Oral History: John Phinney
Lubec, Maine
August 10, 2011
Interviewer: Cameron Thompson

John Phinney, born in 1967, has lived most of his life in Lubec, Maine. He took over his family's business, a wholesale seafood distributor called Phinney Fisheries, currently the largest seafood buyer in the Lubec area, in 1998. 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 how long have you lived here?

John Phinney: Oh, pretty much my entire life. I was born in Utah, but my father's from here and we moved directly back here after he got out of the service.

Interviewer: All right, could you talk a bit about your business here? So what is this business called and what –

John Phinney: Yeah, it's Phinney Fisheries. And we started a new company in the same building, Cobscook Bay Company and we do Maine fresh seafood pies and other value added products.

Interviewer: So when was the Phinney Fisheries established?

John Phinney: Oh well, it actually started on Campobello Island, New Brunswick in the mid '70s. And in the mid '80s my parents sold out on Campobello and moved to Lubec, just across the border.

Interviewer: That was mid '80s?

John Phinney: Yeah. And started Phinney Seafood.

Interviewer: And so what happened after that? How did it come over to this way?

John Phinney: Well, I said the mid '80s they moved to – actually it was a seafood restaurant for awhile and we started buying off of trucks wholesale seafood, sea urchins, scallops whenever it was around. I was in the service for six years and came back and took over the family business, oh, in '98. I renamed it again Phinney Fisheries.

Interviewer: And then you moved out to Trescott then I take it, to this location.

John Phinney: Yeah, yeah, I got this building and the house in auction from Machias Savings Bank in I guess 2001.

Interviewer: And could you sort of describe what you do here? What are the goods and services you provide?

John Phinney: Yeah. Well, it actually started as a renovated place and made it a nightclub and half of it was wholesale seafood, focusing on scallops and sea urchins, halibut, dabbled in some ground fish. Then we got into buying shellfish clams, mussels and yeah, as the industry started dying, wholesale, the catches were all down on everything. So we figure we'd better figure out something to value add the products here, buying less products, do more with it.

And so I actually jumped onboard with the Cobscook Community Learning Center. I don't know if you've heard of them off the road here. But they had a business plan drawn up, oh, in what, 2003, about value adding products here with the fall of the sardine industry. They wanted to try to bring some production jobs to the area and I heard about this. It sat on Allen's desk up there at the CCLC for three or four years. And I'd heard about it and I went and talked to him and so I kind of jumped onboard and took it from him and ran with it.

It was actually gonna be a clam pie we started with, but we got a head chef, Sam Hayward from Fore Street Restaurant in Portland. I don't know if you know Portland well. Award winning chef and he decided four different varieties of pies and so we did all the packaging and all the work and that's what we're producing down here now and that's the Cobscook Bay Company side of the building. We're making seafood pies now.

Interviewer: So sort of going back then, could you describe you used to buy wholesale, who would you buy from?

John Phinney: All the local boats.

Interviewer: Just buy it all from local boats?

John Phinney: Yup.

A lot of local – I consider Campobello local because it's just across the bridge so a lot of the Canadian product – actually the Canadian product was two-thirds of our income, but after 9/11 they made it real difficult to import the food from Canada. Made it too expensive so really hurt our business, but then we focused on the Lubec boats and we're the largest buyer in the area.

Interviewer: And so there was a general decline then? Like you weren't able to buy as much as you would like to?

John Phinney: Yeah, I mean when we started, especially with sea urchins, that's kind of what we're focusing on when I first got back. We were buying 300 to 400 fish totes a day which is about 100 pounds. And it just petered out to an hour buying 30 or 40 totes a day so it's really declined that much. And the same deal with the scallops. We bought actually 32,000 pounds in 2 and a half days of scallop meat back in it was 2000. And now we're buy 500, 600 pounds a day. I mean it's really just declined that much. And like we said we wanted the value add it here instead of shipping it to Boston, give people work here with what little natural resource is left. That's kind of the focus of the Cobscook Bay Company.

Interviewer: So before you started the value added project with the Cobscook Learning Center, you were doing the wholesale. Where were you shipping it down to?

