



NEWPORT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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ELLEN KAPLAN

THE FISHING INDUSTRY IN NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND, 1930-1987

INTRODUCTION

The Fishing Industry in Newport, Rhode Island, 1930-1987, an oral history project, was implemented under the auspices of the Newport Historical Society and the University of Rhode Island Sea Grant Program.

Through question and answer format, the tape-recorded transcribed interviews document the fishing industry from the point of view of its complex traditions and changes. They provide a body of unedited primary source material focusing on priority issues of local concern and those beyond the geographic area under study.

Interviews were conducted by Jennifer Murray of the Newport Historical Society and were transcribed at the Center for Oral History, University of Connecticut. Narrators include representatives of the floating fish trap industry, the inshore and offshore lobster industries, the inshore and offshore dragger industries, the swordfish industry, the wholesale and marketing sector, and fisheries conservation and management.

Oral history enables us to learn about our heritage from those who usually don't write about it. It supplies what's often only hinted at in written historical documents. Readers and researchers using these oral history memoirs should bear in mind that they are transcripts of the spoken word and that the narrator, interviewer, and transcriber sought to preserve the spontaneity and informality inherent in such historical sources. The Newport Historical Society and the University of Rhode Island are not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoirs nor for the views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

Copies of tapes and transcripts are available for research at the Newport Historical Society. Copies of transcripts are also accessible at the library of the University of Rhode Island, Narragansett Bay. As stated in the release form which accompanies each transcript, the memoirs are to be used for scholarly and educational purposes only.

ELLEN KAPLAN

While she was in her early twenties, Ellen Kaplan worked in the fishing industry for approximately two years. This included work on offshore lobster boats, an offshore scallop boat, and an offshore dragger. Her manuscript contains valuable information about life and work at sea, the lifestyle of working in the fishing industry, changes in the offshore lobster industry, attitudes toward women in the fishing industry, and conflict between tourism, development and the fishing industry in Newport, Rhode Island.

Tape I Side I

Biographical interview

Experience working on the water

Work on various yachts. Acted as cook, navigator, stood watch

Perceptions of working on yachts

Interest in the fishing industry-- how Kaplan realized she wanted to become part of it

Work in the fishing industry

First job on a lobster boat

Length of trip

Banding lobsters

Cooking for the crew

Crew share

Two years working on offshore lobster boat, Iron Mistress

Comforts and conveniences

Pride in taking care of the boat

Accommodations on lobster boats

Trip on an offshore scallop boat

Lowlife crew-- criminals, drug addicts, illiterates

Unsafe boat

Perceptions of working on an offshore scallop boat

Grounds-- Georges Bank and beyond

Work on North Riding, a dragger out of Fairhaven, Ma.

No toilet, shower, hot water

Caught in a violent storm 100 miles offshore on Iron Mistress

Horrible seasickness, radio contact with boats in danger

Lack of fear at sea

Kaplan's naivete and spirit of adventure

Work on the Iron Mistress

Steaming to the grounds

Work at sea-- tending the lobster trawls at various locations

Twenty-four hour a day work schedule

Sleep patterns

Standing watch

Work conditions

Work as a cook on an offshore lobster boat

Work on deck

Gender limitations concerning ability to work on deck

What Kaplan liked about standing watch

Swordfishing

Sharks caught on swordfish longline

Disgusting things crewmen would sometimes do to sharks

Deterioration in calibre of crews while Kaplan was

involved in the offshore lobster industry

Attitudes toward women working in the fishing industry

Ill treatment and emotional cruelty by male crewperson

TAPE I SIDE II

Male crewmember, contd.
Work as a woman in a predominantly male occupation--
mostly a positive experience.
Perceptions of work as a female crewperson
Brutal living conditions on some fishing boats
Spare time at sea
Hardest part about offshore trips
Best part of offshore trips
Men Kaplan worked with-- most were single
Women's feelings about their husbands or boyfriends
going to sea with a woman on the crew
Conveniences on the Iron Mistress
Positive aspects of work on an offshore lobster boat
Change in kind of people attracted to the offshore
lobster industry
Fishing as a dangerous occupation
Grappling for lost lobster trawls
Decrease in size of lobster catch
Family's reaction to Kaplan's work in the lobster industry
Women in the fishing industry
Attitudes of New England fishermen toward women in the industry.
Unloading lobster catch in Newport
Newport fish and lobster dealers
Environment
Fishing boat garbage thrown overboard offshore
Conflict between tourism and development in Newport, R.I.
Docking in Newport harbor
Continental Shelf Company

TAPE II SIDE I

Future of the fishing industry
Damage Deco scallop boats did Continental Shelf fishing grounds
Comparison of the fishing industry now with ten years ago
Need for legislation and restraints in the fishing industry
Kaplan's decision to become involved in the tourist business
Perceptions of work in the fishing industry
Physical hardships

Interview with Ellen Leys Kaplan for the Newport Historical Society's Oral History of the Fishing Industry in Newport, Rhode Island, conducted by Jennifer Murray on July 7, 1987.

MURRAY: Is it all right with you if I tape this interview?

KAPLAN: Yes.

JM: Where were you born?

EK: In Newport at Newport Hospital.

JM: How about your parents? They're Newporters, aren't they?

EK: Yes, I think they were both born in Newport.

JM: Your father's name?

EK: David Leys.

JM: Your mother?

EK: Judith Cowey Leys.

JM: Tell me a little bit about your family, and how they came to Newport?

EK: My father's grandfather came from Edinburgh, Scotland. He was a merchant. They started the Sherman Leys Dry Goods which became the Leys Century Store, as it is known now. My grandfather (my father's father) grew up here, and my grandmother (his wife) was the daughter of an Army guy. She had an interesting history. You should interview her, she's 95 . . .

JM: I think she has been. That isn't Aline Leys, is it?

EK: Aline Leys, yes. She's 95 now. She's in the hospital, too. She's pretty good. She still drives (laughs).

JM: Which one was your grandfather?

