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Gloucester, Mass.

Capt. Benjamin F. Payson

Nov. 16. 1893

Interviewed by William Wakeham & Hugh M. Smith.

Has had 40 years' experience as a fisherman. Has fished for mackerel the last 35 years, with the exception of 4 or 5 years in the army during the war. Captain of S. F. Macker of Gloucester.

Used to engage in the southern fishery before the close season. Has been in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Used a purse seine.

In the southern

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fishery has found the fish off the coast in the latitude of Cape Henry. The fish are then heading to the north. Find them in schools. Has followed the schools from Cape Henry to the Gulf of St. Lawrence. That is, not seeing them all the time, but following a body of mackerel.

The fish that are caught in the spring are very

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poor. No fat fish among them. Fish do not get fat until later in the season.

Has followed mackerel as far north as navigation gets in the Gulf of St. Lawrence; up as far as English Bay. One vessel went down to the north end of Anticosti and run into icebergs. Was up to the Gulf 3 years after them, but did not make much of

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a success of it.

Has followed a school of mackerel 10 or 15 miles on top of the water without losing sight of it. Have followed a body of mackerel for days sometimes, keeping with them all the time. The fish they get south are not the same fish that they get in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The fish we catch south in the spring, as

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a general rule, are the fish that stop on this shore. Sometimes they will go into the Bay, but if they do, it will be a good deal later. This body of mackerel that we find on the southern shore, if they go in the Bay, it will be late in June or the first of July. The mackerel that we catch on the Nova Scotia shore in the spring come from offshore, outside of Georges. They

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follow them from Georges Bank to the Nova Scotia shore. They strike a way off shore there. They are then heading to the north.

Have never been schools offshore any further than out of sight of land. Have seen them on Le Have Bank in the spring, on the southwest part of Western Bank. Was catching cod fish in April of this year, and they never saw the like

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of mackerel. One vessel captain was telling me they never saw the like of fish, but when they got out to them, it was all those large bill fish. Some thought they were mackerel, but they were not. Bill fish are a long, slim fish, with a long bill on them.

Mackerel strike on all parts of the Nova Scotia coast. The

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first mackerel used to strike on the Nova Scotia coast at Yarmouth, and between Yarmouth and Cape Sable. They strike about the 24th or 25th of May. Then we used to go down after them, and would go to the eastward. We thought they would strike up that way, and since then we have found out that there is a day's difference between

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that and when they strike Scatteri.

The mackerel here come in from off shore. Get them at the Magdalen Islands pretty near the end of May. There is very little difference between the Magdalens and Scatteri. The heft of the spring run come and go around North Cape. The fish are going down as a general thing when they go through Canso. I think

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they make a mistake. I think they intend to go around North Cape; but fish going down the Nova Scotia coast go up into the bays when they go back in the fall. Have seen mackerel go up to Plymouth; and then turn and go down around Provincetown, and then start and go back up into that bay, but they did not calculate to go there; and that is the way at Canso.

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They make a mistake.

The fish we get off here are supposed to be a better mackerel, because they are a later mackerel. They are the rear schools, and are fatter than the head schools. Have seen about the same size mackerel in the Bay as I have off here.

Mackerel generally leave this coast about the first of Nov. Does not know where they go. Have

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never followed them in the fall any farther south than Cape Cod. Then they were heading to the south and going quite fast. In the fall they are generally in schools; at least then the weather is fine. They follow the Cape Shore as far as Cape Sable, and then they go to the southward. Have been seen on the north edge of Georges going to

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the south late in the fall. It was reported that mackerel are on Georges in the winter some years. They leave the coast by degrees in the fall.

Does not think mackerel swim over 4 or 5 miles an hour. They generally go when schooling about 3 to 5 miles an hour.

Find the best fishing grounds different years in different places. All the

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way from Mount Desert is the general schooling ground. Most of the fish that have been caught by the Gloucester seining fleet have been caught between Cape Cod and Grand Manan.

Have seen mackerel as far off shore as 40 or 50 miles. About 10 years ago we fished on Cashe Ledge.

The movements of the mackerel are influenced

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quite largely by other fish preying upon them. Whales and porpoises drive mackerel. Dog fish prey on them all the time but do not drive them. They go right around with them. Porpoises are the worst fish; also blue fish, bonitoes and albacores. Have known mackerel to be driven off shore by these fish, last year; and the last two years before this the

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bonitoes and blue fish drove them off shore; so far that they did not see any for the last month they went fishing.

Find different sizes of mackerel in the same schools. Sometimes find very large and very small fish in the same schools, but as a general thing about the same size.

Does not think there is any change in the

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relative size of mackerel as compared with 20 years ago. Have to have tinkers before we get mackerel. They grow up in about three years and get to be pretty good mackerel. Have not had big tinkers here for a good many years.

Mackerel spawn from the Capes of Delaware to the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The spawning season

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on different parts of the coast is from the middle of May to the first of August. The farther you go, the later they spawn as a general thing. Sometimes catch mackerel the last of May that have all spawned, and then have caught them the last of June. But think the heft of the mackerel from the 1st to the 15th of June.

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The fish we take in the southern spring fishery have plenty of spawn in them. Some of them have spawned in the last part of the fishing, late in May, but a very small proportion have spawned by that time.