John Phinney: Much of the sea urchins went to Portland to be processed. Scallops pretty much all went to Boston. The clams, some into Boston and I keep a lot of them in state so definitely went out of county.

Interviewer: And you handled all the shipping or –

John Phinney: Yeah.

Interviewer: Let's see. Actually, could you sort of describe a yearly round for me because I realize those fisheries are mostly seasonal. So how does your business deal with the different seasons or how do you deal with the different seasons?

John Phinney: All right. Well, sea urchins, I'm gonna start with that I guess. It starts in the fall usually around the first week of October. And there's several difference. They're divided up into two seasons so we'll buy urchins right up until March. And scallops start December, usually first of December and that will go to March or April also. Shrimp, we buy shrimp in February and March generally. And then in the spring we start clams and lobsters.

Interviewer: And how would that affect your business as far as distributing it and reselling it? Do you hold onto any of that product or you just switch from what you provided at what point in the year?

John Phinney: Yeah. Well, the scallops I freeze some for the Cobscook Bay Company and also the shrimp, we process the shrimp and freeze it for the Cobscook Bay Company. The sea urchins, the majority of the scallops and the clams, they're all shipped away to southern Maine or Boston.

Interviewer: And so you're still doing some wholesale or is it all just with the seafood pies?

John Phinney: No, we're still doing some wholesale, a lot of wholesale.

Interviewer: And which fisheries do you rely on for the seafood pies?

John Phinney: Lobster, scallop, crab, and shrimp, those are our four different varieties of pies.

Interviewer: And so would you say your business would be vulnerable to depleted stocks or fishery closures?

John Phinney: Oh definitely. Definitely.

Interviewer: What would you do if you had a problem? What have you done in the past for when stocks have gone down? I mean –

John Phinney: When stocks have gone down, I mean being from Washington county I have to do what you can to survive so generally I hold a whelk license also and I usually trap whelks. And using whelk, we shut everything else down. I could rely on whelks. The last several years they've closed whelks with the red tide closure. So that really affected us. I mean we'll go from buying 50 bushel a day down to nothing and in the spring it's tough here. It's more in between seasons so that's pretty much our most difficult time here.

Interviewer: In the springtime?

John Phinney: In the springtime. The beaches are still a little frozen or the holes aren't showing for the clams and urchins, scallops are done. So it's tough until June, into June.

Interviewer: So you fish whelks for yourself?

John Phinney: Yes.

Interviewer: Do you hold any other commercial license?

John Phinney: Scallop.

Interviewer: Okay. So you participate in the scallop and you participate in the whelk fisheries. And when did you first start working that? When did you get your commercial license and start?

John Phinney: Now actually I've been doing whelks for probably ten years I would say, fishing whelks. Scallops, I hold the license – well, you must know they put the moratorium on it so you can't get one so I've actually never used the scallop license, just a little bit of hand dragging here and there to keep showing some landings. But I really never fished the scallops heavy.

Interviewer: So the only reason you go fishing then is to –

John Phinney: Show some landing.

John Phinney: A little bit of hand dragging and stuff like that.

Interviewer: And hand dragging, can you describe what boat your using and what you're doing exactly?

John Phinney: Yeah, I got a 16 foot Carolina Skiff. I got a pot hauler on it and a davie and a little three foot drag.

Interviewer: And you go out in the wintertime then, during the season or –

John Phinney: Yup, yup, yup.

Interviewer: And why are you holding onto this license then? What do you see –

John Phinney: Well, I think the stocks are – I mean the laws they put into effect, I think they were a little late, but they're gonna catch up. So I do believe it's gonna be – I might want to retire doing it or – I mean the landing's really increased for the scallops.

Interviewer: And do you think –

John Phinney: Over the past several years. I mean there was a point there five years ago where these boys were barely getting 20, 25 pounds a day. And this was from five years previous to that they were getting 1,000 pounds a day. And you put a 135 pound limit on it in the bay, which was a great law, but I think it was a little too late because they year before they put that limit on, said that folks were getting, 1,000, 1,200 pounds. And then the year they put the limit on, they were lucky to get the 135 pounds. But I see it now. They seem to be getting their 135 pounds in half a day so they are coming back.

