

BILLY HAAS

Lobster Fisherman, urchin diver, scallop diver

Date: May 31, 2005

Time: 2:45pm

Location of the Interview: Ellsworth High School Library

Student Interviewer: Shelby Pollack      Grade 10

School: Ellsworth High School

School Location: Ellsworth, Maine

Teacher or Parent Interviewer/Chaperone: Sheri Wilder

Transcriber: Joyce Whitmore

SP: What are your specific connections to the fishing business?

BH: Uh, I make my living on the water. I am a lobster fisherman, a commercial urchin diver, and scallop diver.

SP: How long have you been doing this?

BH: I started diving before I started lobstering. So, oh, late eighties, eighty-nine or ninety. About fifteen years.

SP: What is your daily schedule like?

BH: Ten months out of the year I work and two months of the year I have off. From around May 20th to the end of June is my slow time which is now. Usually the last week of June is when I put my lobster traps in. I lobstered later last year than I normally do. Uh, usually I lobster until the end of December. Last year I went into a couple of weeks in January. Then the weather gets really bad and I can do better diving for urchins and scallops January, February, March and half of April.

SP: Do you use bait?

BH: For lobster we use herring, cowhide, bull skin, pigskin. A lot of fishermen use it. I mainly use fish heads: red fish, flounder, cod and hake heads. Ninety five per cent of my bait is herring. I use very little farm live stock skins.

SP: What kind of traps do you use?

BH: Fifteen years ago the majority of traps were made out of wood. I use a twelve and a half gage steel mesh that is covered with plastic. It is referred to as a wire lobster trap. Ninety five per cent of the traps used today are made of wire. They usually have three or four bricks in them and they weigh between forty and fifty pounds a piece.

They have shrimp mesh heads, although some people still knit their own heads out of twine. A fishing head is referred to as the hole inside the trap that the lobster crawls through. It is kind of cone shaped. It has a big entrance and it funnels down into a small entrance where they can get into the trap. The idea behind it is it is easier to get in but a lot harder to get out. There are many different types of traps.

SP: How many traps can you take?

BH: I can fish eight hundred traps a year. Each trap has a state tag. On that tag is a plastic ring that makes a small circle that clips into itself and once you have locked it won't come undone. On that tag has numbered one through eight hundred. It also has your license number and your zone you declare to fish in. There are probably a dozen different zones in the State of Maine. Each one of those tags has to be inside the trap. They also give us a ten per cent tolerance for whatever reason. If we loose a trap due to boat traffic or the rope breaks for some reason. When we go to haul it sometimes the rope will be wrapped around a rock. We pull the trap in and it will break the rope and cut it. I have eighty replacement tags. So when I lose a trap I can take another trap and put one of those replacement tags in and keep in the water eight hundred traps at a time. Most people do not lose more than ten per cent of the number of the traps they have in the water. You take a person who only fishes with four hundred traps; he can only get forty replacement tags. That is how that works.

SP: You dive for scallops; do you have to have a license?

BH: Seven or eight years ago there were a few divers who drowned. One year there were several close calls. So the State thought it would be a good idea, which it was, to make every body take certification tenders which are the people that tend to the divers.. They are the ones who take care of the divers. They pull up whatever product. They clean out the unwanted product and put in into the trays. Or, with scallops, they shell the scallops out of the meat. The tenders have to take a two-day safety course. The divers have to take a three-day safety course. The first day is CPR then after that it teaches you what to do if there is and emergency - who to call and what to do to prepare the person or make him more comfortable for either a sea rescue or whatever the case might be. You have to take the course in order to get a scallop license or an urchin license.

SP: Is there any other schooling that you need?

BH: Right now, there is not they are talking about several different certifications

for fishermen- for driving boats and for navigation. There is nothing mandatory out there. There is a few good courses out there. I would like to take one on navigating and reading a compass and figuring how longitude and latitude lines and GPS which is global positioning. Really, I know a little bit about it but it is pretty much the basics. I know enough to get around in my area. Down the road I have some friends of mine that instead of driving their vehicle or flying south, they have some real nice lobster boats and they take them to North Carolina or Florida. They take them to a marina and live off the boat. To me that sounds like a lot of fun somewhere down the road. I would like to take a course in navigation so I would know my boat a little better.

SP: What kind of boat do you have?

BH: I have a thirty five metra cove which has a six hundred-horse diesel engine in it. It's a lot more motor than I need. It is sufficient for what I do. It's kinda like in between. It is a big boat for fishing in close; it is a small boat if you are fishing off shore. You can do either/or with it. It is really versatile. I have a real big motor in it. I kind of like to show off a little bit. We go to races in the summertime. There are eight different races up and down the coast depending on the horsepower you have and the length of your boat. There is probably twenty different classes that they can race and I have my own class that I race in. I have won my class for three years in a row. It's a chance to get away and visit people in other areas. It's a chance to get away and visit with other people in other areas. We usually leave the night before the race and get the kids together and tie up along side of other fishermen and just have a really good, old time.

