

Fishtales
Saturday, September 29, 2012
Working Waterfront Festival

Interviewer – Markham Starr
Interviewee – Ellen Shomer

MS Inaudible

ES Ellen Schomer

MS And where are you from?

ES Matunuck, Rhode Island right now.

MS And was your family in the fishing industry?

ES No, but my ancestors in Sweden were.

MS Do you know much about them?

ES Nothin' [laughs]

MS How did you get in the fishing industry?

ES My brother's ex-wife got involved with the fishermen during the scallop boom on the Cape in the 70s in Provincetown when I went up to visit her was when I first went on a fishing boat was his boat for the Blessing of the Fleet. His boat, the P'Town Queen probably the most disreputable boat in the fleet.

MS And then, but you got into commercial fishing yourself?

ES After that, I got to work on that disreputable boat, the following week [laughs]. But pretty soon I could see that, even though I could barely lift a milk crate full of scallops and thought that feeding the seagulls with the scallop rinds was part of my job, I could see that I wasn't makin' enough money on this boat and needed an upgrade. So that started the search for work that was quite a bit harder. And over the winter, the boats would come in with deckloads of scallops and holds full of scallops and we would all congregate at the end of the pier in the dark, in the freezing cold and try and choose which boat we wanted to go on to shuck. But of course the boats that had the best scallops you would have to fight your way to get on that boat. Then we'd go on the other side of the break wall and shuck for about 18 hours and have our moment down in the galley of being served hot food and just bein' together and goin' back out into the cold. Now experienced shuckers would help the newbies by givin' them a few handfuls in the bucket that just never seemed to fill. And we got \$10 dollars a bucket for, a horse bucket

sized bucket, full of scallops. So some people were really good and real legends and made a lot of money. But this one boat, the LITTLE INFANT that old crew member Peter Cook just made a movie about that might be somewhere here at this festival called *Dad I Wanna Go Fishing*. That was this huge eastern rig. It was beautiful to my eyes back then. And I wanted to go as a crew member and he would always tease me, the captain, but he wouldn't take me. He'd get my hopes up and then let me down. So I made a plan to stow away in the dory on the roof. So it was a blizzard night down at the end of the Provincetown wharf and I had on some weird super warm military surplus garment and snuggled up into the dory and after kind of taking a cursory tour of the boat, what areas I could get at determined that one thing was probably not a safe place turned out was where the quadrant was for the steering. So that probably, somethin' told me that might not be my best bet. But I was up in the dory and I figured I'll come down in my oilers, I'll just start shucking next to somebody. Back then it was like 10, 15 people on the boat. They probably wouldn't even notice that I wasn't one of them for a while and then we'd all live happily ever after. But what happened was, I heard the engineer come down and start the engines to warm her up for the trip. Heard different crew members come down. Heard the weather radio. Heard a lot of doors opening and closing. Lights coming on and off. Then the engines got shut and everybody left [laughs]. I realized they weren't gonna go. It was called off for bad weather that probably would have catapulted me out of that dory into the ocean anyway. And I walked down the dock in the snowstorm dragging my seabag full of stuff and ran into some other fisherman like 2 or 3 in the morning. He's like "What are you doin'?" I said, "Oh I'm just doin' my laundry." [laughs] So that was that. But eventually I got on plenty of scallopers and thirty years later graduated the class! [laughs]

MS So you fished 30 years?

ES On and off, yeah.

MS Sounds like it was pretty tough. So you were on [inaudible]

ES Yup, ten day trips, 12 men in crew. When you were the cook you had to work 16 hours straight usually and to cook their breakfast and their lunch and their dinner. You had one hour for each meal including cleaning up. So it was a lot of headaches and endurance and rushing around. It was no gift to be the cook. Since then I've been on boats where I wasn't the cook.

MS And you got into dragging?

ES Dragging, lobstering. I like, I don't like lobstering so much. It's kind of monotonous. I like the dragging and the scalloping. As you can see. I like the shells [laughs]. But I wouldn't deny anybody that love affair with fishing. No matter where, what bad road it leads them down. If you get into it because it catches your heart, then you're a lucky person.

MS And how was it, I mean, were there any other women fishing at that time out there?

ES Hardly ever, yeah. We had, well there were women, but I didn't get to fish with them. They might have been on other boats or this woman Benji in Provincetown had her own sea clam boat. And little tiny boat. But it had been nice the few times I got to fish with other women. You know. 'Cause there's not a lot of benefit to being a pioneer or glory. There's a lot more grief to it. I'm really happy to see today that people barely bat an eye over seeing women do all kinds of things.

MS It must have been pretty tough though on a crew

ES Yeah, and I don't, now that I think about it, I wasn't trying to prove anything. I just wanted to do it. But I can see how uncomfortable it made them. Like just, we're all living in one room together back in the day too. So we had these curtains over our bunks. If it had just been guys, they would have changed clothes like outside of their bunks so everybody's kind of struggling for a little bit of decorum and I'm pretty well resented. You know. But you know, it's the price of admission.

MS That's great

ES Alright

MS Well thanks.

ES Thank you!