

HERB HODGKINS

Lobster Fishermen, Entrepreneur, and Researcher

Date: March 3, 2005

Time: 11:10 a.m.

Location of Interview: Ellsworth High School Library

Student Interviewers:	Devin Pickard	Grade 10
	Jonathan DeGiosafatto	Grade 10
	Khem Millay	Grade 10
	Senait Millay	Grade 10
	Yohannes Millay	Grade 10

School: Ellsworth High School

School Location: Ellsworth, Maine

Teacher or Parent

Interviewers/Chaperones: Susan Denoncourt, Special Education Aid

Henry Bartends, Special Education Aid

Transcriber: Susan Denoncourt, Special Education Aid

SD: We'll get started with the questions that Yohannes and Senait and Khem have and you just ask questions as they come up or if you want to know more about something, that's a good way to get more information. O.K.?

JD: Yeah.

SD: All right.

YM: I want to start. Mr. Hodgkins, how many lobsters do you catch in a day?

HH: Ah, I never full time lobster fished for a living. I've been involved in most other phases of the lobster industry. So, and lately I've been doing some research with about twenty-four lobster traps with, which I catch between ten and twenty-four lobsters.

SD: per trap or total?

HH: total.

SM: O.K. I have a question. How old were you when you started lobster fishing?

HH: Well, like most children of lobster fisherman, I went with my Dad probably between the ages of six and ten, just going with him on the boat.

SD: Yeah, being a helper or did he put you right to work?

HH: I was sometimes a helper and sometimes a little nuisance.

SD: (Laugh) At least he knew where you were if you were on the boat.

HH: Ah, to be on the boat with him. He would tie a rope around my waist and tie me to the bait barrel. And then he would know where I was.

SD: That's a good way to keep track of you. Did you actually help bait the traps?

HH: I would fill his bait pocket with nice smelly fish, mostly herring.

SD: Mostly herring?

HH: Yeah.

SD: Do you have another question Senait?

SM: O.K. What month is a good time to lobster?

HH: A good fishing month?

SM: Yeah.

HH: When the new shell lobsters, those lobsters that have molted to grow in about the middle of July through November are the best lobster fishing.

SM: In the winter why didn't you (Intercom going with several announcements\_

HH: Pardon.

SD: Why wouldn't people lobster in the winter? Is there any particular reason? Is it the weather?

HH: In the wintertime the water cools in our inshore waters out as far as three miles off the coast of Maine. The lobster's metabolism slows down and they are not as hungry so they will not go into the traps.

SD: After the bait?

HH: After the bait but there are some fisheries way of shore, as far as five to thirty miles off shore, in very deep and warmer water.

SD: so that is where they would go in the winter, further out?

HH: further out in the winter. Just a few of the lobster fishermen off the coast of Maine do that compared to the summer fishermen.

SM: Where do you live?

HH: I live in Hancock, Maine and on Hancock Point and up further in the center of Hancock at the Tidal Falls Lobster Pound. Tidal Falls in Hancock is where I live now.

KM: How big is your boat?

HH: The boat I am now using belongs to the University of Maine to do research. The name of the boat is RV Black Fly. The Research Vessel Black Fly. It is twenty-one feet long with a six cylinder inboard outboard engine.

SD: So you have gone from initially going out on the fishing boat to doing research at present?

HH: Yes.

SD: What type of research are you doing now?

HH: Research in lobster baits and trying to find helpful bait that will be available to the fishermen when they can't get herring. And, ah, using soy products and putting attractants in it that will be healthful to the lobsters.

SD: Is the herring bait getting harder to get or is this just an alternative?

HH: Herring is gradually getting more hard, scarcer, and the fishermen are requiring more of it and it is getting much more expensive for the fishermen to use, so we are looking for an alternative bait. I have tried many types of bait other people have dreamed up in this process of testing.

SD: How did they find you for this? Did they call you or did you inquire to them about getting involved in this research?

HH: Twenty five years ago I was the sole owner of the Tidal Falls Lobster Pound in Hancock and a fella that works for the Sea Grant out of the University of Maine knew me and thought that Hancock would be a very good place to do some research with lobsters and with lobster pounds. So I allowed them space to use at Tidal Falls and they started to do their research here. Its proximity is one of the closest places to Orono, Maine where the main office is so it was very handy for them to use this location.

JG: I've seen different colored buoys. How do they decide who has what color?

HH: A lobster fisherman can use any colored buoy he wants. But he doesn't want to try to duplicate somebody else in the area. You want to have a different color. Say in Frenchmen's Bay there may be certain colors but if somebody down around the Portland area has a similar color, he may use that color. You can choose any of the colors that you want.

SD: But you do it by looking around the area to see colors are available still?

HH: Available colors, yes.

SD: Has your family always had a certain color?

HH: Yes, it goes by family. If say a child or a young person in a family takes over his father's business or something like that he would keep the same color. You may change it if you want but your own license number and where you are registered for a fishing license within the State has to be on that buoy, trap, and on your boat.

HB: How do you feel about this research that you are doing with the soy product?

HH: Well, it shows promise.

