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1.
 GLOUCESTER, MASS.
 Interviews by
 JOINT FISHERIES COMMISSION.
 November, 1893.

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Interviewed by William Wakeham, Richard Rathbun and Hugh M. Smith
November 15, 1893.
Capt. Frank Foster, Gloucester.

47 years old. Has been mackerel fishing since he was 16 years old. Master of vessel for 22 years. Is interested in only one vessel at present, Sch. Minerva, of Gloucester. Has built 5 or 6 vessels for this fishery.

Q. Do different size mackerel go in the same school, as a rule?

There are some schools in which they won't vary an inch, other schools will vary from as long as your finger to 16 or 18 inches.

Q. Do fish run together mostly of one size and grow up together?

Some schools remain together, but of course there are cases where there are all sizes from the smallest to the largest.

Q. Is it not a difficult matter to tell how fast the fish grow?

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They go away in the fall and come back in the spring. After leaving here in the fall they do not grow any until they come back in the spring. They grow when they are on the coast, for the reason that they or their feeding then. When they return in the spring there is not a particle of fat on them. On holding them up you can see the light of day through them.

Q. Were many small mackerel seen last spring, and would it not have been better not to have touched those mackerel?

I think all they landed would not make a drop in a bucket. Only 3 or 4 vessels got any at all. Those were mackerel which had spawned the year before, and $\frac{3}{4}$ of them would go right through the meshes of the net.

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Q. How large do they grow in a year?

About an inch. Mackerel grow rapidly only to a certain size. I suppose somewhere from 15 to 16 inches long.

Q. What is the largest mackerel you have ever seen?

I think 23 inches. I think we got one of that size this spring, which was a very large mackerel. Mr. Church got 400 bbls. of very large fish one time in his steamer. This was fishing about Block Island. Those large fish are there every year. They would lay right across a bbl. Would pack 90 to a bbl of 200 lbs. Late in the year were very fat. Have not seen any big fish for 2 years. In 1886 we were out there and got 100 bbls in one morning.

Q. How large were they?

I do not know exactly. Should

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say from 14 to 18 or 19 inches long. Packed in bbl. Took 160 to 180 for No. 1, 130 for extras.

Q. How did you catch them?

In the seine. It was in the last of Oct. They showed up better then at any other time.

Q. What is the average size of mackerel taken with the purse seine? What will they weigh on an average?

That is a pretty hard question to answer. I should say they would measure between six inch, little tinker mackerel, and 14 inch mackerel. We catch more No. 1s, 2s and 3s than we do larger size fish.

Q. What is the smallest size mackerel seen schooling in the fall, after they are hatched in the spring?

5 $\frac{1}{2}$ or 6 inches. Could get 132 in a common water pan – generally would not fill it.

Q. What was the size of those small

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mackerel last spring?

They were from 7 to 9 inches, possibly, on an average.

Q. Were those year old mackerel?

Yes, they were year old.

Q. Do you find as many large mackerel now as you used to?

More large mackerel this fall than there has been since I have been going fishing. The general percentage this year is large mackerel, altogether.

Q. How far south have you taken mackerel this year?

Just as far as I have gone. (Capt. Adams has record of farthest south taken by Capt. Foster).

Q. When fish are schooling do you always find scattering fish on the surface?

Yes, indeed, always find scattering fish. Will always see them on the

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coast any where. Light vessels catch these scattering fish.

Q. Do you follow schools any distance?

Oh, no; but would follow a body of fish. Would follow them along, perhaps 10 miles from the shore. Would follow them clear to the south as far as we go. Do not follow any one school that we know of.

Q. How far have you followed a body of fish?

We follow them from as far south as we find them to as far to the north as we go. They go to the head of the Bay of Fundy. Fish which approach the coast of N.J. go up the bay and into the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Fish on this coast do not go into the bay of St. Lawrence.

Q. You find, possibly, that the fish which go into the Gulf of St. Lawrence

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might approach the coast there near the mouth of the Gulf?

