Oral History: Edward French
Eastport, Maine
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Interviewer: Anna Henry

Edward French, born in 1959, has lived most of his life in Eastport, Maine. His first involvement in commercial fishing was as crew on a herring carrier, and soon after started tub trawling and scalloping on his own during the summer and fall. This interview was completed as part of the University of Maine project, "Assessing Vulnerability and Resilience in Maine Fishing Communities," funded by Maine Sea Grant (PI: Dr. Teresa Johnson).

Interviewer: And let's see here, how have you been involved in the fisheries?

Edward French: I've done fishing over the years from handlining and tub trawling, lobstering, some scalloping, and also covered it for the newspaper, *Quoddy Tides*.

Interviewer: So first I'd just like to get your perspective of how the community was when you were growing up, what was Eastport like at the time?

Edward French: The community as a whole?

Interviewer: Yeah, I mean how was the economy? How important was fishing here? Those kind of things.

Edward French: Well, Eastport was always a fish-processing center so when I was growing up, the remnants of that were still around. So we still had two sardine factories operating, so you still heard the whistles blowing that called the packers to work. You still had the pearl essence plant going and you still had a pretty strong groundfishery with the handlining. And so there have been changes in the types of fishery.

Interviewer: So what were the most important fisheries here when you were growing up?

Edward French: Well, certainly the herring fishery and again, as I say, it was more that Eastport was the fish processing center so they were both packing the fish and also using it, the pearl essence, but all the weirs around here were busy. There were a lot of weirs, both on the New Brunswick side and in Maine and then later the purse seiners. So herring were very important fishery. Lobstering, Eastport itself was never for a long time much of a place for lobstering, although all the places around it were. Deer Island has the largest lobster pound in the world, but for some reason Eastport didn't get into lobstering much till about ten years ago.

Interviewer: So how did you get involved in the fisheries? Did you have relatives or family that were fishermen or –

Edward French: I didn't. I started I guess when I was in grade school, setting lobster traps and continued with that off and on either here or in Portland or Scotland. And then I started handlining and setting tub trawl. And that was back when there was still probably 15 boats out of Eastport that were handlining a lot from Campobello so some days you got 40 or 50 boats out on the drift. Of course there aren't any today.

Interviewer: So about what time was that when –

Edward French: That would have been in the '70s.

Interviewer: And when did the groundfish really start to drop off here?

Edward French: That would have been I would say late '80s. And the haddock dropped off before then. And then the pollock and cod fish more in the late '80s I would say.

Interviewer: So was it easy for you to get into fishing at the time you started?

Edward French: Yes. Both in terms of people being helpful and passing on their knowledge. There were a number of fishermen that really would help people out, Kenny Mallon, Brady Wilson, Bill McGarvey, and of course the regulations were less too so it was easier.

Interviewer: So when did you start fishing on your own? Like when did you get your first boat?

Edward French: I guess I had my first boat when I was about 11.

Interviewer: And then was it like your primary occupation for awhile?

Edward French: For a short period it was. I was both running herring, selling on the herring carrier here and scalloping a bit and handlining and tub trawling.

Interviewer: So I guess I'd like to go through the different fisheries that you were involved in and through each one. So I guess we'll start with herring. So what was the season like when you started fishing herring?

Edward French: Well, I was working on a herring carrier so I wasn't actually fishing for them, but it was pretty much the year round because during the summer and fall we would run over to Nova Scotia, over to Trinity Ledge or the Lurcher and there you'd see in the three mile ring on the radar you could count up to 300 boats. Gillnetters, seiners, carriers.

Interviewer: Wow.

Edward French: It was really a city of lights which it isn't today at all. And then you'd run to the weirs both along the main shore and then in the winter we'd sometimes run with the seiners down the Maine coast, go down to Massachusetts. So that was pretty much year round.

Interviewer: So you were on the carrier so you'd get herring from the boats and then bring it back to Eastport to the processing center here or to other processing places as well?

Edward French: Or other processing places when they needed me to come down or to pack them there.

Interviewer: So how important would you say that fishery was to Eastport at the time?

