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Interviewed by William Wakeham, Richard Rathbun, and Hugh M. Smith  
November 16, 1893  
Capt. Geo. M. McClain of Rockport, Mass.

Aged 53. Master of vessel 13 yrs. Has been fishing since he was 10 years old. Master of Marguerite Haskins. Has not been south since the close season began. Before that went nearly 20 years steady. Leave here about 25<sup>th</sup> April, and meet the fish abreast of Delaware. Hardly ever went farther south. Twenty odd years ago went south as far as Cape Henry. One day got 3 wash barrels just inside of the Light. Never went south before the purse seine came into use. Went south 3 or 4 years before with hook and line. Did not go so far south as with seines. Met fish when jigging hardly ever to the south of Delaware. Mostly

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off Cape May; along about the first of May. Followed them up abreast of Sandy Hook, New York, and down Long Island. After got to seining them south, used to go further south; down as far as Hatteras. Never got any (himself) mackerel as far south as Hatteras. Never got any mackerel in the Gulf Stream. Never saw any there.

Sometimes they would take the hook early; other times they would not; just as it happened. As a general thing would not get very big fishing in the spring at first. Would be in heavy bodies some years when we first met them, some years in small bodies. When first going seining south, the first mackerel were all large. After we had been a spell were all

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(?). In the early years used to get larger mackerel than we have of late years. First went south with the purse seine in (?). Not much purse seining in the spring before that. I think Dreadnaught, Capt. Henry (?)llard, was the first man (?) about 1868.

When we first see the fish in the south, in the region of Cape Henry, they are going about parallel with the coast, about north north east. When they get abreast of New York they head more to the eastward. When he sees them there they are sometimes schooling and sometimes scattered, just as it happens. When he first sees them they are poor, and full of spawn.

Does not think there

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is much difference in the size of spring school and those that come later. The size of the schools has been growing smaller of late years, very much so. The fish in the schools are mostly on the surface; previously were deeper bodies.

Has followed these spring schools as far north as Cape Breton. Followed them right along shore across Georges, and strike them on western part of Nova Scotia and Cape Sable. Sometimes would strike them down at Canso. They do not always strike on the western part of Nova Scotia and follow the coast right down, but seem to strike all on one day, as though they came right in within 24 hours. Would strike Canso as quick as they

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could strike Cape Sable. Thinks some of the schools seen south in the spring stop on the Nova Scotia shore as they go along, but thinks there is another school that comes in from off shore out of the edge of the Gulf Stream. Some that strike further to the eastward than any that go in in the spring here, that strike the Cape Shore and go into the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Would expect to strike that later body at about the same date each year. They do not vary much.

The earliest he ever caught fish south was about the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April. They were about half way from, the Breakwater to the Capes of Virginia, about lat of Chincoteague. Never got any before.

Greatest distance

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ever saw mackerel straight off the coast was about 80 miles. But sometimes they get them southeast from New York 120 to 130 miles off, but would not be over 70 or 80 miles off the Jersey coast. To the eastward of New York get them a little nearer in.

When the fish move in the fall they follow the coast about the same as they do in the spring. They take a north and south course until they get clear of the coast. See them in large bodies in the fall when they get ready to leave. Does not think they move much faster in the fall unless they are a little late or it comes on heavy weather. They travel about 12 to 15 miles in 24 hours. Has not followed them very far south in the fall, at

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Block Island 20 to 30 miles offshore from Noman's Land. Then they were winding up in the fall; that is as far south as he has been.

The fish are as fast about the middle of September as they will be that year. When they get ready to go south they lose flesh a little.

No mackerel off here now.

Has never caught mackerel in the winter. Has heard of their being taken out of other fish on Georges in midwinter; small mackerel, about 9 or 10 inches. Never taken there in great numbers; just scattering fish. Fish have been caught in the winter down around Grand Manan in some of the weirs not many years ago; cannot say what month, but after the

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vessels have knocked off. Have seen years that we thought certain bodies of fish worked up the Cape Shore and struck there, but did not know for certain.