Yes. A little further to the north. We have no proof of this more than that we do not find them anywhere else.

Q. Are mackerel thin when first seen?

Yes, indeed, not a particle of fat on them.

Q. When are fish first seen off the coast of Nova Scotia, generally?

The 5th of May is the earliest I know of. They are then fat.

Q. They have not begun to fatten up at the south?

No, never find any mackerel south with any fat on them in the spring. Cannot tell the males from the females when in the water.

Q. How far north have you fished for mackerel?

Been in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Went

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up as far as the Magdalen Ids., and up the Miramicha.

Q. How early can you fish up there successfully?

Well, I do not know. I never was there early. Never attempted to go there early. Do not generally go around north of Cape Breton in the spring. Capt. Sol Jacobs got 200 bbls. at Cape North in June. Last spring were 30 sails or more around near Cape Breton in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Q. Has there been any change in the fish, as to the size or movements of the schools?

Well no, nothing more than some years they are more plentiful than others.

Q. You do not see any great difference?

No indeed.

Q. That is to say, you might now find fish schooling in the same way; schools of the same size, and fish of the same size;

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that you did 20 or 30 years ago?

Yes, indeed. I will illustrate this by one instance. We were south; plenty of fish. All at once they disappeared and we never knew where they went to. We never found them again. Have searched the coast for several months and never found anything; until the first thing we know, they come rushing on the coast, all along from Monhegan to Cape Cod.

Q. If these schools of fish that come onto the coasts of Virginia and New Jersey do not go into the Gulf of St. Lawrence, where do they go?

They come on this coast last. They came on this coast this summer, and went as far as above Grand Manan, more than they have known for many years. We do not know where they

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went to. Good schools of mackerel around Cape Cod, off Block Island and Vineyard Haven. They stayed through the whole summer. Large schools. We went up there quite late and got 200 bbls. Raised them any where. Leave Cape Cod 1st of Nov.

Q. There is still some fish there?

Oh yes, there is fish always, but they do not seem to be in schools at this season. They catch them now in traps and in nets at Cape Cod. No sails on the coast now. They catch them in traps until Christmas; that is scattering fish, in small quantities. There are vessels yet on the Nova Scotia coast. Mackerel out of the bay always follow coming up along the Nova Scotia coast.

Q. What time of year is that?

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About this season (Nov. 15). There would be no fish in the bay of Fundy at this season that I know of.

Q. What seems to become of the schools of fish they are now catching on the Nova Scotia shore?

When the season comes for them to come in on the coast, they come in. Think they go into the gulf stream, that is, all those that strike the other side of Cape Sable, but our fish that strike up along this coast come in on the coast this side, and stay here.

Q. Are those fish going out through the Straits of Canso, going out and disappearing, in schools?

Yes.

Q. Do the fish that go up by New

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Jersey pass down by N.J. again?

Oh yes.

Q. How far south is the fishery carried in the fall?

I never knew them to carry it farther than Block Island. I suppose principally on account of the weather. It is on account of the weather that they never find them again after they get that far.

Q. Do you find as large schools in the fall as in the spring?

Yes frequently larger.

Q. Do you know of persons who have run the fish south of Block Island in the fall?

Yes, indeed, one of my men who has been with me for two years, goes south every winter. He went out on the City of Macon, I think, and

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he saw the likes he never saw before in the way of mackerel. They seemed to be right in a body. About 55 miles S.S.W. from Block Island. We could not go there this fall.

Q. They used to fish off the Vineyard?

Yes indeed, but not very recently.

Q. Do you ever find mackerel during the winter?

There are none found during the winter after December that I know of. I do not think small mackerel go south as far as the big ones. Never knew of mackerel being found in the stomachs of other fishes during the winter. In winter these fish go off in the edge of the gulf stream, in warm water. Stay on the bottom. Will tell you my reasons for thinking so. There are

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plenty of vessels go across the gulf stream, and often men go who have been fishing all their lives. If they saw a school of mackerel from the deck, they would report it. Hundreds of vessels cross that stream, and do not see them.

