

SCOTT FULLER

Lobstering and Scallop Fisherman

Date: April 1, 2005

Time: 2:30 p.m.

Location: Ellsworth High School Library

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| Student Interviewers: | Morgan Fuller | Grade 10 |
| | Carolyn Frank | Grade 10 |
| | Jessica Putnam | Grade 10 |
| | Isabel Hopkins | Grade 10 |
| | Janeka Haass | Grade 10 |

School: Ellsworth High School

School Location: Ellsworth, Maine

Teacher or Parent

Interviewer/Chaperone: None

Transcriber: Unknown.

CF: How long have you been fishing?

SF: Well, I don't fish anymore but I did fish for four years from 1983 through 1987.

IH: What did you fish?

SF: Lobsters and scallops.

CF: Was that your choice or did you have too?

SF: Ahh...that was my choice.

JH: Where did you learn the trade?

SF: Right out of Bar Harbor

CF: Was it like a family owned operation or...?

SF: No, I was introduced to it through an in-law. He was a fisherman. He knew somebody who had had the stern man quit. I discovered why eventually. But I went to work with that person to help out and I loved it. I stayed for as long as it was practical. It is a pretty chancy way to make a living. I never knew from one day to the next whether I was going to be rich or poor.

IH: What is a stern man?

SF: What is a stern man? It is a guy that works the back of the boat. You've got your skipper, your skipper works the wheel and everybody else on the boat is a stern man. Generally you are working at the back of the boat.

CF: Did you have a specific job on the boat or was it you had to know everything?

SF: Well, you kind of have to know everything. There was a few times where I had to have the control of the boat handed over to me. You have got a few guys and sometimes some pretty exciting situations and you have got to be able to cover everybody else's back. It is an occupation, a pretty old-fashioned occupation and it is a combination of both skill and luck to make a living and just stay alive.

MF: How many people worked with you?

SF: Well, most of the time it was just myself and the skipper. But there was a few times in scalloping that we would take an extra person with us.

JP: Why did you only do it for four years?

SF: Ah, well, I reached a point where I needed to settle down. I was getting older. I woke up one day and I was thirty-five and I was pretty horrified because I never expected to live that long (laughs). All of a sudden I had to look at life in a different light and I went for months at a time making absolutely no money at all. I would have to borrow money from my wife to put gas in the car to drive down to the boat for the privilege of working a sixteen hour day for nothing. And I would do that day after day, week after week and month after month. When you start to develop some serious debts you can't continue to make a living like that.

CF: Was there any way of predicting your financial inflow?

SF: No, no it was completely unpredictable. There were sometimes, the money, at least once a year; we would hit it so big that I would think o.k. We are in it now. I will stick with this for a few years and I will become rich and retire. And then all of a sudden it would stop and I wouldn't see another fish again for months. Yeah, there was just no way to predict it.

CF: What area did you fish in?

SF: Mostly in Frenchman's Bay and all around Frenchmen's Bay up to about forty miles out. In the wintertime we had to follow them further and further out because lobsters migrate.

MF: did you fish in any type of weather? Or did you always go out?

SF: We fished, Jack and I, in weather that almost no one would go out in. There were a number of times when we ran into situations with the boat, problems with it, and we would be out there all by ourselves with no way to get back in because no one else was out there. Usually they fish in groups of people and stay in constant contact with each other with radio. We went out sometimes with no radio, no radar, and right in the middle of a storm. I can remember a few times out there working and the guys on the docks on the radio pleading with us to come in. They were afraid something was going to happen to us and they were going to have to come out after us.

IH: do you use different bait for lobsters than for scallops?

SF: You don't use any bait for scallops.

IH: You don't?

SF: You use lots of different bait for lobsters depending on what is living in the habitats that you are fishing in at that particular moment and what the water conditions are like.

MF: You drag for scallops, right?

