

Fishtales  
Sunday, September 30, 2012  
Working Waterfront Festival

Interviewer – Markham Starr  
Interviewee – Jon Campbell

JC Well you can fix me in photo shop right?

MS There's always something we can fix...Alright so I know your name but we're gonna start with your name and then just ask you a few questions before we get to, did you have a particular story in mind?

JC Yeah. Well I, the first one that came to mind.

MS Ok so what is your name?

JC My name is Jon Campbell, no H.

MS And where are you from?

JC I'm currently living in Narragansett, Rhode Island.

MS And you've been in the fishing business?

JC When I was younger; there was kind of a family business. It was a neighborhood business. The people next door to me were involved in shellfishing. The guy across the street, Pat DeNuncy used to grab us to go lobstering and it was kind of, probably every day, and the guy behind me built boats. We had to use, we had to help him. We had to build skiffs. We had to do all that kind of stuff. It was really, there was one guy that lived in the neighborhood that owned a liquor store, but everybody else pretty much was involved in one aspect of fisheries or another. And I suppose owning a liquor store is part of it [laughs] when you think about it, yeah!

MS And did you have a particular story you wanted to...

JC Yeah. We had an unusual piece of gear which was a hydraulic dredge that we quahog with. And the state had made these illegal to work commercially. What it was, was a powerful water pump and a bunch of jets that would ride along the bottom, loosen the mud up, loosen the bottom up, and then everything would come up on a conveyor onto a cull board. And you'd pull the quahogs and stuff out of that. So what happened after the state made it illegal to commercially harvest with that is we ended up doing transplants for the state. So you'd go into like Bristol Cove or places in the upper bay that were polluted areas, get all the quahogs out of there you could get and take 'em down to clean water where they'd sit for three or four months or something like that and then they could be harvested, considered clean although I'm not sure that that did much for the heavy

metal contamination and stuff like that. But it did get a lot of the bacteriological contamination out of it. The thing about this arrangement is we got everything off the bottom. If it was down there, and it could get caught on the claws of the bottom of the conveyor, it came up. You know and we'd get boat parts and we'd get, you know a lot of stuff you didn't want. And my mother was excited, 'cause we'd, we'd, you know particularly in some of the older areas, we'd get these beautiful old late glass bottles and all kinds of stuff. So she's like "you know, you guys get anything good, bring it home." So we did. And we got some treasures. We got some not so treasures. And then one day we got a great, big bone. And we took it home and everybody looked at it for awhile. And we said, this is a human leg bone. It's a femur. It's that big bone in the upper leg. At which point my mother said, "Why don't you guys not bring anything home!" [laughs] And that's kinda how that went. End of story [laughs]

MS That's a good one. Yeah.

JC It's a true one.

MS Any others you want to share?

JC Let me think about it. And wander around. If you're goin' all day, if I think of another one

MS Alright

(2<sup>nd</sup> recording)

JC Let me just collect my thoughts.

MS Ok. How about you? You got any stories about him you'd like to share?

JC Are you gonna ask me any questions again or is this continuous? Well, growin' up in a fishing family, this was complicated. We used to always have a lot of the old guys around the house. And I've written some songs based on what they used to talk about. And these were hard old guys, some of 'em. We knew Harold Loftes. Harold had, did you know Harold? One of them had been on a boat and they got hit by a freighter in the middle of the night, boat cut in half, and he said he had the presence of mind, knocked right out of his bunk, to swim down while the boat passed over him. And then he came back up so he wouldn't get sucked into the props. And yeah this was kind of the stock and trade for those old guys. I mean you get all this bluster and everything with the Deadliest Catch guys. But these guys are old Yankee farmers and all that and what was most impressive was how not much rattled them. And the whole thing of Pt. Judith, they'd come in after a trip, get all cleaned up, catch a ride up to Phillips in town, buy a suit, Phillips or Kenyons, buy a suit, new suit and then proceed to celebrate until such time that it was time to go out fishin' again. The suit was in such a condition that you'd just wear it on the next trip [laughs]. It was scuffed up and torn and dirty and everything like that. So you wouldn't even take it to the dry cleaner. You'd just wear it on the next trip