Q. Do the schools strike the upper parts of the coast with regularity from year to year?

That is a pretty hard question to answer. It is a difficult matter to strike those fish exactly when they strike the coast. Might have had weather for a week and not see any. We expect to meet them when they first come out of the gulf, somewhere along about the first of March. Mackerel occur anywhere about the coast at certain seasons.

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Q. There is no particular place where they never occur?

None that I know of.

Q. You may find them around Georges?

Oh yes.

Q. Which is the biggest mackerel region on our coast, including Canada?

I should say on our coast that the Bay of Fundy has the greatest quantity; at any time. When a large body of fish come from the south they generally go to the Bay of Fundy.

Q. How far off shore have you seen mackerel?

It is always inside of the gulf stream. Never saw them off more than 60 miles.

Q. What do you consider the Bay of Fundy, that part north of Grand Manan?

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I call anything the Bay of Fundy inside of the Seal Islands and Matinicus.

Q. Would you expect to find mackerel 60 miles off shore in the Bay of Fundy?

Oh yes. The year 1882 was the greatest year we ever knew in the Bay of Fundy.

Q. How far from shore is the best fishing?

It is anywhere.

Q. Do you know anything about the temperature of the water?

No sir.

Q. Do the schools go inshore at all?

Yes indeed, there has been a very

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good fishery this year close in.

Q. Is that the same school of fish which have gone in?

Yes indeed. But there is always more or less scattering fish. Never knew a season but what there is more or less scattering fish along shore.

Q. Do you find these same small pods off shore too?

Oh yes, very frequently.

Q. Those are not worth purse seining?

Would be if you could catch them. Have set all day long and only get 20 bbls. of fish.

Q. Are the movements of the schools affected in any way by predacious fish?

I have seen mackerel paralyzed so with fish that you could go right up to them and pull them into the boat.

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Q. What were the fish?

They were albacore, from 3 ½ to 5 feet in length.

Q. What is the movement of mackerel in the school, do they circle much?

Sometimes they circle. Sometimes you will see a dozen schools at once, sometimes 20 and 50 schools, all going around like a wheel. Not like menhaden exactly.

Q. What do the mackerel feed upon?

Several things. We call it red feed or red seed that is in the water. It is alive. They also feed on live bait, little fish. Have seen fish in mackerel that length (length of finger).

Q. Is there any difference at different times of the year? Do they feed on this red feed at all times of the year?

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There are plenty of times in the year you will not find any of this red feed in the mackerel.

Q. Is there any particular time of the year that they get the red feed when they are going up the coast in the spring?

Well, wherever they find it. It is not general all along the coast.

Q. Do mackerel feed at the surface?

Yes I think so. They school for nothing but that.

Q. Do mackerel feed at all seasons? Do they feed in spawning season?

I suppose they do.

Q. The question of burning their stomachs has reference to this red feed?

Yes, it is the red feed.

Q. How long does it take to burn the stomachs out?

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Sometimes could not keep them on deck more than 5 or 6 hours. Could not bring them in fresh very well, not without ice. It would affect the flesh of the fish.

Q. You do not find this food at any particular place or season, but may find it any time during the year?

Yes, at any time. The red feed goes in schools. Find it down south where we first strike the mackerel, and as far north as we have gone. Plenty of it in the Bay of Fundy.

Q. Where do the mackerel spawn?

In my judgment, they spawn anywhere from the Delaware Breakwater to the head of the Bay of Fundy, on this coast, and in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. They spawn any time

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from the 15th of May until the 1st of July, and sometimes later than that.

Q. Have you ever seen the spawn running from the mackerel in the water?

I never did.

Q. Do you know whether they spawn during the day or night?

No, I do not.

