

Groundfish Oral History: Richard Bridges¹
Stonington, Maine
June 22, 2011

Richard Bridges started groundfishing commercially in 1964, and gill-netted out of Stonington from 1974 until 1984.

R. And so in what year did you first start commercial fishing?

RB. Commercial fishing, uh lets see, uh see I don't know what you would call commercial? I was, I had 150 traps when I was 7 years old, but I got a big boat when I was 18. So really that would probably be at 18.

R. Were you making money off the 150 traps?

RB. Absolutely, sure.

R. Was your father or your grandfather taking you out?

RB. No, alone. Two of us, one was 8 and one was 7.

R2. Was that in Maine or was that in Connecticut?

RB. It was here (Maine); I was only a week old. Don't tell people that! I was only a week old when I come back here and I don't like to have people know that I'm not a Maine boy, okay?

R2. [Laughing].

R. Okay, your parents were just out of town for the weekend [jokingly].

RB. Yes, it's quite a story on this. Can I go astray?

R. Yeah, got for it.

RB. Well my best friend and I, he is a year older, and we used to go every night after school and the people in town here, in the middle of town we had a telephone operator and if she saw you walking the road and your mother would try to get a hold of you she would pushed the window open and holler to us. Say, "Your mother is trying to get a hold of you" but she had to push a plug in when somebody tried to call one another, it was the old fashioned telephones okay? Well Steve, my best friends mother would call, her name was April, and in the telephone she would say, "have you seen the boys?" Well she would call somebody on the western part of the town here and see if we got over that far yet, and they would call her back and tell her we are on our western part of our string hauling and we should be all done within a half an hour. So they more or less kept track of us. We went fishing out through here in the harbor more or less, but he was 8 and I was 7. We did that for 3 years but we always fished right from that time on. We just kept building up our traps, so I've been at it quite a while. I'm 66 now so, anyway.

R. Kind of along the same lines, where is your family originally from?

RB. Swan's Island; are you familiar, do you know where Swan's Island is?

R. Yup, yup.

RB. They (Uncle and Father) were both born there and they went to Connecticut for work during the war, they were getting a dollar a day down there and a dollar and hour out there okay. So they worked there for 4 years and I come along and they say this is no place for a boy out here so they come home.

R2. What were they doing for work in Connecticut?

¹ This interview was completed as part of a University of Maine study funded by the NOAA Saltonstall-Kennedy grant program (PI: Dr. Teresa R. Johnson).

RB. Foundry, brass foundry. Making shells.

R2. For the war?

RB. Yeah.

R2. And is that what they were doing up here?

RB. No they were working on a farm. Yeah a dollar a day.

R2. Oh okay.

RB. So when they went down there for a dollar an hour there were two brothers that went together. They didn't go home at all. The boss would let them go for a couple, three or four hours on a Sunday, but they worked right around the clock. And when they left down there to come home- that was in 1945. The man said if there is anybody up there that are willing come down here to work- send them. And he gave them both an envelope with \$1,000 a piece. In 1945, the boss of the foundry; because he said he had never seen workers like this.

R2. So that was on top of what they were paid?

RB. Yes.

R2. Wow.

RB. And they came home and both built boats and started lobstering out of here and so that's the story with them, my uncle and my father. But my grandfather and father also fished on Swan's Island when they were younger.

R. What did they fish for?

RB. Lobster, groundfish cause they always went, they had to go haking, what do you call that, trawling to survive. And even though it was \$0.03 cents for 1,000 pounds. That's what they were getting paid for the fish. But at least they could have some fish to eat in the wintertime you see.

R. So they were storing it a lot for themselves?

RB. Yes salting, storing it sure sure, I can just remember that, but anyways. That's how they survived.

R2. I was just wondering was that the traditional thing people do when they go haking around here?

RB. Trawling, you can say trawling, they caught all kinds of different fish but the major fish at the time was hake and went trawling, and they had to go trawling.

R2. But they were keeping the food for themselves?

RB. True, yes yes.

R. And that was off of Swan's?

RB. Swan's. Everybody did. All lengths of shore did, Vinalhaven, you know all these islands. Everybody went haking from like in April through September cause there weren't any lobsters, there weren't many other things to you know the lobsters wasn't that plentiful at the time so they went groundfishing then. Had to. And then when I started up lobsters weren't that plentiful, I could do alright for 3 or 4 months for the best of it but then I went trawling. Then I went gillnetting and that was, kept us alive, kept us at a year's worth. I went lobstering for 2-3 months and then finished the year with ground fish, scallops, and shrimp. But we had to do everything. We couldn't do it with one thing. So the ground fish was the most important thing because we also got stuff to eat, we got fish to eat for the winter. You know that was a big thing. I think today if you could go or something like that's that what they would do, I think you two know what fish is, what you have to pay for fish today, its' unbelievable. And everybody likes fish; I do anyway [chuckle]. Yeah.

R. This may be backtracking a little bit but could I ask a little bit more about your family? Like what about your wife?

RB. Ohh bad woman [laughing].

R. [Laughing]. Is she from a fishing family that was the question.

RB. No, no she wasn't, her family lived in Deer Isle and they had a farm and cows, milking, milk mostly, but yep she's... I have two girls, two wonderful daughters and the oldest one has restaurants. Well coffee shops in North Carolina, three of them. And she's the oldest at 45 and the youngest at 43, 2 or 3, 2. She is as high up in AARP as she can go. She's doing very well. I'm very proud of both of them.

R. Did they ever work in the fisheries? Did they ever work with you?

RB. Yeah absolutely. Oh sure. They went out pulling lobsters for me, went gillnetting and picked fish. Worked at home and the shop and painted my buoys, yep right straight through.

R. Any other family involvement for you while you were in the fisheries?

RB. No, no. I guess I shouldn't say no. My mother and father helped. Families in the fishing industry seem like all worked together in a way like when Carol was having the kids my mother would take my supper or my meals made for me or pack my lunch or whatever. And my father, everything he said, even though I didn't want to listen I learned later on in years, everything he said was right and I was wrong. I found that out when I was 45. So anyways here I am.

