain I guess aha.

MF: And so when did you say you started doing the whale watching business? 2000—

BH: Well we actually started '77, '76. My father started it. And, bout—it was all charter fishing. Back then, probably 90% charter fishing trips, 10% whale watching. Now the fishing's gone down now, I do 90% whale watching, 10% fishing charters so it's kinda reversed.

MF: And is that—how do you—I mean how do you feel about that change?

BH: Uh, I miss the groundfish. The cod and the pollock. They claim they're on the way back, but we haven't seen them in Eastport area.

MF: And do you uh—how do you feel about the tourists? I mean, it's good business but—

[0:08:57.8]

BH: It's good business yeah. It's a good summer fill in for a lot of people

MF: Does it make you concerned about what's gonna happen to the town if it's overrun by tourists?

BH: Uh, I think we're too far away from everything aheh. We're too far away from boston and portland to really get overrun I think. I think it's gonna take a long time.

MF: So you're not—

BH: Cause we're two hours still north of—East I should say, northeast of Bar Harbor so... It's just that much farther to go for people in Boston or whatever.

MF: So you're safe.

BH: I think so, for a while aheheh.

MF: Although, your business might do better if there were more—

BH: Yeah yeah. Yeah, definitely

MF: And what—

BH: It increases every year. It's increased ever since I took it over actually in '91, my father's—I took the whale watch over in '91 from my father. And he had the charter boat and I did the whale watch and we kinda separated the two. And uh—learned how to scrub the fishing boat down to take a whale watch in the afternoon (laughs), I could keep mine clean.

MF: And what kind of changes have you seen over the years on your whale watching trip?

[0:10:07.0]

BH: Uh.. not much changed in the whale watching boats. We always have a lot of whales and we have up years and down years depending of the feed but uh, like I say every year we get more and more repeats.

MF: Repeat whales, or repeat humans?

BH: Humans. Well, whales too. We've seen some whales for 20 years. Same whale year after year, coming back to the same area.

MF: And they're uh—they're mostly humpbacks?

BH: Yeah—uh, no, mostly finbacks and minkies. And last year we had a lot of humpbacks so—yeah last year we probably had about 15 different humpbacks in the area so . . .

MF: Why do you think that is?

BH: Uh, The feed I think. There was a lot of feed last year. Herring in our area.

MF: So maybe that's the reason the lobstermen can't have the herring this year.

BH: I think so (laughs), the whales are eating the uh.

[0:10:57.6]

MF: Um, what about uh, what about waterfront access? That's another thing, it's another kind of hot topic.

BH: Uh, we're losing. Every year we lose more and more waterfront. Not so bad in Eastport yet, but uh—we've lost two or three in the last 10 years in Eastport, access to the water.

MF: Mhm. And is that, is it to the level that it's a concern now?

BH: Uh, people are starting to think about it. But we still have 3 or 4 boat lanes in Eastport so still not a real big concern.

MF: Not an emergency.

BH: Not an emergency, no.

MF: Um, what do you think uh—what's the uh—what's the conflict there? What's the dynamic, what's going on?

BH: Uh, there's really not that much conflict in Eastport really. I mean, um . . .

MF: But there's some—there's some uh—there's some tension between like, fishermen who wanna access and what, what would you say, hotels, or people building houses?

BH: No, just uh people buying property and people used to go across and go clamming, they're building a house there now so they have to find another way to get there, find a boat to get to the beach.

MF: But there's no uh—it's not, it's not out in the open, people aren't having—

BH: No, no.

MF: —a big fight about it.

BH: No, they just find a way around it.

MF: Um, do you see—is that part of like uh, a larger trend in the town towards people who uh—away from people who have like a uh—fishing connection to the ocean towards people who just, you know, wanna build a fancy house?

BH: Uh, well I don't know, how did you put that (laughs)?

[0:12:38.4]

MF: Well, we were just talking just before you came in, we were just talking about summer people and year rounders and so I was just wondering if there's like, if there's a movement away from uh, everybody having a fishing connection to the ocean towards people who just want to build a house there.