Q. Do you know anything about the habits of the mackerel when spawning or immediately after?

I find that the month of June is the dullest season there is. They may be below the surface.

Q. That would happen during the months of May and June?

Yes.

Q. How rapidly do they fatten up after spawning?

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Very rapidly. After the first of July, and from that to the middle of August, they get about all the fat on them then for the year, and then they remain fat until they leave our coast. Not as good late as a little earlier.

Q. Did you ever find any logy mackerel?

No I never did. Once in a while find them without a particle of food in them. Do not find many in schools that are sick. Never see dead mackerel on the surface. They would sink.

Q. Do lamprey eels ever touch those mackerel?

No, I never saw any at the surface.

Q. What fishes feed on the mackerel?

A great many – whales, sharks, porpoise, dog fish, albacore and

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bonito. Bluefish are the worst fish in the world for mackerel. Will bite them for mischief.

Q. Have mackerel decreased or increased in abundance within the past 20, 30 or 40 years?

That is a pretty hard question to answer. They have been scarce a great many years ago, and then they will be very abundant, and then they will decrease again so that we will not have but a few. There are as many on this coast this year as I have seen since I have been fishing.

Q. You do not think there has been a general decrease?

No sir, I think we are able to see as many in 1 or 2 years from now as we ever see.

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Q. Then you would not consider that the extensive fishing which is going on has affected their abundance?

No, not materially.

Q. Are there any years when you see the mackerel mostly small?

Yes, nearly all small some years.

Q. What does that mean? Are they all small the next year?

Some years small mackerel. In 1883 all small. In 1884 No. 3s in great abundance; the biggest catch we have ever had since purse seines have been in use. In 1885 we did not know where they went to. Was not so many then as there was the year before.

Q. Is there any form of fishing

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appliance which is used in catching mackerel that is taking too many fish or destroying them in any way?

No, I do not think of anything that destroys fish to any extent.

Q. Do you think that the purse seine has any effect, is too destructive or not? Either in the quantity caught, or in breaking up the schools and frightening them from our coast?

No, I do not think it is too destructive a method of fishing. It would break up the fish more than hook and line, but do not think the purse seine breaks up the fish to a great extent. All we catch does not amount to a drop in a bucket of water compared with what there is in the ocean. In the years 1883 and 1884 there were a great many

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thrown overboard. Heaved over some myself. Have been sorry ever since. It was in the fall fishery.

Q. Do you think there should be any regulations regarding purse seine fishery?

No, I should not regulate it in any way. It will regulate itself. Think the demand will regulate the extent of the fishery. Think they do not catch enough to supply the demand, even with all the facilities they have. Would not prohibit fishing with purse seines on Canada shore. Does not favor the close season. Thinks the fishermen made a great mistake in having it. Does not think the fish need to be protected during the spawning season. What they catch would not amount to much, comparatively speaking. Does not think the close season

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of much benefit.

Q. There is no particular reason why you would prohibit purse seining for any season?

Well, we might prohibit it altogether. Might make mackerel more plenty. But now if you are going to catch any you have to use the purse seine. Caught more fish in the old days with hook and line than now, but had more men employed. They are inshore now just the same as they ever were.

Q. What is the least depth of water in which you can use the purse seine?

If the water is smooth, can use it in 10 feet. Depends somewhat on the bottom. If smooth, 4 fathoms, if rough 16 or 17 fathoms. Think we would all have to give up the business

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on the coast if we did not use the purse seine, for the reason that we cannot make them bite, no matter how nice the bait.

Q. Where was the great region for jigging in the old days?

Along this coast and the Bay of Chaleur.

Q. Were there many vessels jigging this summer?

I think 5 went to the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Think there are as many mackerel this year as there has been at any time for the last 20 years or more. There are mackerel on this coast that we know nothing about. A great many little fish that we do not see. Do not see all the fish that pass along the coast. Some years when the season is cool or stormy

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large quantities of fish will pass by below the surface.

