

## Oral History: Hugh French Eastport, Maine

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Interviewer: Anna Henry

*Hugh French grew up and lived most of his life in Eastport, Maine. French was never directly involved in fishing industry, but is currently the Director of the Tides Institute. He describes the local economy's shifts throughout his lifetime, particularly the rise and decline of the sardine industry and increased dependence on lobstering. 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: Okay. And what's your occupation?

Interviewee: I'm the Director of the Tides Institute.

Interviewer: And have you been involved in the fisheries at all here?

Interviewee: Not directly, no. And I did do probably a hundred hours worth of recordings of people in the sardine industry who were then in their 80s and 90s back in the late 70s and early 80s. And probably half of those recordings are at the Maine folk life center.

Interviewer: Okay. So can you tell me a little bit about this community when you were growing up and what it was like back then?

Interviewee: It was somewhat larger, more insular I think and still reliant, much more on traditional industry like the fisheries. Particularly it was sort of the last hurrah of the sardine industry. And there were a lot of things here that were sort of on their last gasp. Like businesses where there were third, fourth generation, able to survive who otherwise probably wouldn't if they were starting out simply because they own the building and they've been in business and they were able to sort of eek it out.

Then there began to be affirmative transition that was, began going and is still happening. I mean a fairly significant transition. And it's also when the aquaculture industry was just beginning in the early 80s. The port here was just beginning in the early 80s. Attempts to revitalize the downtown were just beginning. The fish pier, what they call the fish pier, even though it has never really been used as a fish pier was that's when that was built and so forth.

Interviewer: Okay, and how important was fishing to the community?

Interviewee: I think it's always been important, certainly the sardine industry when it started in the 1870s. I mean that's what sort of fueled the community's last period of growth. It was their high point in terms of population and when that began to go south around 1900, 1910 and the community's fortunes very much paralleled the decline of the sardine industry. So the last factory here closed in 1982 so it's now been 30 years.

And you would almost not know that the industry was over here even though there were factory upon factory lined up along the waterfront here. There was very little physical evidence that that ever existed here now.

*Interviewer:* Okay. So other than the sardine factors, were there other industries or businesses that were dependent on fishing?

*Interviewee:* Yeah. I mean certainly lobstering. I think – my sense, I mean I’m not again being directly involved with the fisheries here, my sense is that lobstering is a fair amount more significant today than it was 30, 40 years ago. At least I’ve seen more people that seem to be lobstering. And certainly aquaculture, even though it’s gone through some tough times over the last 30 years, it didn’t exist more than 30 years ago. So that’s much more of a player here.

*Interviewer:* Okay. So how has this community changed since you were growing up? Like how has the economy changed?

*Interviewee:* I think it’s changed fairly dramatically. I mean one, unfortunately the population has continued to decline. I mean since the height of the sardine industry the population of this place has lost 80 percent of its population. That’s a huge hit and reality has hit home on every school, whether it be schools, the downtown district, you know, the city’s ability to provide even basic services to the healthcare system and everything. So it’s – and that’s on one hand.

On the other hand, it’s done some pretty remarkable things. Like the port is I think beginning to come into its own after 30 years of work with that massive conveyor system going in there. And they’ve got the downtown I think is coming back together quite a bit. It still has quite a ways to go in terms of some businesses, but the actual downtown itself is more vibrant now than it was ten years ago. The push to experiment with tidal energy is a very encouraging sign.

Eastport was one of two communities in the state this last, end of last year that won a, what’s called a creative community’s economic development through the state arts commission the other place is in Biddeford. And the only other place in the state that got one of those \$50,000.00 awards was Eastport. And right now we’re in the running where Eastport is one of five islands for the Orton Family Foundation, which is an art based foundation for what they call a heart and soul community planning process.

And so there’s one other community in Maine that’s in the running. There have been two communities in southern Maine that have received awards in the past. The other one is Gardner and then there’s Laconia in New Hampshire. There’s Essex Junction in Vermont and North – I went blank on the name – in Rhode Island. But that’s, both of those two awards and they’re not the only ones. I think are sort of indicative that there is some growing vitality here and it just needs more of it.

But there are cases where we can compete quite successfully and we can go head to head and beyond places like Portland in certain instances. If it’s on a idea basis. If it’s a numbers game, we can’t compete, but if it’s an idea basis we can compete. Increasingly I think we can compete because there are things that are going on here that aren’t going on in Portland for whatever reason.

