

**Oral History: Russell Wright**  
**Lubec, Maine**  
**December 12, 2011**  
**Interviewer: Anna Henry**

*Russell Wright was born in 1960 and has lived most of his life in Lubec, Maine. He has been a marine patrol officer since 1999, and has three brothers who work in the fishing industry. 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:* All right. And what is your occupation?

*Russell Wright:* Marine patrol officer.

*Interviewer:* Okay. And how have you been involved in the fisheries?

*Russell Wright:* Well, I grew up fishing and then I joined the Marine Patrol back in '99, and I've been an officer ever since.

*Interviewer:* Okay. Do you have family members that are involved in the fisheries?

*Russell Wright:* Yes, I do.

*Interviewer:* And how so?

*Russell Wright:* I've got three brothers that's in the fishing industry.

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

*Russell Wright:* Well, when I was growing up here, I mean there was a lot of factories and stuff that was working. There were industries, and over the years – I mean this is a fishing community. It's what it's been, you know, mostly. That's what it is. There's no big industries here as we're all aware of.

Over the years, the industries – the factories have shut down, and all that's left here now is the fishing industry. That's what they survive on.

*Interviewer:* Are there – what are the most important kinds of commercial fishing that take place here?

*Russell Wright:* Well, you've got your lobster fishery and your sea urchin fishery and your scallop fishery is the three main fisheries here.

*Interviewer:* And has that changed throughout the years?

*Russell Wright:* Well, it has because back years ago, there was no sea urchin industry. No one ever heard tell of it. They started off in the '80s with the sea urchins, and that's been a big thing. And now the resource is getting depleted down where it's hard for folks to survive on it. The scallop industry has changed. The scallop industry, when I was growing up, it was a free for all. You could out, and whatever you could drag in a day was what you get. Now it's – their on restrictions up here, 15 gallon restrictions per day. So that's a big change over the years. Lobster industry, now it seems to be better than it ever was. So that's a big fishery.