Q. Have the fishermen done well in the Gulf of St. L. the last few years?

No, they have done slim.

Q. Did you see a large body of mackerel going north this year?

The largest I ever saw.

Q. If purse seining were prohibited in the gulf would it affect you any?

It would not affect me at all because I would not go there. Ever since he can remember there has been years when fish were plenty, and years when they were very scarce. There is a large quantity of fish come on this shore this year that are spawning fish. There will be a large quantity of small fish coming from those big ones, and of course they will come here and grow up here, as

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they were spawned on this shore. This large body of fish are somewhere, and we shall find them before many years. The year 1882 was a very successful one for me, and it was for a great many, and they were about all large fish. Did not see small mackerel that year. The next year was a great tinker year, and the next year, 1884, was the greatest year we ever had since purse seining has been in use. Thinks they will be the same again, but they have taken another course. Have not found them. These large fish that have come on the shore this year must spawn somewhere, and I think we will see the affects of it before many years.

Q. Do any quantity go into the Gulf through the Gulf of Canso?

I think a great many, probably.

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Q. What was the advantage of giving this close season in the spring, which has continued during 5 years?

Nothing: it was a great mistake and nothing else.

Q. What did Mr. Whidden suppose would be the result of the close season?

He supposed vessels would have to go into some other business during certain seasons. It was protection to the fisheries that was his idea. Close season in the southern water should be later than the first of June. Mackerel have not done spawning until the last of June, and often into July. All the fish they catch at the south will not hurt anybody. I think there is too much legislation now against the fishermen.

Q. Are you acquainted with the menhaden fishery?

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Well, I have caught more or less of them ever since they have been going. Do not know where they spawn. Do not think menhaden spawn anywhere this side of New York. The menhaden fishery is only for the people who are concerned in it. Do not want them for bait. Have used them in years past for bait, because it was the best bait we could get.

Q. What bait do you carry on board mackerel vessels now?

Bluebacks, we call them. Kyacks are the same color as the alewife. Have 18 bbls now of kyacks. They are salted. Knows there are two species of alewives. Fresh mackerel are worth more then salt mackerel, as a general thing.

Q. Was there much shore fishery for mackerel?

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No, very little. They go off Block Island sometimes. We used to fish in 33 fathoms, and would get plenty of fish. Sol Jacobs started from the fleet once; went 25 miles off shore in 60 fathoms, and came upon a body of fish; any quantity of them. He lay there until the next night, and 8 of us went out there, and went aboard his boat. He said to me, "the water is alive with fish. I am going to the Cape Shore, but will stop one more night." We worked all night long. All got more or less mackerel, but nothing to what we would have got if we could have kept them in our seines. It was not on account of their being too small, but they would go down before we could get the purse together.

Q. Don't you fish at night?

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Oh yes.

Q. Why don't you take them then?

That is something I cannot tell you. They would go right down and come up on the other side of our seine, and away they would go, 200 and 300 bbls in a school, but away they would go. Would have them in the seine one minute, and the next minute they would not be there. Thinks the steam seine boat an advantage. However, as quick as you put a light aloft you scare the fish, that is mackerel. And should you take it down and meet with an accident you would be able to be tried for your life.

Q. What is the advantage of having steam? Is it to approach the schools more quickly?

Yes. And you can also purse the seine quicker.

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Q. Is the steam launch able to have a light up aloft?

Yes.

Q. Do mackerel school better in the dark or in the moonlight?

You cannot get them at all in the moonlight. A school of fish on a dark night with plenty of fire show just as white as a piece of marble.

Q. Is the fleet of mackerel fishermen likely to increase?

Not unless the business increases. There is nothing that has happened this year that would cause them to increase next year. If mackerel should come on the coast very abundantly the fleet would increase.

Q. Which is the best vessel fishery on this part of the coast? Which is supposed to pay the best?

Nothing will pay better than mackerel, when they are here.