

BILLY GRINDLE  
Fisherman

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Location of the Interview: Ellsworth High School Library

Student Interviewers: Brittany Fellis	Grade 10
Eric Folmer	Grade 10
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School: Ellsworth High School

School Location: Ellsworth, Maine

Teacher or Parent

Interviewer/Chaperone: None

Transcriber: Brandon Stubbs

CD: All right, so what, what is it that you do, or used to do?

BG: I fished, all kinds of fish

EF: What areas did you fish?

BG: I fished from Eastport, Maine to California

EF: Well, there.

CD: What type of fish did you fish for?

BG: Scallops, lobsters, tilefish, butterfish, squid, mackerel, herring, porgies, giant Atlantic blue fin, tuna, and oysters.

EF: Well, when did you start?

BG: When I was seventeen

EF: When you were seventeen until when?

BG: Until I was thirty.

BF: How big was your boat? (Laughter)

BG: Well, I worked on a lot of different boats. The boat I owned was forty feet, but I've fished on as large as a hundred and ten foot boat.

CD: Where did you keep your boat when you got it?

BG: I kept it in Northeast Harbor, Bass Harbor, Gloucester, Block Island and Port Clyde.

EF: What is the most fun to fish?

BG: The most fun to fish! Everybody had different opinions. Off shore lobstering is pretty enjoyable, its hard work, but it can be sustained as a fishery and you are not really hurting the bottom, you just have your traps. The only thing you catch is lobsters and a few crabs, a codfish or a wolfish. It has the lowest impact on the environment from what I can see of all the fishing that I have done.

EF: So what got you into fishing?

BG: I just loved the ocean and that was an easy way to be on the water all the time. I also liked working outside. I can't stand to be inside a building.

EF: When you were fishing in Eastport did you ever get caught up in any of the world pools or anything like that?

BG: No, of course you do riptides down there. I worked on a forty-two boat down there and we were fish dragging and scalloping and we didn't have that much trouble.

BF: What was the biggest tuna you ever caught?

BG: The biggest tuna I ever caught weighed one thousand two hundred and ninety pounds.

BF: Holy!

BG: It was a big fish; it was like twelve feet long. A tuna can swim at fifty-five miles per hour, so we used hand line and now we use rod and reel.

EF: Right.

BG: It's like putting someone on a 600 Suzuki in the parking lot and with a piece of lobster whip and trying to hold them back. You just gotta let them go. It was a lot of fun. It took about two hours to land that fish. He pulled a thirty-foot boat. The boat was off; we were just letting him fight the fish. He pulled the boat about five miles from the fleet where we hooked him up.

EF: So like when you lobstered and stuff, how many traps did you have?

BG: We had twenty two hundred and we would haul twenty two hundred traps in about forty eight hours, then we would turn around and haul half of the string again which is

another eleven hundred and we'd usually get six to eight thousand pounds: It's less buoy handling and deep water, you know, one hundred fathoms and like that.

CD: Did you ever catch a blue lobster?

BG: Yep, we've caught a few actually. We caught three and we saved em' and gave them to Woods Hole because they do some kind of research.

CD: What was the biggest lobster you have ever caught?

BG: We fished kinds south of the mud hole which is the canyons off of New Jersey and Massachusetts. If you want the real big lobsters you have to go east of Nantucket, but I think the biggest ones, the great big lobsters, they can't get in our traps.

CD: Right

BG: They usually get a claw stuck and then you haul it up and they are hanging'. I think eighteen or nineteen pounds was the largest lobster we have caught.

CD: That's still a pretty big lobster. (Laughter)

BG: I gave my dad the claw and its crusher claw is as big as this tape recorder.

BF: Like, how much does it cost to fish lobster?

BG: Well, every fishery is so specific. The lobster boat that I worked on, this is going back a while, was probably a three hundred thousand dollar boat. And you have to pay to tie up in New Bedford or Westport, or wherever you tie up. We would have to buy fuel, food, and lobster bait. So probably three thousand dollars a trip would be for expenses. Plus, you know, the cost of the boat and the insurance and all of that as well.