Edward French: At the time it was certainly one of the things that people still depended on I think because historically they had depended on it. Of course it had been much, much greater here when you had 18 sardine factories going at once, and the same for Lubec, but it was an industry very much in decline. But as I say also with the pearl essence so they were using the herring scales and also with the

fertilizer plant. There weren't really any smokehouses at that time though. But there was still a fairly important industry here then.

Interviewer: And how has it changed or what caused this change? I mean I know it's dropped off quite a bit.

Edward French: Right, right. Well, I think In terms of the sardine packing itself there were a number of factors. Partly competition from other countries. When a plant burned then people needed the capital to rebuild and they didn't always have it and just people were no longer eating tinned food. World War II sardines were sent overseas to all the servicemen, but after that it really dropped off. And then also the catches declined too. The inshore catches from the weirs really dropped off so a lot of the weirs weren't rebuilt. And the fishermen blamed the other ways of fishing often for why there are declines in the catches. So the weir fishermen or the stop seiners would blame the purse seiners. The purse seiners would blame the mid water trawlers and it's probably partly true that they all contributed, but certainly the herring weren't coming in shore like they used to.

Interviewer: All right. So then after you worked on the herring carrier, what was the next fishery that you were involved in?

Edward French: Well, I was groundfishing, both handlining and tub trawling for cod, pollock, halibut.

Interviewer: And I guess what caused you to transition from the herring to the groundfishing?

Edward French: Well, it wasn't really so much a transition in that time and still somewhat today. People like to fish a number of different fisheries so –

Interviewer: Right. So it was just a part of your annual round?

Edward French: Right, right.

Interviewer: Okay. So what part of the season were you groundfishing then?

Edward French: That would be in the summer and the fall. Well, the spring some too.

Interviewer: And where was that? Just around here close in shore or –

Edward French: Yes. And out at Harbor Passage. Of course in those days you could fish in Canadian water then. You can't today, but –

Interviewer: So how big was your boat for that?

Edward French: Oh, just 18 foot.

Interviewer: 18 foot, okay. So you just did day trips?

Edward French: Right, right. And a lot of people did that. There were a lot of small boats that were fishing. And as I say on the drift, you get quite a large number of them. And it would be people from Campobello, Deer Island, Eastport and they all got along fine.

Interviewer: How many hooks were you fishing? Do you remember?

Edward French: For tub trawls?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Edward French: It must have been 300 to 400, I didn't run them out real long lines. And this is for halibut so they're spaced further apart than they were for cod fish.

Interviewer: So how long did you do that?

Edward French: Well, still I'll occasionally set trawl for halibut, but in terms of handlining, oh, I don't know, it must have four or five years or so.

Interviewer: Oh, really? And what made you decide to kind of get out of that?

Edward French: Well, partly other work, but also the decline in the groundfish, pollock and codfish slowly disappeared so it didn't make sense. The halibut are still around so I still fish for them so –

Interviewer: And that was in the '80s you said when they started to decline really?

Edward French: Yes, yes. By the '80s.

Interviewer: What were the markets like at that time? Did you sell your fish locally?

Edward French: Yeah, there were usually buyers either here, in Eastport or Lubec. And then also you could peddle them around town and used to sell pollock for $5.00, the whole pollock which that'd be a 20 to 30 pound fish.

Interviewer: And then you also said you also scalloped a little bit?

Edward French: Yeah, a little bit. Yeah. That really started here in Eastport in the early '70s. And I don't think before that that I remember anyone was scalloping. So I did that for a little while in the '80s.

Interviewer: And were you on someone else's boat or –

Edward French: Yeah, I fished with someone else.

Interviewer: And about how many boats were scalloping at that time? Was it –

Edward French: At that time there weren't very many. I think it started I remember just one or two and by the late '70s, '80s, I would say it was up to 15 or so. And then slowly it increased more and more and you've probably heard about the number of boats for awhile that were coming into Cobscook Bay, up to nearly 200.

Interviewer: Yeah. So what was the season like when you were involved in it?