R. Alright lets see, so we just talked about your family. So we're actually curious if you remember anything about what groundfishing in this area was like from before your time, from before you were old enough to go fishing.

RB. Oh absolutely. Oh yeah. As a kid we used to, I think I was about 14 and there was a couple of us in town, about 2 or 3 of us with outboards and we used to go down about 3 miles and used to hand line, pollock and cod, load our boat, and come in. 3 miles out here and then 18,19,20 right in there like you know I went gillnetting, I was a little older than that.

R. What year was that?

RB. I, oh no, no that's not right cause I started gillnetting in '69, but the year that we were catching those fish was probably in the 50's. But in '69 I started gillnetting. I think I went scalloping in there but yeah about '69 through '80, '85 probably I went gillnetting. I hate to tell you this, well its over with now but I used to run 45 minutes from here through a fishing ground and most of the summers that I would go we would bring in about 3 quarters of a million pounds of fish through 3 months in that year. And 90% were cod because the hake, the hake was \$0.10 cents, pollock was \$0.12 cents, cod fish was \$0.25 cents so I tried to fish for cod, which I did. We also in that time we handlined with a Norwegian, I'm not sure if your familiar with this stuff or not but it was a new jigs, plastic jigs came out and we started using them here. And we could handline, two of us could handline 4,000 cod a day.

R. How does that piece of gear work? Is it like 7 hooks that revert and vibrate or something?

RB. Yup you got it. On a monofilament line, we had, I had 9 hooks on one filament. It was new when it come out, it was unbelievable because nobody wanted to waste their time using it cause they thought that brand new bait-herring they could get out of the water -was the best bait you could get -well they found out that what usually there is always dogfish around. The dogfish would go for the bait but they wouldn't touch the jigs. so they could keep right on jigging for cod and get cod or whatever you were fishing for.

R. Even among the dog?

RB. Even among the dogs, yeah. Dogfish don't touch it. Once in a while you might hook one but they don't bite it.

R. Um do you remember any of the stories that the old timers would tell?

RB. Ohh gosh you want me to get into that? [Laughing].

R. [Chuckle]. Maybe just a little bit.

RB. [Laughing]. Well...

R. You got any favorites?

RB. No, uh, most of them paid attention mostly to the weather, you know, what to look for. As far as the clouds and color of the sky you know and if it darkened up real quick. Are the clouds broke off, well maybe I'll narrow it down a little bit for you. Like tonight it is a little overcast and if it started to clear a little bit the clouds when they break start to break off from a body, how can I put it? From a body of clouds you know and the clouds start to break off there's wind with it, so we always paid attention to it when we was out fishing. If we saw this cloud mass and the clouds start breaking off we need to try to hurry our gear in and get home cause we knew we'd have some wind for the way home for one thing. And then dry easterlies. Anytime the wind is out of the east you can catch the cold, well that's what the old saying was, you know. It has to be west or south. Any westerly wind is good fishing wind, but easterly is not good. Only because, I believe and my father too, was the tide. Any time the wind is out of the east the tide always runs hard and the fish have harder jobs to get on the hook or to keep your bait on the hook. You understand what I'm telling you?

R. Mmmhmm.

RB. Things like when the tides running hard and you don't get that tide with the wind from the west of it. So, that's one.

R. Most of the winds are from the southwest here?

RB. Yup. Right here its Southwest in Bar (the) Harbor here. Uhh, he told me so much stuff that... I'll tell you one funny thing. I noticed it when I fished started trawling that my fish would come up and when you were cleaning them, guttin them, that there would be rocks in them and I never could figure out why. Fish take on rocks before a storm to weight them down. I couldn't believe it but they do. They try to take so many or what I don't know, and they always said that too. They always had a lot of sayings, you know. Lets see, I'm trying to think of that, people laugh at it cause we're superstitious, it's terrible. Most fishermen are, it's not too good [laugh]. I can't even think of what I was going to say now. Anyway. Lets drop it, drop it on the old sayings [laugh].

R. We can come back to it later.

RB. Alright.

R. So lets talk about your experience in the fishery, move beyond the old-timers for now. So I think I already asked this: in what year again did you first start commercially fishing for groundfish?

RB. [Counting to self]. '64. Yup 1964.

R. And that was on, that was tub trawling or hand lining?

RB. Handling on the boat, yup that's the first thing we started on.

R2. What kind of boat was it?

RB. It was a wooden boat built over here at the yard.

R2. So it was a lobster boat?

RB. Yeah, yes. Almost like I have today, but.

R. Um was it your boat or someone else's?

RB. No yup, it was mine. I had it built. Father said, "You get 2,000 dollars. If you want to go to school go ahead, if you want to go fishing, go fishing and here is 2,000 to start." So that was,- I graduated in '63 and that was a lot of money then.

R. Did you buy the boat for \$2,000 dollars?

RB. Yes.

R. How long was it?

RB. 36 foot.

R. 36-foot. What size engine?

RB. It had an oldsmobile. A V8 oldmobile in it. About two years in I put a diesel in. The first diesel in town. So...

R. Still going?

RB. Nope. Nope. Cause today I have two boats again. A 42-foot glass and a 41-foot wood. I just had the wood built about 5 years ago.

R. For fishing?

RB. Yes. I didn't sell the other one. I kept it. That's my work off. All the time 1974. That's when I bought the glass one and I kept it and use it in the winter time shrimping. Keep the wooden one for the lobstering. And the wooden one is so I can go fishing today. If I didn't have the wooden one I probably wouldn't be fishing today.

R. Why is that?

RB. My legs would have been gone.

R. So it rides better or works better?

RB. Ohh absolutely. There is no comparison between the glass and the wood. I can, it's just like throwing a bottle out into the water. Or throwing a piece of wood. You see what I'm saying?

R. Yeah.

R2. It absorbs the shocks?