EF: So when you go out on the water, how long do you stay out at a time?

BG: The longest I ever stayed out was twenty-six days sword fishing on the Northern Edge but normally I would say four to seven days would be an average trip for most of the off shore fishing that I did. And then, day fishing, in shore fishing, you would just leave at four in the morning or midnight the night before and get back the next day.

EF: So out towards California, what did you catch more of that is different from here?

BG: Well, on the west coast, I was working on a sport fishing boat and we were going down for swordfish and game fish. It wasn't commercial fishing. The good sites out there are on the tuna boats. We would fish for sport fish – marlin, swordfish, that type of thing. But they have similar fisheries and if you go farther towards Washington and Oregon they fish cod and all of that.

CD: Do you dive?

BG: No

BF: Like what time of the year do you fish or did you fish?

BG: I fished year round. Tuna fishing, you fish in the summer on their migration. They come from way down in South America and they go all the way to Canada. And then they go back in the fall. Offshore lobstering runs from March. It is just hard to fish cause the wind blows all the time and the weather is lousy and you can't haul the gear. So usually we would haul our gear in around Christmas and then we would start setting' em' out about the end o March and then you would fish year round. And scalloping you can fish year round, fish dragging you can fish year round but now they have regulated the industry so you only have eighty-eight days. And you can only fish this number. When I fished, outside, they'd close certain species off, like you couldn't catch cod or South Atlantic finfish or whatever. But now it's really regulated so they dictate when you can go pretty much – the government.

EF: So like when you are out on the boat and things are going a little slow, what do you do for entertainment or to keep yourself busy?

BG: There is really not much slow time out there. If you sword fished, it would be a five day boat ride to where the grounds were, cause it was way, way off shore. And so most people read, there is a lot of gear work to do, things that are broken, mechanical work, you know. You've usually got to have at least three engines running. You have a main engine which could be anywhere from four hundred to a thousand horsepower. Then you have either one or two generator sets and sometimes a hydraulic engine and they are all like Detroit's V8 or Cat's and there is a lot of maintenance on a boat so usually not a lot of down time but when you do have down time, most people read.

CD: So when you are offshore fishing, how much water are you fishing in?

BG: It used to vary, we used to fish shoals, um, thirty fathom, well a fathom is six feet so that would be one hundred and eighty feet and then some places we would fish deep water one hundred fathom. And, anywhere in between, depending on what you are going for. And Down East, close to shore, you know, you would fish ten fathom sometimes.

CD: Yeah.

BG: When I was dragging scallops or setting gear. I never really did any inshore lobstering because off shore lobstering just paid better where I was.

BF: Were there any areas that you were not allowed to fish at?

BG: There was some but not like today. We used to fish the whole of Stellwagon Bank which is now a marine sanctuary, and they have closed it. There were some areas where there were cables such as Swans Island. Around any of those islands where there is an underground cable, those are always restricted and they are indicated on the chart that you couldn't fish there cause you might damage the cable or tow it up. But most of the places you could fish, almost anywhere.

EF: Did you have problems with like other people getting into your traps or stuff?

BG: Some of that. Not too bad. Off shore there is so much bottom; people are spread out. In shore they are all right on top of each other and it is so easy to set your gear next to someone else and then the tides come and go and the toggles and the buoys get twisted up. You can spend hours trying to free up your gear from the other guys, so you cut it and tie it back together. And when he hauls he sees that it has been cut and he either moves away from you or he could, you know, cut you or whatever. We didn't have too much trouble with that. Sometimes, like in the shipping lanes we used to set a lot of gear. And those boats eight to nine thousand feet long going twenty miles per hour they don't go around your buoys, they just go through them

EF: You have to have licenses and stuff, right?

BG Oh, yeah.

EF: To fish?

BG: Off shore licenses, and...