Interviewer: And sorry, I missed it, when did you get started with – when did you get your commercial license?

John Phinney: For scallops it was three years ago I believe, just before they put the moratorium on it. I think it was three years ago.

Interviewer: Did you get it because you heard about the moratorium coming in?

John Phinney: Yeah, I heard wind of that, but I wanted to get it anyway and they have put a moratorium on just about every other license so that was really the last one. I seen it coming so yeah, I guess that's part of the reason why I got it.

Interviewer: And how did you get into going for whelks then, harvesting whelks?

John Phinney: Well, it's kind of like an untapped resource here. And I had a friend that used to do it back in the '80s and they done quite well with it. The price wasn't real good and actually he made me find market for him because he wanted to go try it again. And I drum up about 2,000 pounds worth of market a week and then he decided he was gonna do something else. So now I had all this market so I geared up and went. And we've gotten several sea grants on the MTI to design traps and I'm probably the foremost whelk guy in the state I would think now. Yeah.

Interviewer: So how do you harvest them then? You use traps you said.

John Phinney: Traps, yeah.

Interviewer: Sorry, I'm completely ignorant. How does that work?

John Phinney: It's a plastic trap. They don't like to climb on wire. And you bait them, you got a head in it just like a lobster trap. They climb up these plastic barrels that we have or square jugs. They fall in and the net stops them from getting back out so yup.

Interviewer: So you established a market for that.

John Phinney: Yes.

Interviewer: What was that market?

John Phinney: Well, they're a tough thing to move. But the Spaniards like them. The Orientals like them. Just from calling my different scallop markets and the specialty markets, worked through the phone books, internet, try to find anything on whelk and any name associated with it I'd call them and yeah, I built it up to I could probably move 2,500, 3,000 pounds a day at a decent price. You can sell them all day for $0.15, but this isn't feasible fishing for $0.15 so –

Interviewer: And you would ship them down with your business here then?

John Phinney: Yeah, yeah, I ship them down with my scallops and my clams or periwinkles or whatever else I'm buying at the time.

Interviewer: Let's see. So sort of getting back to your business or just in general, are there any specific fishery regulations that positively or negative affect your business?

John Phinney: Well, of course they're all gonna negatively affect the business. But there's a necessity to them. The sea urchin industry is damn near in shambles now. I think a lot of the regulations they put on were good a little too late. I submitted a proposal I think three years ago for weight limit, tote limit, ten totes per boat. And I was sad to see that that didn't go into effect and actually I blame the lobster lobby really. I mean they want to go when the price is high two weeks before Christmas and deckload the boat and then they're all done sea urchin fishing. But the regular guy that just has a sea urchin license, it's more feasible

to get just ten totes, come in, make a good day's pay and he can do that all season.

Yeah, so that's one thing I'd like to see would be a tote limit. Now they've shut down some of our best sea urchin area, the Pembroke River. I guess, but when they open that back up, which is supposedly next year I think they're gonna open it back up. And that's gonna be booming, but every boat in the state will be there which is another reason I plead for a tote limit. Because if not it'll be cleaned out in two weeks and be all done. These boats from everywhere is gonna come and – it's like the 135 pound scallop limit in the bay. That was a great idea because we assumed it was going to keep a lot of the boats from away to come down here and fish. If they could get that in their backyard, why are they gonna come all the way up here, get a hotel room and fish up here? But the rest of the state's scallop industry is – they're lucky to get 25 pounds a day so it's 135 pound was worth it for them all to come so – it's really amazing to see in the first of December the convoy of boats coming under the bridge up in to our Bay which everyone has the right to fish. I can't knock them for that.

Interviewer: Well, do you buy from these boats that come up?

John Phinney: No, and that's the sad part about it. So they generally take them back with them. They really don't sell them here in town.

Interviewer: Is that true of the scallopers and the urchiners?

John Phinney: No, the urchins, they're sold here. Yup, because this is the market. I guess it's really the last holdout for urchins in the state. So all the Oriental trucks and other buyers are here parked on the boat ramp downtown. And they all bid on the eggs. There's about seven or eight trucks that are there all winter.

Interviewer: Do you compete with them bidding?