EK: Her husband's name was William [Leys]. He died twenty years ago. He had the store as well. My father has it now. My brother is a manager there, general manager of the men's department. My mother's mother grew up in Jamestown [Rhode Island]. Her maiden name was Hoyle. Her mother was Irish. She had a huge family. They lived in Jamestown. I think there were seven girls and two boys. She married a man from Ohio. His name was Cowey. My parents both grew up in Newport. They went to Rogers High School. They were high school sweethearts. They went to college, but they got back together again after that. Then my father took over the store with his cousin Donald. We all were born and grew up here in Newport. They live in Middletown now. They live in the house that my mother grew up in on Tuckerman Avenue. My grandmother (her mother) lives next door. They have some property there. My mother takes care of my grandmother.

JM: It must be nice having all of your family around.

EK: It is. I really realized it until I had a baby, because I've got five brothers and one sister, and they're all so interested in him. He's the first grandchild. He's the first nephew. They all come over, and they babysit for him. They take a huge load off of me. It's nice to have that support. I

feel sorry for Navy wives and for people who live in places where they haven't been before. I've always thought I'd like to move away, but just for those sort of reasons, I end up staying here. When I got married, my husband wanted to live in Ft. Lauderdale, and I didn't. I didn't like Ft. Lauderdale. I couldn't adjust.

JM: Is that where he's from?

EK: He was born in Brooklyn, New York. He grew up in New York and different places around New York. As an adult, he lived in Florida for about ten years. He was a yacht captain. I didn't want him to be a boat captain anymore. We were getting married and I wanted to live in a house. We did work on the boat together -- we worked on yachts together. So we moved here, and he started a business here -- a marine service business. He's built a tour boat, and he started a water taxi business. He's doing really well. We're just working really hard to get this (going). The tour boat was just finished last week. I feel like I've just maintained a relationship with working on the water or having to do with it, which has really made me happy. When I got out of college, I worked on yachts for a few years, then I worked in the fishing industry for at least two years. Then I went back to working on the yacht again.

JM: What did you do on the yacht?

EK: I was mainly a cook, but I was usually the mate as well. There was a captain and a mate. They did all the cooking and cleaning and all the other stuff. I would stand watch and navigate. It was just like a team working together. We would take charter guests out and entertain them. Sometimes I worked on a boat where it was owned by a private family, and only they used it with their own guests. Another time I worked for a man who owned a chain of restaurants, and he would send all his restaurant managers to come for weekends. We would make gourmet meals for them and take them around wherever we happened to be, whether it was in Maine or Maryland or Florida or the Caribbean.

JM: It must have been beautiful.

EK: It was nice. I liked it a lot. I got sick of it. I got sick of entertaining people that I didn't care about. That was one reason I really wanted to go fishing. When I was on the yacht, I said I was tired of cleaning out people's ashtrays and being nice to people I didn't like. I decided I thought I'd like to be on a work boat where you just work with the same crew, you cook for the same people all the time, and there's no frivolous things on top. You're doing your work, and it's the same thing over and over again.

JM: Where did you go to school?

EK: The University of Rhode Island.

JM: You have a degree in. . .?

EK: Home Economics.

JM: How did you get interested, other than what you just described, in working in the fishing industry?

EK: I don't think I was really aware of it even when I got out of college. I started working on a yacht, and we traveled around a lot. Somehow, wherever we would go, there would be fishing communities, and I would see fishermen. I became really intrigued by the fishermen. I would see families out fishing, and I thought, "I want to do that." It was totally a romantic thing. I was, "I'm on this boat now. I can live on a boat, I can navigate, I can exist on a boat." I didn't know I could do that before, so now I wanted to try something new. I was a waitress in the Marina Pub at Goat Island, and I got to know a group of fishermen that came in there. In the winter, they kept their boat down there. One day one of them said, "Hey, you want to go out fishing with us?" (Just as a guest.) I said, "Yes, yes yes." I got all ready, and as it turned out his bander/cook wasn't showing up. He says, "You can work." I said [to myself], "Oh, no!"

JM: This was a lobster boat?

EK: It was a lobster boat. It was the MikenTod. It belonged to Ted Schiller. He might have even sold it

by now. I don't think he's even in the business anymore. So I went out on this short trip. I seem to remember it was something like nineteen hours. As it was, he decided to go out to wherever we were going. It must have been eight hours out to where we went. Maybe it was eight hours to where we went, and we worked for nineteen hours. I just remember I was putting the bands on the lobster claws. I'd never done this before. You have a tool that you put them on with. I was going to cook the meals. I was excited about cooking because I really knew how to do that. All we did was work. We caught four thousand pounds of lobsters which you would never do in that amount of time now. My hands were bloody. I could barely squeeze the banding tool. I was pushing it against my body to open it up. I was determined that I was going to do this. Finally, I got to go in and cook some steak and potatoes [laughs]. We went back in, and I made -- the bander made -- something like five percent, and the crew probably made seven or eight percent. I got this big check. I was so excited. I was just hot to trot. I don't think I went fishing again for a while. I think I went off on a sailboat in between that time. It's all such a haze to me the progression of exactly what happened. Maybe a year had gone by or so, and he had built a new boat called the "Iron Mistress" which is now the

"Nathaniel Lee." I happened to run into Ted. The boat was brand new. They had just brought it up from Alabama. He asked me if I wanted to go fishing with them. I said, "Yes." I got on the boat, and I stayed with it for the next two years. In fact, I stayed on it and all the other people were on and off. I was with the boat for the whole first two years. I was so proud at that point that I didn't want to leave. The boat was new so I kept it really clean. It was spotless. I wouldn't let the guys come in with their oilskins on. I was like their mother hen. I took this role that this is a nice boat, and it's going to be comfortable to work on, and they're going to have good food. It was air conditioned; there was a shower. It was heavenly.

JM: There was no shower on the Mike and Todd?

EK: No, I don't think so.

JM: Where did you stay on that first boat?

EK: We didn't sleep [chuckles] on the MikenTod. I don't remember. I think there were bunks all together in the foc'sle. Maybe we slept on the way out or on the way in. I know, on the Iron Mistress, there were two staterooms. I shared a stateroom with the captain. That was very comfortable. I worked on a couple of other boats. Now I'm trying to remember. . . Maybe that was just before I worked on the Iron Mistress. I worked on a scallop boat. We went out for a week.