The early run of fish are large; of late years all we get on the Cape Shore are large. Never catch any small ones. No difference in the size between fish caught here and those caught at Cape Shore. If they find a large number of small mackerel south in the spring it does not follow that they will find them small on the Cape Shore. Find them at Grand Manan, or thereabouts. Not many fish on this coast that size.

After June they find the

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best fishing from Cape Cod to Briar Island; sometimes off shore; and sometimes in shore. May come into the South Channel and play off shore 30 or 50 miles perhaps from land, and may come on the coast and go right into the bays, just as it happens. Of late years more apt to go into the rivers and bays; all along the coast of Maine from Portland to Eastport. Have known fish to go up the rivers into the "gunks" as we call it. Have caught them up the rivers, in Johns Bay, and up around Georges river. Rockland Bay, and up Penobscot and around Kennebec, up in the Machias river; Casco Bay is a great place for them. Apt to find them in shore more than offshore of

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late years, especially in the summer months. Thinks one reason why they go inshore and up the bays and rivers is to get better feed, sometimes to get away from blue fish; generally something forces them in, - scares them. The schools are affected by other fish preying upon them. Has known blue fish, bonitos or albacore to cause periods of scarcity in mackerel. Often times will drive them so that they do not know where to find them.

Find different sizes of mackerel in the same school quite often. They range all sizes; sometimes down to 8 or 9 inch mackerel up to the very biggest ones. Would not expect to find any school with the fish all the same size.

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This year the mackerel appeared to be mostly large, and have caught about the same size. Very few small ones seen this year. Saw them all along shore, especially around Barnstable Bay and Plymouth. Caught large schools. These little fish, he thinks, were born this year, for the reason that they are so tender and transparent; skin is so tender. Has occasionally found large mackerel

in schools. They generally come just before what we call the main body of fish. That would be about the 15 to 20 of May. Does not think there is much change in the size of the fish. The size varies. This year about all large ones. A few years ago, for about half a dozen years

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together, we got all small ones, but that the price of small ones was way down to nothing, and the price of large ones was very high. Could not seem to get any big mackerel for a number of years. Since that these small ones have disappeared, and what we get now are all large. As large this year as he ever saw them. Does not know whether the close season had something to do with it or not.

Could not say how early mackerel begin to spawn, but thinks along in June is about the best spawning month, but they spawn as late as July. Has seen spawn in them as late as that. Might have been mackerel that did not spawn. This was on our coast. Thinks they spawn all along the

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coast; from backside of Block Island close in shore; into shallow water. Do not know what depth, but quite shallow water. Do not think they can go down in deep water and spawn. Has not observed whether they spawn during the day or night. The first ones we get in the spring are hardly ready to spawn. If we catch them when ready to spawn it will spurt out of them. Do not find any fish that have spawned in the spring. Mackerel are not as active about the spawning time. Often times we will set a seine for these fish that are going to spawn about the 5<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> of June, and if we get around them and get our seine

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together in shape at all, they will hardly ever get away from us. Thinks they feel kind of logy and sick when it comes time for them to spawn and cannot go down in deep water. Thinks that is why they do not dive the seine. They are less ready to take the hook at that time; do not bite much. More apt to be lying on the bottom. Sometimes we will lose them. They are liable to disappear most any time. They appear to sink about the spawning season and do not show themselves for two or three weeks. Often times have a school come up on top of the water to feed. If we are there at that time can catch them quite easy. After that, the

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first thing we know they are gone and do not see them for a long time. Then the spawn is out of them and they are poor. No fat on them until the spawn is out. After that they fat up very quickly.

Does not think they are as abundant as they were 20 years ago, take them as a whole, both large and small ones. This year there has been a fair quantity of large mackerel; about all that size. No mixed schools to amount to anything this year. We consider that kind pretty shy; hardly ever get a big catch of them.