SP: Do you go by yourself when you go scalloping or diving?

BH: Uh, mostly I do. There is me and one other diver. I always have a tender. There are usually three people on the boat; two beside myself whether we are urching or scalloping. I can dive by myself as well but it is nice to have somebody else to talk too and well as for safety reasons. My kids, the two boys, go with me frequently in the summer time lobstering,. I have a t v and a play station so when they get bored they can take a nap or go up front and watch t v or whatever. In the wintertime once in a while on a weekend they will go with me. In the wintertime I close my boat in; it has a nice heater and they are comfortable and they will run around in their short sleeve shirts just about like they would if they were at home.

SP: Where do you sell too?

BH: The scallops, really, we don't do too much scalloping anymore because there are not many of them. Most of the scallops we will sell locally. The sea urchins that I sell are mainly to Cambodians. There are a few native buyers that will buy but most are for the Cambodians. There are processing plants down in Southern Maine, Portland, and in southern New England and Boston and New York. There is a lot of work to process sea urchins. You have to break them

open and pick out the roe which is like caviar, sort of like a fish egg. It is a real delicacy. The lobsters go to local buyers. A majority of the lobsters I catch go to Canadian buyers. They also go to processing houses where they cook thousands of pounds a day. They flash freeze them.

SP: How many lobsters and scallops do you catch in a year?

BH: Oh, it is hard to say. I am going to say. lobstering seems to be getting better each year for a variety of reasons, and the amount of lobsters I get, I think, is somewhere between seventy five to a hundred thousand pounds of lobsters and urchins - probably fifteen to twenty thousands pounds of urchins. Depending on what the price is, lobster prices vary. I think last year the lowest price was about three and a quarter but by the end of the year, around Christmas week, it was five fifty a pound. In this area it is a really good thing that we have lobsters. It really helps the economy especially the further downeast you go. There is little industry and few occupations that you can make a decent living with and lobsters are really vital to the economy in downeast Maine.

SP: When you are talking about the urchins, is it those little green ones that you can pick up?

BH: We have what we call a catch bag. It holds about a bushel. You have a stainless steel rake. The urchins are stuck to the rocks and in between the cracks of the ledges and on the sides of flat ledges. You would be surprised at how good they can hang on. I don't know what it is but they are pretty strong. Sometimes you can just reach down, you know, swish water with your hand and they will come right away and other times, you have to scrape hard with a the rake. It is sort of like what you would use to cultivate a flowerbed.

SP: Does red tide effect what you do?

BH: It has almost no bearing on what I do. Mostly red tide affects mussels and clams. Red tide is right on the surface of the water. I am not real familiar with it but you can see red tide on the surface. I think it is just some type of bacteria that just blossoms in the water like an algae. It is definitely red. I have pictures of it and have seen it several times on the surface of the water. The majority of the time you cannot see it. It usually happens when the water temperature has been very warm and there hasn't been a lot of rain and wind. To me, I guess, I am not sure it is right; the conditions have to be right for everything to come together to create a red tide. , Red tide affects the surface of the water. Whenever there is red tide in the area it will shut down clamming and musseling. Urchins, scallops, and lobsters the red tide has no bearing on, what so ever.

SP: How far out do you go?

BH: Last year I purchased a federal permit. There is an imaginary line, you take a map of the coast of Maine, anywhere you can see land you can go three miles out from that part of land of the coast of Maine there is the imaginary line. On

most nautical maps it is a red line that dips in and out with the contour of the coast. Inside that three mile line is state waters and I can legally fish from where I am out to three miles from shore which is quite a large area. , I have done all right fishing in that area. As I get a bigger boat and learn more about the business I will probably want to fish out more. In the fall, probably from the middle of October through December, the majority of the lobsters are caught, the better hauls, the bigger catchers are caught on the other side of that three miles. At the end of May and the middle of June the lobsters will come in from off shore. The water is colder off shore and the lobsters will come in from off shore on their migratory route and they will shed in the shallows because the water is warm. That is where we are right at the head end of Frenchman's Bay. That is when the lobsters are the weakest. They have filled up their shell and do not have more room to grow. As soon as they shed they are starving to death. They will eat whatever they come across. They will even eat each other. In a trap if they run out of bait, they will start eating each other. Their cannibals. As long as there is herring in there they will eat everything but each other, but if the herring runs out they will eat each other.

When we put lobsters in a crate we usually put seventy-two lobsters in each box. In the summer time when we catch the lobsters we will take the lobsters out of the trap and band them. At the end of the day we will break them up into ninety-pound boxes. Anytime you would like to go out, I will take the boys and we can go out.

SP: Thank You.