JM: Was that out of Newport?

EK: That was one of those Deco Boats. You probably heard terrible things about them. That was really interesting. I didn't have a bad experience. A lot of people did. I made one trip, and we went out for at least a week. There was a crew of something like ten guys. Two of them were from Texas. They were the most lowlife creatures I had ever met in my life. They were really homely and really rough. Apparently they were drug users. Heroin or something. I was very naive. I didn't know about this until later. I found out they were supposedly members of some kind of gang in Texas that went around robbing gas stations. They might have committed murder, I don't know. Then there was a guy from West Virginia who was illiterate. He was the skipper of the boat. It was a motley crew. There were two young guys from Maine who were like myself. They were college students, and they were clean cut. It was really funny. We went out. We caught a lot of scallops. We came in and I got paid, and they were all very civil to me and very nice. I don't think the boat was very safe. It was really loud. My ears were ringing for a week afterwards. I was always looking for adventure, and I think that was [it] [chuckles].

JM: Where did you go on that boat?

EK: It left from the Aquidneck Lobster Company.

JM: Out to Georges Bank?

EK: Yes. On that boat we went farther, I think. I remember him at one point saying we were very close to Nova Scotia. We were way out. We were two hundred miles out, I think. Maybe where we weren't supposed to be. Then I did a short stint on a boat called "North Riding" out of Fairhaven.

JM: Is that a dragger?

EK: Yes, it was a dragger. It was owned by an English guy. I went with him and a friend of mine named Taffy Roberts. There was a Portugese guy on the boat, too. That was a very primitive boat. I worked on that for two months. There was no toilet, no shower. We had cold water that you could pump which we would run out of occasionally. So I had to wash and cook with salt water. While I was on it, I was really superstitious that maybe I was a Jonah or something because we never made any money. I got really disappointed and quit after two months. I got terribly seasick on the boat [laughs].

JM: You didn't on the others?

EK: I did. I got seasick, but not as violently. The only time I remember being really violently ill on the Iron Mistress [was when] we were in that storm. It was during November, 1980 something. It was when the Fair Wind went down. A few people died in that storm. It was one that came up suddenly, and we were

in it.

JM: Where were you? Do you remember?

EK: About a hundred miles offshore.

JM: Continental Shelf?

EK: Yes, that's where we were. We lost some windows. A wave . . . For a while, we were going with the wind. I guess we were going towards Bermuda. It took us a while to get the windows covered up with boards before we could turn around and come home. It took us thirty-six hours to come home. I just remember being curled up in a fetal position and feeling so terrible. Some of the guys were coming in and cooking up Chourico for themselves, and I was just feeling worse and worse [chuckles]. It was awful because we still had radio contact. We were talking to the other boats and hearing about boats that were in trouble. I don't know how many people did end up dying in that storm, but we survived it and came in.

JM: Do you think that the fear makes you get sicker?

EK: I wasn't scared. That's another part of my naivete, I think. I always felt totally safe on that boat. It was an 85 foot steel boat. I always felt good in a steel boat. I never felt scared in that boat. Maybe [in] a smaller boat I would have. It was just purely seasickness. I wanted to get up and do things, but I just couldn't. I don't ever remember feeling scared. Nowadays I might be, now that I'm

older, I'm more cautious about things. At that time in my life, I wasn't scared of anything. I would go anywhere, do anything.

JM: What kind of hours did you work on the boat the Iron Mistress?

EK: It was off and on. First of all, we would steam out to where we were going. It might take twelve hours, so we would take turns taking watch and sleeping. Then when we got there, maybe we would have a section of trawls in one place. We might have five in a row. We would work pretty steadily. It would depend . . . Maybe everything would go smoothly. We would be done in five hours in that area. Maybe the trawls would be all tangled up, and we would be working ten hours untangling them, repairing them, getting them back in the water. So that would be longer. Then we might steam to another area which might take us four or five hours, but then we'd be back to work again. So we would just keep going, and it wouldn't matter whether it was day or night. We'd often be up in the middle of the night working for as long as it took in that area. Then we'd go to sleep. Sometimes when things were going really well, we'd work all day -- maybe we'd work ten hours -- and then we would just shut the boat off and just sit and drift and go to sleep for the night. There would always be a person on watch just to make sure that nobody was going to

run into us. We were out in the middle of nowhere usually, and we weren't in a channel or anything. Hopefully, that person on watch would stay awake. We had a stereo system, and sometimes we could talk on radio to someone nearby. I liked that. It was nice when you had working conditions like that.

JM: What's it like cooking when it's really rough?

EK: [Laughs] A nightmare. On the days it was really rough, I would always get out one pot. I would secure it to the top of the stove. I would always start out making spaghetti sauce for spaghetti. Then, if it got really rough, I would forget the spaghetti sauce, I'd throw in a can of beans and chili powder and make it into chili so it would be a totally one-pot meal. If it wasn't too rough, I could get the two pans on and do the spaghetti and the spaghetti sauce. Most of the time, you were always going to be rolling or moving around, so I had these bricks I put in the oven. I used to like to cook roasts and turkeys and things, which is kind of treacherous, because there's always the grease sloshing around. I put bricks in the oven, and I would position the roast pan in between them, and that worked pretty well. I also had restaurant netting (rubber netting), and we put it all over the kitchen galley counters. It was just like a regular kitchen. It was really nice on the Iron Mistress.

It would keep things from rolling around. You always had to keep everything secured at all times because you never know. It might be a calm day. Even if you turned the boat around, and you went into your own wake, it would roll because you're turning around to go get this other trawl. You could never be guaranteed total stillness. I was used to that from yachts. Working on a sailboat or on a power boat, you always have to have everything secured. I was pretty used to bracing myself and thinking, "I can't leave this tub of flour out. I'll stick it in the sink right now." I really enjoyed cooking. I would go out of my way to make good meals.

JM: What were the meals?