BH: Mm, there's not too much conflict or anything in our area. I'd—we lose a piece of land we usually find another way around it.

MF: Um, what about uh—so your father was a uh boat builder.

BH: Boat builder, fisherman, yeah.

MF: What about his family, where did he come from?

BH: Grew up right in Eastport, with his father and grandfather.

MF: And were they fishermen too?

BH: Yep—well not so much my father's father. Actually he wasn't, but he owned a piece of land on the water and uh, he had cabins and place for people to stay, and my mother still has them today. Cabins and motels so . . . I grew up on a peninsula, my father's in the herring fish industry and taking fish, so I just grew up in the industry.

MF: So the tourism business in your family goes back a couple generations too.

BH: Yep, yeah.

MF: And what, uh, but there were probably a lot fewer people coming out I imagine.

BH: Yeah, especially with the fishing, as far as the fishing there is. Whale watching, we're increasing.

MF: Yeah. Um, so, let's see what else do we have here. Oh, what about out on the water? What kind of changes have you seen among other, other, other fishermen out on the water? Are they moving where they're fishing?

[0:14:26.4]

BH: Yeah, more of the guys move—started fishing offshore in the last ten years. Fish stayed right around the harbor. Bigger boats, they do better, and get bigger boats and they tend to stray a little farther offshore.

MF: Um, uh, I know a couple of the students who are working with this project from COA are doing uh, um, kind of, mapping projects and asking people about where—like where your favorite fishing spots are, favorite ledges and things, I mean as a charter boat captain you must have places that you take people.

BH: Oh yeah, we have certain places, mostly shoals, the ledges. But I don't fish too far out of the Eastport area you know. I don't fish more than a three mile radius, four mile radius, so.

MF: And what are some of those places you take people?

BH: Um, one's called the hainy[?] ground. Uh, trying to think of some of the other ones. Yellow rock, we have a place called yellow rock. And green island shoals is another one.

MF: And are those places that your dad took people to?

BH: Yeah. Same places, yeah.

[0:15:36.7]

MF: And, but you probably have seen a change in the uh, in the fish that are there, right?

BH: Oh definitely, yeah. Real decrease in the big codfish and pollock that used to be there.

MF: So what's there now?

BH: Uh, small cod and small pollock. We don't seem to get the big ones back. Well they're getting 'em down the coast, but the big ones don't seem to be making it to the Eastport area for some reason.

MF: So, but not different species, just smaller ones?

BH: Nope, not many different species.

MF: Huh, yeah. Well let's see, what else do we have here. Uh, what issues affecting the fishing industry are you most concerned about today? Is there anything besides the bait?

BH: Mmm, not really, I can't think of right now.

MF: Um, and what about—okay—oh this is a good one. What about new industries? Um—

BH: Um—I'd like to see something done with the green crabs cause I think that is hurting the clams. If they gave—if they came up with a way to, ya know, sell the green crabs for another market—I guess they've been working on it for years, but no one's really come up with enough money to have some I guess.

MF: And what kind of use do you think they could be put to?

BH: They claim they cook 'em and eat in Asia. Um, striper bait I guess they use 'em for. So there's different uses for 'em. But they're just not paying any amount of money to make it sustainable to fish.

MF: Right. Too many of them and they're not valuable enough.

BH: Not valuable enough, yeah.

MF: What about uh, are you concerned about things that are—industries that are cropping up along the coast, like um, you know, um shellfish or oyster farms, or things that are taking up coastal space.

BH: Not too much in our area, no. Aquaculture's always been in the Eastport area, since the late '70s, early '80s. They seem to get along with the fishermen.

MF: So is that, are there still active salmon far—

BH: Salmon farmers yep. Lots of salmon farms up our way.

MF: And they haven't uh—I know there's you know, some people feel like the salmon farms are, are dangerous for the uh, for the fish, um the free-swimming fish like causing disease and stuff.

BH: Uh, yeah. It's back and forth with the argument I guess, little bit of an argument. But it's not, not, never improving I guess but.

MF: I mean that argument's been going on since the '70s

BH: Yeah.

MF: It hasn't changed in—

BH: Hasn't, no. Heh.

