

Fishtales
Sunday, September 30, 2012
Working Waterfront Festival

Interviewer – Markham Starr
Interviewee – Bill Adler

BA Hi nice to meet you.

MS You're...?

BA I'm the Executive Director of the Mass Lobstermen's Association, but

MS Oh ok. Could you start one more time? Ok so could you tell me your name?

BA My name's Bill Adler. I'm the Executive Director of the Massachusetts Lobstermen's Association and I'm still lobstering. I set my first traps in 1963, pulling by hand out of a dory. And before that I had where I got attached to lobstering was my first job ever was on the water and it was gathering sea moss off the coast of Marshfield where I'd go, you go out and you'd rake sea moss with a big rake into your dory, come in and sell it. And we'd get a cent and a half a pound wet. Well, it was big buck then. The average was probably a thousand pounds for a tide. A tide is probably low tide, it had to be calm, you had to go three or four hours to work. And so I did that through college and in '63 I decided, I says, hey what would it be like to put some of those lobster traps down and see if I could catch a lobster, which I did. And so I continued to moss and lobster out of a dory and gradually got bigger and bigger to an inboard, more traps and in '74 I went full time lobstering. I actually went dragging in the winter with my boat which is a lobster boat and gill netting and lobstering and I did that right up until the time that I got drafted to run the Association. And part of that was I think because I did have a college education and a master's degree. And I was as I frequently when I had to go give an award to a kid for a scholarship or somethin', part of my opening statement was I'm here because I'm the one that owns the suit. And so it's gone on and I've been involved now with the politics of it, being the Executive Director. I'm on the Atlantic States and several other commissions. I'm the Chairman of the Lobster Institute which is in Maine, but the Lobster Institute is from New York to Newfoundland. It's an industry funded organization that goes to research and education and somehow I ended up sitting at the head chair there too. So I've been doing all this and some of the weird stories that have happened over the years, first of all just from storms, I remember some of the great storms we've had where our traps were wrecked and they moved miles and miles and in tangles. And I remember our harbor working for, we'd get together and we'd go out and there'd be these great big florets (?) of buoys, which are all your traps, everybody's traps in a big ball on the bottom. And your buoys looked like a floret of different colors. And what the boys would do is two boats would come alongside the floret and tie onto it and take off pulling it. Other boats would come along behind it and as the floret moved, the traps would come to the surface and what would happen is these boats would come in and

cut the, didn't matter whose traps, cut them and bring em aboard, cut em bring em aboard. And when these boats got loaded, they'd go off. There'd be two more boats. So it was like our harbor all working together. And this was mostly during the days of our single traps because they would just take off. So there were those types of things. And then there was like the great storm of '78. It was a Halloween night and I was out with my wife going to the movies and the wind was blowin'. I'm going, this does not look good. And the '78 storm was the time that they actually had to close down, there were houses moved off everything and then in '91 that was the "no name" storm as people have come to call it. We went out after the storm and you couldn't find gear. I know I lost just about everything I had out in the ocean in '91. Of course I, once again I was working so I didn't have as many out as everybody else, but it was totally a disaster. And I had to go up to the Governor and try to get help for my fishermen. And I said they need a disaster declaration. And they need a paycheck. And at the time it was Governor Weld. And Lieutenant Governor Cellucci. And I got for them, not only the disaster, but I also got unemployment for them. And they were able to go and buy traps. Unfortunately, and that, everybody knew about that one because the houses were moved, the streets were destroyed and everybody knew it was bad. The next year, there was another storm, but it wasn't considered that bad because no houses were moved, no seawalls came down, but our guys lost the traps they just got. I had to go back in and get it again. And we did. But it's been this up and down thing all these years with all the different scenarios I've seen it all. And some of these knew fellows; they haven't seen what happens in a storm like what we saw. And it'll come. And I know that some of them will go out and they'll go, "What do we do now? Look at, there's a big ball of traps. What do I do?" And the old timers will go, "Yeah, that's right and this is how you have to handle it." And so life goes on in the lobster fishery and so we, I know we just try to keep them all afloat. But I still have to go lobstering because, and I go out on my own boat which I had built in 1980. And I go out because I just have to still smell the bait and then I know that if they're havin' a bad year I know it because I'm havin' a bad year. I'm nowhere near their size. But I can see if they have a storm, I got the storm too. And so I can tell and keep a pulse on it. Also, I enjoy going out because nobody talks back to me out there. The seagulls don't talk back to you. Nice peaceful time out there. But I've been out in a lot of different weather, done a lot of different things and I don't know what else I can tell you.

