

RUSSELL BOYNTON

Date: June 4, 2005

Time: 2:45 p.m.

Location of the Interview: Ellsworth High School Library

Student Interviewers:     Jeremy Grant             Grade 10

                                  Hillary Camber             Grade 10

School: Ellsworth High School

School Location: Ellsworth, Maine

Teacher or Parent Interviewer/Chaperone: None

Transcriber: Joyce Whitmore

JG: What exactly does a wormer do?

RB: First of all a wormer has to work by the tide. The tide has to be out. You take each tide which is around six hours. You go about four hours before low water which gives you two hours to low water and then you work two hours after; that would be if you are blood worming. It is about a three to four hour tide. Sand worming is a little shorter because the worms are out further so you have to wait for the tide to be out further. Likewise, it comes in, so you have a two and a half to a three-hour tide unless the tide is really small. Tides range from eleven to twelve foot tides to just the reverse - an eight foot tide. When you have the eight-foot tides you have shorter tides because tides do not go out as far. Otherwise than that you have a ...oh, oh, we have a problem. I didn't notice that thing tipped over. Do you have any newspapers?

JG: Yes, I will go and get you one.

RB: There is some stuff you may be able to use. There are some license blanks in there and some fishery stuff. I went down to the Department of Marine Resources, which is about a mile from my house and picked up this stuff. They said you could take as many of these things as you need, whatever, I didn't know how many I would need.

These worms are not supposed to be mixed up. That is the accident that has just happened. There are two types of sand worms in here. This is cut somewhere. See, his tail is broken off. I had these separated. They do not do well with each other. They fight. This bloodworm will eat this worm and try to

swallow him and kill him. If this worm is too big it gets in it and burst. I have got to separate them.

That is what they look like. These things right now are worth twenty-eight cents apiece; and these things are worth twelve cents apiece. The twelve cents are the sand worms.

HC: How many worms do you usually get?

RB: O.K. I have got two different hoes up there. One is a bloodworm hoe, it is an old one but I haven't used it this year. I was but now I find it is easier for me to dig sand worms.

RB: That's a pretty good question. I dug about twelve to fourteen hundred sand worms today. I put them in a crate and I will sell them tomorrow. The guy asked me to crate them today and I will sell them tomorrow.

HC: Will they still live if they are out of water?

RB: Oh, they will live for quite a while.

RB: They will pack them in a fine weed. That is also an industry. There are guys that go out and do that. They will go out and pick up this weed. Do you know what eel grass is? It is green grass around the shore and it is pretty sharp on the edges of it. Underneath that they will find this fine weed. They put this weed into a tomato box or flat and line it with newspapers like this. They will put the weed on top and spread the worms across the weed like that. The worms will work down through the weed and eventually land on the paper.

O.K. Wish I could have caught that and shown you something. That is good right there. See the end right there and the four little black things. That is what they nail you with. They can bite with that. These guys get aggravated very fast. These guys have got two of them but they are docile. They don't bite. I have never gotten bitten by a sand worm.

HC: Does it hurt?

RB: It's like a needle kinda pricking you. You jump. If you carry them in your hand. You are just digging along. When I was digging we used to call it good digging if you get a worm every six hoe full. I used to count the hoe full. If I was getting a worm every six, I would stay there. You go about a four across. Then you get a little bunch and get three or four. Now, they are getting one worm about every fifteen to twenty hoe fulls. They are getting scarce.

Most of the guys dig two handed. You dig on mussel beds where the mud is softer. You thrust the hoe down in; it is like clamming. There will usually be two or three worms there. If I want to pick up both- blood and sand I hook this on to here. I have two separate areas to throw them in.

Tomorrow, when I take my worms in and take them out of the crate. I will have to freeze some salt water in mountain dew bottles or something like that. You don't feel them all the way up, only about three quarters full cause they will expand when you freeze them. I will use them to keep the worms cold until I get to North Blue Hill where I sell them.

It is a really good part time job.

I can give you some stories like if you don't know how to walk in the mud you have to take your time and learn how to walk in the mud. He wanted a part time job to make money in the summer then he would go to school. I was digging bloodworms at that time. He did not know how to walk in the mud. His name is Robert Madrell and he became a doctor at the Ellsworth hospital but he started digging worms. I said, "Robert, I am going to go out there and check that middle ground but you stay where you are." I went out of his sight. People don't tend to follow instructions. He decided it must be really good out there. In the meantime I had disappeared out of sight. When I came back around the point there he is out there stuck in the mud. He got one boot out but the other boot is stuck. After about ten minutes I went out to help him and told him to take his boots off. Pull your feet up. He walked to shore in his stocking feet dragging his boots behind him. I took his bucket. He was so tired he lay down on the bank up there about half way between the water and the shore. I disappeared again. When I got back to the truck, I asked where is Robert. Not there. I go back and he is still a sleep. I wish I had waited. The tide was about three feet away from him. Wish I had just sit there and waited just to see his reaction. Anyways, he became a doctor. Others who have done this part time have become lawyers.

