

JOHN CROSSMAN

Lobster fisherman

Date: March 24, 2005

Time: 1:15

Location of Interview: Ellsworth High School Library, Ellsworth, Maine

Student Interviewers: Tom Crossman Grade 10

Aaron Burton Grade 10

Donald Awalt Grade 10

School: Ellsworth High School

School Location: Ellsworth, Maine

Teacher or Parent: None

Transcriber: Joyce Whitmore

TC: How long have you been in the fishing business?

JC: Twenty-three years.

TC: Where did you first start fishing?

JC: Frenchboro. That is an island off the coast.

TC: Who taught you to fish?

JC: My father.

TC: How has the lobster industry changed?

JC: Well, there is a lot more people in it now, than they used to be. There was a decline. Then the lobsters picked up and now there are more people in it and there are a lot more regulations in fishing than there used to be? There are a lot more guidelines that you have to follow.

TC: Where do you fish now?

JC: I fish off Bass Harbor, Mount Desert Island.

TC: Do you know where the best fishing spots are?

JC: Yeah, but I can't tell you. It's top secret.

TC: What is the best season?

JC: Uh, it varies year to year. It depends on the weather. If it is a warm winter than the best months will be August and September. If it is a cold winter than the lobsters will be later and the best season will be October and November.

TC: Uh, what is the range of the season?

JC: Well, it is year round but primarily most of the money is made from July 4 until Christmas.

DA: Well, where do you sell your lobsters?

JC: Usually, to whoever is paying the most?

DA: Uh, what is the average price of lobsters now a days?

JC: Right now, the day before yesterday, I got paid seven dollars and forty cents a pound. This is not the average; this is a high price time of year.

DA: How has the price grown since you first started?

JC: Probably about ten years ago at this exact time of year you would be looking at about four dollars a pound.

DA: What kind of bait do you use?

JC: Herring.

DA: And where would you locate that?

JC: Well, purse-seiners catch it, sell it to bait dealers, and then a bait dealer will deliver it to our house. Sometimes, we have to go to a sardine factory. And they cut the bait, use the pieces in the middle for the sardine cans, and the scraps they sell to the fishermen and we use that.

DA: Have they always used the same type of bait?

JC: Yes, there are different types of bait. There is cowhide and other types of fish but they are not as prevalent as herring. Herring not only works the best but is also the easiest to come by.

DA: What are the joys of being lobster fishermen?

JC: I haven't found any yet but I am still looking.

DA: What are the difficulties.

JC: The joys are - I can't be fired. Nobody can tell me what to do. I can be whatever I want to be. Nobody can say, "I don't want your type around here. We are going to fire you." That cannot happen. That's nice. I can work when I want. I cannot work when I want.

JC: The drawbacks are - it is hard on your body. It is hard work. If you want to get anything out of it there are a lot of hours in a day that your work.

DA: How much do herring usually cost?

JC: It is going up. Six years a bushel would be about six dollars. Now a bushel would be about twenty dollars.

DA: Wow.

JC: So if you use ten of those a day you have spent two hundred dollars before you even made ten cents. If your fuel is two dollars and ten cents a gallon and you burn fifty gallons of fuel, you have spent about three hundred dollars before you have made anything. You have gotta work hard to make back what you have spent.

DA: How do you get the fuel into your boat?

JC: With a hose. I have my own truck and I have fuel companies come and fill up my fuel truck. At my leisure I will bring my truck down to the boat and fill it up usually once a week. I carry a lot of fuel so I only have to fuel it up once a week. So, I back my truck right up to the boat on the dock, lower the hose down just like at a gas station and fill up.

DA: Does anyone help you on your boat? Do you have a stern man?

JC: Yes, I have one stern man that I pay and I believe in slave labor so I have a son that shows up once in a while when he is not sleeping and I get him to do a little bit of work.

DA: What does the stern man do on the boat?

JC: Roughly about one half the work that I do. There is two traps per buoy. He tends his trap; I tend my trap. I steer the boat to the next buoy. He baits the pockets and mans the lobsters while I am steering to the next buoy. I gap the buoy. Then obviously the mental work about where to set the traps and where to find them and this and that.

DA: Do you fish in any weather?

JC: Not as much as I use to when I was younger. The older you get the harder it is on your back.

DA: Some people scallop in the winter. Do you?

JC: I used to for about fifteen years. There is not many scallops left so now I just go lobstering year round.

AB: Is it true that during a rain storm that lobsters will come up closer to the shore?

JC: No, no, it is just that during the rain season it is summer time so that is when the lobsters are already are closer to the shore. Whether it rains or not is irrelevant. They are already there because the weather is warm. In the wintertime when it is obviously snowing, you know, they are away from the shore. The only difference that precipitation can make sometimes is in the spring of the year when a lobster is crawling in. if you get a freak snow storm in April the snow will hit the water and change the water temperature and sometimes the lobster will stop crawling. Where they will normally crawl, they will sometimes stop and decide to go under the rocks right then. Sudden water temperature change freaks them out. I've seen that happen. I've never noticed rain to make much of a difference.

AB: Uh, how many boats have you used in your fishing career?

JC: Not including skiffs when I started out as a kid hauling by hand, not including those. Actual boats would be one, two, three, four, and five.

AB: What happened to the four before the one you have now?

JC: Three of them I sold and one of them I sank.

AB: How did that come about?

JC: Well, that is not a pretty story.

AB: Do you mind sharing with us?

JC: (Laughter) Well, I was scalloping. As you scallop you drag metal drags on the bottom of the ocean floor and you hoist them up with a hoist to the side of the boat. You use a separate hoist with a hook on it to hoist them up into the air so you can dump out the contents. And the weight was so much, it got away from me and drifted off past my reach and the weight (obviously you are lifting from a boom which is about ten feet high on the boat) the center of gravity shifted and the boat just flipped upside down.

TC: What did you do in this situation?

JC: Swam, what would you do? (Laughter)

AB: Did someone come pick you up in the boat?

JC: Yeah, I swam away from the boat because there was gear shifting and things crashing. A lot of stuff was going on that I didn't have time to think about what it was so I swam away from the boat and let all this take place then I swam back to the boat, I climbed up on top of the bottom of the boat which would be where the propeller and rudder would be and took my oil pants off and waved them in the air until someone went by and picked me up.

DA: Was it just you or was there someone with you?

JC: I had a stern man with me. He was a younger kid who was in the high school at that time. It was during a weekend and he didn't have school and he was going with me. He did the same thing that I did. We swam away together and then back and got back up on the boat. About fifteen minutes someone came by and picked us up and about ten minutes after that the boat sank.

TC: Did you just have to leave the boat under water?

JC: Yeah, it was in about two hundred and seventy feet of water. There was no way you could salvage at that depth. You could have somebody dive down...

TC: Are the lobstermen friendly like that? Are there any rivalries between fishermen over spots for lobstering?

DA: Yeah, there are. There are boundaries; one-town fishes here and another town fishes here and where they cross over there are usually some issues.

DA: Have you ever had your lines cut for any reason? Have you seen that happen?

JC: Yeah, I have seen that happen.

DA: Are there any other stories about your job?

JC: Uh, well the most exciting story I have already told you is about sinking the boat. Other than that it is a pretty mundane job. You are doing the same thing over and over again. It is very repetitious. Uh, not very exciting at all. So, pretty low key.

TC: O.K. Thank you for this interview. I guess this is it.