John Phinney: I do, yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer: Is that true of all other markets as well? Do you have to compete with them?

John Phinney: No, the sea urchins are the only thing that we really do that with. The scallop buyers are all well established generally and they go to a set plant somewhere. But sea urchins is a different animal. Yeah.

Interviewer: I was wondering how did you handle the 2008 lobster crisis?

John Phinney: Oh, what crisis?

Interviewer: Okay, so it didn't affect you then.

John Phinney: [laughter] It really didn't affect us. Are you talking about the –

Interviewer: It was an economic crisis basically, the price dropped or the –

John Phinney: What'd it go to? I think it went to $1.75 a pound for shed at one point. But you know what, that really didn't affect me too big because I usually make a set amount per pound on everything.

Interviewer: And they were still selling to you then even though –

John Phinney: They were still selling to us, yeah. Whoever went. A lot of boats didn't go because of that. But actually I just got into buying lobsters at that time so I was kind of glad I started a little slow. It's gotten nuts since then. We've picked up almost every boat in town now so it's – I built this brand new tank last year and now I need one three times that size.

Interviewer: Do most of the say Lubec fishermen sell to you then or are there other dealers that sell to you?

John Phinney: There are other dealers. I'd say I get about half of the lobsters in town.

Interviewer: Do you provide them with anything? Do you provide bait or anything else like that?

John Phinney: Yeah, bait at cost so I deliver the bait. It's delivered here, I set it aside in the yard different spots for them so they come here in the morning, they bait up. I take it out of their check, but like I said, I don't turn any profit off it, I just kind of – courtesy for them.

Interviewer: Do you think that's important for you to provide?

John Phinney: It is. It is. It is. Well, I provide it, but they pay for it, but it's convenient. I order it for them when I see when they're low and I have it here waiting for them so it's something they don't have to worry about.

Interviewer: I'm sort of gonna move away from fisheries. Is there anything else that you think I should –

John Phinney: No. No, whatever you think.

Interviewer: All right. Yeah, I'd like to just maybe talk about community generally. So when you were growing up here, could you tell me about the community then? How was the overall economy at that time?

John Phinney: When I grew up it was booming. It really was. We still had two or three sardine packing plants here. And they had one on Campobello. I think there was three still operating here in Lubec. Sea urchins had just started. They were getting 70 or 80 totes a day and then unloading and going back and getting another 70 or however sea urchins, were ridiculous here back then. The scallops' everywhere.

I think the biggest thing for me is when I was a kid, you could see all these handline boats for ground fish in the bay. They were just full of these small little handline boats. And now you can barely catch a legal size cod now. It's amazing the decline that I've seen in the fishing industry.

Interviewer: And what were these handline boats? They're all commercial or are they recreational?

John Phinney: Yeah, yeah, they were commercial.

Interviewer: And they were all Lubec locals or –

John Phinney: Lubec, Campobello, yup, Eastport. And they made a good living off it. They'd catch 300 or 400 pounds of codfish a day they said and I fish every summer and I haven't caught a legal codfish in probably two to three years. That's amazing how it's really declined.

Interviewer: So when you were growing up you're saying the important sources of jobs and income were the sardine plants and –

John Phinney: Sardine plants, yeah.

Interviewer: And then fishermen were also handlining ground fish and urchins was coming up at that time.

John Phinney: Yeah, and the licensing wasn't as strict. Just about anybody can get a license for anything. I mean if you wanted to go to work there was a license available for if we had to go to work.

Interviewer: Was there any other industries or any other major sources of jobs that you can identify?

John Phinney: Of course we have Roosevelt Park, it's an international park so they hired a lot of people. I don't think that's really declined because these younger generation really don't know who Roosevelt was. I guess it wasn't a big deal to them. But when I was a kid the 40 plus people, the people had the money would go on vacation, they'd remember Roosevelt. So that was a big source of income here.