EK: For the guys, it was definitely meat and potatoes. Roast turkey with stuffing and mashed potatoes and gravy and vegetables. I was always sure to give them balanced meals. I was a Home Ec major. [I] had to do that. Spaghetti, chili, lasagne, pot roasts. We'd often eat lobster. I used to make lobster and potato salad -- a big thing of that. They would make sandwiches out of lobster and potato salad. Pure lobster salad was so rich so I would even it out with the potatoes. Or I'd make lobster spaghetti sauce. When I worked on the North Riding, we didn't even buy meat. We would eat what we caught. Of course, we didn't catch much [laughs]. They would try

everything. I remember we were fishing for squid so I made squid spaghetti. I had never had squid before. It was delicious.

JM: I bet it was. So fresh like that.

EK: Right. Then we would always catch something in the nets -- flounder or cod. We'd just fillet it and broil it. I liked eating the fish. On the Mistress a lot of times, some of the guys didn't like fish. They were big meat eaters. I always had a steak meal. Every trip I would always buy the same steaks and cook them, and we'd always have turkey or chicken. I'd go out shopping, and I'd think of each meal as some sort of meat, and I'd buy the roast or cut up chicken or whatever. I would usually fill up two shopping carts, and I'd put it all in my Volkswagon. I had a Volkswagon in those years. I would load up that Volkswagon; the front seat and the back seat and drive it down the dock and unload it so many times. Eventually, our fresh water tank rusted. It was a steel boat with a steel . . . they didn't line it with fiberglass or anything. Eventually, if you tried to take a shower, it looked like a murder had been committed in the shower stall. You couldn't even use it for cooking, it was so rusty. I had to buy a case of bottled water every time. I was always lugging that kind of stuff around.

JM: They had three big meals a day?

EK: Yes. I remember getting up for breakfast was the hardest. It was so painful.

JM: What time did you get up?

EK: It seemed like I was always getting up at maybe four or five. It varied. If we were coming up to getting close to a trawl, someone would wake me up so I would have time to give them breakfast. It was always bacon, sausage, scrapple . . . and eggs and home fries. Always. I would never eat anything like that now. I lived on that, and that's what they ate.

JM: How did you cook that if it was rough?

EK: That's a good question. I remember I had an electric skillet. The kind you plug in. I braced it somehow on the counter. If I needed to, I'd put everything in there at once. It had a cover on it. I had little pieces of line around the galley, and I would just tie everything up, tie the top on. If it was a rough day, I would just make scrambled eggs and throw some meat and cheese in it, and they could dish that out for themselves. That way they would still get a balanced breakfast with a lot of protein in it. It would keep them for a long time. At lunchtime, I used to make sandwiches. I think I would always keep something on the stove. I would keep a stew on the stove or something that they could come in and dish out for themselves. I used to buy some junk food like potato chips and cakes and things. I do

remember, I used to make cookies and brownies and things because in the summertime we always had to buy bait to fill the lobster traps up with. It was frozen when we bought it. Sometimes we wouldn't go out for a few days, and it would melt and it would rot in the sun. I used to get sick to my stomach being around it, so my excuse to get away from it was always, "I'm going to go make some cookies" [chuckles]. I always had to make them something good [chuckles]. So I'd go inside in the air-conditioned galley [laughs], and do something like that because I couldn't stomach it.

JM: That's a hard smell to take.

EK: I never saw maggots in my life until there were maggots in them. I've never been exposed to that before. [Laughs] When I first got on the boat, in fact, I picked up that rubber netting and there were all these little white worms on the counter. I said, "What are these?" One of the guys would say, "You don't know what those are? They're maggots." I was aghast. I said, "Well, who's been taking care of this galley? Don't they clean up after themselves?" After that, I always rolled everything up and bleached it and cleaned it. I was appalled. That's how a lot of boats are. They have a guy who's a cook, and he's also a deck hand.

JM: Did you have to work on deck, too, on that boat?

EK: I never threw pots around or anything like that. I wasn't strong enough. I did do the banding. That was a job on deck. You get the lobsters, band them, and throw them in the hold.

JM: Did you do the banding on that boat?

EK: Yes. You'd start out as a cook and a bander, then you'd work your way to the deck. I was never going to do that because I couldn't pick up the pots. They're really big, heavy things. They would stack them four or five high. I did repairing on the pots. I was very good with a hammer, and I also could splice. They always needed a lot of splicing done. I could do that. When it was really cold in the winter, my hands . . . I was too dainty to do it. I don't know how the guys did it because you couldn't wear gloves. The wind would be blowing and your hands would be wet. If it was nice weather, I could splice really well. I could teach someone how to do it. If there was a new guy on board, I could teach him how to do it. In fact, I still do a lot of splicing for my husband now. He needs it, so that came in handy. I also always stood watch. I knew how to navigate from before.

JM: From the other boats?

EK: Yes, a lot of times cooks wouldn't stand watch, but I always did. I enjoyed that.

JM: What did you like about that?

EK: I liked sitting up in the wheel house. It's just watching where you're going. We would plot the course. We were always going to the same place, but I thought it was important to plot where you were in case you lost your electronics, which happened to us twice. I don't know what it was. I just liked it, especially if it was early morning when the sun was coming up. That was one thing I was saying to Marilyn the other night that I really miss. When I was fishing, was the only time I got to see sunrises because now I would never get up that early. Maybe to feed the baby, but you're not outside on a boat where you are really in it. You'd see things that you might not ordinarily ever see. The fog banks rolling back and forth. Or you might see porpoises or whales. Ted Schiller, particularly, was really interested in harpooning swordfish. He wanted to get a swordfish, and we did get a couple. He harpooned one once. We spent a lot of hours when it was nice in the summer looking for swordfish. He was just so hot, he would forget about the lobstering. We'd go out, and we'd all be looking and looking, and looking, and we'd have our harpoons -- this primitive thing. That was nice. It got kind of boring after a while, but one time we even hired a plane to help us spot swordfish. That didn't work that day. Another time we put together a longline just for a side

thing. I didn't like that too much because we would often catch sharks. They were blue sharks. They were no good. They would be dead, and we couldn't use them for anything. Ever since that movie "Jaws" people get really weird about sharks. It was really disgusting. Some of the guys would take the shark, even if it was half alive, and they would cut him up and do all these disgusting things. [It was] something that men do sometimes. That was gross. The original crew we were with, they were all very nice guys. That lasted about a year. We worked together really well. I think it was after Ted left the boat, we started getting a couple of different captains, and [we] started going through different people. Sometimes we'd get a crew member that didn't like having me on board or something like that. That only happened -- severely -- once. The guy was a good friend of mine, but he didn't like the idea of a woman on the boat. He just tortured me. That had never happened to me before on any other boat.