EF: How long does it take to get one?

BG: Now you have to buy them. Someone that has one has to want to give it up. They don't issue any new ones and usually you would fish for someone who already had a license. You just couldn't go out and buy a boat and go lobstering. It's expensive and usually when a person sells a boat, if he is getting out of the business, he will sell the boat with the license. And they can go for a lot of dough.

EF: So you got rid of all of your stuff. And the boat too?

BG: Yeah, when I fished you had to have a federal permit for the tuna cause that is a government regulated species and then scalloping was the same, it was just because I didn't have over so many horsepower, so I was limited.

CD: Was there any of your fishing off shore sorta like what they were fishing in Perfect Storm?

BG: Yeah, that movie was pretty inaccurate. I could only watch about ten minutes of it. I never got through the whole movie. Some of it was realistic but most of it wasn't

realistic at all. But yeah, when I swordfished, that's where we went out on the Northern Edge and out that way it is deep water. But fishing as a whole is a dangerous business; I think it is just as dangerous to run a lobster boat on the coast of Maine, as it is to go way off shore.

EF: How many people went out with you?

BG: Depending on the type of fishing again, if I tunafished I usually would take just one guy and if I was scalloping, two guys and if I was lobstering usually three people. Sword fishing, we had five guys and when we dragged on the big steel boat we had a twelve man crew. We would process everything, put it in cardboard boxes, put it in plate freezers, flash freeze it really quick and then fill the boat up before we would go in.

BF: Did you ever work with women on the boat?

BG: A few times, scalloping, but it is pretty physically demanding and you need a lot of upper body strength and that is where some women that we fished with couldn't fit the build. Most of the time it is pretty much a man-dominated industry.

BF, BG: (Chuckle).

EF: So is it any different when you stay on a boat for a couple of days than it is staying around here or do you just get used to it after a while.

BG: Well, I think it gives you a great appreciation of how insignificant you are and how in rough weather you know you are getting slammed around in a boat and there is no land and you know you could sink or die or drown at any given moment. And then you look out on the waves and there is a little sea gull that weighs half a pound, bobbin up and down, not bothered at all. So I think it makes you appreciate, not to take. You get a greater appreciation, you see beautiful things – you know, whales, unbelievable amounts of whales and dolphins and the sunrises and sets. A lot of natural stuff that is really neat that you never see and you know seeing it in a movie, it is not the same.

CD: Do you ever get seasick?

BG: I got sea sick one trip. The cook poisoned the whole boat; he didn't rinse the dishes off and left way too much soap on the dishes. And we were all sick and we were in a big storm. We had a hurricane way off of Portland, about a hundred miles off of Portland and we had a lay too. We call that when you can't fish, you just kinda just sit there idle and keep the nose of the boat into the sea and we had a "lay too" for like five days with thirty five, forty foot seas and everybody was pretty sick.

EF: So what is the worst storm you have been in?

BG: Oh, I don't know. I mean depending on the boat and the guy handling the boat and the competency of the crew, a bad storm can seem not as bad as it could be. The boat

requires a whole bunch of people to act and not have to ask questions. They must work in harmony with each other, you have to know what is going to happen before it happens or you will end up in a statistics grid. But I don't know, we went through a hurricane down off of Florida and in the Gulf of Mexico we also saw some big storms. When you get way off shore, usually the water is so deep that the seas even though they are huge, they are not fast so they are not breaking. They are just these huge mountains of water that go up and down, up and down. Wintertime fishing is probably the worse, cause it is cold and you get a lot of wind and strong seas. Usually we would always pay close attention to the weather radio and if it called for really bad weather, imminently we would cut the trip short and head for the dock. If you were way of shore, then you just had to wait and ride it out.

EF: Do you think you learn more fishing with other people or fishing by yourself?

BG: Well, you can always learn something from other people. I think you learn a lot about yourself and what you are capable of when you fish alone. When you fish with other people, it teaches you a lot about the dynamics of people and what you can expect from them and what they can teach you and you can teach other, so probably it is a fifty/fifty split.