SF: You drag for scallops in this day in age. Back when I was doing it there were a few people who were diving for scallops. That was quite exotic at that time. Now it is pretty common; more people dive than drag. Actually there are pros and cons to both diving and dragging. Dragging is extremely productive. It is just like dragging a bulldozer over the bottom over, over, and over again. You just destroy everything and when the drags come up they are full with all kinds of fish, mostly dead and dying. You have to throw them all back. The only thing you keep is the scallops and then only the right size. The small ones go back. It doesn't matter if the shell is cracked and they are going to die, the law says they all go back in, so they all go back in. Probably what kills them is the fact that the drags are coming back up with rocks so you know that you are destroying the bottom. One of the pros is that you leave a lot of scallops down there. Any scallop that is under a rock or a ledge, the drag is going to roll right over them. The divers go down there and they don't do any kind of environmental damage. What happens is that they don't miss a single scallop? They go down there and clean out the beds and there is nothing left to seed.

JP: Was there ever any kind of fish that you didn't know what it was?

SF: Oh, yeah! It happened all the time. Especially after a hurricane we would find tropical fish. You know, right off the Maine coast you have got the Gulf Stream rolling across and it comes up the coast a few miles off the coast of America and then veers off to England which is up near the Arctic Circle. It has got a very mild climate even compared to ours and the reason for that is because that is where the Gulf Stream drifts. But when the hurricanes hit, you would run into tropical birds here and there that were blown off course. You would start pulling up the traps and you would pull up all these

tropical, really colorful fish and really exotic that you had never seen before. They would be fish that were swept out to sea and into the Gulf Stream by tidal surges.

JH: What is the best season to lobster fish and scallop?

SF: The best for both, unfortunately, we always had to choose, every fisherman had to choose. If you were a lobsterman, come October, you needed to choose whether you were going to make your money from lobstering or scalloping because the lobsters begin migrating in earnest in October and there are not that many left in November, although we usually fished right up through January. We would follow the lobsters right out into the deep water but they started getting scarce after October.

The scallop beds are legally open in October and they get cleaned out really fast. Just as soon as they open, people go in there with their draggers and just wipe them right out and then for the rest of the season and that would be the end of April, it is catch as catch can. You just drag. I can tell you some horror stories about fighting over fishing beds but after October there is not much left and you have to decide what you are going to make your money in.

CF: Can you tell us a horror story about fighting over fishing beds?

SF: Well, okay. We had been out day after day, week after week just dragging for nothing. Well, we got desperate and there was an underwater mountain out there on Frenchman's Bay and it was a nasty place but we just decided for the heck of it because we had tried everywhere else to drag it. It is rocky and had ledges. Now the drags are steel, their steel lengths about as big as the thick of my fingers but they would rip all to pieces coming up over the bottom there and we would have to be standing at the tables with the cutters and the clamps to put new links on when they came up because they were being torn to pieces. You had to be always ready with a box of spare parts. We would drag, repair the nets and drag some more but we were making enough to be making a living. My cut was probably about two hundred dollars a day then which was pretty good for back then. It was really great cause we had been making nothing and all of a sudden we had this little place all of our own. Nobody else would even think of dragging there because it was just such a pain. Then the other fishermen started noticing and word got all over Frenchmen's Bay all the way down to Schoodic. Word got out that there were a couple of guys that were bringing in scallops. The other fishermen would invite me out for beer and stuff and they would be probing me with questions trying to figure out where we had been fishing. I kept dodging and dodging and this went on for a couple of weeks. We were making a good living. It looked like we would make a good living through the winter and then one day we set out and dropped the drags and all around us from all over came boats and they completely engulfed us. There were so many of them that you couldn't move without bumping into another boat. We had to turn off the engine and drift and everybody was trying to drag at once. It was a mess. Nobody really got much of anything at all. By noontime we got out of there and probably by six o'clock there was nothing left there to fish. They had cleaned out the entire mountain. It really didn't

do anybody any good but everybody was so desperate and that is the kind of competition that you run into.

Lobstermen spend a lot of time, well, fishermen in general, spend a lot of time lying to each other because you don't want other people if you are striking it good to know where you are getting those fish from because they will come out and clean it out and then nobody wins.