Edward French: I think it was November 1st or 15th through to April 15th. They used to stagger the opening along the coast according to where people were still setting lobster traps so – and that was part of the reason for the trouble here was the staggered opening. It was opening earlier in Cobscook Bay so the boats came up here the start of the season. So –

Interviewer: And so were you dragging then for scallops? Yeah, okay.

Edward French: Yeah.

Interviewer: At that time were there any regulations on ring size or meat count or anything like that?

Edward French: There wasn't a meat count. I don't remember having a size limit.

Interviewer: Okay. I think those may have been later. I'm not sure. And where did you typically fish?

Edward French: In Cobscook Bay.

Interviewer: Just – okay. And what were the markets like then for scallops?

Edward French: They were local buyers or people again peddled them around. But you never had any trouble selling them.

Interviewer: And how has scalloping changed? Did you know what the fishery is like today?

Edward French: Well, the landings peaked in the '90s and they've been in a big decline for some time now, significant, significant decline. But of course there's both a meat count and a daily catch limit here so people are limited in terms of – it used to be that people would come in with – they would have to shuck till late in the evening to shuck all the scallops. But when there's a catch limit of course they don't have to do that so – but yeah, landings were at the start of the season were very large.

Interviewer: We're also kind of interested in like changes or specific events that impact a fishery and how fishermen adapt. So can you think of any kind of critical changes that happened in any of the fisheries that you were involved in and ways that you responded to them? I don't know, like some of the challenges are like rising fuel prices or like a loss of market or decline in certain species, those kinds of things. Can you think of anything like that that may have made you change your strategy or –

Edward French: Well, certainly declines in species affected how people fish. The loss of the groundfish now is really no groundfishing in Eastern Maine and also the herring fishery has dropped so much. And so more people are lobstering here and there's quite a bit more pressure now in the scallop fishery, urchin fishery because of that. So where before you had a greater choice for diversification, spread out in the fisheries and now there's greater impact on just a few fishery which it makes it much harder for those to be sustainable.

Interviewer: Is that most of the people that were involved in groundfish then when that started to decline, did they just move to other species or did a lot of them get out of fishing in general or do you know?

Edward French: I don't know how much, at least for the handliners, they were depending on it. They had other sources of income usually so when that dropped out, it tended to be the older fishermen anyway so more just stopped fishing. I'm not sure that, at least with the handline fishery, how much anyone really so much shifted over.

Interviewer: So how has the community changed since when you were growing up here? How has the economy changed?

Edward French: Well, certainly the populations continued to decline. There used to be a population over 5,000 at the turn of the century and now it's 1,300. But in terms of the industries that the town depends on, was much more on fish processing

and course agriculture took off here in the ‘80s. And for a while it was really very strong and it’s declined of course in Maine some. But the economy’s also shifted more towards some tourism, much greater artistic community here too.

Interviewer: How has the role of fishing in the community changed?

Edward French: I would say whereas before fisheries or fish processing were seen as really one of the strongest backbones of the economy, it’s now more on the side I would say. And it’s not seen as really one of the aspects that people really depend upon now.

Interviewer: Would you consider Eastport to be a fishing community now?

Edward French: Yes. I think a lot of people want to preserve that heritage and I think when – but there are a lot of newer residents that don’t have that experience and so they might not see it quite so much as a fishing community as the older residents do.

Interviewer: What are the most important kinds of commercial fishing that take place here now?

Edward French: Well, certainly the scallop fishery, the urchin fishery less so. There’s a fair bit of lobstering now. And there’s some limited amount of clamming and mussel dragging. But the herring fishery’s almost nonexistent.

Interviewer: Are you familiar with when the Hague Line was established here between Canada and –

Edward French: Yes. You’d have to remind me of the year, but –

Interviewer: 1984. And I’m just curious if you know how that affected fishing or the community here. Was that an important shift or not?

Edward French: No. Not for the inshore fisheries here.

Interviewer: Were there offshore fisheries that were affected or this community mainly relied on more inshore stuff?

Edward French: This community relied on inshore.

Interviewer: So you mentioned a little about aquaculture, how important is it to the community?