Interviewer: Were a lot of people crossing the border and going into Canada at that time? Was there – I mean was there a lot of traffic –

John Phinney: Yeah, there was a lot of cross border trade. Yeah, September 11th really – yeah, it killed a lot of the cross border traffic. Tourism was big here. Front Street was booming. It was really a great time to grow up. When I was in high school, Lubec probably had – we had 70 or 80 in a graduating class. And I think they shut the school down last year. I think it hit five per class so it shows the decline of the area right there. Within 10 or 15 years they go from 40 to 50 in a graduating class down to 5. But there's no jobs. There's nothing to keep the young people here. The youngest and brightest are traveling to Boston to find a job or going to New York and we're telling them to do that. And it's sad. It really is.

I'm trying to parlay some opportunity and try to keep our youngest and brightest here. What would this area be if we could keep our youngest and brightest here? If we give them something to do and they can build businesses. But right now we're sending them away which is depressing.

Interviewer: I'm gonna get into discussing the changes generally. So maybe you could start off with talking about what happened to the sardine plants then and those sorts of jobs and the waterfront.

John Phinney: I think the offshore fleet have got so good at catching fish that they don't make it here. They really cleaned them up pretty good there. Oh, I guess about ten years ago there just was not enough product coming in. We just couldn't find enough herring. I mean they're starting to come back now. They're starting to come back a little bit here, but now they're being processed elsewhere. I think there's still a – what have we got? We have over in Blacks Harbor Connors. I think they're still operating. We just lost the last one in the state of Maine. That's sad considering there had to have been thousands when I was growing up in the state. It was just amazing.

Interviewer: So you said there was three sardine plants when you were growing up?

John Phinney: Yeah, there was one in Campobello. I believe there was three in Lubec when I grew up. I think at one point they had six in Lubec.

Interviewer: And so that last one you said closed down ten years ago?

John Phinney: The last one here, yeah, I think it's about ten years ago when the last one closed down, Peacock Canning.

Interviewer: And what about the two before that?

John Phinney: We had USA Fish. I can't remember what the other one was, but there was three still operating I'm quite sure. My father grew up before he started his own – actually I wouldn't say that's before, but he was a fish buyer is what he did. He bought fish from the boats and coordinated it with the plants and sold them to the packing plants. So that was kind of how he spent 20 years of his life. Was coordinating with the boats to the processing plants, arranging the trucking to get them there, everything.

Interviewer: So –

John Phinney: My grandfather was a handliner. Long line of fishermen.

Interviewer: And what happened to the handlining practice? Why isn't there any handlining now?

John Phinney: I think the net boats off the cape just got too good. I think they've just cleaned them up before they migrated this way.

Interviewer: And when – I can pause if you'd like?

John Phinney: Yeah, let me have a look at it.

Interviewer: So when did –

John Phinney: And there's several other things. Well, the new regulations where you couldn't dump your – it's like before we had all the sardine industry and they were dumping the dirt back into the water which was feed which brought the ground fish in. I mean there's still ground fish out there cause the Canadians are still doing fairly well off Grand Manan and the douls off the backside of Campobello, but they're just not coming into the bays now.

Interviewer: And you think the sardine closures have something to do with that?

John Phinney: It did. It did. I mean there were – I think it has a lot to do with it because like before we had so much industry here and they were putting some of that feed back into the water and that scent went out to deeper water and brought these fish in. And that had a lot to do with it.

Interviewer: So when did you notice a decline in the ground fish near shore?

John Phinney: Oh, I would say major decline probably 15 years ago was the last time I saw a handliner in the bay, commercial handliner.

Interviewer: Were these handliners using it as their primary source of income

John Phinney: They were, yup. And the size regulations, I totally disagree with the size. I mean what a codfish now legally has to be 21 inches, but you bring a 19 inch codfish up from 300 feet of water, he's dead. So you're throwing dead fish back over, which I totally disagree with that. And that's what these net boats are doing.

Interviewer: That's what which boats are doing it?

John Phinney: These net boats are doing down off the cape in this area in southern Maine and it is a shame. They're having to throw a dead fish back. Where if they can meet their quota with smaller fish, there might be more fish out there.

Interviewer: So now there's some salmon farming in Lubec, how has aquaculture been important to this community? Is it at all important to the community?

John Phinney: Oh, it was. It was great actually, but huge boom in the '90s, the early '90s with it, late '80s, early '90s. And it gave a lot of people a lot of good jobs and it's probably still I would say the largest employer in the area. A lot of these farms now are – you can see right across the border – not many of them are actually on the American side anymore. Most of them are on the Canadian side.