RB. Yeah, and the wood is up and down this way [demonstrating with hands] and the glass is all every which way because your constantly in the glass boat bracing, you know. And you're using your legs all the time. The last 5 years I went in the glass boat I slept at night with my feet on the pillow. Two pillows in the air like that and I haven't touched a pillow since I had the wooden one.

R. Who built it?

RB. Peter Kass. I don't know if you ever heard of him but he is the best boat builder in the state and he is, there are 10 of his boats in town now. Beautiful boats.

R. Who built the glass one in '74?

RB. Bruno & Stillman. Never heard of him? Yup, big company then. They were putting them out too fast and the crew's not as good, very good boat, super boat. Lowell, which is a boat designer, he designed the boat and Bruno & Stillman started building them. And they went over real big because they were going about 20 knot and back then in '74 that's fast compared to 10.

R. That's fast now.

RB. Yeah that is fast now, that's right. They were good designs you know? And this Lowell designed the boat. Anyway, I still have them.

R. So how difficult was it to get into groundfishing when you first started?

RB. Nothing. Just go. Just go. And I didn't even have to have a license. I guess I had to have a commercial license I think. You know, I actually can't remember if I did or not. I thought the commercial license was just for shrimping but I don't think we had to have a license to go trawling. We could do about anything we wanted to do to be honest with you. And we did it. But.

R. What about state permits?

20:00.0

RB. Nope. The scallop was like the lobsters. I had to have a scallop license. And shrimp which was a commercial license too. That's all I had was lobster, shrimp, commercial and scallop. And that was it.

R. And what ports were you fishing out of when you first started?

RB. Right here.

R. Right out of Stonington?

RB. Yup.

R. So we already talked about your first boat.

R2. Where would you typically take your boat out?

RB. To work on it?

R2. Yeah, was it here?

RB. Yeah, Billings probably.

R2. And you had three boats total over your career fishing?

RB. Yes. Yup.

R. Could you tell me about the other boats? We talked about the first boat which had a was it a V8 oldsmobile in it. The 36-foot wooden one.

RB. From '64 through '74. And then in '74 I had the new glass one built and then 5 years ago I had the wooden one built. So yeah I've had three boats.

R. What size engines were in the last two?

RB. Caterpillars. 350 horse cats. I've had caterpillars for 35 years, just caterpillars, same engines.

R. Do you know the gross tonnage on the boats?

RB. 21 ton on both of them. The wood and the glass are pretty much the same. And I'm pretty sure that's what he told me the last time I pulled out my wooden one, but they are both the same- about 21.

R. How much could the glass one hold? How much fish could it hold?

RB. Ohh uh I want to say it's very hard. When we would consider we had enough fish in there about 17,000 or 18,000 right in there.

R. What about the 36-foot wood one?

RB. 8,000 probably. Yeah.

R. So maybe just to repeat this, well actually within the groundfishing industry what kinds of species did you target over the course of year?

RB. Cod.

R. Just cod straight through?

RB. Yes. All my life it's cod 'cause they were much higher. Cause when I was in the heft of my fishing 'cause I didn't know what they were doing with it cause we had done real well and there was very many. Only one or two of us going at a time. And we were doing good, they were big codfish. I mean you take \$800 a day in 1964 that was a lot of money and those fish we were selling to Vinalhaven 'cause that was the only other fish company around here other than taking them to Portland or Boston.

R. Did you sell to B&M? Who did you sell your codfish to?

RB. I was just trying to think of his name. Um Bickford. Bickford was his name over there.

R. Bickford?

RB. Yeah.

R2. In Vinalhaven?

RB. Yeah. You ever hear of it?

R2. No, I was just clarifying.

RB. Oh okay. Spencer Fuller bought a plant over there. He is in Portland right now. We sold to him for a while. But anyways those codfish that I was catching they would dry them right over there. Send them down to Florida and they would strip them up into salt cod and put them in little boxes and send them right back up this way. I don't know if you have ever seen them in your life or not? Salt cod in a wooden box. Well they actually come from Vinalhaven. When I was, by the time I was growing up and catching fish most of them come from me cause a lot of the other boats were catching hake and pollock.

R. Cause those are all fresh fish that were getting canned at B&M?

RB. Yup, yup.

R. What percent of your overall income so you think groundfishing was?

RB. Oh gesh. Three quarters.

R. Three quarters?

RB. Yeah. Yup.

R. And you were fishing about three quarters of the year for groundfish?

RB. Yup, well not three quarters, half. We would do better at groundfishing than we would at anything else.

R. And the rest of the year was...

RB. Shrimping and lobster.

R. Shrimp and lobsters.

RB. Yeah cause the shrimp wasn't worth anything and lobsters weren't worth anything. We could get buyers of the fish alright even though there wasn't a lot of money, but if you could get some good poundage you could make some money on the codfish because I mean, I think we had 75,000 for a week of cod. That was the best week we had so you know, it was good.

R. For how many days, or for how many trips was that?

RB. Over 6 days. We went everyday. Weather didn't bother us. Cause I had, the 42 boat, there wasn't any in town in '74 you know. And when I got it we could go offshore. Yup.

R. So what months were you groundfishing usually? From what month through what month?

RB. Well actually lots of my netting would start in April and quit Labor Day and stop lobstering cause Labor Day is usually the time those shedders would come out. We would go right up to Labor Day. And set up and set in our pots.

R. So cod was the most important groundfish for you?

RB. Yup, yup.

R. And you first used hook and line?

RB. Yup.

R. And then you also used jigged and then you gillnetted and you also used the Norwegian jigs?

RB. Yup. And I trawled in there too you know. Hake trawls.

R. Like tub trawls?

RB. Yup.

R. How long did you do that for?

RB. Ohh see I was tub trawling before I was into the gillnetting, 'cause then you could see what was there for fish. That's a lot of work and because it was hard to get the baiters to bait the trawls and it was always quite expensive. So then we get into the gillnets and gillnetting is good money. But it's the poorest way to catch a fish. I don't care what anybody tells you. It's a poor way to catch fish because you hurt more, you

kill more stuff in the water. Don't get me wrong, not so much of the porpoise or the whales, we don't see much of that. I think once in 10 years I had one day, I had one and the last day I went I took an observer with me and I got two. The last day I went. So there's three dolphins, or whatever porpoise as we called them, I had in ten years. There was never a whale, but it's a poor quality fish in the gillnet, cause when they get so many fish in them, they lay on the bottom.