HB: Do you see a down side or an up side? How do you think it will play out or succeed?

HH: It should succeed. It will probably never be a product that will fish as good as herring does. That is a favorite. Mackerel is used also in some other areas but not so much on the Maine coast. Artificial baits will be less attractant to the lobster probably forever than the conventional baits. That is my estimation on it.

HB: So we can expect one way or the other that the lobster take to be less than it has overall?

HH: No, I wouldn't say that. It could have some effect if it is used a lot. But see, if a fisherman is out of fish bait, he won't be fishing until he gets fish bait. But if he has a back up of something that has shelf life that he can purchase, he can use that as a substitute until he can get his favorite bait back.

HB: so this would be imposed. The soy product would be imposed until the mackerel or herring population wasn't so depleted and would come back to some extent?

HH: Yes, there are other products we are trying to develop at the same time. One is a corn product and will put attractants with that.

HB: At the same time the ban on using mackerel or herring would be lifted and they would be free to use, right? Is that the way it would work?

SD: I don't know if there is a ban on it.

HH: I don't think there is a ban. It is just availability.

HB: It is cheaper so it is a natural economic incentive.

SD: Or is it just if they cannot get the herring?

HB: If it doesn't work as well does it offset? I mean it might be cheaper but less incentive.

HH: There is less incentive if it doesn't work good enough.

HB: so the fisherman would be likely to pay more if...

HH: What we are aiming at is a better soak, what we call soak duration. Say the herring is in the trap for three days. If you can get artificial bait that will attract up to eight days or two weeks that would be a big boost to the fisherman to fish with artificial bait.

JD: I have a question. What is the biggest lobster you have ever caught?

HH: That I have ever caught?

JD: Yeah.

HH: Oh, about three and a half to four pounds. It goes by maximum length of the body shell of the lobster.

SD: From like the nose to the tail?

HH: Yeah, from the nose to the tail.

HH: If that section is over five inches long you cannot keep it. You must put it back for conservation measures.

SD: If it is a female, don't you put it back if it has eggs?

HH: If it has eggs you are not allowed to have it in your possession. You must put it back in the water.

YM: What kind of bait do you use?

HH: I use the soy bait or the corn meal bait and I compare that bait to herring.

HB: What are they finding about the lobster life cycle. Is it on the decline in alternate years or did I hear something like this. I am not a student of this but aren't they trying to figure out about how the annual life cycle of the lobster works and how it works that some years there are fewer and some years there are more. Is that a big question?

HH: there is a lot of research that temperatures of the ocean waters have a lot to do with it.

SD: The predators/

HH: How fast the lobster grows and what predators there are out there and everything from striped bass to seals are predators of the lobsters in the ocean.

SD: Cod?

HH: Codfish. Recently it was in the Bangor Daily News that they caught a twenty-two pound lobster.

SD: Wow.

HH: A picture of it was in the paper.

SD: That had avoided the predators for a while.

HH: they are trying to guess how old that lobster is right now and the guess is between fifty and one hundred years.

SD: Yikes.

HH: The colder the water the slower the lobster grows. Newfoundland lobsters are much older when they become legal size.

JD: What month do fishermen start catching the most lobsters?

HH: In July up through October and November.

SD: That is good. That is when the tourists are here to buy them.

SD: How often do they shed their shells? Is it once a year?

HH: A lobster from the time he becomes a lobster from an egg for about a year sheds his shell many times in the year.

The larger it gets the less often it sheds its shell. A lobster that weighs between one pound and two pounds sheds its shell approximately about once a year.

SM: How do you tell if a lobster is a girl or a boy?

HH: There are swimmerets; they call them, underneath the lobster body. The male has two swimmerets and they are filled out and are very hard. The females are very soft. You can also tell by the lobster tail that looks like the shell comes down around the tail. That would be longer compared to a male lobster. That is nature's way of protecting the

eggs under the female lobster when she carries them under her. She extrudes them and they stick underneath her tail for many months, six or seven months.

SD: Six months before they are released?

JD: I don't know if this is true or not, but I've heard rumors that in some waters there are blue lobsters.

HH: Blue lobsters are very rare, they are one in one million I believe out there. It is a genetic fault in the genes.

SD: In its coloring?

HB: Have you seen them?

HH: Oh yes. There are also some lobsters out there that are red like a boiled lobster; they are even more scarce. And I have seen one of them.

HB: If you put it on someone's plate they would think it was cooked.

HH: We tried that at the picnic grounds once. They opened up the bag and it flipped across the table (Laughing) There were a few screeches from the ladies. They thought they were having flip-flops.

HB: What is the best way to cook a lobster in your opinion?

HH: Boiled.

HB: Boiled, fully boiled? Or just a little bit...steamed, boiled or broiled?

HH: Steamed or boiled in water. I cannot tell the difference myself if they are steamed or boiled.

HB: do you put a little bit of salt in the water?

HH: If we are using fresh water we usually put in a scoop of salt but we usually try to use sea water which is all salted. A lot on the coast prefer that.

HB: Are there places where lobster taste better than other places? Are female lobsters better tasting?