EF: So while you were fishing, you didn't have any other job?

BG: No, that was it. I was usually the engineer so I did all the welding and fabrication on the boat and took care of the engines when we got to the dock. But that was it, yeah, you would fish, you know, you could make a good living and it took up most of your time and when you weren't fishing you just wanted to be off and hang out with your girlfriend and family or whatever.

CD: Did you ever fish at night?

BG: Oh, yeah, when you are off shore you usually fish twenty-four hours a day when you are out there. You 'd get little naps here and there, but, yeah no, you'd work right through the night.

EF: Long days!

BG: Yep, long days, accept tuna fishing cause they don't bite that well at night and the sharks come out and all you end up doing is catching a lot of sharks which is fun but it doesn't pay so well. We would usually pull in the gear about sunset when we were tuna fishing.

CD: What is the strangest thing you have ever caught?

BG: The strangest thing we ever caught was when we were towing off Block Island, sixty miles off shore and we had a huge net. It was two o'clock in the morning. We had these huge lights that shown back off the boat and the mouth of the net on that boat was

probably a hundred yards wide. Normally what happens is it is full of fish so it comes right up to the stern rail. And then you look down and there is this huge bag "coded" it is called of fish. So this one night we hauled it back and like a hundred and fifty feet off the stern of the boat all the corks, the floats on the net, are up and out of the water which is highly unusual because whatever you haul up is supposed to be heavy. All of a sudden the net starts floating and just bulging. The net is square and when you pull it tight there is this gross looking black, gray, horror movie, membrane bulging out of all the nets and it is just getting bigger and bigger and bigger. It is like forty feet tall out of the water and what we have is towed up a huge dead whale. Like it was the biggest whale I had ever seen. It had decomposed in the bottom of the ocean and when we took it out the gas in the dead skin and intestines all expanded and it was growing. We were all just sitting there on deck at two o'clock in the morning. We had had no sleep in a week and our mouths were hanging open. And like I mean, it was a horror movie, huge pieces of intestine and whale blubber just went flying. We stopped the winch. We couldn't figure out what it was. And then all of a sudden BOOM it blows up through the air just flying everywhere and then it started to sink. And then the stench came over the boat. I have smelt some awful smells and the captain who is up in the wheelhouse, he tries to slam the window shut in the wheelhouse, he comes running out and throws up. Most of the crew got sick right there on the deck. I didn't get sick. I don't know why (Laughter). By the grace of God the net floated off that huge rotten carcass and that thing gloated down wind and the net stunk like that for like a month though, like the slime in it. It was the weirdest thing anybody had ever seen. It was strange.

CD: I would say that was very strange.

BF: That was gross!

EF: So when you are just fishing for whatever what kinda bait works the best for certain things.

BG: In Massachusetts and Rhode Island everybody uses skates for lobster because they have a really high sand flea population down there and you take two big skates, guys drag them and then they sell them to you for bait. When we fished in Massachusetts for lobsters, most people used herring. I guess they also use moose hide, deer hide, and cowhide. At that time they hadn't come out with it. For tuna fish you want to try to use live bait and depending on what they are eating, it might be blue fish or porgies or mackerel. It might be bottom fish - sometimes the tuna go deep. They eat baby juvenile cod and you would go out there and try to catch some small ones and try to keep them alive to use for bait. Scalloping, you just drag and most fish dragging does not require bait. You just use a net but that is disruptive and you kill a lot of fish so most people do not do that anymore.

You can have some bad trips. The ocean is very complicated and we do not know enough about it. There are areas where there is warm water, cool water, hot water and it moves up and down and as it moves up and down the bait moves up and down as well and the fish are very sensitive to climatic pressure changes. Like three days before a



hurricane you couldn't catch a fish out there even if you wanted to cause they are not thinking about eating. Nobody can explain it, they just know. During a big storm the pressure starts to drop and they behave differently.