R. Do they get sand fleas in them?

RB. Yes anything in them. Eels, slime eels alright? There are places out there that would clean the fish out in a half hour, so. And you lose a lot, so it's a poor way, but hook you don't lose them or dragging you don't lose them. Your taking back every hour and on your hook they'll stay alive if you tend your gear everyday, but gillnets no. It's a poor way of doing it.

R. How many gillnets were you using when you first started?

RB. I used 20 the first time we started and then I went on the last three years I had 40. Yeah 40, the last three years I had 40.

R. What was the mesh size?

RB. 6 ½

R. Even from the start?

RB. From the start. The only size they had. If you want bigger that's fine cause all your doing is catching bigger fish, and when they go smaller than 6 ½ your just getting smaller fish, juveniles. I want to say 50% of the fish out there when I was fishing was too small to be caught in a 6½ inch mesh but they would be feeding on what we call bug-eyed shrimp or krill. They would be feeding on them and when they were feeding on them they would get they're bellies full and they look just like a pregnant woman and they couldn't swim through that 6½ inch mesh.

R. Cause their stomachs would get caught.

RB. That's right and that's the only reason why we caught them because they were full of feed. It's quite something fishing. That's why I like fishing is because everyday it's different and today I'm still learning things after all these years lobstering. No two years are alike; there is always a challenge out there. So that's why I like fishing.

R. Are there shadders coming in here yet this year?

30:30.0

RB. Just started. Yup the ocean is full of lobsters, its full of them. There's nothing to get 50 lobsters in a pair of traps, it's not keepers you understand, but lobsters overall. I've never seen that in my lifetime, things'll look good in the lobster industry for a while if they all live.

R2. So you were, first you started, well you started in 1974 when you bought your boat you were gillnetting at that point, right when you started?

RB. Yup, yup.

R2. Okay and then you would switch to tub trawling during the year or did you have a period where you just gillnetted and then a period where you trawled?

RB. Period when I trawled and a period when I gillnetted, but I didn't do much trawling other than halibut trawling after I got the gillnets. The tub trawling was filled in between. I done most the tub trawling in my old first wooden boat. And after I got my gillnets we kind of tossed the hooks away cause it was easier and everything was aboard the boat every night and you know haul them back every day.

R. You got the gillnets in '69?

RB. I got the gillnets in no '74. Same year I got the boat.

R. Okay so when you got the new boat you also go some new gear too?

RB. Yup they were pretty close. The years have gone by so fast. That's pretty close.

R. How long were most of your trips when you first started fishing?

RB. I had no trips. We run Jeffery's, which is at 45 miles, everyday. Up to as far as 60 miles. But we went every day.

R2. 60 miles out and 60 miles back?

RB. Yup.

R. So how long of a trip was that?

RB. 2 hours out and 2 hours back.

R. That's a fast boat.

RB. Yup. But you know if we went further 20 knot you got a pretty good idea. And the reason why I got out of gillnetting I say I had two girls and my wife said to me, "you haven't seen the kids for three weeks" and I said, "what are you talking about?" and she said, "You haven't. You been leaving in the morning before they wake up and they in bed when you get home" and that's they way we went. Most fishermen that want to do something- go hard in their life early. So when she told me that I sold my gillnets. Sold everything and started lobstering. Just lobstering, yup, and went to the elementary school and coached basketball for 6 years in my spare time. So I took plenty of time with the girls. I had quite a life and I've enjoyed it on the water. Everyday on the same way when I get on that bay in the morning I still get cold chills up my back when I see that sun come up. It takes just 7 minutes from the time it breaks till it gets up over. I've done it 1,000 times and still when I see that water flat calm and the sun in the morning, ah, its unbelievable.

R. So how many crew did you have when you were fishing with the gillnets?

RB. Two. Two beside myself.

R. And what about before that with the hook and line?

RB. Two.

R. Two as well?

RB. Yup. Kept two on the boat. Scalloping two.

R. Shrimping two?

RB. No, one besides myself shrimping most of the time, but scalloping we had three and most of the time I kept two men besides me.

R. Same guys or did you go through a lot of crew?

RB. Nope I didn't go through a lot of crew because I took care of my crew. I didn't want them to do anything I wouldn't do and I paid them good, but they got tired or got off on their own. Most of them got off on their own and started fishing. Save enough to get their boats and things yup.

R. So what's the farthest you ever traveled to go fishing?

RB. I'd say 60 miles.

R. 60 miles?

RB. Yup.

R. Cause it was always just kept to a day?

RB. Yup.

R. What condition do you think the stocks were in when you first started gillnetting?

RB. It was unbelievable. People don't know if you haven't seen it if you know what I'm saying. But yeah I mean I feel when you go 45 minutes from here, like 20 miles, I feel, I fished 20 miles for 4 years and I didn't go outside of there on the inside in the one area.

R. What years were those?

RB. Well the first 4 I went.

R2 '74-'78.

RB. Yes, you're getting on to it woman.

R2. [Laugh].

R. And uh before that with the hook and lining?

RB. Same thing. I didn't go quite as far as that but, what had happened when those jigs came out it just amazed me and I wanted to try it the worst way, but nobody was doing it and nobody tried it. But I did hear that in Vinalhaven a couple of fellows were doing it so I went out there, and it just so happened that there was a big bunch body of herring and wherever there is feed out there, there are groundfish with them. That's just the way it is, wherever the food is is where the fish are. Okay and there was just a lot of herring in the Gulf of Maine that year and there was a lot of codfish so.

R. What prices were you getting when you first started and what process were you getting at the end for the cod?

RB. Same thing went straight through.