HH: No, but some people would like to order female lobsters in hopes to get the roe that is inside of the lobster. The red/orange roe when it is cooked a lot of people like to eat. So they ask for the female lobsters for that reason. But as far as flavor goes, male or female, there is not difference.

HB: Feeding grounds or where they tend to feed...does the depths or the cold make the flesh firmer or anything like that?

HH: No, but they will adapt to the area they are growing in. If the lobster is on the sandy bottom like up in Prince Edward Island they will be a much lighter color. Nature makes them adhere to the coloration of the environment.

HB: Do they migrate or do they mate in shallow water? How does that work?

HH: The females mate right after she molts or sheds her old shell. That is the time when she is very soft and that is the time she will mate with another lobster, similar in size, and ah, a male lobster that is similar in size.

HB: In shallow water or cold water, do they tend to move during the course of the year? How much ground does a lobster spend his life in? Is that a big question?

HH: They've done a lot of tag studies. Marine resources does tag studies and the Lobster Institute at the University of Maine has done many. They find that the larger lobsters growing in shore kind of migrate down the coast and in the same direction as the gulf, as the current in the Gulf of Maine. The larger ones will tend to migrate in that direction more than any other direction as they get larger in shore and a lot of our lobsters way off in deep water have been much larger lobsters out there and the larger the lobsters the more eggs they will carry under the. Of course the currents will travel, kind of clockwise in the Gulf of Maine. It brings those seeds from those lobsters in shore and ah, where the water is warmer in the summer and they molt much more often and become grown up lobsters.

JG: Would there be bigger or more lobsters in a tropical water setting?

HH: Tropical water? Our lobsters are found as far as North Carolina, down the coast as far as North Carolina.

SD: I've had a lobster in the Caribbean and it is almost different looking. Its claws are smaller and it looks different. It must be a different species.

HH: Yeah, they did have claws too, huh?

SD: Yeah.

HH: Those are similar to crawfish that are African. Spinney lobsters have no claws on the west coast and off Australia and those lobsters are in the warmer climates.

SD: And ours, you said, go to North Carolina.

HH: That is just about the range of this species of lobsters.



DP: Why did you start lobstering?

HH: I got interested in the lobstering industry as a whole. My father was involved as a lobster fisherman for many years and he built a lobster pound and had feeding rounds and fishing boats here in Hancock and I grew up in that business. Then after high school I decided I wanted a life in the merchant marines so I went to Maine Maritime Academy. I saved up my money for three years and then I bounced back to Hancock, Maine, bought lobsters with all that money and I've been in the business ever since.

SD: What are some of the disadvantages of being in the fishing industry? As far as your go, you are pretty much self employed, aren't you?

HH: Yeah, it is a self-employed business. A corporation can't have a lobster license to fish. It has to be an individual.

SD: So it is good that you are your own boss?

HH: Yeah.

SD: Are there some disadvantages to it or none that you can see?

HH: disadvantages? Well, there are some fishermen that seem to try to fish and just don't have the knack for it.

SD: There is a business side to it, isn't there?

HH: a business side?

SD: As far as expenses for bait and fuel, if you make a lot of money at one time of the year do you have to kind of plan for the off months?

HH: Yes, some have alternative work to do in the months if they don't fish in the wintertime. Here there are a lot of occupations they can do including cutting wood.

SD: Year, right. What are some things that if someone is interested in the fishing industry in general, what are some of the things in school they might try to learn?

HH: Learn?

SD: Learn or focus on learning more about when they are here at school?

HH: Well, I think economics is a very important thing. Basic understanding of economics and of course any business you are in, especially if you are self employed, it is very important to understand book keeping, record keeping, management of your business monies.

SD: Much new technology coming into the fishing industry in general?

HH: Yes, a lot more technology has come into it. Improved equipment such as radar, which is a big, big plus for the fishermen. From radar we now have GPS for navigation.

SD: For their safety or marking the lobster sites?

HB: When this country first started there are accounts of lobsters being used for fertilizer and being used to feed slaves, and so forth. What do you see as the picture a hundred or two hundred years from now?

HH: There is no indication that there is going to be a loss of lobsters in our oceans yet.

HB: When you say loss what do you mean?

HH: The laws are getting stricter and the fishing is getting to be more controlled.

HB: And do you think this is what needs to happen?

HH: That has to happen. Now in the case of recent fisheries that are getting depleted like your codfish and haddock, a lot of fishermen have in order to keep fishing tried to get into the lobster business to make a living, so there has been a lot more pressure for the lobster fisheries.

SD: Restrictions?

HH: With restrictions, yes.

HB: And so what do you personally prescribe in order to preserve those fisheries so they don't go to a rock bottom zero population?

HH: Limits. They are keeping pretty good track of the population of lobsters and they will restrict the amount of traps that can be in the water. They are changing regulations that way.

HB: There are always compromises that you have to make.

HH: Compromises, yes. The number of traps that a fisherman can have, they are controlling that now.

SD: Thank you Herbie for coming.

HH: You are welcome.

SD: We will now close this interview. Jon, hit the off button.