Edward French: Less so than it was in the mid to late ‘80s and the ’90s when they – infectious salmon and anemia hit Cobscook Bay and all the pens had to be emptied. It had quite an effect on the industry in Maine particularly. And you also had the consolidation of all of the – originally salmon farming was meant to be a way for a fisherman either to transition over or to be doing that on the side and also fishing. And eventually it was consolidated all into fewer and fewer companies. And now you only have one company operating in Maine so there isn’t that sense of ownership that people once had, which has been disappointing. But we still have fish farms in Eastport, but we lost the processing plant so there aren’t as many people dependent on it as there were in the ‘80s and ‘90s.

Interviewer: When they kind of declined, do you know what people who had worked in aquaculture what they did? Did people move away or did they find other work or –

Edward French: Some did. They're still, Cooke's is operating a processing plant in Machiasport so some I think went down there to work, which is more of a drive. And yeah, I think some moved away too.

Interviewer: And you also had mentioned tourism. How important is tourism here today?

Edward French: Well, it's one of the aspects of the economy we depend upon in the summer. Our summer season's fairly short. We're not at all like Bar Harbor or Camden, but it's something that people can – we have quite a few shops that are open downtown in the summer, but in the winter it can look rather bleak. But they try to make enough money in the summer to help tide them over. But it's something that the town's continuing to work on to try to attract tourists, certain cruise ships which occasionally come.

Interviewer: So now kind of back to the fishing community here, overall do you think fishermen in Eastport or doing better or worse than 20 years ago?

Edward French: Than 20 years ago.

Interviewer: Or it doesn't have to be specifically 20 years. I mean if there's a timeline where you think things have changed and how they've changed for the better or the worse.

Edward French: Prices in some of the fisheries are certainly stronger. I think for full time fishermen probably things have improved in some ways if they're in a fishery which is still fairly robust like lobstering and for the scalloping. It used to be that the fisheries were almost a subsistence type of economy so that when you caught the groundfish you could then use it to help feed the family during winter or with the packing of the fish. No one made much money packing fish, but it helped you get through the winter. Whereas now the fishermen, those who are still fishing, they're very much dependent upon the fishery and they can make a fairly good living at it.

Interviewer: Do you feel the fishing community here is resilient?

Edward French: Yes, I think they've had to adapt to both the changes in the stocks, with declines, and adapt to new types of fisheries and grab the new type of gear to catch – they develop their own types of scallop drags. I think they have been very resilient.

Interviewer: What do you see as the major strengths of the fishing community in Eastport?

Edward French: Well, I think one of the real strengths is that they have a stronger sense of the necessity of trying to make fishery sustainable so that there isn't a boom and bust cycle. And I think they've often had to be fighting with the state over that, particularly in the scallop fishery. A lot of the initiatives to try to make the fishery sustainable have originated with the Cobscook Bay fishermen and the reaction from the state was always foot dragging. And eventually the state would adopt the proposals, but the idea for the daily catch limit began here, the meat count, culling before, shucking, a lot of those rules were developed here. And that's helped preserve the scallop fishery here which is pretty much the only one that – the only place in Maine where there's still fairly strong scallop fishery.

Interviewer: Do you consider the fishing community here to be vulnerable?

Edward French: Oh yes, very much so because when you are so dependent on just two or three fisheries, it really amazes me that the lobster fishery has been able to be this strong for so long considering the number of fishermen and the number of traps in the water and why lobsters aren't completely overfished. They'll tell you because of the maximum size limit and throwing back the egg bearing females, but it wouldn't take much for the lobster fishery perhaps to collapse. If that happened, much of the Maine coast would be severely impacted. And the scallop fishery, they're trying now with - well, particularly with these closed areas, to try to build that back up, but the scallop stocks have certainly gone done significantly. Yeah, there's a great deal of vulnerability.

Interviewer: What do you see as the major threats facing the fishing community?

Edward French: Well, certainly prices. If prices go down like they did in the lobster fishery, it becomes almost unsustainable with other prices, fuel prices particularly, going up. Becomes almost impossible to then earn a living. I think the lack of government action in terms of not being proactive to protect stocks is a big threat to the fishery. Yeah, I guess that's ah...