Have you ever seen the movie Perfect Storm? Do you remember the choice those guys made. I think a lot of people thought the choice they made was pretty stupid but if you have ever tried to make a living in the trade you know that the choice they made was a necessity. It was a risk, I mean, the chances were that the storm would not be that bad and they might come in and they would have made a good living for that year. One guy was going to buy a truck finally. They had to take a risk and that risk got them killed. Fishermen sometimes because you are making such a marginal existence, you always have to be willing to take those risks. Most of the time when you take a risk like that it will pay off so you have to be willing to take that chance but then someday you are wrong and you don't come back.

CF: Does being a fisherman affect your personal life as in friends and where you hang out and stuff?

SF: I was having a great time. I don't know about most fishermen but I know down in Bar Harbor especially at that time it was quite popular for people to hang out with fishermen. Like I was being invited to all of these fancy parties with all these professional and wealthy people down there. It was a strange experience because you had all of these guys hanging around in tailor made suits and scattered here and there throughout the party you would have the fishermen guys that I see out on the boats all day long wearing their jeans and flannel shirts and drinking cheap beer (laughs). It was real popular with the tourists. I always had to fight the tourist women off. One thing that was a little bit unusual about me is that most of the fishermen were quite surly about all of the attention that they got. They didn't like people going down and interfering. But I didn't mind it. They would come up and talk to me and have casual conversation with me. The next thing I would know, I would look over and realize somebody was filming us and they would be able to take that film back to Ohio and show people that they actually had a conversation with a Maine fisherman. Most of the guys would say don't talk to those people, Scott, don't talk to them. I didn't care, you know, it didn't really mean anything to me and if they got a thrill out of it, so what.

JP: Did you like scalloping or lobstering better?

SF: I liked that there was more money in lobstering and especially if we got into a good rhythm. I liked scalloping because it was a lot cleaner. I would stink like a fish for three weeks after I quit lobstering. I would smell like bait. Yeah, the oil just seeps into your skin and there is no way to get rid of it.

JH: do you like to eat scallops or lobsters?

SF: You know I wasn't that big a lover of scallops or lobsters before I started fishing but I really loved it after I started. I thin I came to appreciate them more.

MF: What parts did you like best about fishing if there was a choice?

SF: My nickname on the docks was Shakespeare because I used to wax poetic. Most of the guys worked hard but for me it was a religious experience. The first time I went out on a boat and we lost sight of land I had a feeling of living in a protective bubble that society puts over you all the time. You are protected by laws, by tradition, by expectations. There are all these shelters that make you feel safe but when you get out on the water you start to see what primitive man felt and why he created the gods that he did, these really hard unforgiving gods. When I was going out, I could feel the bubble of civilization being stretched further and further and getting thinner and thinner and finally land was gone and the bubble burst. I had this sensation that I was standing in the hand of God and it was only luck that would keep that hand from closing and crushing me. It was such a rush. I just loved it. So I looked forward to every single day, escaping that bubble. You know I think if I had been out West I might have tried to be a cowboy. I liked being a fisherman. Cowboys generally come across as being stupid, maybe they are, and maybe they aren't but the same thing was said about fishing. I know you cannot be a stupid fisherman. You had to be clever and you had to be lucky to survive. I liked that element of chance and of depending on yourself. It took both elements to make a living and to stay alive. It took good judgment and I was proud to be a part of that tradition.

MF: Do you miss it?

SF: Oh, you know I do. I write songs about it.

CF: Have you ever been in a life-threatening situation?

SF: I have been in all kinds of life threatening situations.

CF: Can you tell us about some of them?

SF: The first one that happened was about a month after I had started fishing. We were out in a horrendous storm. You could not see three feet in front of you. I was having a hard time breathing because I kept sucking in water. I was working on the far side of the boat. I had never been out in weather that bad. It was just incredible. I was going over to tend some traps, at one point, and I looked down in the forward cabin and there was three feet of water down there and everything was floating. I knew that we had three automatic pumps running all the time but it looked to me like the pumps were losing. I was the new guy and I didn't want to act like I knew more than the skipper but I thought I should call his attention to this. As I walked by him I casually said, "Is there suppose to

be three feet of water in the forward cabin?" He just said, "Yep," and then he goes back about his business. All of a sudden his head snapped up, he looked down into the forward cabin and said, "Take the wheel, Scotty, we are going down" So I go over and grab the wheel. I couldn't even see the bow of the boat there was so much water rolling over the top. All I could see was the compass. He gave me a compass heading and he said take this heading and we will get back to Bar Harbor. I had never steered a boat or anything like that. This was quite an experience for me.