The fish generally go down about the time they are ready to spawn and stay down. The spawning process generally lasts two or three weeks.

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This dull spell occurs on our coast in June, but sometimes get very good fishing then. Appear to lose the fish at that time. They sink along all parts of the coast, no matter where they are, and when they raise, they raise all at once. When they first come up they are poor. They grow fat gradually until the last of August. Do not

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get any fatter after that.

Very seldom see sickly or logy mackerel, without they get hurt. Never found dead mackerel at sea. They sink if they die.

Those Cape Shore mackerel are easier to catch just before they spawn. After they spawn they are shy and hard to catch.

Thinks mackerel have decreased within the past

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20 years, although we always had good years and hard years fishing. In 1851 had the biggest catch that we ever had, and had not the facilities to catch them that we have now, although there were more vessels out then than now.

Would attribute most of the decrease to other fish preying upon them. Does not

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think what the fishermen catch decreases them very much, but of course it does some, but nothing compared to the fish that prey upon them. The reason of the scarcity of mackerel is that the young have not come to maturity. It is due to natural causes.

Caught but very few in the old days before the spawning

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season. We never went mackerel fishing in the early years until the spawning season came in. Perhaps a dozen vessels would go out as far as New York, and they would not go until the first of May. The regular hook and line fishing began on the coast after the 4th of July. Very little was done before that. Most of our fleet here used to go to

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Georges.

Used to go south in the days of hook and line fishing. We used to get full fares sometimes. They were salted then. The best fishing grounds in those days was North Bay (Gulf of St. Lawrence); and some years on the Shore, but the Bay used to be the best place. Have known years when there was a very large body of small mackerel on

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the coast, and that body of fish was followed the next year by a large body of larger mackerel. Have seen years when we had those big schools of tinkers; only worth \$4.00 a barrel; could catch abundance of them the whole season; and the next season those small fish come back a size larger, and the next year a size larger still,

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when they would be getting quite big.

Thinks the purse seine helps to decrease the mackerel, in a small way. Does not think it is unnecessarily destructive in any way. Would not put any restrictions on the purse seine fishing. That time is passed. If they had put it on when they commenced it would have been all right, but

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it is too late now to put any restrictions on it.

Had no objections to the close time law; thought it was a good thing. Vessels never made a success going south. If they got plenty of fish, had to give them away almost. But did not like the close season the way they got it up. It did not satisfy us nor anybody else. They

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said we should not catch the fish until the 2nd of June. Those fish would strike in May on the Nova Scotia coast, and there traps would be all set from Elizabeth to Yarmouth; and they would send them to Boston market; and the Nova Scotia boats would go down there and fish and send them into our markets. We would go down there

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the last week in May, the fish would be schooling, and their vessels catching all the way from 125 to 150 barrels apiece – they catching the fish and we looking at them. If they would put that law so we could compete with Nova Scotia it would be all right for us, but then they put it a week too late it does not benefit us.

The object

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of the law was to increase the mackerel that is by not catching them until they had spawned, but the bulk of the mackerel never spawn until after the close season is over. If no one could catch mackerel until after the 4th of July you would increase them.

Would not be any use in legislation at all. If they have any legislation, make it

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universal, and make the time later than it is now.

Thinks the purse seine, to say the least, does not do the mackerel any good; it tends to drive them away. A body of mackerel might be started from one place to another, but hardly think it would drive them off the coast. Never knew of such an instance. Have seen perhaps 30 or 40 seines working

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at one time. Have seen over a 100 vessels laying under their main sails with the pockets alongside dressing out of them, in a small space. The fishermen have different opinions as to the benefit of the close time on the mackerel; some think it is a good thing, and others think not. Thinks there would be strong objections to a renewal of the close

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time.

Could not catch as many with hook and line if the purse seine was given up. Thinks that day is over. It would take longer than I'll live to get it back again. Think mackerel have changed. There are so many fish after them and so much feed in the water. More feed in the water than there used to be. The water this year appeared to be

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full of feed everywhere we went, and they will not bite a hook when that is around.

Very few vessels go into the North Bay now from this coast. Last year 4 or 5 hookers down there, and year before last 3 seiners. I was one of them. This year have been a good many seiners down there. Probably 75 vessels would go from this port and

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down east for the spring fishery. Most of them from here.

He went south this year. Did not catch any fish. Saw some fish, but they were wild. Only 2 or 3 vessels got any, and they got only a few.

Thinks it would be a hardship if fishermen were prevented from fishing with seines in the North Bay. Vessels with hook

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and line have not done as well as seiners this year. One vessel, the Norembega, is bound home with 450 barrels, taken with the purse seine in the North Bay. We have no privileges there now. Cannot buy anything there in the shape of provisions, etc. Would not buy the license to go into the North Bay. Would steal first.

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They used to allow us to fish in the Magdalen's, but now they do not. Their vessels will hook in shore just as they please, but we cannot do so. Would not get any privileges there even if they duty was taken off by the United States.

There has been a large body of mackerel in the Bay this summer, but we could

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not catch them they were so wild. They were out on Bradley, and all up and down the Island, Cape George, and Margarie. Very few mackerel go through the Gut of Canso; most of them go the other way. Those that do go through I think go by mistake. Has known fish to go through there, the last of May.