Interviewer: In what ways do you think fishermen can adapt to these threats and challenges?

Edward French: Well, certainly fishermen now have to spend much more time lobbying for or attending meetings to try to get rules that they think will be effective in sustaining the fisheries. That didn't use to be the case at all. And so fishermen almost have to become politicians which it makes it harder then because it's less time that you can fish. So uniting and not being – I mean fishermen always traditionally were very independent, now they have to try to speak with one voice which is difficult. But if there are organizations, which there are, which can try to present a united voice for the fishermen, that helps with influencing legislation. I'm sorry, what was the question again?

Interviewer: How fishermen can adapt to the threats and challenges.

Edward French: And then also being prepared to enter other fisheries and also being involved with marketing efforts or lobbying so that there are strong marketing efforts for their fish.

Interviewer: So are there people who represent the interests of commercial fishermen in Eastport?

Edward French: Yes. There's the Cobscook Bay Fishermen's Association which I'm sure you've heard about which does a very good job. Particularly now with the scallop fishery, but they've also worked with the urchin fishery, clams. I think they've done a very good job of trying to get the fishermen to speak with a united voice.

Interviewer: Would you say the fishermen are well organized?

Edward French: Yes, I mean it's always greater to see greater participation. But I think, as in any organization, that's difficult to get. But I would say they're quite well organized.

Interviewer: How would you characterize the relationships between fishermen in the community? Are there conflicts or -

Edward French: I don't see any. Used to have people sometimes complained about the smell of some of the different processing plants here, but people would say that's the smell of money. But now with the salmon net sometimes where they were drying them near where there was a restaurant and might have not made the most appetizing meal, but in general, no, I'm not really seeing conflict. Sometimes it's some question about use of the pier here because it's sometimes used for the port too for loading ships. But in general conflict sometimes arise more between one fishery and another, particularly like lobster fishing and scallop dragging so they can-- gear conflicts, but not with the community.

Interviewer: How about between fishermen in this community and other nearby communities?

Edward French: I think they get along better than they may have in the past. There's always that sense of lobster wars and lobstermen being very territorial, but the number of Eastport fishermen now fish down off the back and they – for awhile I suppose you were having traps cut, but I don't hear of that now. And the tribe's getting much more back into the fishery than they were for awhile. They traditionally have done weir fishery and some groundfishing. But recently they've been starting to go back up and get into the lobster fishery some and groundfishing with draggers so – and the relationship seems to be okay.

Interviewer: Has fishermen's access to the waterfront changed?

Edward French: Not particularly here in Eastport. I mean there has been some loss of access because it used to be you could just go down along the shore and keep your boat there, but because we have good infrastructure here with the break water and fish pier, it's been I think certainly adequate for the fishermen here.

Interviewer: Besides fishermen, who else uses the dock space or waterfront here?

Edward French: Well, there's some recreational use and also the schooners and some visiting boats. There used to be a great deal of trade with the islands here. This was a real commercial center so you had a lot of islanders coming over here to shop and they would tie up and they said you used to be able to walk almost from Eastport to Campobello on all the boats that were tied up. But that's not the case today of course. And as I say also the port uses the pier occasionally for loading ships.

Interviewer: So we talked about tourism a little bit, but how do you feel about tourists and people from away moving here? Do you think that the town should cater to those interests?

Edward French: People from away. I don't know if cater is the right word, but I think they certainly should be welcoming to them. And unfortunately there sometimes is a real rub between those who have lived here for a longer time and those who have moved in. Perhaps it's partly the fault of people moving in being too aggressive in their opinions, but I think quite often can be a great deal of sense of people being provincial in their attitudes and not recognizing that if not they themselves their grandparents moved here and hopefully people were welcoming of them when they came here.

They used to say that half of Eastport came from Back Bay over in New Brunswick and so people moved here. And this used to be a very cosmopolitan place. There used to be people working in the fish factories came here from Syria and Nova Scotia and a lot of different places. And of course when the

shipping was big here in the early 1800s, there were people from all over the place here too. So it always had been more of a melting pot of many cultures and so to see this very narrow provincial attitude is rather disheartening.