EF: What happens if you go out and you don't catch anything/

BG: One summer in Gloucester there was a boat called the Anna Maria Elena. It was a scallop dragger and when the scallops got thin they switched over to sword fishing. They were looking for an engineer and they begged me to go. I almost went but I didn't. So my brother got on that boat and they went out for thirty-one days and made seventy-five dollars per man.

EF: Man, that was bad.

BG: The boat could hold twenty thousand gallons of fuel. So you had to pay for the fuel and there was a ten-man crew. You had to pay for all of the groceries for the crew for a month so there were a lot of expenses. They ended up pulling into St John and refueling to go back to Gloucester. I have made a few trips, eight or nine days, where you might make two hundred dollars. Usually it is in the wintertime and the weather permits it. You can have what is called a broker any time. You might get out there and lose a piece of equipment or have a system or gear failure or electronic failure. Anything is possible.

EF: Were there some places that you kept on going back to cause you got a good catch?

BG: Yup, a lot of times and they would be good years because the fish would come. Scalping, as you continue to drag the bottom, you do so much damage you eventually take all of them and they will not come back for many years once you have cleaned the place out. But there are some areas scallops will, just for some reason when they are migrating or moving, they will just keep filling certain holes and you can go back year after year and get them but there are definitely hot spots out there – same thing with lobsters. You know, there are just places in the bay where you can set your gear. That is because there is a ledge there and the lobsters love it or whatever. Yeah, there is definitely good and bad spots for fishing.

CD: When you were sport fishing over towards California did you ever hear of fish surfing like the waves? Have you ever heard of that?

BG: No, but it is very possible.

CD: I just learned about it this past year in Florida when I was fishing but I was just wondering. It is an interesting thing to see.

BG: There is a lot I don't know about the ocean. One of the strange things was when you have big seas off Florida and see the flying fish. You will be asleep and all of a sudden on deck you will hear all this racket and they will land in your boat and in the morning there will be eight or nine flying fish. I have seen whales come up in a triad

under schools of herring and open their mouths with tons of herring just spilling out of their mouths. I have seen them do that which is pretty unusual. But I think you could spend your whole life out there and never see or learn all that stuff.

CD: Have you ever caught a cobia?

BG: They are great smoked.

CD: Oh, yeah, they are.

BF: What is a cobia?

BG: They are just a big surface fish and they are kinda slow. They go deep too but they like to fin up in the sun. A lot of times you will catch them on the surface with a pinfish which is a small bait fish.

EF: What is a butterfish?

BG: Butterfish are almost wiped out. The Japanese loved them and they are about this big, like a small pancake and I don't know how they got the name – butterfish - cause they are really bright and silver and shiny. They almost look like a sunfish with tiny scales and shiny and we used to ship them to Japan. The market was all Japanese and there were tons of them out of Rhode Island and we just fished them all out. Caught them all.

Almost everybody that fished for them left out of Rhode Island and they were due south of Rhode Island probably south of Block Island forty or fifty miles out in the warm water. There is another type of butterfish that they have down in the Gulf of Mexico that we went down to fish for because we caught all the ones on the east coast but they had a weird parasite in them and the Japanese wouldn't buy them.

EF: When you were working in all of these places, you didn't take your boat with you, did you?

BG: Usually I was working on a big boat and we would go there. We would steam the boat, however long it took and fish whether it was in the Gulf of Mexico or down off Florida. My small boat, I only fished from Eastport to Block Island cause it really wasn't large enough to do anything else.

EF: But on the big boats, you went everywhere?

BG: Yup. I mean I had known guys that fished out of Rhode Island that went to Alaska and then to Russia where Boris Yelson was.

CD: What type of fish do you think is the most fun to catch?

BD: Tuna fishing, I guess, is the most fun. It is also boring because you can go all week and never get a nibble. You have to keep cutting chum and bait and it is expensive. I mean that is fun fishing because it is such a thrill but there was a lot of time when you were just cutting chum wishing something would happen.