The cause of the decrease is pretty hard to tell. Seines may do part of it, and may not,

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and may be owing to nature. Spawn may not have come to maturity for some reason. The quantity of fish is not as large as it used to be in 1846. Used a great many more fresh then. About 1875, for a few years more caught than in 1846. When there is small mackerel in large quantities one year, generally look for them to come back the next year with another years' growth on them. But some years they would not seem to be the same fish; would not be as many of them, and would not seem to correspond in size. Does not always follow that a large body of small fish is followed by a large body of large fish the next year.

Is not certain whether the close season did much good or not. Does

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not think it did a great deal of harm. But does not think it protected the spawning fish much because by the first of June not a great many of them have spawned. Considers the object of the law was to protect the spawning fish; to let them get the spawn out of them before being caught. Thinks they should put it later than the first of June because many spawn after that time.

The southern voyage has not been a profitable one as a usual thing. Some vessels will do well, but on an average not a paying business, even from the earliest times. If they get a good catch, would get them all in a hump, and would make a glut on the market, so that they would not get much for the fish.

Cannot tell whether the purse seine has any effect on the

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mackerel or not. Is inclined to think it scares them rather more than the old method. The old method was an inducement for them to come on the coast; gave them something to eat. Purse seine is no inducement. Does not think it much use to legislate on it. If the fishery scares them, we have got to go out of the business of course. If it does not, they will come back on their old grounds. Would not personally advocate any regulation of the fishery at the present time. Let it regulate itself. Has not been in the Gulf this year. Was not down the Nova Scotia coast this year. Used to do a great deal of hook & line fishing in the Gulf. Does not know that it would be a very serious deprivation to stop purse seine fishing. Would make

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it pretty hard for some for a spell.

Would not be a very serious matter to mackerel fishermen to give up fishing in the North Bay with seines. Might go, possibly, and do nearly as well with the hook.

If the purse seine was given up on our coast, does not believe they could catch them as they used to before they went seining, but might bite just the same if they went the same way. The way it used to be, would sometimes fall in with a large body of fish schooling on worms; and we would heave bait into them, but they would not look at a hook the first day, but we kept at it, and they would stop schooling; then as a general thing would go to catching them. Sometimes get them as fast as we could hook them

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in. Do not know why we could not do it now. Used to be a great deal of that fishing done in the Gulf. Has not in the Gulf lately fishing; not in 4 or 5 years. Do not many go there now.

Thinks the purse seine has a tendency to break up the schools. Having seines at a body of fish sometimes breaks them up in a short time. They change their position and go out of our reach. Pretty hard to account for the small catch of mackerel on this coast during the last five years. Whether it is the seines that have caught them up; or whether the seines sheered them off in some other direction; or whether it is the lack of fish coming to maturity. It may be from natural causes, or it may be they keep out of sight caused by

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the seines scaring them.

Never followed mackerel further than Cape North. Has been in the Gulf of St. Lawrence in the spring. In the summer season has been to Anticosti. Did not go south this year, but his vessel went with another man. Caught about 200 bbls. in one trip, about the 10<sup>th</sup> of May. Probably got about 400 bbls. while south. Did the best of any vessel down there. Got 200 bbls. at one haul.

Mackerel feed upon different things, judging be what we find in them. Consider as the natural food these little bits of things, about the same as mustard seed. Will see the water sparkle with them; some red, others grey; - all colors. What we call seed. That is the natural food for mackerel. They seem

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to be contented when feeding on that, and get fat then. Find it all over the coast some years very plentiful. Some years not much of it. Sometimes see a great many mackerel and not much feed; and sometimes a large amount of feed and not many fish. Sometimes catch mackerel full of this feed, and yet do not see the feed. It may be under the surface so that we do not see it. There is a kind of food which harms the mackerel. It is what we call the cayenne. Different from the red seed. It is soft so that it will run, and is very red. When we fish that in them it will rot them very quickly. They will not keep. Seems to burn their bellies right out. It does not affect the quality of the mackerel at all. They are just as good quality, if we can take care of them in time, but they will

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spoil quickly, especially in warm weather, and if they are very fat. This “gunk” is pretty well distributed along the coast, in the summer months especially. Does not know that he ever saw any early in the spring. Find other things in the stomachs of mackerel; sometimes little fish; sometimes sea fleas. This fall in Boston Bay the surface of the water was solid with these little sand fleas, about  $\frac{3}{4}$  in long.