Interviewer: How affordable is the current housing situation here and has that changed?

Edward French: Well, it used to be very affordable in the '60s and '70s, yes, you could buy a house here for I don't know maybe $15,000, $10,000 or less. So we suffered with the housing boom in the late '80s and then more recently again. And it's made it somewhat more challenging, but no more so than most places. And we're not quite as bad as some places along the coast like Bar Harbor. So some people have certainly moved out to the nearby communities partly because taxes are less too.

Interviewer: What do you feel have been the most critical changes in the community since you've lived here? I guess throughout your life here.

Edward French: Well, I think the loss of the fish processing has been a real struggle for the community to adapt to. And that's true throughout Maine where natural resource based industries were lost whether it's in the forestry or wood processing or the shoe factories, textile factories, which we also used to have here. And so with the loss of those industries, forging a new economy out of many different sources where you're not sole dependent on just a few employers to employ most of the town has been very difficult. And Eastport's far from alone in struggling with that. Actually, we've been struggling with it longer than many communities. And so perhaps we have a few more insights in how to make something work.

Interviewer: Are there any other big changes that you think have been important?

Edward French: I'm sure there are, but I can't think of anything.

Interviewer: That's fine. What do you think this community will look like in ten years?

Edward French: I think we'll be booming and have a population of 10,000 and everyone will be happy. No, I think we'll continue struggling as we have been for some time. I don't see any radical changes. There has been certainly a shift towards more of the creative economy and I think that will continue to be fairly strong part of the economy here in Eastport. And I think the aim is to try to have that work and mesh also with more traditional parts of the economy, the fisheries, and aquaculture here and tourism. And I think it's possible for all of those to coexist. But I think it will continue to be a struggle.

Interviewer: What would you like the community to look like?

Edward French: Well, it would be great to see it to be very vibrant place where all those aspects of the economy were healthy including fisheries, creative economy, some light industry, and also where it was a good place to raise your families. It is a very good place to raise your families, the trouble is it's tending to become more of a retirement community. And I would hate to see it turn into that. I would like to see the schools be able to be strong and vibrant and so I hope that it continues to be a place where people want to raise their kids. And that the kids will then want to continue living here because they know they can make a good living and do work that they enjoy.

Interviewer: Would you advise young men to enter the fishing industry now?

Edward French: If they know what they're getting into. If they have a good sense of the struggles. Yeah, I think that's certainly something that is viable. You may have to change the type of fishing that you do, but yeah, I think that certainly many people still are able to make a living there and I'm sure they could.

Interviewer: What do you like most about living in Eastport?

Edward French: Well, I think I like probably most that it's still a very real place. It's still very authentic. It's still a place where people do make their living as they historically have and that they're not trying to present something that's not real and not true to visitors. There's still that authenticity and freedom and independence too. People have still very much a sense of independence here.

Interviewer: That kind of wraps up the questions that I have. Are there any other issues that you feel are important that we haven't talked about that are important to understanding kind of the past and present future of the community or any of the fisheries that you've participated in?

Edward French: Well, perhaps in terms of attitudes people sometimes have here is that Eastport really has gone through these boom and bust cycles of big projects and we haven't really touched on it that much. But shipping and ship building was really big here in the early to mid 1800s. Sardine packing was really big here in the late 1800s, first part of the 1900s. The Quoddy Dam tidal project was proposed here in the '30s and never actually got built. We had also a big fight over an oil refinery here in the late '60s and through the '70s. There was a coal fire generating plant proposed for here. Again, where there was a big fight and so people sometimes have a healthy skepticism when new ideas are proposed. And some of that is good and of course more recently there's been a big fight over an LNG terminal here.

One thing I think people did learn, particularly after the oil refinery fight where people didn't speak to each other for – well, may still not be speaking to each other, was that it was better to try to get along no matter your differences because the ramifications are so great for a community that it just can end up destroying a community. And that was what was particularly unfortunate with LNG was that it, and some of the neighboring communities, they didn't restrain themselves. And so some of those ramifications will be long lasting I'm afraid.