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Gloucester, Mass.

Capt. John F. Critchett

Nov. 17, 1893

Interviewed by William Wakeham and Hugh M. Smith

Age 56. Been fishing since 1852. Has been living in Gloucester 27 years. Been master of a vessel 27 years; mackerel fishing all that time, except for the last 4 or 5 years. Name of vessel Sch. Richard Lester of Gloucester.

Has engaged in the southern spring fishery a number of springs. But has not been there for 6 years.

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The furthest he has been is down off Cape Charles, and most generally met the fish there. Some meet them most down to Cape Hatteras, but he has not been that far. Meet them about 40 or 50 miles off shore. Mackerel used to tend in shore further than they do now.

There is a school of mackerel goes into the Gulf of St. Lawrence regularly, and they tend

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way off in the gulf stream. They are a big school.

Has a chart prepared by Eldridge which shows how the fish will go; that is, as to latitude and longitude. It gives the cold and warm water bands. It is a regular coast chart.

When he first went south mackerel came closer in shore than they do now: that is, years ago. When he first met

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the fish in the spring fishery they were heading about E.N.E. Sometimes they varied a little from day to day, but that is the general trend. That body of mackerel does not touch this shore. It is the same school that we catch off Sandy Hook. Down south see mackerel from 5 to 20 miles off shore. Used to follow them as far as Cape Cod. Vessels that go south now follow

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the same course.

Mackerel generally go the same route they come. They would strike the Nova Scotia coast generally about the first of June or 25th of May. Have known mackerel caught off Cape Sable, some 6 or 8 years ago, the 20th of May. Capt. Smith caught a school of mackerel the 20th of May off Cape Sable, some 20 miles

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off Browns Bank.

When the fish first approach the Nova Scotia shore they come in from sea. Regularly every spring a school strikes in among the Cape Sable Islands, and they catch them in the weirs. Some of the go up the Bay of Fundy. They have caught them up as far as Digby. In Saint Mary's Bay, in past years, the people there

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would set their nets, and in high water the mackerel would play around the nets, and in low water they would pick them out of the nets.

Some of those mackerel go into the Gulf by the Gut of Canso, and some come out through there. The large schools in the spring generally go around the North Cape. Has been there the 10th or 15th of June, but vessels do go there earlier than

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that, but not very often. Seiners do sometimes. Has been in there hooking about the 5th or 10th of June. When the mackerel first come in the Bay they strike about North Cape, then follow the land up to New Brunswick and further north; where they go to spawn. Has followed them up to Magdalens lots of times. Those Magdalen Island fish are large. The first school

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that comes are large mackerel. The second school smaller size. The first school strike the Magdalens about the 5th or 6th of June. Has known of mackerel being caught there the 2nd of June. Some schools go as far as 7 Ids.

When we first see them in the spring they are poor and full of spawn and milt. The spawn is not very well advanced.

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They do not get to be that way until they get pretty well eastward. The schools that come about this coast do not spawn. Thinks they spawn further south, along the New York and New Jersey coast and off Long Island. There is nothing in them when they come here.

Has not followed mackerel any further than Block Island in the fall.

Has never caught

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mackerel in the winter, but has seen them taken out of fish in January – taken out of cod fish. They were small mackerel about 6 inches long. Seen them taken out of fish on Brown's Bank. One winter was down the Bay of Fundy buying herring, and saw mackerel caught in nets there in January. They were in good order – fat.

The school of mackerel that

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comes in the Gulf spawn as soon as they get there, probably along about the 15 or 20 of June, judging from their appearance. Thinks there are mackerel that do not come north, and they spawn about the first of June. When we catch them in Boston Bay there is nothing in them.

Later in the season mackerel are abundant along this coast, between the Bay

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of Fundy and Cape Cod.

A school of mackerel struck in the Bay this fall, and we did not know hardly which way they come from. Think they came right in from sea. They were not down the Bay of Fundy.

We did fairly well this year. Caught all of our mackerel out around No Man's Land, Block Island and backside of Martha's Vineyard.

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Our first trip we caught them all in our seines. That was along about the 1st of July. Then they were fat. Get fatter mackerel on this coast than they do in the St. Lawrence. Those mackerel that we get off Block Island have followed the coast down, probably 15 to 20 miles off, and come right in from a southwest course.

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Have caught mackerel at times when the spawn was running, and also milt. Catch as many sometimes at the spawning time as any other. The mackerel they catch on the Nova Scotia shore have the spawn in them, and the milt has about come to maturity.

Mackerel travel very fast – about as fast as a vessel would sail with a keen wind. When they

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strike that shore, might see a school off Cape Sable this afternoon and the next afternoon be most down to Halifax. They are in a hurry in order to get on the spawning ground. Would expect to meet them with a certain regularity at a certain date; and the same with the mackerel in the southern waters.

Mackerel feed on line food – what we call shrimp. Does not

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think they take any food that is hurtful to them, but has found them with food in them that burns them – what we call cayenne. Has seen that in the Bay of Fundy. Has found them just full of it. Has not noticed so much of it of late years. Out around Block Island and back of Vineyard Haven this summer the water was covered with food(?) about 6 inches long – we call it

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lant, and wherever that would be there would be mackerel. When we find a large body of feed at sea we expect to find mackerel. Sometimes these signs fail, but we have to rely upon them as a general thing.