Interviewer: So what happened? In the '90s, what was the makeup of the aquaculture then?

John Phinney: I really didn't get into the aquaculture a lot. But it was a bunch of smaller sites owned by independents and it kind of got bought out by the larger Cooke Aquaculture now I think is really the only one, there may be another one, but I think they bought out all the sites and bought out all these small independents. Which put a lot of money to the area, but now they're moving them to where they can make money.

Interviewer: Why were they all bought out in the mid -

John Phinney: Well, I guess that's just the nature of America I guess. They bought them out so they could corner the market and Cooke pretty much corner the market. They bought a lot of these people out just to shut them down. Plus we had the disease that ran through in the late '90s which they had a big die off so they had to rotate the pens. They're riddled with problems since then, since 2000 they've been riddled with problems. But I think the largest outfit now, Cooke's, has a processing area in Machiasport, a plant there in Machiasport and they hire quite a few people. And there's still a few that work out of here. There's still a few sites left in our bay, but nothing like it was in the, like I said, the early '90s.

Interviewer: I was wondering if you could talk about tourism generally in the community, how that's changed or been important at all.

John Phinney: It's actually amazing to see the town come to life the last few years. I don't know if you've been in the town yet.

Interviewer: Yeah.

John Phinney: Five, six years ago it was rundown, there's really no business on waterfront, Water Street. We've had a lot of influx, a lot of tourist come in and bought a lot of the buildings, fixed them up. And the tourism, it seemed to be booming the last two years. I barely recognize anybody in town anymore. But it's definitely, definitely seasonal. In the wintertime, they still run the streets, but the last two years – actually, probably the last three years, the downtown waterfront's been

booming. I see it coming. It's gonna be kind of the next Bar Harbor. I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing, but we really – I say our tourism's been increasing threefold every year for the last three years.

Interviewer: Was it important when you were growing up here at all?

John Phinney: Not a lot. Like say the Roosevelt International Park was really the only tourism – that was the biggest tourism draw. Of course we had Quoddy Head, West Quoddy Head, the most eastern point. I mean we've always had a tourism industry, but it seems to be the – it might be the downturn in the economy, people are staying closer to home because it's generally New Englanders who we see coming here. And maybe instead of taking their Vegas trip or their Florida trip, they're trying to conserve a little money and stay in state. It seems to be mainly New Englanders coming.

Interviewer: And how has this affected the community, this increase in tourism?

John Phinney: It's generated some money for the town. I see that. The downside of it, the property taxes in Lubec are going ballistic. A lot of out of staters are buying up most of the property. But the locals are moving to Trescott. That's all. But yeah, it's created quite a few jobs in town. And like I said, it's increased by three fold the last three years. It seems to be doing very, very well. Just good to see.

Interviewer: Do you think Lubec is known for any particular kind of fishing, like any –

John Phinney: Yeah, we're probably the most prominent sea urchin fishing community and it's the last holdover sea urchin I think in the state. Anyways, something unique is it's mainly a drag fleet which the rest of the state has been a dive. They always dove in the rest of the state, but here it's primarily a dragger fleet. And of course we've always been known for the scallops, for the sea urchins as well. Probably the biggest. Most well known for that.

Interviewer: Would you say most fishermen here have multiple licenses or fishes single species?

John Phinney: Yeah. Which has been a controversy too. These licenses are rare, but most of the lobstermen have all the licenses. But most of them have dual licenses. Yeah, most of them do. And do they have an annual round or does it sort of follow the seasons at all?

John Phinney: Yeah, yeah, so like the people hold the lobster licenses, they'll go the last two weeks before Christmas when the price is really high. Sea urchins, they'll go sea urchin fishing. Generally the first week of scallops. So yeah, these are the first week of December they'll do a scallop and then they go sea urchins for a couple weeks. And then they'll wait till spring for the lobstering.

Interviewer: Do they participate in non-fisheries work at all?

John Phinney: There's really very little non-fisheries work in here. I mean we have had a little influx with the out of state line of property here. So a little bit of carpentry work. But really there is no other industry. The tourism and the fisheries.

