

PIKE BARTLETT

Interviewer: John

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Place: Bartlett home

Transcriber: Sally Merrick



Pike Bartlett was born on February 3, 1951, and moved to Friendship from Massachusetts in 1973. He has two children, one of whom conducted this interview. He is president and owner of the Friendship Trap Company, which he started in 1977. His hobbies and special interests include skiing, sailing, motorcycling, and his children.

Q: What do you do?

A: Well, I have a company that makes lobster traps. We start with rolls of wire and bales of mesh, and we cut it and bend it and make it into lobster traps.

Q: How long have you been doing it?

A: I started the company, called the Friendship Trap Company, in 1977. And when I

first started, I was in Massachusetts the first year, and then I built a building here in Friendship and was up here in 1978.

Q: Did you ever make wood traps?

A: No, when I started, there was already one company in Maine that was making wire traps called Macraps down in Freeport, and it looked like the trap of the future. I did some market research to see if it was really going to be a better trap than wooden traps--the wire trap, that is--and it looked like the days of the wooden trap were numbered. The wire traps were heavier underwater, so they didn't move around, and they were lighter on the boat, and they also required less maintenance. So all around it was a much better trap for fishermen than wooden traps. And because they didn't move around on the bottom, they caught more lobsters.

Q: How have traps changed since you started?

A: Well, the small things have changed. One of the most noticeable changes to people that just are casual observers and don't know a lot about traps would be the colors. When we started, there was only one color of wire for the traps, and that was green. And then we started to add colors like black, and then white, and then gray and yellow and blue, and now there are six or eight colors. That's the most noticeable to some people. But another big change has been the change from the hand knit heads that people used to make by hand to this material which we call *shrimp line*, which is a netting that's made overseas that we use for the heads of the traps. And now the latest big change coming along seems to be concrete runners, as a combination of runners and ballast for a trap, instead of the wooden runners and bricks inside of the trap. And that seems to be the next major change that's taking place in traps.

Q: How has the business changed?

A: Well, the business in a lot of ways has gotten a lot tougher because when we started, we didn't have a lot of competition, and we got in at the beginning of the wire trap business, and so it went along pretty well for awhile. It was a new industry, and we were into it early, and we probably did a pretty good job. Now, as in most industries, as time progressed, it has become what we kind of call a mature industry, where there are a lot of people in it. There's a lot more competition, and some trap builders have come and gone, and it's become a lot more price sensitive. People shop around a lot, and also to compound that issue is the trap limits. Regulations have cut down the number of new traps being built by about a third to a half. So we not only have a mature business, but we have an industry that has also gotten smaller because of regulations mostly.

Q: Describe the traps you make.

A: We make all kinds of shapes and sizes of traps. Of course, most of the traps we make are lobster traps, but we do make some traps for fish and some traps for shrimp. And they range in size from 36 inches long up to about 50 or 52 inches long. The most common traps are 48 inches long and mostly 21 or 24 inches wide. Most traps weigh roughly about 40 to 50 pounds, whereas the old wooden ones weighed 70 or 80 or sometimes 90 pounds. And the average 48-inch trap costs around \$50.00, and a 36-inch trap can still be around \$40.00. And like I said earlier, they're all different colors, and the different cages, and almost every fisherman makes their own custom ideas on their traps.

Q: How long does it take to make a trap?

A: Well, that can vary a little bit by how complicated the trap is. For the average trap it takes about one hour of labor, total. We have different people that do different parts on the trap. We have some people that just cut the wire and bend the wire; we have some people that clip the cages together and put bricks and runners in; we have other people that put the heads in, and other people that guy the heads off, tie the heads and put the doors on, and that type of thing. So everybody's kind of got their own special job that they do.

Q: How many do lobstermen usually have?

A: Well, that's changed a lot over the years. About eight or 10 years ago most fishermen had 400 or 500 or 600 traps, and they all kind of had a different amount. And then we started to have the government talk about regulating the number of traps that fishermen could have. And they told them that they could only have 800 traps, let's say--different places had different numbers. But the government might have said that you could have only 800 traps. Now there may have been a few fishermen that had more than 800 traps, but most had less. And the effect of it was that a lot of fishermen, once they were told they could only have 800, even if they were only fishing 600, bought more and wanted to have 800 because they were told that's all they could have. And they were worried the government would restrict them to less than that if they didn't have the whole 800. So now the trap limits, depending on what area of the lobster fishery that they're in, could, I think, be anywhere from 600 to 800.

Q: What do you think the future holds for the business?

A: Right now the lobster business looks pretty stable and pretty good. There's a lot of concern about whether we're overfishing the lobsters or anything, but I think that the biggest issue might actually be what we call natural predation, where we have things out there like striped bass and codfish that eat the small lobsters. Now, for a long time we caught a lot of the striped bass and codfish and ground fish, so there weren't too many things around to eat the small lobsters. So we caught a lot more lobsters here for awhile. Now since there are more fish out there eating the small lobsters, we

have to be careful that they don't eat too many small lobsters, and we wind up with less lobsters in the future. And that's what we're watching and being very careful about that, I think.