JM: What did he do?

EK: I was thinking about that the other night. One thing that really stood out in my mind, I remember him taking dead things, like a dead bird, and hanging it over my banding station. I even remember bursting out into tears once. I can't remember exactly what it was that he did to me, but it was an emotional

cruelty kind of thing. I remember I slapped him across the face once. He got a big kick out of that. I had been good friends with him up until that time. I never realized he had such a hang-up about a woman. Marilyn had the same problem with him. She worked with him too.

JM: Was he your age?

EK: Yes, maybe a year or two younger.

[End of side one, tape one.]

EK: He was an extremely macho guy. One of the most macho around. You'd think a guy like that should be more comfortable with himself. I don't know what it was. He was definitely a man's man. All the guys liked him a lot. Of course, if I would complain to the skipper about him, nobody could really even understand because it was one of those things. It's like beating someone up, but punching them where you can't see it. I don't think he stayed on the boat. He was transient. I was real glad about that. A lot of people always expect, when you're a woman on a fishing boat, you're going to run into that problem all the time. That wasn't the case at all. The fact that I was there probably tempered their behavior somewhat. I think, for the most part, they liked it. They could confide in me, perhaps. It did make life more comfortable for them. Some other boats where they didn't have a cook, they might go out for a week

and eat cold sandwiches all the time. They might live in squalor. It would be really filthy. It's uncomfortable. All you do is go from working on deck to getting into a filthy, dirty bunk and eating cold food. You make more money that way, but as far as I could see, and I think Ted Schiller had this idea . . . why do it and be miserable? Why not be comfortable? As long as you're not spending tons of money. If this is going to be your livelihood, why not do it in a civilized way?

JM: Are there a lot of people who do that the other way where it's brutal like that?

EK: I couldn't tell you any percentages. Of the boats that I knew, I remembered one in particular. It was the highliner. It was really primitive.

JM: In Newport?

EK: Yes. I don't think they even had a stove. Maybe they had one little burner, and I remember the head (I guess they don't care about the toilet anyway), they used that for a closet. A bucket often is easier anyway because the head might break down. It's easier and cleaner actually. It was just crowded and uncomfortable. I enjoyed the fact that I worked on this comfortable boat. [Laughs]

JM: What do you do in your spare time out there? Is there any extra time?

EK: Often there was a lot of time. I read so much. I

really got to read a lot of books. I loved that. I like to read a lot, so that worked out fine. Nobody was sitting around whittling [laughs] or singing or anything like that. I would just cook and read.

JM: What's the hardest part about those trips?

EK: The bad weather. I fished for two winters. The first winter, we didn't go out as much, but the second winter, we weren't catching as much so we were trying to go out. I remember every single trip was freezing, gray and rough. I was seasick a lot. It was always cold, and the boat was always rolling. It was like being in perpetual misery for a week. I said to myself, "I'm not going to do this for another winter." Summer can be heavenly, but wintertime [wasn't]. We weren't catching too much. You'd go out, and you spent most of your time untangling the trawls because the weather had been so bad that they would get tangled up. There were winter storms continually. It was so frustrating. All you're doing is repairing your equipment, and you're hardly getting any lobsters out of them. I thought I wouldn't do that anymore.

JM: Can you make much money on those trips when it's like that?

EK: No, you didn't. Of course, the price would go up which would help. In the winter, the price would go pretty high. I remember when we weren't doing that

much, we did collect unemployment when we weren't fishing. I remember doing that. So we could survive OK.

JM: How old were you then?

EK: I think it was 1979, 1980. I was twenty-six, twenty-seven, around that age.

JM: What would you say the best part of those trips was for you?

EK: I felt like I was free as a bird in a way. First of all, by being a fisherman, you don't have obligations to anybody for anything. In a way, you might look at it like you can't do anything, but I never had to say, "I'll meet you or I'll be at this party or anything". I was fishing, so nobody could count on me for anything. I was always going to be fishing. I really enjoyed being on the boat, being outside, and then coming home. I had a really nice apartment on the Point. When I would come home, I'd have a few days off, maybe a week, maybe longer. Then I could totally do what I wanted. I liked the lifestyle. It wasn't laid out. It was not nine to five. I never wanted to work a nine to five job. To me it was freedom. Other people might consider it terrible because they couldn't plan. Other people need a plan. I didn't want to have to have a plan. If I wanted to take the money I made and quit tomorrow, I could do that. I had no responsibilities except to

pay my bills. I always could manage that. That was no problem. I could really work anywhere. Even if I decided not to go fishing, I could call up someone and say, "Would you like me to come and clean your house for a few weeks?" I'd go do that. After a while, I stopped cleaning houses. I got cooking jobs after I got more confidence in my cooking abilities. That was working my way up in the domestic scale. [Laughs] I felt free. I would party a lot, which now I don't find that desirable. I liked knowing all those guys, which I wouldn't care about now. All those young brawny guys -- I thought that was just great, hanging around with them. It was a phase that I went through, I think.

JM: Were most of them single men?

EK: Most of them were single. I don't remember working with that many guys who were married. If there was a skipper who was married, his wife might not want him to hire a woman on the boat, so I wouldn't work on that boat.

JM: Ted Schiller wasn't married?

EK: No. I remember he did have a girlfriend the second year I worked with him. She might have been uneasy about me being on the boat. I never really dated guys that I worked with. I would hang around with them, but I would date other guys. I didn't want to get involved. The first time I dated a guy I worked

with was when I worked with my husband, and then I became involved with him after a while. That was on a yacht. That was his doing [chuckles]. I had never gotten involved with guys that I worked with.

JM: How about the conveniences on that boat? You said they had a shower and a bathroom?

EK: Right. It was just like a regular bathroom in a house. That was really nice.

JM: Did they have VCRs or anything like that yet? I guess that was a little early.