As I am taking the boat in, I am looking down into the forward cabin every once in awhile. The waves had come in and hit the side of the boat so hard that it had knocked out the plywood under the fiber glassing and it was all bulged in and the water was rolling over the side. He was down there trying to put it together with a Philip's screwdriver. I am thinking, "Oh, my God are we going to make it."

I had never made that much money at that time. The first season I had made a huge amount that kinda got me addicted to fishing. I was working sixteen to eighteen hours a day; seven days a week and I never had a chance to spend any of that money. We were about forty miles out and I was thinking are we going to drown out here and someone else is going to be partying on my money. That was just aggravating me because they were not going to have to pay funeral expenses. They might spend one hundred dollars on a fruit punch and dips for a little memorial service but that was it, no one was going to bury me. I was really upset about that. Two songs also kept rolling through my head. One of them was the "Wreck of the Edmond Fitzgerald" and the other was the theme song to "Gilligan's Island."

We were out there for hours but all of a sudden the pier of Bar Harbor just showed up in front of me and we got off the boat. The skipper said, "Well, Scott, it is going to take a few days to put this boat back together, why don't you take a few days off."

The next day I went out and bought my first used car, paid cash for it, just making sure that the money wasn't in the bank cause if I was going to die, I wanted to make sure I spent all that money. I took that car for a test drive and I drove down to Sand Beach. There was a hurricane coming and the waves were thirty feet high rolling up on the beach. It was cool and the rain was pouring down. This car had speakers in it and I was listening to an opera on the raid. This woman was singing an aria that was just fantastic and it was just filling the car with this incredible sound. The sound of her voice seemed to be the human response to the storm that was raging around me. I cranked the speakers up and I am just thriving on the whole thing and all of a sudden the speaker's blow.

CF: Did you get the speakers replaced?

SF: No, nope, I learned to live with it.

JP: Do you keep in touch with any of the people that you used to fish with?

SF: Nope. I have been down a couple of times. There have been a couple of times where I have missed fishing so bad I have been tempted to take a leave of absence and go down there. But that is a young man's game and it is just not practical anymore.

CF: What do you do now?

SF: I work as a counselor for OHI. I work with handicapped people, particularly multiple handicaps.

CF: Did you jump from being a fisherman to being a counselor or was there a transition?

SF: No, it was pretty much a jump. They hired me because I was large. They didn't hire me because of any real great skills I had. The things I knew and the things I could do, they discovered in me later on. They hired me because I was large and powerful and fierce looking and people were intimidated just by looking at me. At that time, in those particular circumstances that is what they needed.

JH: In a lobster trap how many lobsters do you usually get when you pull it up?

SF: Well, usually there is nothing in there. But I have seen lobster traps so full that lobsters were hanging on the outside, for crying out loud. There was a time when there was a trench that runs past Iron Bond down by Frenchmen's Bay and all of the fishermen about mid October would go out and drop their traps off down there because all of the lobsters are deeper into the bay. When they are leaving, they tend to prefer to use that trench. It is like a big interstate highway out in deep water. So usually after the time of the first snow or the first frost hits, the lobsters can feel the change in the water and they will start moving out right then. That is when the migration starts.

Everybody went out there as usual and dropped their traps but there weren't any lobsters out there. We were late getting there. We had a boat problem. Our engine had broken down and we used to use a Greyhound bus engine and every time any parts broke down we had to send to Portland to the Greyhound bus station for parts. It always took four days for the parts to get up here. Well, we were broke down while everybody else was moving his or her traps out of the trench. Finally we got back out and we started pulling our traps in. When we started pulling those traps up there were so many lobsters in those traps they were packed solid full. I had never seen anything like it and we did that for about two weeks. We just kept pulling them up. Everybody else was out in the deep water and nobody knew where our lobsters were coming from. Again, they followed us one day and started dropping their traps back in the trenches but by that time the lobsters were already cleared out and in deep water.