EF: Are there size limits?

BG: At the back of the tail of a tuna fish there are two bumps and they call that the fork of the tail. The last time I fished they had to be eighty-eight inches minimum – from the fork of the tail to the front of the mouth.

EF: Well, do you get a lot of them that are smaller than that?

BG: The giant Atlantic Blue Fin tuna, you do. We used to fish for Big Eye, Albacore and Black fin tuna which usually run forty to ninety pounds. And on those there is a size limit but I have been out of so long I can't remember. Those are a lot of fun to fish too. They are more plentiful, easy to catch, but they don't have the commercial value that the giant Blue fin does.

CD: Have you ever caught a tarpon or something like that?

BG: I've hooked tarpon but I've never caught any cause I wasn't fishing for them. But I've seen them. They would come right up to my mother in laws dock in Florida. They are a great game fish and they are a lot of fun but luckily there is no commercial value.

CD: Have you ever had any problem scalloping when you re out fishing off of Eastport?

BG: No. I'll tell you, you don't want to fish of Eastport in the winter because it is just a ghost town.

CD: Oh, yeah.

BG: You know there is the little Waco Bar down there. In Eastport we just fished during the day and we would tie up to the dock at night. We'd usually go up to the bar and have a couple of beers and have some clam chowder or whatever they were serving and then call it a day. It is a pretty quiet place. We were there in the late winter – January, February, early March and it just a kind of fill in until we could catch scallops somewhere else

EF: Blue Lobster. Do you know why it is blue?

BG: It is a genetic mutation. It happens to like one in so man million, I used to know a detailed explanation, but I don't anymore.

EF: So there is nothing wrong with the meat or anything?

BG: No. They look like a regular lobster. We have caught some before that were yellow and some an orange yellow with lots of freckles on them. It is just like pigmentation. It is one of those things. There is a gene there that can trigger a color change. But it is outnumbered by millions of others, so it is pretty slim.

BG: Are there any fish or lobsters that you had to throw back because of some chemical or something in the water?

BG: We never had any trouble with that. But the female lobsters, of course, if there are any eggs you have to release them. We would always check the lobsters.

CD: Did you ever have problems with red tide or anything like that?

BG: When we used to oyster and clam there were times when the flats would be closed. Then you would not fish until they released them.

CD: So have you ever caught halibut or anything like that?

BG: We caught halibut. I have never long lined for halibut. I always wanted to but there are so few. I know there are a few lobstermen down in Addison that do it. We have got some dragging for scallops. We got one that was a hundred and forty pounder which is a pretty good size fish. They are a delicious fish.

EF: So when you catch tuna do you have to save all of it or can you eat some of it?

BG: You can eat some of it. The Japanese people eat almost all their seafood raw so it has to be really handled well. Back when I started we weren't as fastidious as they are now. Now they give you, they call it a body bag and it is insulated. When you get to the dock a Japanese guy has this long steel rod and pushes it into the center of the fish and pushes it out. He takes a core sample and he looks for any cancer, checks the temperature of the fish when it gets there and cuts the head and tail off as well as the five little fins in the back. The head steaks, the steaks right behind the head and the tail steaks are great and that is usually what you can take if you want. Then the rest of the fish, they put it into a coffin that is what they call it. It is a big wooden box and they take it usually to Logan Airport. In twelve hours it will be in Nagasaki or Tokyo at an auction. And they go for big money once they get there. Forty, fifty, sixty dollars a pound. That is not what they pay us for em' but...

CD: Did you ever have any problems with seals when you were fishing?

BG: Nope. I've caught a few mackerel fishing. They hit your lure but we just cut the leader off and off they go. I guess they have a lot of trouble with them in the salmon pens but I have never done any fish farming type stuff.

EF: So you went right into fishing right after high school?

BG: Yup.

BG: Well, I guess I have got to get going.

BF: All right. Thank you.