R. About a quarter you said?

RB. Yup just about. Then I'd come over here and started selling in Stonington and then we started going to Boston, but \$0.25-\$0.30 cents, but then we had to pay for trucking for cod \$0.25-\$0.30 cents maybe \$0.40 cents but then we had to pay for trucking and you know to get them out there \$0.10 cents so I better off staying right in to Vinalhaven. The only reason why I come over here is because it shorten my day up by a couple hours. Going in there sometimes we would get stuck in there and I could get out, 'cause other boats selling be 9:00 or 10:00pm before we get home and here we would come in unload and that was it. But price \$0.25 cents, majority of the fish I caught that's what I got for them.

R. So you finished fishing before the Portland Fish Exchange started?

RB. Yes. Yes.

R. Okay. So while you were fishing did you notice the stocks change at all?

RB. No. No the last year I went not just because of the kids, my wife stepped on me but, I had to go, started going a little bit further. Like 30 miles to get what I wanted to get and it seemed like it... when I got through there was like 15, 18 maybe 20 probably 20 gillnetters out of here then, a lot of boats going and only two of us that first 4 years. I only saw two of us going out of here and then each year there started to be more. There was probably 15-20 boats out of here the last year I went.

R2. What year was that?

RB. That was '84. '74, '84 yes yes '84.

R. Okay so '84 was the last year. And do you know how many boats were going out of other ports in the area when you first started?

RB. Yeah we had three or four. Four out of Vinalhaven when I was going. I would say the two out of here and then the same thing happened over there that happened here happened over there, they started coming, more boats started coming but they probably had only had 10-12 boats over there but we had the majority of them here.

R. Do you know about Swan's or Bass Harbor at all?

RB. Ohh yeah there was absolutely. Swan's Island had four and Bass Harbor had four but Bar Harbor I don't know, there were more boats there in Bar Harbor than Bass Harbor so I don't know about there. There was Jonesport -they all got into it the whole coast was into it. There was money to be made so there was a lot of boats going up and down the shore.

R. Did you ever see any of them over here in the same fishing grounds?

RB. Yes absolutely where ever the fish were and we were doing real well. Our biggest problem was when we were going to Portland. When we first started going to Portland, I got out of it. I only went one year to Portland before I got out of it, and these fellows would go to Portland and Boston and there was weeks that they landed unbelievable poundage of fish here. I mean it was like two tractor trailers a day of fish, of all different species, and guys would get wind of it when they unloaded them trucks. The fisherman out of Gloucester, Gloucester was the biggest problem, they would get wind of it and up they would come. Draggers especially, big draggers, they would get into the gear. We had an awful time out here with them. Everything went along cause the last one to come up they stopped him. They got the coast guard to come out and his boat was full of gillnets in his you know dragged up 40-50 gillnets and had them hanging off the boat, so I don't know if you watch this whale thing on television.

R2. Whale Wars?

RB. Yes.

RB. Well they have, they did the same thing. They dropped the rope in front of the boat and the wheel picked it up and stopped the boat. The gillnetters...

R2. Who did that?

RB. The gillnetters did. The only way they could stop it till the coast guard came because they wanted to coast guard to come to see what he had done. The gear was all around his boat hanging there.

R2. They hung it on purpose?

RB. Yup.

R2. Or after they caught it in their net they hung their nets to dry or something?

RB. Nope, the draggers, the Gloucester fleet got into the nets and towed them up to the surface with their doors, heisting their doors and fishing nets up. The gillnetters wanted the coast guard to see what they had done but if they (the Gloucester draggers) could run the boats they could of gotten clear of that nets, cut them and taken off and forget them down here, but the boys got together and got together and dropped their hosses. Hosses is an anchor rope in front of the boats and filled the rope on the wheel so they couldn't stall the engine, so they had them right there. The coast guard came down and the company that owned the draggers ended up paying for the nets and those fellows got a heavy, heavy fine. But it had been going on for 5 years before they caught them.

R. Where was that?

RB. Jeffery's Bay.

R2. Were there five boats from Gloucester?

RB. There was three from Gloucester.

R2. Did you have a nickname for them? [Laughing]

RB. Yeah I do dear. I don't want to vibrate that tape [Laughing].

R. Did they ever land here?

RB. Nope, nope they never came in here. But there were only two or three of them in Gloucester.

R. Did any other boats from different ports ever land here? Bar Harbor boats?

RB. Nope, nope. They would come up and fish with us, oh sure, we fished together, talked, but they didn't want us out there, they wanted the fish. So I don't think there's any place on this whole coast of Maine that the fisherman... I think there are smarter fishermen in this town than the whole length of the coast. If there is any fish out there to be found they will find them right here 'cause the fish that was caught in this town from the fishermen, the figures were unbelievable, unreal I'll tell you. Robin knows, I don't know what it was but probably 3-6 million pounds brought in in 3-4 months, at least that. So, but they would get wind of it down there when we would have a big catch for a week. Send in probably a million pounds for a week and up they would come and get into the nets.

R. Cause they would see the Maine plates....

RB. Sure, they know the driver's unloading them cause all the fish goes to the auction I guess you would call it down in Gloucester and course the truck driver would come in there and they would ask him, "where your from?" and he'd tell them Stonington and they'd come up to Stonington.

R2. So when they left would there still be fish left or would they have pretty much gotten them all?

RB. No, you wouldn't, I'll tell you what back then what we run into, when we fish a place hard, 'cause your cleaning a fish, I never liked it but they would gut a fish right there on the fishing grounds. Finally the boats in here picked up on it but they would attract the dogfish cause they were feeding on the stomachs and stuff and they get them in their nets and the fish would leave cause dogfish and fish don't mingle.

R. The fish run away?

RB. Yup, hugely. But they found out what they were doing and so they would haul in the other net or two and go into another area or haul their nets and clean their fish but they wanted to clean the fish as quick as they could to keep them as fresh as they could.