CF: Did you ever get in fights like yelling fights with any of the others?

SF: No. There are some guys notorious for shooting at each other. Do you remember the teacher named Mr. Boynton? He has quite a story to tell about getting shot down in Stonington. He knew an old man who had gotten too sick to tend his traps so they were

just sitting out there not being pulled. He went to visit this man and said, "You know, if you like I will go out and pull your traps for you and bait them so they will be all set for you when you go back." The guy said, "Go ahead." He went out and was pulling this guy's traps and the next thing he knew there was a crowd of guys standing on the shore looking at him and pointing. They were all carrying rifles and they were pointed at him. Then bullets were flying all over. Every once in awhile they will find a boat just floating with a couple of bullet holes in it, no fisherman on board.

All these guys don't usually yell at each other but they will sabotage each other's traps. If you drop your traps where another guy has dropped his, he won't like it. Everybody has their own territory. If you drop near another person you can get away with it as long as your trap lines don't interfere with their trap lines. That is a big no, no. They won't tolerate it. The easiest thing to do is to cut the guy's line but he might not get the message.

They did it to my skipper a couple of times. They would just take a knife and make periodic cuts up the rope so when you drop it over the wench and drag it in the rope begins to unravel. It just doesn't unsnap, it starts to unravel. That places the skipper in difficult positions. He has got seventy dollars worth of traps down there. Well, today it would probably be a lot more than seventy. He has got to try to bring them up but he knows that before he gets it up the rope is gonna completely unravel and the traps are going to disappear. Usually they disappear just as they are rising out of water. They drop off and all you can do is stand there helplessly and watch the traps sink back into the water never to be seen. I have seen that happen a few times.

MF: So are there rules or laws that fishermen have in their general area/

SF: There are traditions that you are expected to follow. I was just describing to you what happens if you overstep those boundaries. Not everyone oversteps the boundaries but you can do it accidentally and that is frequently what happens. Jack did not deliberately drop traps so close to another person that his traps would tangle with theirs. But you are responsible for making sure your gear doesn't interfere with their gear and if it does you can pretty much expect that it is going to be sabotaged. It is to just teach you a lesson, you know, don't do it next time.

CF: Did you ever get injured?

SF: Oh, yeah, yeah, a few times. I have had a rather dicey existence my whole life so I just kind of took that sort of thing for granted. When I started fishing I heard that fishing was a hard, dangerous occupation. So I walked into it ready to accept anything. I took it for granted that Jack was a very wise person, other wise why would he take such enormous chances. I trusted him. I thought he was the best. After a few years I realized that he was taking chances. He really did not have the knowledge to be able to make wise choices

One day I had the drags dropped on me and I told the guys about that. Apparently I am the only person who has ever lived through having the drags dropped on the. I have back injuries to this day that got messed up when a couple thousand pounds of steel and rock dropped on me. We were out in a storm and we got hit by a wave that was in the process of rolling the boat. The boat was a forty-foot lobster boat but it was not set up for really scalloping which made it extremely lop-sided. Well I saw those drags come up solid full of rocks and that wave swung us and the drag started to swing to the other side. I felt like there was nothing else I could do, so I just charged it. I tried to use my body weight to try to swing it back but of course it was impossible. It was like swatting a bug in mid air. So I was swing back over the back end of the boat stuck to those drags. The skipper panicked and hit the drop button and the drags came down. I was thrown backwards with that weight settling on my chest. I took it for granted that I was dead. Then, all of a sudden the drags started coming off me. Once the drags came down the boat stabilized. The last thing you ever do is drop the drags on another crewmember. I could go on with story after story, but I will finish up with the fact that I realized I had overestimated Jack's wisdom.....

And I got done. I got my teacher's certificate which I have never used and I ended up going to work as a counselor. That is the story of my fishing career.

JH: Very good, thank you

All: Thank you.