Interviewer: So what do you see as the major strengths of the fishing community? Say creative. What else are -

John Phinney: They're very, very hardworking. They're hardworking people. And it's not easy to go on that beach and pull up mud with a pitchfork for four hours a day. They do what they can to survive. And they're independent. They don't generally ask for a handout. They go on the beach and feed their families.

Interviewer: And what do you see as the major threats facing this fishing community?

John Phinney: Major threats.

Interviewer: Could be specific or general.

John Phinney: I think if something happened to the clamming industry here, if something were to kill the beaches, that would absolutely devastate this area. Because probably a third of the licenses held totally in this whole area are clammers. They're clammers and before the sea urchins we were a clamming community. Everyone dug clams because Lubec does have the most coastline in the country I do believe, as town wise because we have all the inlets and bays and harbors and everything so - and for years we were a clam digging community until the sea urchins really came. Eastport was the scalloping community. We were the clam digging community.

Interviewer: So –

John Phinney: That would actually devastate this area.

Interviewer: Could you talk more about the clamming in general? So you said a third of the fishermen have clamming licenses, is that what you said?

John Phinney: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

John Phinney: And probably a third of the town's income come from clamming. I would think it'd be that high. And you actually see it pretty quick. They're starting to come in any minute.

Interviewer: What's that?

John Phinney: They'll be coming in any minute.

Interviewer: Yeah?

John Phinney: But that's really declined also. But it had a lot of conservation areas. We never had to worry about red tide here either. I mean this was something just in the last ten years, that we never ever heard of it here. And since it's really that's hurt a lot because it hits in a time when there's nothing else to do unless you have a lobster license. I mean usually hits in midsummer. And that's really all there is to do. Most of like say the urchin fishery's in the winter. The shrimping, the scalloping, it's pretty much all in the winter. Summer time was clams so the red tide has really affected the area a lot.

Interviewer: Can anybody get a clamming license?

John Phinney: You still can, yeah. Yeah. It's tough work, but some of them do really well at it. They're making a couple hundred dollars a day on a good tide, which is pretty good.

Interviewer: How has fishermen's access to the waterfront changed?

John Phinney: Actually this town needs a community dock like they have over there in Eastport and that's huge. Now we have floats that we take in and out. They've tried to build a marina which didn't work. It just amazes me this town doesn't have a real community dock where the boats can tie up. Most of them are on moorings, which is no safe haven. They need to get out in a skiff to get to the boat, which is dangerous, you're talking January and February here with the northeast wind, it's dangerous.

As their access to the waterfront, I guess that's just the way we've always done it. But in Eastport they have four large docks on Compobello Island. That's half the population of this town. I'm surprised this town doesn't have something like Eastport. Does that answer your question about the access to the waterfront?

Interviewer: And what about recreational fishing? Is there much recreational fishing occuring?

John Phinney: Yeah, there's quite a bit of that. I don't know how this new law is really – that hasn't gone into effect yet, has it? The saltwater fishing license?

Interviewer: No, I don't think so.

John Phinney: Not yet, I think next year or it was January or something. But another thing about the dock that they have in Eastport, if you go over there, that whole front of that dock is just lined up with people mackerel fishing. We really don't have that here. You really need a boat to get out and mackerel fish. Actually, salt water fishing stuff mackerel's really all that we've got left here. The flounder have seemed to disappear. Pretty much all the ground fish have disappeared. The tuna seem to be springing up though. I do hold a tuna license. I'm gonna go this year.

Interviewer: And how do you feel about this increase in recreational boating or pleasuring boating and other uses for the waterfront?

John Phinney: I think it's great. I think it's totally great cause, like I said, it's pretty much our fishing fleets, it's a winter fleet. That's when our boats are out in the bay fishing. And we do have a large lobster fleet, but they usually fish the outside shore. We call the outside shore the other side of Quoddy Head. So there isn't a lot of traps in the bay. There's no dragging in the bay. The bay's pretty much unused most of the summer except for pleasure boats so I think it's a great thing.

Interviewer: And how do you feel about tourists and people from outside the community who want to move here?

