



WHAT DOES SHELLFISHING MEAN TO YOU?

**A COMPILATION OF INTERVIEWS WITH CAPE COD PEOPLE INVOLVED
IN SHELLFISHING**

Sandy Macfarlane

Coastal Resource Specialists

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INTRODUCTION

The Barnstable County Cooperative Extension contracted with Coastal Resource Specialists to interview people on the Cape involved with shellfish in some capacity. The objective was to get a sense from the people being interviewed – shellfish officers, growers, and commercial fishermen - of what shellfish means to them. All were asked the same question at the start of the interview: “What does shellfishing, the act of shellfishing or the ability to harvest shellfish mean to you?” From that starting point, questions centered on how the individual got into shellfishing and then what they thought the future of shellfishing might be.

While not written in quotes, the material came directly from the interviewees.

The interviews represent geographic, age, gender, and experience diversity as well as shellfish species diversity. One group not contacted directly but an important component of the Cape community was the Wampanoag Native American tribe. We would like to add one or two interviews from to this group to complete the user groups.

Some major themes emerged from this work but one theme that came through loudly is that shellfishing remains an important component of the Cape economy and culture and those who are involved are concerned about its continued presence on the Cape.

Luther Eldredge – Commercial/Grower – Eastham/Orleans

He has been shellfishing nearly all his life. He used to work his grandfather's grant when he was 6 years old, culling quahaugs and that was 74 years ago. His grandfather had a grant in the Town Cove – every day, his grandfather took him with him. They were three kids from Chatham – their mother was a Ryder – when they moved to Eastham – and then a 4th arrived. It's been a part of his livelihood ever since. It is something he loves to do and has always done it – even when he worked for the power company, he was shellfishing on weekends and holidays. When there was no work with the power company, he came back to shellfish. Since he retired, it is all he does and it still provides a good part of his income.

He was in the dragger fishery for a while, and has fished for quahaugs, scallops, clams and mussels. His first real job on the water was dragging mussels off Corporation Beach in Dennis, in Cape Cod Bay, with Bernard Collins (father of Eastham Selectman Ken Collins). The mussels were sold to Gorton Pew company and they were selling them overseas – they weren't popular here then. He was a culler and Howard Walker was the skipper. He was 13 and went 6 days per week and got paid \$3.00/day or \$18-24/week – a lot of money for his age and the times. He got his first Social Security card in 1940 and just recently found out, after finding some old papers, that he had the same last 4 digits as his mother.

He started working for Coffin Construction Co. They did all or a lot of the construction for what was then Cape and Vineyard Electric and he worked in Maine, New Hampshire and Pennsylvania as well as Massachusetts but most of the work was on the Cape. They did sub-stations, setting poles, new construction, maintenance and reconstruction.

As soon as work was over, he went quahaugging or clamming. His favorite is quahaugs and that is what he did mostly. He fished for scallops but that was seasonal. He talked

about how eelgrass in the Nauset system disappeared several years ago but was coming back now. He knew that some eelgrass was being planted, possibly by the people at the National Seashore but he wasn't sure. He's also seen more sea lettuce than usual and he has seen more in Pleasant Bay since the new cut-through. All of the new mussel beds in Nauset are covered with lettuce.

He talked about fishing with Harry Hunt and Jackie Crossman (for lobsters). He now has a 10-pot limit but they weren't too good this year. He was sea scalloping in the bay and elsewhere.

He met "the girls" (two women who established the Nauset Blue Mussel Co. in the late 1970s). They started small, buying a few bushels a couple of days a week. Within a year, they were buying 300 bushels per week. He ran the company for a while, keeping people like his brother Red, Mark Niquette, David Slack and others working, harvesting the wild mussels. They started at about \$3.00/bu. and it went up to \$15.00/bu. Then Mother Nature did not produce seed.

He has maintained his grandfather's grant. It is now split into three pieces – his brother had one (until he got hurt several years ago and was unable to get around and it is now in Jeff Valle's name) and Steve Smith (a Nauset Harbor lobsterman) has the other. Luther grows oysters there on racks and bags. They grow from ¼" to 3" in a year in Town Cove. He told about one year when 50% were big enough to harvest in 5 months. He sells directly to Nauset Fish Market which is where he has sold most of his stock. There is a big demand on the Cape.

He talked about the old days in Cape Cod Bay. Before 1940, he was aboard a small quahaug dragger. Before that, people used bullrakes in the Bay with 40-50 foot poles. He remarked at how difficult that must have been, fishing from catboats with the very long poles. When engines came in, so did pumps and some people, such as the

Youngrens, were able to get an unbelievable amount with their pumpers. Then the towns stopped it and there was a limit of 175 bushels/week.

He has seen natural changes in the stocks over the years. Last year was one of the best for clams. They generally don't come up in the Cove in big numbers but this year there was some seed as well. Quahaugs have been better this year than he has been seen in a long time and it is not the marked stuff – it is natural seed and there are lots of tiny seed showing up in a lot of places. There are some razor fish (razor clams) in places he has never seen them before. He spends a lot of time looking. If there is a flat he hasn't been on in a while, he will check it out. He has seen very few moon snails (they used to be abundant) and he has seen no whelks in the Cove this year and not as many green crabs but there has been an abundance of sand crabs. He said it was amazing to see different things in different years. The first year the Nauset Fisherman's Association planted quahaugs, they put them all over the shore. He waited about 10 days and then went looking for them and all he found was green crabs. There was a market for the crabs at one time for tautog bait. Bass fishermen should use them too.

He's had complaints from people in shore cottages, especially near his grant. There has been a problem about the access to the grant for years and there are complaints about buoys or about the fact that the people have to walk around the gear to get to their boats. But the grant, which was used for bedding stock in the old days and when he was in the mussel business as a place to store shellfish in the water, has been in continuous use for four generations. His grandfather's mother got the right of way to operate a shellfish business and while landowners have tried to get rid of the access over the years, they have been unsuccessful.

He talked about the number of docks that have appeared and said that around every pier is soft muck with no shellfish. In places where there was good clamming, when a dock went in, it became soupy mud. It bothers him to see the docks and to see them not used.

He said they were only there for an investment. The owners think they will someday sell and will make more money because of the dock.

He has used his grant to store shellfish – spare mussels in the winter, big quahaugs that he couldn't sell right away – but he planted some quahaugs one year and they grew fairly well. A friend suggested he try oysters. He put in 5000 the first year and is up to 24,000 this year, on a third of an acre. He talked about different ways of farming and said if he switches to quahaugs, he will keep them under nets until they are ready to sell.

As a commercial fisherman all his life, he was asked if it was difficult to switch to farming. He said he is still doing wild harvest. When asked about aquaculture expansion, he questioned why unproductive areas (the requirement for getting a grant) are unproductive. He said that forces something that probably shouldn't be there and that aquaculture is taking place in areas where there never was anything and probably never will be anything. He said it must be something with the bottom. He talked about springs. He said near his grant, there was a spring where they filled water jugs in earlier times and it was the best tasting water anywhere.

With tourism, they want steamers in the summer but people want quahaugs all year round. There is nothing like quahaugs – clams casino, cherries. The amount of quahaugs dropped off after the size limit got changed (from 2" longest diameter to 1" thick). Something was going on.

There used to be lots of grants in the Town Cove and the Cove was filled with quahaugs. They used to keep all sizes on the grants so when they were big enough to throw spat, they did and they seeded the whole place.