*Interviewer:* Yeah, can you think of like what do you think has caused this recent kind of growth and new vitality in the area?

*Interviewee:* I think a number of things. One, I think there’s been a sense for a long time, probably for almost 30 years, that things had to change if this place was going to survive. And it wasn’t worth sort of bickering with one another. We had to find ways to build some partnerships and some alliances, both within this immediate

community as well as to the outside that could help solve some problems, could help build some critical mass in a place that doesn't have a lot of population and can build some connectedness to the outside and a place that's not the center of the universe.

And I think that there have certainly been ups and downs and a lot of fits and starts, but that's really been the story over the last 30 years. There's been a fairly sustained effort. And things like what's happening in the port, things like what's happening to downtown are a reflection of that. And I think there has been an influx of other people here so there's a more diverse population here than there was 30 years ago.

There aren't enough young people here, but there are some. When I moved back here, I was surprised that the, to some extent, the number of younger people, but also the talent of some of the younger people. And I think that's a critical segment that needs to grow.

*Interviewer:* Okay. How has the role of fishing changed in the community since when you were growing up?

*Interviewee:* Well, you don't have the factories that you once had and so there's less, you know, you don't hear the sound of factory whistles. You don't see that sort of shore side presence like you used to. On the other hand I think it would appear to me that perhaps the actual fishing fleet here looks like it may have actually increased somewhat. And that may be a reflection of more people lobstering or more people scalloping or something.

But all the sardine carriers that used to come in here, that's all gone. The pearl essence that was a big part of this community for years and years, that's all gone. But things like aquaculture are here, but there's no processing plant here anymore. So there had been some processing, but you still have the pens on the bays and so forth, but there are, I think there's at least one, maybe two lobster operations that are either expanding or under construction right now, which is significant.

*Interviewer:* And we're also kind of interested in the history of the canneries and can you give me kind of – we've gotten a lot of information about it, but stories are kind of mixed. Can you give like a basic timeline of like when it really started going and how many there were and then when it started to decline and just a basic run-through?

*Interviewee:* Well it started after the early 1870s, partly as a result of the Franco Prussian war, which prevented some European canned sardines from getting into the U.S. And so that provided an opportunity to start something here using the variation of herring on this side of the Atlantic. And you began to see particularly New York operators appear on the scene sort of melding with locals to begin some of those early canneries. So the first one is probably like 1874, 1875 and it began to grow from there, initially centered here in Eastport and obviously to the back and westward along the coast.

And that growth continued pretty much up through 1900 or so and there was some shifting going on, particularly in the latter part of the 1890s where there was a pretty massive consolidation. In fact at one point, almost all the factories came under the control of one company or one firm, which is sort of a reflection of what else is going on in the sort of manufacturing or the processing sector in the United States. It wasn't particular to the sardine industry. You also had as

that began to happen, you also began to see a much more mechanization going on and that occurred right through the, after 1900 in particular.

And then you would see – I think we have an account book here actually from a factory in Lubec around 1904 or so and halfway through the season they brought in certain machinery and that put whole numbers of particularly the male side of the work force out of work because there were just so far fewer needed. And so you began to have an industry that was much more female dominated in terms of the workforce breakdown.

And then whether it be foreign competition or just people's lack of interest in eating sardines or it just became very cost prohibitive to produce things as cheaply as before. You had a pretty steady decline beginning around 1900, 1910 and there were certain stages where it would bump up a little bit. And like during World War II when there was more demand because of the war, but when I was growing up there were only two factories still in existence and that dropped to one. And as I said in 1982 the last one closed.

*Interviewer:* How many were there when it peaked?

*Interviewee:* I think there were probably upwards of 18.

*Interviewer:* Okay.

*Interviewee:* And it was, you know, it had a very industrial feel to the place when all those factories, you know, workers here. A lot of workers coming in from Canada either seasonally or permanently. And the boat traffic was phenomenal then whereas today it's almost none.

*Interviewer:* Right.

*Interviewee:* And it's rare now to see a Canadian vessel coming in here, at least on the commercial side.

*Interviewer:* So kind of speaking of Canada, are you familiar with when the Hague Line was established?

*Interviewee:* Yes.

*Interviewer:* And how did that affect the community here?

*Interviewee:* You mean in terms of out in the Bay of Fundy?

*Interviewer:* Right.