Very often find other fish with mackerel; such as herring or pogies. Catch herring sometimes with mackerel, and sometimes get a school of

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mackerel and herring together, mixed up; and sometimes alewives with mackerel, and sometimes squid. Sometimes along the Maine coast might purse seine up a school, thinking they were mackerel, and find they were pogies or something like that. Has caught shad with mackerel. Never caught blue fish with mackerel, but have mistaken

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blue fish for mackerel. Has chased them for mackerel. Blue fish eat the seine up. Take big herring and sometimes they will school just like mackerel.

Blue fish will drive mackerel, and so will horse mackerel, but blue fish are hard on them. Dog fish are harmless among the mackerel – do not drive them any. They follow on behind the schools.

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They will eat them, but will not drive them.

I was down the Maine coast. Had been laying there for 2 or 3 days on account of bad weather – this is some 12 years ago – and we all came out in the morning, and when we got out about half a mile off I saw a dory with two men in it with a dip net, dipping right out of the water. Could not tell what

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it was at first, but thought it was herring. Did not think it possible it could be mackerel. “I says to a couple of our fellows, ‘go out and see what they are doing,’ and there they were bailing mackerel right out of a school into the dory. My men began bailing also, and they bailed a dory about half full of mackerel; big ones, about 15 to 16 inches. The school was at the surface all

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this time, or just below the surface. These mackerel were kind of paralyzed, and were just as close as they could get. These dog fish and these bonitoes had them all surrounded so that they could not move, and sharks or something had them paralyzed as they would not move.”

When the mackerel spawn they very often disappear for a time.

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After they spawn they come up to the surface and go to schooling. Never catch many mackerel in the Bay with the spawn in them.

Mackerel are more shy than they used to be 20 or 30 years ago. For the reason that they are driven to death; very greatly by seines. They are more shy now and less than what they used to be. Not

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so many go into the Gulf of St. Lawrence as there used to be years ago. I have been there and caught three trips of fish years ago. Now you can go and lay there and not get hardly any. The seines have had the effect of shying the mackerel. Has done the most of his fishing with seines. Has done a good deal with both seines

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and hook and line. Less number go on the coast now than 20 years ago.

Those fish were found only in Boston Bay this fall. Quite a number of vessels made fares there; could not say just how many; probably 75 vessels fishing there. These fish did not stay long on Boston Bay. In one night got the biggest haul.

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The next night they did not get any. Got some scattering schools afterwards.

Does not know how to account for the decrease as compared with 20 years ago. It makes them scarcer by being caught up. Where a large number of vessels were fishing off shore they would shy the fish. If you were to set for a school and miss them it

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would scare them so you would not see that school again.

Does not think the purse seine catches too many, or ever did. Used to get these small mackerel where they would mesh in the seine and sink it down, and they would be destroyed, but not much of that lately. It was just the same in the southern fishery.

Does not believe the 5 years'

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close season amounted to anything. Did not affect the mackerel any. Believes there would be just as many mackerel without it. The year before there was a big body of mackerel at the south, and all the vessels got more mackerel than they could sell – only worth \$2 or \$3, a barrel. The next year they thought it would be best to pass a law not to have anything

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to do south for 5 years, so they got it passed. During that 5 years no mackerel came on the coast. This summer quite a number of fish came on the coast. It did not make them any more plenty on this coast than they were before. Very few mackerel taken with the hook and line now. This law was for the spawning season also: - to give them a chance to spawn before they caught

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them. That was on the Nova Scotia shore also. Could not catch them there until after the 2nd day of June. But those mackerel were just as full of spawn after that as they were before, The close season did not cover the spawning time. Does not believe that law would do any good if it were in force again. He would not advocate it.

Does not think they would get as many

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mackerel with the hook and line as they used to even if the vessels went in the same number. Does not know the reason exactly, but the mackerel seem to have different habits now. They want different bait. Have seen it in the Gulf, when there appeared to be just as many mackerel, but when we heaved bait on the water it would scare them and away they would go, but years

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ago it would not frighten them so much. Have heaved away 75 barrels of bait myself in that Gulf.

If there never was a seine manufactured, and that fleet of vessels kept going the year around, believes they would probably do just as well. There were more mackerel caught in those days than now.

Does not believe purse seining hurts the mackerel any, but, of course, if they use it before

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the spawning season it reduces the number.

Used to go to the Gulf of St. Lawrence after the 4th of July, years ago, and would catch more fish than we do now, and better quality. Could handle them better – not so large a quantity at one time.

Pretty hard to tell about regulations for the purse seine fishery. He never goes seining until late in the season

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anyhow; that is, July and August. Does not go in for the spring fishery. Goes cod fishing then. Thinks it would cripple those who do nothing else but fish for mackerel to shorten the season.

Thinks if the Gulf of St. Lawrence were reserved for hook and line fishing it would be a good thing. Thinks if they let the Cape Shore alone and let those fish go into

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the Gulf and keep spawning there for sometime, there would be more mackerel. All the fish caught on the Cape Shore in the early part of the season have spawn in them; that is, they have not spawned. It would be better for the fishermen if they did not catch them until after they had spawned.

Has been down the Newfoundland coast a good deal. There were certain

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parts of Newfoundland years ago where mackerel used to be very plentiful, especially on the western part. Used to get them in St. Georges Bay, many years ago, but not now. Has caught mackerel way up to Herring Island.

These fish that come out of the Bay come very late. They stay later on that coast than they do on our coast. The mackerel on

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this coast go south quicker than they do there. Thinks the mackerel on this coast go farther south than those that come out of the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

A few mackerel about here now. Caught a few in Provincetown Bay in the nets, and a few about Newport in small boats.