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- Interviewer:* Are there any fisheries that used to be important here that aren't anymore?
- Russell Wright:* Oh, used to be herring fishery here, a lot of shut off boats and shut off herring, used to be a lot of weirs on the shores, and that's pretty well a thing of the past.
- Interviewer:* Okay. How – were the canneries big here?
- Russell Wright:* Yes.
- Interviewer:* And how did that affect the community when they closed?
- Russell Wright:* Well, I mean it put a lot of people out of work.
- Interviewer:* Yeah.
- Russell Wright:* You have Peacock's down here on Main Street that employed, you know, a lot of people then you had Booth Fisheries over here that employed a lot of people, and you had the can plant that used to run years ago that made cans. I mean it was big industries back in those days, and when they shut down, they put a lot of people out of work.
- Interviewer:* Do you know what those people did? Did they move away or?
- Russell Wright:* Well, some of them had to.
- Interviewer:* Yeah.
- Russell Wright:* Move away and get jobs and, you know, and well, some of them went into the fishing industry. Like I said, there's no – not a whole of opportunities. Back years ago, you used to be able to – if you wanted a lobster license, you just filled out the application, sent it in and got one.
- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* That doesn't happen anymore.
- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* Same way with the scallop fishery and the urchin fishery. All – you know, moratorium on licenses. So you can't get a license. So that's a big change over the years that I've seen.
- Interviewer:* So are there many young people entering the fishery?
- Russell Wright:* Well, there's no way for them – impossible to enter the fishery.
- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* I mean, with the lobster fishery, you've got to go on the apprentice program, and after you get done with the apprentice program, you have to go a waiting list. And for someone graduating high school that isn't into the fishery, chances are very slim that they're going to get in the fishery.
- Interviewer:* Right. So what do most young people do around here?
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- Russell Wright:* Nothing. I'll be honest with you.
- Interviewer:* I bet that's the same everywhere, right?
- Russell Wright:* I'll be honest with you. Nothing. No, there's not a whole lot of opportunities. Either they move away and a lot of them will go to schools, better their education, move away and get a job and there's – like I said, the ones that grew up in the fishing industry, either they fish with the family. We have the clamming industry here and the periwinkle industry that a lot of them will do that. You know, it's seasonal, but you know.
- Interviewer:* What about tourism? Is it important here today?
- Russell Wright:* Well, that's the big thing in all towns now.
- Interviewer:* Yeah.
- Russell Wright:* That's what it is. It's becoming a tourist town.
- Interviewer:* And about when did that start?
- Russell Wright:* I'd say in the last couple of years it's gotten real big in Lubec.
- Interviewer:* Yeah.
- Russell Wright:* I mean the last couple of years, there's a lot more people around in the summertime, and more people are coming towards the coast than ever before. So I mean, as you can see driving through here, we've got more restaurants than we got population of people, and they are summertime places.
- Interviewer:* Let's see. Was the fishing community affected with the Hague Line was established?
- Russell Wright:* No, not up here.
- Interviewer:* Really
- Russell Wright:* No.
- Interviewer:* Okay.
- Russell Wright:* See, everything up here is all day boats. So.
- Interviewer:* Okay.
- Russell Wright:* They're going out in the morning. They're coming back, you know, in the afternoon or the evening. We – the issue we have here – I mean we've got Canada right there.
- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* So we've got a line that's America, Canada. There's not a whole lot of bottom here for fishermen to fish on.
- Interviewer:* Right. Do most fishermen here have multiple licenses and fish for multiple species?
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- Russell Wright:* Yes. Most of your fishermen here has been into it for a number of years and kept their licenses up. Some people let their licenses go and wish they hadn't of.
- Interviewer:* Yeah. Do many fishermen have other work outside of fishing as well?
- Russell Wright:* Oh, yes. Because you've got – I mean, if you scallop fish, you know, it opens up the 17<sup>th</sup> of December and closes down the end of March. So, if you only hold a scallop license, you've got to do something the rest of the year.
- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* You know, a lot of them are clam diggers. They will dig clams all summer or pick perriwinkles and same way with the urchin fishery. If you're only holding an urchin license, then the urchin fishery is a short season.
- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* So you've got 45 days.
- Interviewer:* Okay. Would you say, overall, that fishermen here in Lubec are doing better or worse than 20 years ago.
- Russell Wright:* I'd say they're doing better.
- Interviewer:* Yeah.
- Russell Wright:* I think some of the restrictions and stuff and, like I said, the lobster industry – when I was growing up, the lobster industry, you'd be hard pressed to make a living at it, and now, in the last few years, as we all know, the lobster industry is booming.
- Interviewer:* That's true.
- Russell Wright:* And, you know, and the fleet of boats that's here now is top of the line, and years ago, if you had an old piece of boat that would float, that's what you went in. So the boats are better. I'd say they're doing better.
- Interviewer:* Are there more people in it now or fewer than there used to be would you say?
- Russell Wright:* How far back?
- Interviewer:* Well, I guess how has that changed and when I guess?
- Russell Wright:* Well, I mean, yes, there's a lot more people into the fishing industry because there's nothing else for them to do.
- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* Like I said, when the factories shut down and one industry that was here, when that closed up, that pushed more people in the fishing industry. Oh, yeah, there's way more boats here now than there ever was. Then when the urchin fishery started off in the in '80s, you know, everyone got an urchin license, when urchin fishing and some of them have done very well at it and bought bigger and better boats, and they just went from there.
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Yeah, there's a lot more boats here than there ever was.

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

*Russell Wright:* No, not really.

*Interviewer:* And why – what makes you say that?

*Russell Wright:* I don't.

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

*Russell Wright:* Major strength?

*Interviewer:* Uh-huh.

*Russell Wright:* I don't know. That could be put a million and one ways, I guess. I think the biggest major strength that they have here is some of the restrictions they put on here that's kept the fishery going like the scallop fishery with the restrictions of the daily limit and the days they can fish. I mean I'm not just saying days they can fish because of weather and stuff, but I mean I think the restrictions that they put on in the scallop industry saved this place. This is probably one of the richest scallop bottoms there is in the State of Maine right now, and the urchin fishery, that's been good here. And the lobster industry, like I said, in the last two or three years here, has been real good. So.

*Interviewer:* Okay. What do you see as major threats facing the fishing community here?

*Russell Wright:* What I see – the problem that I see is a lot of our people are older now, and you know, if they retire or pass on, as you may say, I mean there's no young people that's getting into it because they can't because they can't get a license. So does the fishing industry die down or does it come back? There's no way for them to get into it, you know. There's no way for them to get an urchin license or a scallop license at this time and lobster license. So I mean, once your older people get out of the business, they can't sell the boat – well, they can sell the boat, but they can't get no license. So how are they going to get – bring younger people into the fishery? That's the issue that I see.

*Interviewer:* Are there any other threats that you see facing fishermen here?

*Russell Wright:* If they deplete the resources would probably be a threat.