*Interviewee:* It certainly affected the fish pier, which I had a hand in finding or channeling the funds for it because the whole sort of justification of the fish pier was that we were going to have access to a certain section of the fisheries, sort of the eastern tip that got turned over to or declared part of Canada's jurisdiction. And so the whole premise for the fish pier went up in smoke. I think it's found another use, so I think it's very valuable to the community, but it was initially supposed to facilitate some access in capturing of that fishery resource at sort of the eastern end of the George's Back and that just didn't happen.

*Interviewer:* Interesting. Let's see here. So do you consider this place to be a fishing community today?

*Interviewee:* I think to a fair extent yes. I think it's certainly different than it was 30 years ago, but in some respects obviously you don't have the fish processing or the sort of immediacy that you once had, but you have, you've got a market down here on Sea Street, which has done phenomenally well bringing in lobsters every day and other fish trucks going down. And the pier, the main pier is probably better, is better set up for the fisheries than it was and it's right in the center of town, that whole fleet of fishing vessels.

So in that sense it's still very visible and very much a part. And I think that's a value here that's held pretty highly that we don't want to simply be a, strictly a tourist community. We want that sort of working tie in with the sea, whether it be the fisheries or whether it be the port or what have you or tidal energy. So I mean I think that's kind of a reflection of what we're trying to – I think what's happening here now is that there's a much greater appreciation that a number of things.

Maybe they would be compatible, but it's also a belief that to not put all of our eggs in one basket like in the sardine industry or tidal power or of some giant project. It is better probably to put our lifeline or investments into a number of things. So any one goes bad, we still have all these others that can continue. So I think fisheries is considered to be an important element.

*Interviewer:* Do you think fishermen in Eastport are doing better or worse than say 20 years ago?

*Interviewee:* I couldn't answer that I don't think. My sense is – I mean the only thing I could probably point to and I don't have any, I'm not the person to ask is with the scallop fisheries. I know that there was, you know, maybe happened by the time I moved back here. You would see boats in from other areas for the opening of the scallop season and they would just be a hundred boats or whatever.

Obviously the resource couldn't be sustained and that seems to have changed in that there, it now seems like it's more of a locally harvested resource now. It seems – I would assume they're doing better just because there are fewer fishermen going after the same resource, but I don't know that for a fact.

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

*Interviewee:* I think the fact that it's still here is an indication of that. I can't speak specifically for some of the challenges they may be facing right now, but the fact that you are seeing some investments in lobstering, onshore lobstering facilities whether that's processing or just storage. I don't know, but that to me would indicate optimism about the future anyways.

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

*Interviewee:* I suppose so. I mean I don't see any immediate thing that's about to put the fisheries out of business. I think it's something that can never be taken for granted. I mean ultimately you have to make sure they have access. You have to make sure that they can, that there's something for them to catch and obviously the numbers have to work for you moneywise. The market has to be there and so forth.

But I mean there are things and again, I'm not the person to ask. There are things like those, the Cobscook Bay Fishermen's Association and that's, you

know, everyone always says fisherman can never together, but that's an example of at least an attempt. I don't know how successful they've been, but I think that's helped from what I can tell.

*Interviewer:* Okay. How would you characterize the relationships between fishermen within this community?

*Interviewee:* That I don't know.

*Interviewer:* You don't know, okay. How about between fishermen and non-fishermen in this community?

*Interviewee:* I think it seems to be okay. I mean I don't see anyone overly complaining about stinky fish or something. I think there's a general feeling that the fisheries contribute and an awareness that the fisheries are what they are. You're not going to turn it into some sort of boutique or something.

*Interviewer:* Right. Let's see. How important – you mentioned kind of tourism, but how important would you say tourism is to the community here?

*Interviewee:* I think it's important. It's not, you know it's certainly not the tourism volume that you find in the mid coast or along the southern part of the state. I think it's increased. I think it probably will continue to increase. I don't see it, I don't see this place becoming Bar Harbor anytime soon.

*Interviewer:* Right. How do you feel about tourists or people that move here from away? Do you think that the town should cater to their interests and encourage that?

*Interviewee:* There is an issue here that the population needs to grow and whether the people who are part of that growth are from here or from elsewhere I don't know that that's, I have too much concern one way or the other. It would be nice to have some sort of mix. Like I know that there's a particular need for some younger people, more younger people. And again whether they're originally from here or have ties here or whether they're from elsewhere I don't have too much of an opinion.