Caught most of my fish this year in Boston Bay, this fall. Not very good fishing on the coast in the summer; very small catch. The fish showed all summer by spells, say for 10 days or so, but this fall they schooled pretty well off Boston Bay along in October. These fish, of course must have been to the eastward during the

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summer months, probably around the coast of Maine somewheres. When they showed up this fall in Boston Bay, they were also schooling down at Monhegan and off the coast of Portland.

No particular parts of the coast that they seem to avoid. May expect to find them anywhere, wherever there is sufficient water for them to play in.

The largest number of vessels he ever saw working together was about 300; in the vicinity of Boston Bay, along about September or Oct. Has not fished off Block Island this year.

If mackerel get no better than they have been of late years, hardly think they will make a success of the steam seine boat. The vessels having the steam seine boat have

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done no better this year than other vessels. There is a saving of labor on the steam seine boats. Do not have to row any. Do not think they can purse the seine any quicker than we can. Can go around the fish quicker, however. It is much costlier, and heavy to tow, and the risk of losing the boat is greater. Cannot take it on board. The patent purser has not been used very extensively yet. Has not put it in his boat yet. Understands it works well. A thousand mesh full length seine will cost about \$1,000. General length about 200 or 225 fathoms. Will last 3 or 4 years if well taken care of. Preserve them with coal tar. Salt it when we stow it away; that is, if there is any “gury” in it. Keep them wet all the time, until winter

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when we dry them and stow them away.

The cost of the outfit for seining is much greater than for hand line.

Ship my men on shares. The cook gets extra pay. Have 16 or 17 men for two seines. Have both seines at the same time. Vessels have been carrying two seines quite a number of years, perhaps

15 yrs. Nearly all vessels carry two seines now. All use pockets for preserving the fish. Pockets cost about \$100. Dimensions of pocket about 1000 meshes deep, made of very heavy twine.

Sometimes catch other fish with the mackerel; sometimes get herring; sometimes get what we call kyacks. They are nearly like the herring; about like an alewife.

Has been much destruction

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of mackerel with the seine in past years. Have lost a good many fish in years gone by from having to heave them overboard. Were not prepared to salt them then.

Sometimes used to get menhaden with mackerel, but not many now. Hardly ever catch blue fish with mackerel. Have seen blue fish as far east as Mount Desert Rocks. Have taken shad with mackerel quite often. Sometimes they are mixed, half shad and half mackerel. Mackerel will not attack a full grown shad. Full grown shad is larger than the mackerel. Mackerel will eat the scales off the kyacks.

Get some large hauls of shad sometimes separate from

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mackerel. Sometimes it pays very well to catch them. Great place for them in the vicinity of Kennebec. Catch them along in August. They are not heading in any direction; seem to be playing around and feeding. Have no spawn in them then. They are fat at that time. Hardly ever catch them in the spring in the seines. Sometimes catch them on the Cape Shore, just a few. No spawn in them then. That is along in June and the spawn is out of them.

Never took salmon in the seines. Caught a little one once, that is all. Could not remember just where it was.

Does not know whether the shore fishermen are interfered with by the seines or not. They used to growl considerably at the seines, but not much now. The netters

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are not interfered with hardly any by the seines, for the reason that the fish they catch in their nets we cannot catch in the seines. Hardly ever get any fish from schools. Our fishing is with scattering fish. We do a good deal of our seining at nights. Did not use to fish nights. Probably 15 years ago was the first we undertook night fishing. Now whenever the water fires we are looking for fish. They are less shy at night. Can catch them very easily as a general thing. Have all kinds of methods of fishing at night. Sometimes water does not fire much and the skipper goes on the masthead. Can see them better there. Cannot do anything on moonlight nights.