My son went to school at Cheverus High School. He got a full boat scholarship to Brandeis University. One year he decided he would forget about school and just go digging worms and clams in the winter. One hot July day he went right out of sight. He had a hang over which didn't help any. About half way through the tide, we met back at the car. He said, "Dad, I have made an important decision, I am going back to school" Wow, what a day this is. This is the greatest day of the year. He went on and became a lawyer. This is a couple of success stories.

This is not a life to get into but it is a good way to make money when you are young or when you are old. I taught school for twenty-eight years, I taught here at Ellsworth but this is what I do now. It is a part time job and I like it except when I have to dig at night. I do go at night quiet a lot with a friend named John Shoppe. He is a referee.

So, what else can we talk about? Let's see. Got any more questions.

You can dig one hundred and twenty five worms without a license any day of the week. In order to practice to see if you like it or not, before you spend, I think the license is forty-four dollars, I would go out and borrow boots. When I worked at Surry, I would take one kid to see what it was like. None of them ever worked

more than one tide.

I am not a clean digger. I get covered with mud. I go to work every day

JG: How long have you been doing this?

RB: I graduated from high school in 1951. I started digging all summers in 1957, digging and going to college and working at the A & P. I was busy all the time. It is funny, when I started digging a bloodworm was a cent and three quarters but they were thicker. So I made seventeen fifty a thousand. I would usually get a thousand or fifteen hundred so I would make seventeen to twenty five dollars a day but in the A & P I was making only ten dollars a day. I was making more money worming than I was working in a grocery store. I only got a dollar seventy an hour at the A & P. So you can see how things have changed. So, how many years was that. That is almost fifty years part time.

JG: What got you started doing this?

RB: Well, I was brought up on the coast. My father sold clams and scallops. He operated a shucking house. I was involved in digging clams - two dollars a bushel in those days, then I shucked the clams and then I even pinched the clams. Did you ever pinch clams? If you take a look at the clam it has a little black thing in the belly, we used to squeeze that out because they said it was bad for the grease. A lot of his clients wanted squeezed clams. Us kids, for ten cents a gallon, would squeeze clams.

I was also digging clams and then one time I saw these guys coming in with these buckets and I said, "What have you guys got there?" they said, "We have worms in the bucket."

I said, "Wow. That's all you got and you carry those in that one bucket." In those days I was digging four or five bushels of clams. Now, the easy part was digging the clams; the hard part was lugging these things. Now, here these guys had just as much money in one bucket as I did with the clams, so I decided to dig worms. It looked like an easier job to me. I did it every summer and I did it after school when I was teaching until I got more involved in coaching.

JG: What is a typical day?

RB: I already told you about the digging part. So you got from two to four hours of digging. I used to be able to sell the worms very close to where I dug them right there in Sullivan but the guy I sold too went out of business so now I am going to north Blue Hill. From my house it is about forty minutes. Forty over; forty back - another thirty minutes to count the worms out. Another two hours there so it takes about five hours.

You have got to be a person who can get up at two thirty in the morning and not just say, uh, I don't want to do this. When it is hard to get started is when it is

raining. Once you start digging, it is o.k.

HC: When it is raining there are no problems?

RB: When it is raining you have to be careful of the water coming into the hole. These worms are pretty hard to pick up if there is a lot of water. You gotta have kind of a dry hole. If it is pouring, you get a day off. Write it off income tax wise. I drove two hundred miles to dig. When you are self-employed, you gotta be sure you keep out enough money to pay your taxes.

My grandson works as a stern man on a lobster boat. He works for Bruce Damon out of southwest harbor. Bruce told my grandson to be sure he saved six thousand dollars this summer. If you are going to pay six thousand dollars tax, you are going to make pretty good dough. You pay about twenty per cent. So you are going to make about twenty thousand as a stern man on a lobster boat.

There is a lot of things you can write off if you are digging worms. You have got to save money to pay that self-employment tax. Your self-employment tax can be higher than your income tax. You can make a lot of money. It is all according to how hard you are willing to work. If you want to work two tides a day... At my age I do not like to work two tides a day but there are guys that do that. They do well.

I liked to play when I was young. I liked to work hard and I liked to play. I always went by the motto, "Work hard and play hard" I guess I got so I didn't like the fishing part that much. My father offered me a job in the business. I drove for him two weeks on the fish route but I said, "Dad this is not for me. Find a guy, I will break him in, I will train him but I did not like this" I went into the insurance business for a while but I didn't like that either. I felt like I was rooking people. I loved basketball. When I was in the service and came out they had the GI Bill. The GI bill paid a certain amount towards college. I decided if I went to college I could play basketball and that is what I did. I played basketball and what happened to be a teaching college. I got out and went into teaching. I also coached and I considered coaching to be playing. I think all young people should find something that they like to do. If you do something you like to do, it is not work.

When you are digging you wear a glove on one hand. I don't have any blisters because I wear a glove.

JG: Anything else we should know.

RB: If you are interested, it is a good part time job. Don't knock it until you try it. Most people can pick it up.