*Interviewer:* Yeah.

*Russell Wright:* You know, like the urchin fishery, I see that as going to be a thing of the past. You know, I just can't see – I've watched it right out when they started. I dragged urchins. I've dragged scallops. I've lobster fished.

Back in the '80s, I mean you could load a boat in three or four hours. Right now, a good boat, if he comes at the end of the day with three to four trays, he's doing pretty good, but back in the '80s, you know, when you got 50, 60 cents for them, now they get \$3.00. 2.50, \$3.00.

*Interviewer:* Right.

*Russell Wright:* You know, they can make a week's pay out of it.

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- Interviewer:* Yeah. Do you think there are any ways that fishermen can adapt to that?
- Russell Wright:* Oh, I don't think anyone can adapt to not making nothing.
- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* I don't – you know, like I said, some of them have multiple licenses. They can switch over and lobster fish and do that. There's only some people. Some fishermen have only got an urchins license and a scallop license. You know, if the scallop fishery collapses, which that has its ups and downs, and they're relying on urchin fisheries because a urchin fishery is 45 day season. So you've got to make a year's work in 45 days. Not going to happen.
- Interviewer:* Yeah.
- Russell Wright:* They've done well. I mean I'm not disputing that. You know, some of them do make more than I make in 45 days, and I work a year. Last year, this time of year, you know, before Christmas, they was getting \$8.00 a pound for sea urchins. So some made.
- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* But do they save it? I don't know.
- Interviewer:* Do you have any opinions on what is needed to strengthen commercial fishing here?
- Russell Wright:* No because I think there's – you know, they've got a lot of policies and laws in place to protect the fishery. You know, you can only do so much. Mother Nature will take care of the rest. Like I said, we do still have a pretty good fishery as we're all aware of. Saturday's the start of the scallop season, and you know, there's a lot of boats that come in.
- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* You can see what we've got for water and then, up in that bay there, you know, I'm expecting 75 to 80 boats in the first morning dragging.
- Interviewer:* That makes a busy day for you.
- Russell Wright:* Yeah, I mean it's a small puddle. It's – but, you know, it's the only place on the Maine coast that there's very many scallops. So and that's why they have to go to the shorter season.
- Interviewer:* Is enforcement tough around here or?
- Russell Wright:* Enforcement is tough everywhere.
- Interviewer:* Well, yeah.
- Russell Wright:* Overall, no. I mean we pretty well got it down to a science. You know, we don't have a lot of trouble. Everybody is human, and they'll try to sneak one by you. But in a small community, word gets out real fast.
- Interviewer:* Right.
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*Russell Wright:* So. You know, if people is trying to break the rules, there's always someone who wants to tell you.

*Interviewer:* Right.

*Russell Wright:* Unless they're breaking them.

*Interviewer:* Right. So are there specific people who represent the interests of commercial fishermen here?

*Russell Wright:* Well, they have advisory boards and a scallop advisory and an urchin counsel and lobster. They all have their own advisory boards, yeah.

*Interviewer:* Would you say the fishermen are well organized around here?

*Russell Wright:* I would say 50 percent.

*Interviewer:* Yeah.

*Russell Wright:* It's like anything, you know. People – some people, you know, this is their livelihood, and they do very well at it, but they work very hard at it. And you have other people that they only care for today and to heck with tomorrow. That's the way I see it, but overall, I think it's pretty good here.

*Interviewer:* And compared to other communities?

*Russell Wright:* I've worked in other communities. You know, people try to, like I said, abide by the law, but, you know, if they get a little bend in the corner, they're going to take it.

*Interviewer:* Right. Okay. How would you characterize the relationships between fishermen here in Lubec?

*Russell Wright:* Amongst themselves?

*Interviewer:* Yeah.

*Russell Wright:* You ever see fishermen get along?

*Interviewer:* That's a common answer.

*Russell Wright:* I don't know. Overall, it's not bad, but I mean they'll fight amongst themselves, you know, back and forth, you know, someone made \$20.00 and the other guy made ten, there's issue but.

*Interviewer:* Right.

*Russell Wright:* Overall, it's not bad. It's like every community. I mean we haven't had issues yet or –

*Interviewer:* Right.

*Russell Wright:* Meeting each others in battles but, you know, we've had a few disputes we've had to settle.