EK: No, we didn't have a TV. I've been on boats that had TVs [chuckles]. In fact, the last sailboat I worked on had a TV and a VCR. We just had the stereo and the tape deck. I love music, and I brought lots of tapes. There was no telephone on these boats [laughs]. No telephone, I really enjoyed that. Now that I think of it, I liked being away where nobody could call you on the telephone. Nobody could bother you. That was wonderful. So it was music and there wasn't traffic; there wasn't sounds of the city. I remember, at one point, working with guys that were into heavy metal music. I liked heavy metal music, but I didn't love it, and I didn't love it at ear-splitting level. I think it was that, and guys who were using heavy drugs. I realized what kind of a crowd I was beginning to get involved with. I think they used drugs on the boat. Most of the boats, I

started out [with], there was never any liquor or drugs at all. I liked that because it was an escape from that. When you came in, you could drink or use drugs if you wanted. That was OK. Some of these guys I worked with were horrible on shore. I worked with some guys who were disgusting, but [when] you got them out on the boat and they didn't have any liquor around, they were OK. There was no place for them to get it, so that was good. They were decent company. They were acceptable. When things went downhill towards the end, I think they were using drugs on board. I just thought, "I don't like this anymore." I was ready to move on, go somewhere else, do something. Of course, I was single. I was free. I could do what I wanted. I moved out of my apartment, and I moved somewhere else. Then I went on a sailboat. I just kept moving around. I really enjoyed that freedom.

JM: How about coping with the danger out there?

EK: The danger of the boat? I did feel afraid when I was working on the scallop boat and the dragger. The scallop boat had these dredges, these big metal dredges. They had winches with wire -- wire would wind up on them. They were dangerous. These guys had to whip the line or the wire around. I would watch them. I had heard about people losing limbs in situations like that. I would stay as far away from

that equipment as possible. On the dragger, I used to operate the winch myself. The captain had lost his finger in the winch, and he had it sewed back on again. I don't know why he had me doing it. I was afraid of it, but I did it. I did everything on the boat. I really learned a lot because everything I did once, I ended up doing all the time. I set a bad precedent. I thought, "I'm the cook, I shouldn't be doing this." They used to catch these monkfish. They were almost your size. I'm telling you, they were huge. They had to gut them immediately, so I thought, "I'm going to gut one of these monkfish." You can imagine. This fish is enormous. He had the intestines and it was so gross. I went out and did it, and after that, once the guys saw me do that, whenever they'd get monkfish, they'd say, "Ellen." I could barely manage the fish. It was so big. I realized I shouldn't have, but I was just eager to learn and to do everything. That boat was very small, and I would get violently ill on it. It had those winches, and I knew the captain had lost his finger in one, and I was afraid of that equipment. Also, I knew a guy -- something had broken and had fallen on him -- he'd broken his leg really badly. I was always afraid of something breaking like that and coming down on the deck. But with the lobster boat, the biggest fear -- and I was never in that position

-- was perhaps that the traps might start going off the deck when they weren't supposed to, and they could catch somebody. Someone could get caught or tangle their foot in the line. I didn't go out on that part of the deck. I was thinking about this recently because of that Super Squirrel incident, that rogue wave. I know that we were in a rogue wave once. It was that kind of sea where there's waves coming -- it wasn't real rough, it wasn't a big storm -- but they were coming and crashing all every which way, and we were all working on deck. I was in my banding station, which is pretty safe (I had things all around me). All of a sudden, this enormous wave -- I don't know how big it was. I don't know if I even saw it coming. This was a big boat -- 80 feet. It came over the wheelhouse and it came crashing down on our heads and it was like a waterfall. I held on like this and I remember, it was just like a waterfall coming down over my head. It seemed like it would never stop. I knew all these other guys were on the deck, and I thought, "Oh my God, who's going to get washed overboard?" It ended, and we all looked up and we were all there -- all five of us. I turned around behind me and water was gushing out of the boat -- the inside of the boat. It was probably two feet deep. The only way it could have gotten there was to break through all the windows in the

pilot house. The shatter-proof glass in three windows had totally shattered into big, long sharp shards. There were two big upholstered seats in the wheel house, and it had cut right in through all the Naugahyde on these seats. If anybody had been sitting there, they would have been killed. We lost all of our electronics. I'm thinking that maybe we had radio at that time. We lost everything. We're all very modern people. We don't have a sextant on board. The compass still worked. We didn't have a Loran or radar anymore. Before that trip, the skipper, Steven, had been pushing and pushing for Lexan windows, which are a plastic. He'd been wanting them very badly because the last boat he'd been on had always had it. These guys didn't want to spend the money for Lexan, and they didn't, and then this happened. He was so upset because of the thought that someone could have been sitting up there. It was the weirdest thing. It was like a tidal wave. It didn't happen again. The rest of the day was OK. If it was that bad, we wouldn't have even been working. We had to turn around and come in. I guess we got a location from somebody, or maybe we used the last plotting that someone had made, and we must have turned around and come right in. I seem to remember ending up on Second Beach. It was in the winter and we were talking to some

Portugese fisherman, but he couldn't understand us. It was foggy, but we were steering by the compass and hoping that it was correct. We couldn't keep fishing without the electronics.

JM: You were glad to see Second Beach?

EK: Yes. That was wild. I guess we'd lost our windows twice, and once the propeller dropped off. We were out on the continental shelf. We heard this thud, and all of a sudden we weren't going anywhere. The propeller just dropped off. We ended up waiting. We waited about twelve hours, and the Iron Horse towed us in. That was a helpless feeling because we could have just drifted and drifted and drifted. We had the radio and the Coast Guard could have come to get us if necessary. We had to wait until Iron Horse had finished their work, and then they came. We were drifting. I remember I was on watch. There was nothing we could do. We were drifting toward the Nantucket Lightship. I'm talking to this young Coast Guard guy, and we are going straight for it. There's nothing we can do. We're waiting for the Iron Horse to come and get us. This kid's saying to me, "Can't you put out an anchor or something?" It's ridiculously deep. I said, "Why don't you just put out some fenders on the Lightship when we start running into you?" But, we missed them by a few hundred yards.