John Phinney: Well, some fit in, some don't. I mean the ones that fit in, you can tell because they've stayed here and they've got along with the locals. And they were a very accepting bunch for Maine or rural community, we're very accepting. And I think this whole place is set up to get to by boat. We seem real rural and desolate, but there's a place I can park you out in the bay in a boat and you can see five different communities of 5,000 or 6,000 people. It was all set up to get to by boat, so we've always had influx of other people coming in and out with the shipping industry, the sardine industry so we're very accepting unlike say a community in Aroostook County that does potatoes. They really didn't have a lot of influx of people here at all so they've grown tight and they don't like

outsiders. But we've always had a good influx of sailors and other things. So we're a very accepting community.

But one thing about this community, they don't care how much money you got. So when we see people come in that start flinging around I have all this money and you should kiss my butt, they don't do that.

Interviewer: How affordable is the housing situation in this area?

John Phinney: Actually it's going crazy. I got this building and my house at auction for $77,000.00, which was a hell of a deal. But waterfront there's houses going for $200,000.00 on the waterfront now. 15 years ago I could have bought the entire town for $200,000.00. It is going nuts, but I think compared to the rest of the coastal U.S., it's still reasonable I would say. We've had a lot of people from New Jersey move in. And they're great people and they seemed to have stayed. But they'll sell a small two bedroom house in Jersey for enough money to come up here and pretty much buy a mansion. So it's still reasonable compared to the rest of the coast. And I think it's why we're getting a lot of the influx of people. I mean it's the last holdout of decently priced coastal real estate in the country.

Interviewer: What do you feel have been the most critical changes in this community since you've lived here, since you've grown up here?

John Phinney: The death of the sardine really, really hurt. Actually, I think a big part of not so much Lubec but Eastport I think that a lot of the big part of the death of Eastport not only was the sardine industry, I think actually the completion of the interstate. A lot of this stuff used to be shipped by ship. You know what I mean? Before the interstates were completed. But that was a little before my time or probably right around my time, I guess. Everything goes by truck now where everything used to stop in Eastport and go by ship.

The red tide, that has definitely affected the area drastically to the negative. The salmon industry was quite a boom. But I think that's almost gone now. Like everything else it's so much cheaper to do it in Chile.

But I think the biggest problem with the area is if you don't want to go fishing or you don't have a license, there's really nothing you can do and that's what we're trying to correct with the Cobscook Bay Company. We're trying to give some production jobs. Another option besides going out there in February and risking your life.

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

John Phinney: A mini Bar Harbor. From what I've seen in the last few years, how the tourism's been growing, who the waterfront – now we have more bars than we have – we have no stoplights and I think I counted six bars. And I think there's five restaurants. We have more bars or restaurants than Calais. That's where the community is headed. As to whether I'd like to see it, I don't know. I think I'd like to see it to a degree, to bring some work here. But I really don't want to see it become another Bar Harbor. Nothing against Bar Harbor now.

Interviewer: What do you like most about living here?

John Phinney: It's quiet. It's trusting. If something happened, if I went to the bar, fell down, dropped on the floor, I know I'd wake up in my bed. Like I said, not a good example, but if I was broke down on my road, someone's gonna stop and help

you. It don't matter whether you're a tourist or who you are, they're very kind helping people, very accepting. It's quiet. I love to live in the country. I love my kids can run around. They go on their bike. I don't have to worry about them. They're going to be taken care of. And it's like we've lost a lot fishermen in the last five or six years. You probably knew about that. We've lost a lot of fishermen and see the way the community's pulled together to help their families. Yeah, it's small town America I guess. That's why I'm not so sure if I want a Bar Harbor, but will take some of the money though.

Interviewer: So I'm done with questions, but are there any other issues we haven't talked about feel important?

John Phinney: No, no, I'd just like to reiterate. We need something to keep our youngest and brightest here and that's really our focus. Some other opportunities besides on the water because it really is – I don't know if it's a dying industry, but they've limited access to it so much. There's really no jobs here. It's almost becoming a retirement community here now. Because, like I said, all our youngest and brightest are going away to school, going away to so called make something of themselves, where they can make something of themselves and make something of this community if they stayed here. That's where I'm at.