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- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* But other than that, it's like every other fishing community. There's greed.
- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* That's what it is. It boils down to greed.
- Interviewer:* And, in terms of – between like Lubec and other surrounding communities, is it kind of the same situation?
- Russell Wright:* I would say yeah. You know, I cover a few communities. I cover Eastport, you know, places like that. It's all about the same. I mean you always have a few of them that's always bickering back and forth over something, but, overall, it's not bad.
- Interviewer:* Okay. What about between fishermen and the non-fishermen in the community?
- Russell Wright:* There's no issues. I mean most everybody in this community right here is tied in the fishing industry somehow.
- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* You know, it's a family operation or it's a family and friend operation, but I mean if you take all the boats out of here, if you took all the people and figured them all out, it's – somewhere, their family's tied into the fishing industry. That's all there is to do.
- Interviewer:* Right. Has fishermen's access to the waterfront changed?
- Russell Wright:* No, not so bad here. We've had a few issues with, you know, because with the seaweed harvesters getting access to harvest seaweed. We had some incidents with that but – and a few clam digger incidents where, you know, crossing people's property to get to the shore, but overall, no. I mean as far as going to the boats, no. There's plenty of access here for boats. We haven't run into that yet like they have in some towns.
- Interviewer:* Right. Okay. Are there other people, besides fishermen, who use the dock space or waterfront?
- Russell Wright:* Oh, yes. I mean, sometime, you have all your recreational boaters, and of course, all tourists that come, they always have a boat and they put it in. So I mean this is all a public land and held by the state. So I mean they've got all this access here. So there's plenty of boat landings around here for them to put the boats in, and we've never had any issues that way.
- Interviewer:* Okay. So is recreational fishing big around here?
- Russell Wright:* It is in the last few years.
- Interviewer:* Yeah.
- Russell Wright:* Because there's a recreational lobster license that they can get.
- Interviewer:* Oh.
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- Russell Wright:* And it's a five trap license and the last I would say four or five years, that's got real big around here. Everybody wants to fish their own traps, five traps. So I mean that's a big thing here now.
- Interviewer:* And how do the commercial lobstermen feel about that? Do you know?
- Russell Wright:* You know, some will argue and chew over it. Most of them, they don't – and a lot of the recreational guys, they fish shore water. They haul them by hand most of them.
- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* So they ain't in the way of these big boats offshore in deep water.
- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* So they don't have no big issue. I – you know, you'll hear someone, they'll growl at you because someone's fishing somewhere, especially over here in the bay, but it ain't no big issue really.
- Interviewer:* Okay. How about aquaculture? Has that been –
- Russell Wright:* Aquaculture was really big here. You know, now it's kind of petered down. Back in the, you know, the '90s, I mean this whole solid bay was full of aquaculture, and now we have just very few sites now that's active.
- Interviewer:* And that –
- Russell Wright:* And that employed a lot of people back in the them days. A lot of people in this town was employed with that. We had the processing plant down here that processed the salmon and trout, but that went away. So everything now, that's grown here, is taken to Canada and harvested.
- Interviewer:* Oh, okay.
- Russell Wright:* So it's all owned by the Canadian company.
- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* But there is still a few people in this town that work on the sites. So I mean they employ some people, but the aquaculture is way down to what it was a few years ago.
- Interviewer:* Okay. How affordable is the current housing situation here?
- Russell Wright:* What do you mean?
- Interviewer:* I guess like have there been lots of people from away who have moved in and –
- Russell Wright:* Bought all the houses?
- Interviewer:* Uh-huh.
- Russell Wright:* Yes.
- Interviewer:* And has that increased prices quite a bit?
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- Russell Wright:* Yes because, as we all know, shorefront property now is way out of reach really.
- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* And back when I was growing up, you know, I mean I could have bought the whole town for what most people pay for half the houses now.
- Interviewer:* Okay.
- Russell Wright:* And for a young person starting out to come into this town and buy a house is almost impossible.
- Interviewer:* Yeah.
- Russell Wright:* Because the housing market has gone up but, in the last two years, as we all know with the economy, that has tumbled, but there's still houses, you know, they're way out priced, I think. But, you said, when the things was going good in the housing market prices went up and people think they can still get them, and they're holding onto them.
- So for a young person starting out or even a person with a family, it's hard pressed for them to step out and buy a home because we're all surrounded by water.
- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* And anywhere there's water, the land value has gone up.
- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* That's a big issue.
- Interviewer:* So do a lot of people – do most fishermen, who fish out of Lubec, live in Lubec or?