MF: What do you think about the land based farming that they're talking about putting in in Belfast?

[0:18:22.0]

BH: I think it's a good thing. Creates job and uh, you can control disease more and control atmosphere of the salmon.

MF: Yeah, um I guess it alleviates some of those conflicts between the fishermen and the farmers.

BH: Yeah, yeah. I think it would, yeah. But there's not too much conflict in Eastport area. We grew up—everyone grew up around it, so. And they'll let you fish right up to the pens with lobster gear or whatever, so they work well together in Eastport.

MF: So do you know most of the people, do you feel like you grew up with most of the people who were out there?

BH: Oh yeah. I know everybody in my area.

MF: Uh, let's see. Oh, what—what about, what about places? Places, either on land, or on the water that are important to you. Not—you know—I don't know, personally important, emotionally important, or important for your business?

BH: Yeah, mainly the bay I guess. The whole bay. That's where I make my living all year round. I would do my whale watch on the bay in the summer and go right into urchins October, November, scallops January and February, and this is my slow time of year. March, April. Then

I'm gearing back up to do whale watching again, so. I make my—100% of my living right off the water. I do some survey work for the universities time to time.

MF: So—but like bottom survey?

BH: Yeah, bottom survey, or uh acoustic surveys. I work with the University of Maine a lot.

MF: So you know the bay pretty well.

BH: Yeah yeah, oh yeah.

[0:19:55.3]

MF: Um, do you ever—does it ever surprise you? Or you ever find something that you didn't know was there?

BH: Um, not now I guess. Years ago maybe.

MF: Do you remember what it was like when you were a kid first going out?

BH: Oh yeah. I mean I grew up on the charter boat, so. I just grew up in the industry, so. Really didn't have too many surprises.

MF: Did you ever consider doing anything else?

BH: Uh, not really. Maybe shipping out, ya know, Maine Maritime Academy but other than that, pretty much just make sure that I stay on the water.

MF: Uh, what made you decide not to ship out?

BH: Uh, I like the fishing, so.

MF: And you had seen, I mean you had been up and down the east coast, you had seen all these other places, you wanted to come back. You wanted to stay.

BH: Yep. Yeah, we only did deliveries so we were only gone for a couple days at a time.

MF: But it never—you never wanted—you never have thought, "Ah maybe, maybe Florida."

BH: No, not really. Maybe, I'm thinking about it more now for two months in the winter heh.

MF: Yeah. Um, what about—oh, what about uh stories that you'd want your kids or grandkids to know?

[0:21:12.4]

BH: Uh . . . well I don't know what I'd have for a story. I—my father I knew, my father I get—my mother's got pictures of my father. Pitchfork, and standing knee high in water, pitchforking pollock onto the beach and putting 'em on in skiffs and selling 'em for like a penny a pound.

MF: Wow.

BH: And back then—to go from that to—we can't even catch a decent sized pollock there now.

MF: That's amazing. Just a couple of generations.

BH: Yeah.

MF: Uh, maybe they'll come back.

BH: Yeah. Well they say they're coming back, I don't know. They put a lot of restrictions on things, so.

MF: Better sharpen your pitchfork. Griffin, do you, do you have anything?

GP: No, no—well, I do have one question, and that's if, if there's anybody fishing out of Eastport right now who didn't grow up in Eastport?

BH: Uh, that's a good question . . . I don't think so. At least in the area, they're all pretty much from the area I think.

GP: Alright.

BH: I don't we've had anybody move in from even down the coast.

GP: Well, that's all I can think of.

MF: Um, anything else? Anything else you wanna—anything else come to mind since you sat down?

BH: I can't think of anything, I think you've pretty much covered it.

MF: Awesome. Well thank you very much.

BH: You're welcome.

MF: I really appreciate it.

BH: I've got another guy, said he'd come out if you want him to, Doug Wood. I don't know if you've got anything scheduled, but.

MF: Um, I don't know either, but there doesn't seem to be anybody outside

GP: When I last checked the schedule, we had some openings

BH: Yeah, I had his card, but I don't think I have it with me. But I can go in and send him—

[0:23:02.3]