JM: How deep was it?

EK: I'm not sure how deep it was. We didn't even carry an anchor. We used to carry a grappling hook. We would use that sometimes when we would lose a trawl, so we must have had the grappling hook only I don't know if it had chain attached to it. It was just on a line. You couldn't really use it as an anchor. If it was an anchor, then we couldn't use it as a grappling hook. We'd move along and try to grab this trawl that was down like the buoys that it was attached to. The radar reflectors had been down, so we knew the trawl was there, and we'd have to try to find it that way. Sometimes we would spend hours grappling for these trawls that we lost. They're worth a lot of money. Fifty pots to a trawl. Each pot was worth twenty-five dollars or something, and then all the line and all the lobsters that were in them, probably. But anyway, we didn't have an anchor.

JM: Did the amount of lobsters decrease while you were on the boat?

EK: Yes, it seemed like it was pretty good the first year. It seems like it went down, and it has gone steadily down since. You never can really get the truth from anyone. Fishermen don't like to tell what they've caught. Somewhere I have all the records of what we caught for the two years that I was on the

boat. I don't know where they are. I thought someday I might like to go back and look at how much we caught and how much we were paid for them and how we'd separate them out into the different categories.

JM: What was your family's reaction to your doing this?

EK: My family is the type that would never interfere with anything. If they disapproved of it, they wouldn't say so. Maybe they were a little worried about me, but I think they thought it was a good thing for me to do. They've never expressed an opinion, really. They've always supported me in every decision I've ever made. I'm lucky that my parents would never meddle in my life in any way. After I was doing it for a while, and I was on a boat that was a nice local boat with good people, I think they were sort of proud of me. Maybe I could have been doing something a little more ambitious or important. It's like they know I'm going to go on to something else.
[Laughs.]

JM: Are there many women working in the industry now?

EK: I have no idea, but I don't think so. I met this French-Canadian girl that first time I took that trip on the MikenTod. She came in when we were unloading and she was on another boat. I don't know which boat it was. She was quite a gal. Too bad you can't interview her. She's all over the place now anyway. Her name was Sylvie. She used to work the deck. I

remember meeting her and thinking, "Wow, that girl can do it." She was a regular on this boat, and I became good friends with her. She was a very strong woman. She had arms . . . She was a little amazon. She was very sexy too, though. She caused a lot of trouble. They used to call her the French Connection. All the guys were falling in love with her. She was a great deck hand, a great person on a boat. She saved them a few times. They were out, and it was really bad, everybody was sick, and she steered the boat in. She was just strong. She was part Indian and French-Canadian. She did that for a while, and she was extremely intelligent. She got really tired of working with guys who couldn't even converse with her. And she moved on. Last time I knew, she was down in the Caribbean, and she was sailing around with some Swedish guy. They come and go. Marilyn was with it for a while. A woman named Muriel, I think, is working in the fish importing/exporting business now. It might be Norwegian salmon or something. But these are few and far between. I know there are a lot more women on southern boats. The big southern boats that would come up were also big comfortable boats. There would be wives and girlfriends, and I think it was a lot more common.

JM: They would work?

EK: Yes, they would usually cook. On the swordfishing boats, I remember meeting women on the longliner boats. They were really rough women, really rough women. They were usually from Florida or thereabouts. I think the men, particularly in New England, don't like the idea of women on the boats. I remember when we were unloading in New Bedford, I hid down below. That was when I was on North Riding. That was a man's world. The women worked in the fish houses, but they weren't on the boats. I felt very self-conscious, and I wouldn't even walk off the boat there.

JM: Did you usually unload in Newport?

EK: Yes. It was just when I worked on the North Riding for two months that we were there. Other than that, I almost always unloaded in Newport. On North Riding, we also would unload at Parascandolo's. They were really nice down there. I liked that place. I thought the people there were nice. They would always pay you right away. Aside from that, it was at Aquidneck Lobster. I felt pretty comfortable there because we always came in there.

JM: How about the wives of the crew? How did they feel about you?

EK: I don't really know. I always would try to be friendly to them and put them at ease. I would understand what kind of position they were in. Most

of the men that I ever worked with weren't married. This one guy, Hank, was married. I was friendly with his wife. I would always try to make friends with the girlfriends. I wasn't interested in having any animosity whatsoever. You don't really know if they're saying anything bad. You don't know about it.

[Machine off/on]

JM: People have talked about the environment, how even out on Georges Bank it's really getting dirty. Did you see much evidence of that? These are mostly dragger fishermen that are pulling up huge bags of garbage.

EK: No, I didn't. You know the garbage is from the fishing boats because we would throw all our garbage overboard. I guess I didn't think about it a lot at that time. Now it upsets me a lot. I would have been willing to save it. You gather so much after a week with all the stuff you buy at the supermarket and all that. We could have saved our plastic stuff, at least. That's what the garbage is from, all those boats. We would throw the plastic bags overboard. It's disgusting.

JM: Do the European boats do that, too?

EK: I hear that the Mediterranean is worse. The big boats, the Russian boats, I don't know what they do. That sort of stuff would sink pretty quick, so I

didn't see evidence of it. When you're lobstering, you're just pulling up traps. I don't remember seeing a lot of junk in the water. Not like if you're going through New York Harbor. That's where it gets dirty. In the ocean, there's currents and all, and there's tons of plastic and metal down at the bottom.

JM: Locally, what do you think about the conflict between tourism and development and the fishing industry?

EK: I think tourism is going to win out eventually, unless the state is really going to watch out for the fishing industry . . . There's always more money to be made in hotels, condominiums and tour boats. The people who are truly interested in fishing are such a minority. The people involved in tourism ought to be interested in it because it does add a desired quality to the tourist town. I think to developers, that's not the important thing. You can see it because so much of it has disappeared. There were more fishing boats, there was more evidence of it downtown. Now there's Parascandolo's. Even Bucolo's has turned into a little tourist mecca down there. It's not even a fish market anymore. Aquidneck Lobster, he'll hold on to that maybe as long as he lives -- maybe twenty, thirty years -- as long as he is able to work. He only has one son that I know of that's still fishing. Maybe the State

Pier's safe. There's been a lot of to do about it and controversy. I know there's people who are really anxious to build condominiums down there. I don't do anything about it myself. It just looks like that's the way things are going. I always figure this town will keep building up and building up -- we have a lot of new buildings now -- and it'll be in a heyday, and then it'll go down again. Like it did before. That's just the way things go. A lot of buildings that are being built are attractive, [but] some of them are ugly. I don't have any complaints about that. That's just what happens.