MS Well that's great. Now did you always lobster? Did you do something before that or?

BA Well the first job I had as a teenager was mossaing.

MS Mossing yeah.

BA Yeah.

MS But I mean, you got your master's degree in what?

BA English

MS Did you do anything with that or?

BA Taught school. And lobstered. I taught school probably from '66 to '74 and lobstered all along anyway. But I'd come down after school and there'd be another school teacher out of Brockton would come down to Marshfield and there was an auto mechanic and the three of us would come down and go out in the afternoon. We were called second shift. The other guys were comin' in and we were goin' out to haul until the sun sets. And so I did all that and that was another reason I probably got drafted into what I did because they'd go, "You know how to write a letter. You're hired, forever." You know so this is what I've been doing and did all these years.

MS And the sea mossaing is for gardens or?

BA No it was interesting that at one point in time I was put in charge of the crew and given a truck to pick up their moss out of Green Harbor, Marshfield and take it down to Kingston where they processed it. And people would come up to me and they'd go "What are you doin' with the seaweed?" Toothpaste, beer, chocolate milk, ice cream and meringue. It was, moss was, you'd dry it, they'd bleach it, and they'd pulverize it. And it was a, if you see chocolate milk, and you see cocoa milk and stabilizer, it's the stabilizer. The beer companies Carlings for one, used to use it in filtration. It's a gelatin. It serves, it's a white powder, by the time you finish it and it's, the French name was Plumage. And the old people used to say that you'd put some of this weed into milk and boil it and then you'd strain the weed out and put your flavor and it served as the gelatin. So that's what moss was used for. And it was a good, it was a good business for a kid in school, because it was summer, and you'd go out and the bad part about it was you weren't workin' for anybody. So if it was too nice a day and you didn't wanna go, no one was gonna fire you. And that was probably the downfall of some of the mossers. They didn't take it serious enough. But if you did, you could do a pretty good job and I just remember us going out, the sun coming up, low tide and we were heading out and it was calm and we'd be coming in sometimes our dories would be about, oh maybe five inches from sinking. I mean we just packed the stuff up. You could look like a monitor coming in. And we'd be on the beach. Everybody all the other kids goin' off to bag groceries and we'd be done for the day, you know. Yay! You'd be out there if it was in the summer, you know, you got too warm, you'd jump overboard and take a swim, because you're, the rocks are right there, you have to comb it off the rocks. It's a golden brown, only about that long. And I remember we'd, you'd hit a rock with the rake and you'd go "Oooh look at them" Visions of dollar signs. As you're rakin' it, the rake was a special rake, about this long, lot of teeth and sort of pointed at that [end], and a big long pole. And you stood in your boat and you raked it like that, dumped it in the boat, and kept doing it for that time that you're out there. And remember you only had low tide and around it to do it. And then what happened was they started to find, Kraft used it also in cheeses. They found the substitute and they found they could get it from another country cheaper. And by the time my son did some mossaing, I gave him my rake, they were up to 9 cents a pound. I go "Woow" and they supplied their own boats. They gave 'em fiberglass dorles to use where they'd provide us with dories, but we'd have to spend the first two days keepin' 'em from sinkin'. They were wooden. And we'd have to caulk 'em before we went. And then they were givin' them the boats, they were 9 cents a pound. And then it died. The whole business

died. And there is no more, although the moss still grows. But there's no market for it. And it's too bad because it was a good summertime job where, healthy job, where you could make your money rather than being over bagging groceries or workin' at Dunkin' Donuts or somethin' like that. So that was the spark for me. The first job I had was on the ocean and I'm still on the ocean.

MS That's great. Thank you.

BA Ok. Alright.