R. Have you ever fished for dogs?

RB. Yes, I hated it. Only a couple days. I couldn't stand it. The stomachs were bad. See that's dogfish and shark- that's a family. Their bladder breaks, only in a blue shark. A blue shark and a dogfish they eat them, they eat dogs, blue shark and dogfish are both alike, their bladder breaks quick. And it goes through the whole body and you can smell it, it's terrible. So when we get a mackerel shark or a ... we call it a mud shark but its not it's a one that your not supposed to have today... it was very good eating. We used to open them right just as soon as we catch them and take the bladders out.

R2. Did you skin them too?

RB. Nope, nope. Those, the mud shark it isn't called a mud shark cause there is a special name for it, and there is three sharks out there that's got the same tail as a swordfish and if you cut the fins off the sharks a lot of times they would sell them for swordfish. Okay?

R2. Yeah.

RB. They did a lot, cause there are only swordfish, a mackerel shark, what's it, oh the mako has the same tail, they have the flat place on the trail and only swordfish and those three sharks have it. So they would cut off the heads and the fins and you could actually sell it in the market and in the store or fish market. If you sliced it you could see there's not much difference in the meat. The color of the meat or whatever so they would go for swordfish.

R. So were you using ice this whole time?

RB. Yes.

R. And where did you get your ice from?

RB. I didn't. When I was going here I was only 40-45 minutes from the dock.

R. So you didn't use ice?

RB. No, I didn't use ice. Just an hour for me to run it and get in here.

R. What about later on when you were going out to Jeffery's?

RB. Yeah we had to.

R. Who were you buying from?

RB. Um we had an icehouse up on the hill here and then they would bring ice back when they would bring the boxes back on the truck and we would get so many boxes.

R. Do you remember the prices per ton?

RB. It wasn't a whole lot it; it was something like I think we paid \$3.00 a box. That's about the only thing I remember is about \$3.00 and that was up here we used to have to pay so.

R2. How big was the box?

RB. Fish box, 100 pounds, well you could put more in it but on average 100 pounds probably for a fish box. Yup.

R. So when you were selling on Vinalhaven the whole time you sold on Vinalhaven was to this guy who dried it as salt cod and then it got processes farther?

R2. In Bickford.

RB. Bickford.

R. Bickfords.

RB. Yup.

R. And do you know where it went after that generally?

RB. Just what, my fish out of Vinalhaven went to Florida, and then it came back here and all over. It would come up this way and we used to get the boxes in the fish markets around here and it would say right on them Vinalhaven, Maine.

R. Ah people probably though it was all 100% local...

RB. Ohh yea it had a Florida top on it but if you read right down there on the bottom of the box it said Vinalhaven, so but they used to dry them over there and I just couldn't believe it.

R. When did that stop?

RB. Um well I went about 6 years over there, 7 years probably. But I wish you could of seen, as far as my eyes could see in there, there would be racks.

RB. So anyways there would be racks of just fish as white as snow, not a fly around anywhere. Not one anywhere cause it was salty and they don't mess with salt- a fly, but they would put codfish, I think it was 10,000 pounds of codfish in a 4 by 8 square block in a cooler, and they would pile them up- okay. Every thing face up the first day and then the women would repack them down the next day. That water would, half of those fish would drive the water out of that fish and almost dry it but I forget now what they called it.

R. And that was in salt they were doing it?

RB. Yes, buried it with salt. When they put them on the racks they were there for like two days and they would bring them in and ship them right to Florida.

R. Just two days?

RB. Yup. But like I say they would squeeze most of the water. You could actually ship them right out once you got them off all that weight cause it squished the water right out of them. And uh the drying, either one of the fish could of gone right out, they could of shipped them, but they wanted to get them dried. Not dried fish, but to get the water out of the fish. 'Cause it would I don't know it would do something if they didn't get it out so they tried to push it out, pressure it out, dry it out. So when they get a lot of fish they either fill the racks up and then pack some like that to get rid of all of that fish, cause this stuff is all salt, no freezing or anything you understand? And then they had to pack it in boxes and rack it and fill it each. Wrap it and pack it in 100 pound boxes and ship them out. They would go on the ferry over to Rockland from Rockland I think they flew them down to Florida, I don't think they were trucked. I'm not positive of that but I think they was.

R. Who are the truckers here in Stonington?

RB. Well it would have to be Hardee. Hardee, the Co-Op, and Trundy. There were three truckers, yeah.

R. And same rate with every one of them?

RB. Pretty much, pretty much, yeah. Yup. Its hard to say that cause as the years go along oh a one company and another company and as the years come up, things stated going up higher and higher the ice went higher, gas, trucking went up you see what I'm saying? And we started off with \$0.03 cents for that was

only for about 6 months we paid \$0.03 cents for a pound, but Jesus when you only get \$0.10 cents for your fish that's not leaving you too much, see? But it was still good money. Better money you could make anywhere 'round here.

R2. Did you only sell your cod to Bickfords or would you sell...

RB. Everything. He took everything but I like I told you I tried to get cod and stay with the cod.

R2. But all the drying he was doing was with the cod?

RB. Yup, yup that has nothing to do with me, that was all him. I just brought them in round and kept them as clean as I could and as fresh as I could, and the minute they hit the dock then he would split them. Probably 20 women cutting the fish, splitting them, and putting them and its no job, anyone who knows what they are doing-it only takes about a minute to split a fish and ready it for drying. There is not job to it at all; it's unbelievable the way they cut them. You don't see it anymore. Women were I guess tough back then.

R2. Yeah back then...

RB. [Laughing]

R. How many other people were selling there, do you know?

RB. How many boats were there?

R. Yeah how many boats were selling to that processor?

RB. Oh my god. There was probably 20, 15-20 boats out of Vinalhaven. Those were trawlers okay? They were hakers, that's what I call them, no gillnets until I started. When I started then a couple more gillnets came up from over there and I was selling over there.

R. Those are like hook and liners, tub trawlers?

RB. Yeah tub trawlers. But I was kind of on top shelf cause nobody else had been jigging and nobody could catch the codfish. The codfish that those guys on Vinalhaven were catching were like this [demonstrating size with hands] rock cod that had worms in them. When you get worms you have to candle them and pick the worms out, that took time, labor, money and I averaged 20 pound cod the first 4 years I was jigging, averaged about 20 pound codfish, on a hook and all I had to do was split them and there was no worms in them.