- Russell Wright:* Well, the people that fish out of Lubec that's – there's a fair amount, but we have a lot of people that transit from other places up here especially in the scallop industry and the sea urchin industry.
- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* They come from different towns up here and fish. You know, but most of the people that actually, you know, do live here, they boat – they all got boats and fish out of here yes.
- Interviewer:* Okay. What do you feel have been the most critical changes in the community since you've – I guess since you grew up?
- Russell Wright:* Well, the – with all the industry gone, that was quite critical. There's no work for anybody. Before, I mean, you pick up a job anywhere. Now, you ain't going to pick one up any – nowhere unless you get on the stern of a boat and they're pretty well filled out. You know, people from away – more and more people from away are moving in here now. That's the big – when I grew up here, we knew everybody.
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- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* We knew everybody in the town. I hardly know half of them now because they're summer residents. They come in the summer. They go in the winter. A lot of these houses are all vacant in the winter now. So I think that's a big change, and that's happening in every community now especially, like I saw, when you're surrounded by water. That's what everybody wants.
- Interviewer:* Right. Does the town cater to the – those interests of people from away and summer people?
- Russell Wright:* Well, I think it's a big thing. It brings money in. You know, and like I said, you take like these inns and these restaurants that are owned by people who have moved in here and bought these places and that brings tax revenue in. That's what you've got to have. You've got to have – I mean they employ summer help in the summer. You've got to have that because not everybody is going to go fishing.
- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* So and I think, if they're going to bring a tax base in, of course the town is going to be supportive of it.
- Interviewer:* What do you think this community will look like in ten years?
- Russell Wright:* I have no idea. In the last ten years, it's done a lot of changing. So the next ten years, I have no idea.
- Interviewer:* What would you like it to look like?
- Russell Wright:* Well, I would like – I would hope that I mean it stays a fishing community because, if the fishing industry collapses here, I mean that's it. What are you going to do? I mean we're out on a peninsula.
- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* You know, it ain't like you're going to drive to McDonald's in Machias and go to work. You know, that's 30 miles. So I mean working for \$7.00 an hour ain't going to cut it. So I mean, hopefully, the fishing industry will keep succeeding like it is. I hope, you know.
- Interviewer:* Well, what do you like most about living here?
- Russell Wright:* I like small communities. I like, you know, knowing everybody, you know, and just – well, I guess – it was peace and quiet. But now, with the – there's a lot more stuff going on especially in the drug situation and stuff, and you run into that everywhere now.
- Interviewer:* Yeah.
- Russell Wright:* And, you know, people stealing. Of course, that's all tied into the drugging, but you know, I – what I like about it, it's – most of the time, it's quiet as you can see. There's no – peaceful.
- Interviewer:* So you used to be a fisherman. What prompted you to join the Marine Patrol?
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- Russell Wright:* Well, I wanted to do it when I graduated from high school.
- Interviewer:* Oh, yeah?
- Russell Wright:* That was – you know, I like the water, and I like dealing with people. And then when I graduated from high school, that’s what I wanted to do, but I never - I guess I never went through with it then I went into the logging industry and worked away for awhile at that and then I come back and went fishing. The opportunity arose again, and I went through the process.
- Interviewer:* Okay.
- Russell Wright:* It might not have been one of the smartest moves I ever made but.
- Interviewer:* But you like it?
- Russell Wright:* I like it. I mean I like dealing with people, and most of the time, I mean we did – with our job, it’s a little different than most police officer jobs. We’re dealing with people’s livelihoods.
- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* So we have a little more leverage when we’re dealing with people.
- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* You know, if you're dealing with somebody and they think they’re going to lose their license, it’s a little different situation.
- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* You know, so, and I know everybody in the fishing industry. There isn’t many I don't know.
- Interviewer:* Right.
- Russell Wright:* So I mean I can deal with them fairly well.
- Interviewer:* I’m curious to one of the – we’re also doing interviews in Eastport. Are there many – what would you say, I guess, are the main differences between Lubec and Eastport in the fishing communities?
- Russell Wright:* I think Lubec is a little stronger fishing community. It’s a little more people into it like the urchin fishery and stuff like that. You know, Eastport does have some industry where they can they still go get a job somewhere, and over here, there’s none. So I mean people over there, you know, some of them work with the ships coming in and – Stuff like that, you know, they still have some things to do, and over here, this – but this – I think Lubec is a little more – don’t get me wrong. There is quite a few fishermen out of Eastport that fish hard, but I think there’s more of them here that fishes year round, you know.
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