JM: Where did the Iron Mistress tie up?

EK: At the State Pier. For a while we were up at Derecktor's Shipyard. There were a few fishing boats there. That was before he even built his big buildings. He was just enlarging the place at that time. It was always a pain in the neck to get in there. There were guards at the gate and that sort of thing. It was mostly at the State Pier, I remember, because I lived across the street. It was very convenient. I could walk over to the boat. I lived on Marsh Street.

JM: They've gone out of business, haven't they?

EK: Who?

JM: Ted Schiller and the group you were with.

EK: Yes, it's been transformed. I think it was called

Continental Shelf Company. It was about seven men that owned it, and I think maybe they regrouped and have another name and Ted isn't involved with it anymore.

[End of side two, tape one]

JM: What do you think the future of the fishing industry is here in Newport?

EK: From what I've heard (it's all hearsay), it seems that lobstering is in a bad way. They're not catching anything near what they were. Dragging, I'm not so sure about. It seems like things have been fished out, and either it's going to disappear or we're going to have to wait a few years and maybe lobsters, scallops and fish will become more abundant. When the Deco boats came, they say they raped the continental shelf and all around. They were catching a lot of scallops. They were tapping resources that hadn't been tapped before. Now the beds have to get built up again. I don't know if there's going to be an opportunity for that to happen. People are still building new lobster boats, but I don't know if they know what they're doing or not. I wonder. Through the grapevine or picking up a National Fisherman, I know the fish prices are really high, so they must not be catching as much as they were. I don't think it's nearly as lucrative as it was ten years ago. It's too bad. People are

eating more fish. People should be eating more fish. I guess they need more legislation, restraints or something like that. One of my other reasons for not doing it anymore was because it was definitely going downhill. It was so frustrating. You'd go out and you'd come back with so little. [You'd] sit around and not catch anything. There's more alcoholism. It's just too chancey. You catch more tourists around here than you catch fish. So I'm in the tourist business.

JM: When you did that, you were part of an occupation that is ancient, yet it was an unusual occupation for a woman. How do you feel about that?

EK: I feel really good about it. I think I was very proud of the fact that I was able to do it. I was able to do it physically, and I was able to be accepted onto the boats that I worked on - that I was accepted as a real crew member. Especially being the type of person that I am. When you think of fishing, you have to be a very brawny, tough person. That's not how you would perceive me to be. I was able to do the job that I was hired for, and I had a certain amount of respect for what I did. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the status. I liked being the only woman. I got tired of it after a while. I did it, and that was nice. It was a nice phase of my life. I'm glad that I didn't get married when I was twenty and have

kids and I'm still a housewife. I've done some different things, despite the fact that I've hardly left Newport except to sail down to the Caribbean and back. At least I've done some adventurous things. I think that helped me to be a much more content person now. To be able to look through my photo albums and see what I did and where I went and the adventures that I had. That gives me a good feeling. And I lived to tell it [laughs]. I never suffered any injuries. I guess I learned a lot in certain ways.

JM: Were there physical hardships?

EK: I think the seasickness was a physical hardship, being seasick the times that I was. But as soon as you hit land, you forget about it. I was always able to work even if I was seasick. If I wasn't able to work, like that one time I talked about, I was very upset. In fact, I wanted to quit, and I went and told Ted that I thought I should quit because I got so sick. He just wouldn't hear of it. He said, "What are you, crazy?" I thought, "This is terrible. I couldn't do my job. I couldn't cook them Chourico sandwiches [laughs]." I remember going sailing with a girl who had sailed around the world (a good friend of mine), and we were going down to Bermuda. I was sick the first couple of days because I hadn't been on a boat in a few months. Just from my training, I was still getting up and making dinner. She said,

"Ellen, what are you doing?" I wasn't even getting paid. I was going along. I was working, but it wasn't a paying job. She said, "I wouldn't be trying to do this if I felt the way you did." I felt this had to be done. This was just the way I was. She was in awe at me.

JM: What did you get from doing that that you couldn't have gotten from anything else?

EK: It was just the adventure factor as opposed to working in my father's store. I worked there when I was in high school. That was so boring. I hated it. I could not sit behind the counter. I would rearrange things. It was just too boring. I've never worked in an office. I was so happy that I was doing something that had variety, that didn't have a true schedule, that every time I went out on the boat it was the same yet it was different. The weather was different. Maybe the crew members were different. We caught different things, we saw different things. That was a big plus. It was something that I wasn't always going to do so it was just another experience that I had. I remember at that point thinking, "Next I'm going to go work on an oil rig supply boat." I thought that maybe I'd go be a cook. I never got that far. I did apply for a job once on a U.R.I. [University of Rhode Island] research vessel. They needed a high volume, short-

order cook, and I didn't have that kind of experience. They were afraid to hire me. I was more used to cooking for groups of four to ten. You have to know how to order food for fifty people. I did end up cooking for that many people. The last three years I've been catering, but I'm not doing it now. I'm so tired of cooking. After cooking for a lot of people, you get really burned out on that. Those were some of the ideas I had. I was thinking about going to Alaska to get a job on a crab boat. I always heard that they hired a lot of women on those boats. In fact, there are women captains in Alaska. I didn't get that far. I just didn't pursue it.

JM: Is the adventure what you really liked the best about it?

EK: I think so. That had to be it. I couldn't say what else it would be. [It was] the lifestyle at that time. I really liked being single. That was good.

[Off/on]

JM: Is there anything that you'd like to add?

EK: You asked me all the right questions.

JM: I know there are probably a million things I've probably missed.

EK: No, I can't really think of anything. The things that you asked me are the things that I had thought about before you came.

JM: It's been great talking with you. Thank you very

much.

End of Interview



NEWPORT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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DATED: Sept. 10, 1987

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