R. No worms?

R2. Was it because you hooked them?

RB. No they are what you call a school cod. A cod that is migrating, just coming in here, feed and go back offshore or wherever but the ones they were catching were groundkeeper's.

R2. So they were closer to shore the ones they were catching?

RB. Yes, when I told you ground keepers there was an inch inside stock, I was catching an offshore stock like I don't know if Ted Ames...

R2 Yeah that's what I was thinking of.

RB. I knew you was. Okay but that is true, there was an inside stock and an offshore stock.

R2. And that was something that you recognized back then?

RB. Ohh yeah, no problem it was common to us, white bellies is a school cod that travels outside and come in here, the Gulf of Maine, to follow the herring to feed, but the grey ones, the black cod we call it, are ground keepers that live here and bond there.

R2. Ohh so you could tell them apart by the colors?

RB. Ohh yeah no problem, some of them were red. The rock cods red.

R2. The ones that were inside were black or red?

RB. Yes, yes and they had worms, and you had to pick them out, no big deal but cost money when your filleting and you have to candle them and have to put a bulb under them and get those worms out. Every fillet, there is a difference than a white offshore white belly cod what we called a school and they go and come as they please... I guess.

R. So what months were you usually fishing for those ones or where you fishing for them the whole time?

RB. That's July. Nope July the last two weeks in June, the first two week in July, so usually about a month that time of year, the fish, the herring, would come in in a certain way. Don't ask me why. It might have been to spawn I don't know that. But right when the herring showed up the cod showed up and everything else. There was pollock with them, big pollock but I was, I just got cod and I would fish for the cod 'cause pollock were in deeper water most of the times when there is herring around and I didn't want them.

R. Not worth as much?

RB. Nope, nope. You find that out if your going fishing, very quick [laughing].

R. Did you feel like the prices you got for your cod were fair?

RB. Cod, yes it was back -then yeah absolutely it was a good price. 'Cause if you think about it for \$0.25 cents a pound uh today there is a lot of times they only hit a dollar you know today.

R. Right, yeah.

RB. But I mean there are times when they are higher but a lot of times they hold a dollar a pound. Maybe not that high. You could buy cod fish 6 months ago all filleted for \$3.99, so see that fish isn't very expensive when they bought it, and I think right now they are getting their quota up all the codfish they wanted offshore. I mean I've heard that. It's funny how it's coming back, I don't know how long it will take for that to come back but a lot of them are showing up.

R2. Do you see them in your lobster traps?

RB. Oh yes plenty of them.

R2. The cod?

RB. Yup, the inside stock, yeah, okay. There are it's an 18-24 inch cod, that's usually what they are running and then certain times of year we get a small run like little fellas like that, a lot of them. What did I say 18-24, legal ones.

R2. And are those the sizes they would be in the 70's when you would see them too?

RB. No, I didn't seem much in our traps then.

R2. Well when you were catching them?

RB. Yes.

RB. But we can't take them home you understand?

R. Do you know whether your groundfish linings were ever recorded?

RB. No, no.

R2. They weren't?

RB. No. Everything I caught, I mean, we didn't have to. My shrimp, we didn't have any market- this is why we are arguing about that for- because we never had a processing plant down here. We had to go to Portland with them and when they slacked off we peddled all, peddled all our shrimp, everything. So no I don't got not a thing from all that fish that I caught. And trust me, they was only two of us the whole way length of this coast, through, well Portland, but I don't even think there was any in Portland when I started. The two of us my friend and I he started his first year and I was the second year with him and for two years we were the only gillnetters that was around. Nobody around here and then everybody started. But no, there's no landings. The only landings that I had, I had a book that I would write down what each net had for that time of year, the date and where we set our nets. We used to put the poundage of what we figured we would get out of the net, the date, and the bearings.

R. You would look at that the next year?

RB. Yup I would look at that the next year.

R. Where did that book go?

RB. Fell overboard [laughing] cause it was different each year but after I remembered the bearings that we fished on, once you fish the areas you know the bearings. So, but they weren't there, so I threw it overboard. Wherever there was feed we would find the fish, so hunt for feed.

R. We're curious in your opinion what would need to happen to revive the groundfish fleet in eastern Maine?

RB. Ohh boy I was hoping you would ask me a question like that, I know just exactly how to answer it. You would put so many fish a day and you won't have any problem when the fish come back again, so many fish, so many boats or whatever, when you catch the limit that's it. Gillnets and fish are out, let them come back. When you see you know if everybody has to work together. Say a couple thousand pounds a boat a day when we was catching 8,000-15,000 a day, but if you had a couple thousand a boat, even with today's expenses and stuff but you got to have a price. You can't let fish go for \$0.03 cents or \$0.05 cents, them people, that middle man has got to pay for them fish. If it comes back again if we start fishing again. Do you understand what I'm saying, that has to be with it. You have to get money to hold with 2,000 pounds okay. 2,000 pounds enough, so many a day that's all you got to do. All I knew what to do was catch all that I could catch.

R. And you think that would lead to a better price?

RB. Yeah, absolutely if they knew that there was only so many fish being landed they would have to pay to get them. Okay because fish aren't going to be any cheaper, well actually right now I said they are cheap but they aren't right now, they are high and you know cause of the fuel costs. They had to pay it 'cause they couldn't survive but if they were able to go fishing, like see this area get right together, like PERC, and set right out and everybody talk it over about how many fish we feel comfortable with, catching a day to survive to make a living. Those big days are all over with. We know that and so if we could just get so many a day that's good. At least you have some fish out there but if you just go and catch all the fish you can it's not going to help you a bit.

R. So what about infrastructure and services around here? Do you think there's anything that would be needed extra to what's currently available?