and just get another suit when you came in. And it was funny, we were standin' around down a the point one time. And we'd always have these scientists come around and they were looking around Point Judith like it was some kind of anthropological site. And they really missed the point on a lot of stuff. There's a bunch of stray cats and they're lookin' at 'em, and one's sayin' to the other one "Gee we wonder if it's a steady seafood diet that makes all the cats down here have no ears." And we're like, "No the cats chew the ears off of each other, it has nothin' to do with, it's a cat-food diet that makes 'em have no ears" You know and just stupid stuff like that. And then we had my cousin Paul Gorman. He'd come by every morning while we were kids waitin' for the bus. And he married, he had this sports car which he bought, but I think it had been in a couple of wrecks. So he made a new body for her out of galvanized sheet metal. So we're out waitin' for the bus when we were kids. And here comes Paul. He's married a Narragansett Indian woman, Mary Thomas. And she was an elegant lookin' woman. So the two of them are ridin' up into town in this MG with a corrugated tin body on it that he made. We used to call it "the cookie sheet" [laughs]. So they'd go ridin' through town. Uh! Just funny stuff. And then my old man would go over to the dark side and work as a game warden sometimes. So, of course, you know he's now in charge of enforcing the law on all his buddies. Of course, that doesn't work too well. So, he's all the time lettin' people go. We'd get up in the morning and there'd be a bushel basket of scallops or something on the back steps 'cause he'd let somebody go. Him bein' a game warden for awhile meant I was basically raised on confiscated shellfish. So that worked good. And then we'd make home brew, 'cause everybody liked to drink, but everybody was cheap. So we'd have that goin', usually in a big earthenware crock. And we had one batch that the cheese cloth fell off the top and it got a nice layer of yellow jackets on it. And that batch had a lot of pep. And the thing is you pitch in. There was none of this, as a kid, you didn't get to sit around and watch TV. or do anything like that. If the home brew is ready, we're washin' bottles and runnin' the cappin' machine and all that kind of stuff [laughs]. And some of the batches were hotter than others. I remember, we'd be sittin' in the kitchen and you could here bottles goin' off in the basement. You know "Bang!" And some of 'em would have an inch and a half of like white sludge in the bottom which was just yeast. They used to jack the recipes to get it as potent as they could get it. So you'd have to pour it off through cheese cloth. And everybody'd get to drink it, kids and grown ups and everything like that. There was one night where we're sittin' in the kitchen, and we used to keep the newspapers stacked up in one corner like you did in the old days. And everybody's fired up. And somebody gets up, I don't know where they thought they were, just gets up and goes over and takes a leak on the newspapers piled in the corners [laughs]. There could have been ergot fungus on the, it was like...And my mother would stand at the top of the stairs and yell "Half the world is drunk, and the other half is takin' care of them and I quit!" And she'd go to bed. And we're all sittin' down there in our t-shirts and every once in a while we'd dig a bunch of steamers and the people would come over 'cause they'd want steamers. I remember one kid, obnoxious kid in the neighborhood, so he's there. He's gonna get some steamers. And we've got 'em. We've steamed 'em open. And you've got the brother and you've got the butter and all that kind of stuff. And he's ready to dig in. And I forget who it was, one of my brothers or something, said, picks one up, dunks it, hangs it over his mouth and says "Wow, this is just like eatin' baby birds." And he just, the kid just disappears" [laughs]. So it was fun. We used to make quahog skiffs. And the

way we decided to make 'em is we'd glue both sides to the, or fasten both sides to the stem, you know the bow. And then we'd fasten the transom to one side of the planking. And then we'd get my mother in the '48 Ford to drive the other side of the planking in to the transom. Just kind of "Come on, a little more, little more." This thing's like a compressed triangle at this point. If the thing ever slid it would have shot right over the barn. "Come on, come on, a little more!" There's smoke comin' out the back tires. Somebody's standin' there with the Yankee screwdriver waitin' for everything to line up. Oh it was wild. It was a great upbringing and I'm sure an upbringing you couldn't duplicate now. It was an enviable upbringing. We all had boats before we had cars and all that kind of stuff. But it was just, that whole life on Salt Pond. It wasn't until recently when I was down on the Chesapeake Bay that I realized we, rather than living like deep sea guys, like here in New Bedford, we lived, the way we lived was really similar to how Chesapeake Bay watermen lived. That sort of cycle, annual cycle of fisheries. Eels in the winter, scallops in season, quahogs all the time. Stripers and Bass when they were running 'cause we could all, myself, Rick Huntley, Tommy Luson [?] used to go out every day after school 'cause you could just load three or four garbage cans with Bluefish and sell 'em at the co-op. That was our after school job. Rick's dead now, Tommy died on his boat. But it was, it was just somethin' you did. It wasn't thought of as bein' anything. You'd plant a garden. You'd shoot woodchucks for the bounty. You'd get a deer. You'd go fishin'. It was all just the fabric of life with no separation. It's only in recent years that its started to look in people's eyes there's more separate vocations, but around Point Judith it's like everybody did all those things and it was just what you did. The guys on Block Island and the guys in Point Judith. The guys that Cindy's book [Salt of the Sea Fishermen of Point Judith] is about. They all, those were the old guys, not even that old. But when I was a kid comin' up, Good Woodens [?] and all them, they were all my neighbors. So it was really, we never viewed it as a separate microcosm of any kind or whatever you wanna call it. It was just, that's the way it was around there.

MS When were you born?

JC 1951. And I'd have to say, probably more friends of mine died on their own boats then died in Vietnam. Or if not their own boat, somebody else's boat. That's growin' up in a fishin' family, at least chapter one [laughs]

MS Great. Thanks