*Interviewer:* Right, okay. How affordable is the current housing situation here and how has this changed over the past 20 years?

*Interviewee:* From 20 years ago probably, you know, the housing prices have certainly risen. There are more seasonal residences here than there were 20 years ago. The prices, you know, people say the taxes are high. I'm not sure that that's really, how much that really is the case compared to other places. We just don't have the population base to spread that, some of those basic operating costs over.

There are still today, I mean there are quite a number of empty houses here still, but what I have seen over the last 20 years is or last 30 years is there has been a gradual, certainly with exceptions, but there's been a gradual improvement of the housing stock here, mostly renovations, but some new housing.

*Interviewer:* Okay.

*Interviewee:* And the quality of the restoration work or renovation work is higher today than it was 30 years ago.

*Interviewer:* What do you feel have been the most critical changes in the community since you've lived here? I mean growing up and then to now?

*Interviewee:* Critical changes? One would be loss of population. Second, probably a positive change would be the internet, which has made it, has helped connect the area a little better I think to the outside world, but it also has made it possible to operate here in a way that might not have been possible 30 years ago. So you do have people who are able to tap, better tap into the wider market whether it be elsewhere in Maine or outside of Maine. I think we might have a computer programmer here whose main work may be with a New Hampshire company or something, but they can work from here.

*Interviewer:* What do you think this community will look like in ten years?

*Interviewee:* This is a question I'm going to be asked by this Vermont Foundation in two weeks.

*Interviewer:* Oh, yeah? Well, it's good practice then.

*Interviewee:* My sense of things are, there are any number of obviously variables that could throw things off track. My sense is that things are going to continue to coalesce here. We bought this building, which was about to be torn down in 2002 and established this institute then. And it's been predicated on revival here and if the place doesn't revive, we don't make it.

*Interviewer:* Right.

*Interviewee:* So I continue to – we feel probably the most optimistic we've been, knowing full well there's still a lot of work to do and a long ways to go. But I think there's a remarkable partnering that's going on in this community and I think there's also a remarkable willingness to re-think some things and being fairly open to some newer things. And I think that is what is helping to at least position this area for what I think will be eventually some growth, population growth in particular.

*Interviewer:* Ideally what would you like this community to look like?

*Interviewee:* I think I'd like it to continue to have a certain character to it that is not just like every other small community in America that has its own distinctive quality about it. And I think there are a lot of parts to that, whether it be the downtown and its architecture, some of the residential houses. There's a certain quality that comes with knowing as many people as you are apt to know here because there aren't a lot of people.

And certainly the fisheries is a big part of what makes this place. We would not – nothing against a place like Camden and whatever, but I would hope that it would not become a place like Camden.

*Interviewer:* Right, okay. What do you like most about living here?

*Interviewee:* And this is where I'm not supposed to say that I'm about to move to Chicago, right?

*Interviewer:* Oh, are you? I didn't know that.

*Interviewee:*

There are some challenges here that I enjoy being a part of. My wife and I moved here from Portland and she's from Chicago and I was pushing to move to Chicago when she went out. But I think there are some quality of lives here that you don't find in somewhat larger places. I mean we live near the downtown and it's, you know, we don't need a car all that often. I mean we can go to the library and go to the hardware store. We can go to the grocery store and there's actually a fairly committed sort of young parents grew up here, which I was not expecting which has certainly made it easier for us with a six year old very energetic daughter.

And there are some things here in terms of activities that you wouldn't necessarily expect in a community like this. And people say people would not expect the Tides Institute to be in a place like this. They wouldn't expect necessarily the art center to be in a place like this or for that matter the port that's out here. So and then the downtown here is actually for this end of the state or east of Searsport, east of Belfast it's remarkably intact. So there are some things here that are good. Yeah, I mean but there are certainly, you know, there's the downside. I mean distance and not as many people here as one might like.

*Interviewer:*

All right. Are there any other issues that we haven't talked about or that you think are important to understanding kind of the past and present and future of the community and the role that fishing has played here?

*Interviewee:*

Well, I think you have to – I mean one thing that you certainly have to, you know, that's true throughout this place, the history of this place is the fact that there is a border community. And the community is huge both negatively and positively. You mentioned the Hague decision, well that impacted things here. And there's been a much more of a tightening of the border than it once was. I mean one of our interests was to see, continue some of those connections into Canada because there's culturally and historically and the ties have been so great. Yeah, I guess that's what I would say.