RB. Ohh well to be able to go fishing? Yeah you're going to have to have ice and I would like to see people cutting fish. I mean before all of us die I've been asking, we have marine class at high school and I don't know if you have ever heard of Tom Dime but he's a very nice smart man and he is teaching it. And I want him to show these kids about how to tie these trawl knots that and show them about trawling cause they don't know anything about trawling and filleting fish and cutting fish or whatever, cause there is nobody around anymore. If we was able to go fishing and have our own plant right here, we had one of the biggest fisherman in town just bought a place up here now and it's open and its going pretty good and he would like to cut fish and have people working to cut fish.

R. Where is that?

RB. It's Brent Oliver, it's right up, its up over the hill here about a mile, I'm trying to think of the name, he changed the name. Uh, I don't know what it's called.

R2. So he is buying fish?

RB. No, he wants to buy fish, and I was going to go dragging this summer to see what was out there cause there hasn't been a dragger on the bottom out here for years and we seen a lot of red fish, I don't know if you know what red fish are but we are seeing a pile of them. They have been here for 10 years, they just there aren't very big but that's what's going in the trap. I mean I'm sure there are some bigger ones out there, but we've had them for about 10 years. If a trap sets up on the bottom and parted off and we hooked it with something or caught it with a net or whatever there's no doubt going to be about 20-30 redfish in it.

R. Do you have a permit to fish for redfish? Do you have a groundfishing permit?

RB. No I had a multi-species license and I just lost it. I got pissed off because the guy told me I didn't send my logbook in. I did not fish and I did send it in and they lost it. And I told him that and I haven't heard a word from them and I have yet to get my permit, they didn't send it to me. So that's over with.

R2. When did that happen?

RB. A month ago.

R2. Oh a month ago.

RB. Maybe two. I'm not sure.

R2. So you lost your...

RB. Multi-species permit.

R2. A month ago. Is anyone helping you talk to them?

RB. I haven't called the man back yet and I haven't talked to the redhead there.

R2. Holly?

RB. No the man, the boy.

R2. Ohh Aaron.

RB. Yeah Aaron. I haven't told him what had happened but I got mad and then I didn't fight it anymore. I'm tired of fighting it when they tell you cause I'm not on a computer, and you can do it with the computer. My daughter, we got talking about it after, and she said you know dad there is nothing to it, you go in there and send it in every week. They want you to do it every week now, but I have 1, 2, 3, 4 logbooks to fill up and now when I go in there used to be, like my shrimping I would fill out my logbook for the year. I didn't fill it out everyday. That was okay but still it's a lot of work, it's a lot of stuff to keep. We want to go fishing, we don't want to have think about logbooks and these little boxes on your bulkhead that tell you if you go out or not, what is that?

R2. VMS

RB. Yup. Were small, were not company boats or anything like that. On my fish, on my shrimp, I don't mind filling a logbook. The lobster, I hate it cause a fisherman, lobster fisherman does not tell anyone where he caught his lobsters and especially what area, what day, you see what I'm saying? That was something that was in us when we started. You just don't say anything; you just don't talk about it.

R. That's a lot of pots to write information about.

RB. Well it is it is too. And I think the way it's set up right now is they are picking one fisherman out of an area for a month or something like that. He has to do it for the month and then they get another fisherman for a month to send in whatever he is doing.

R2. Oh for Aaron?

RB. No for the state. 'Cause we fought, we fought we didn't want it, we lobsterman fisherman did not want the logbook. Cause we thought it was lobster fisherman didn't want to give up the information. But I understand they need it cause it makes there work a hell of a lot easier but they getting paid for it too. Don't get me upset you two (laughing).

R. Would you like to go fishing again for groundfish?

RB. I would love to, this is why I only have a high school education, and I'm here with PERC because I've known Robin since the first time she has ever come here. She knows how I've worked in my life and I know she is a very smart woman when it comes to fishing. And we're trying to keep it alive so these kids can do they can do what we did and get by. If these lobsters weren't here it would be bad; the whole community would be gone. The whole state on the waterfront, it was like I say we had to go groundfishing, we couldn't make it just lobstering. Whatever happens out there, and lobsters are great right now, but in my lifetime I've seen that come and I have seen that go just like any other fishery. But I do believe that we hit the groundfish so hard that we depleted it almost, and I like I say the last 5 year I have seen a lot of

groundfish show up and I'm happy with it, and I want to go just to see what's out there. Not for the money, I just like to go out and if I can bring in some flatfish or something and sell over to the fish plant just to be able to go out I mean. And I would tell anybody the same thing I just told you earlier about so many fish a day and that's it. And them guys if lobstering went to hell they can go ground fishing or hooking or dragging or whatever.

R2. What if it was only boats out of Gloucester and New Bedford that were allowed to go fishing if you guys up here didn't have the access?

RB. [Laugh]. What do you mean, how I would feel about it or...

R2. Well cause your talking about we'll come together and figure out the amount but what if only one boat caught that amount? Would that be okay in your opinion?

RB. No, no. Well it would be almost what you are saying because if you had 10 ton of fish to catch and so many boats, you see what I'm saying? If only three of the boats caught them then that's it. But then you gotta be smarter than the next guy to catch your quota, see but I don't think, I can not believe the only thing that is left of the groundfish is company boats you know? Not would I want uh...

R2. Day boats?

RB. No.

R. Owner-operators?

RB. Owner operators. Uh bankers, lawyers, they own the boats that's what we got there now fishing for the groundfish and the rest of the state that needs the money, workers. I can't explain it to you because you would have to see it. But we had with those 17 boats, say 20 boats in here gillnetting, they would probably be 300 people working in this town just on the fish if you were taking care of it, and today you need those, people need those fish. You know it's a good fish. So, I don't know, I'm getting kind of wound up about it now, but anyway.

R. So you would say it's important for the community here to have access.

RB. Yeah exactly, I just don't like the idea of them taking all of our fishing rights away and giving them to a money boat. That's what's happened. They have bought all the permits and they're nothing but lawyers, most of them I think, but owner operator, nothing else should be out there. You through with me?
[Chuckle].

R. Anything else you want to add?

RB. No, I guess I've talked enough [chuckle].

R. Well thanks so much.

RB. Oh you're welcome.