NEWPORT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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JOHN McDONALD

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 It supplies what's often only hinted at in written historical documents.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.

JOHN McDONALD

John McDonald and his brother, James, have worked together as fishermen on their day dragger, Natator, since 1948. Prior to that time, Mr. McDonald spent his childhood on the water catching eels and scalloping. During the 1940's he had extensive experience swordfish harpooning off Martha's Vineyard, Point Judith, and Block Island. Swordfish were abundant in those waters then. Now they are seldom spotted.

Mr. McDonald has extensive knowledge of the fishing industry through years of first-hand experience and perceives his occupation as "A lot of hard work, but it's something, once you get it in your blood, you can't seem to get out of it. I've been doing it all these years."

Mr. McDonald describes the seasonal nature of the day dragger fishery and expresses dismay at overfishing and depletion of local cod, haddock, and yellowtail flounder stocks, once the mainstay of day draggers. His concerns for the future of the fishing industry are illustrated by comparisons of catch sizes in 1948 with 1987.

Tape I Side I

Biographical Interview
How McDonald became involved in the fishing industry
    Childhood on the water
    Eel pots and scalloping
    Swordfishing off Block Island in 1942
Swordfishing off Point Judith during World War II
Boat bought by McDonald and his brother in 1948
Swordfish harpooning
Swordfish abundance during 1940's
Where swordfish were sold
Swordfishing off Martha's Vineyard
Perceptions of fishing as an occupation
Effects of longlining on swordfish stocks
Swordfish harpooning as a seasonal fishery
Comparison of the fishing industry during World War II with now
Technology, World War II, and the fishing industry
Technology and depletion
Fishermen today couldn't go fishing without technology
McDonald's close calls in the fog without radar
Newport fishing fleet during the 1940's
Grounds fished by McDonald as a young man
The Natator
Seasonal nature of the day dragger fishery
Depletion of local cod, haddock and yellowtail flounder stocks
McDonald's work now
Availability of dock space in Newport harbor past and present
Greek lobstermen in Newport during the 1940's
Gloucester fishermen who came to Newport during the 1940's
Offshore lobster fishermen in Newport, 1980's
    Development of the offshore lobster pot fishery
McDonald's offshore trips
    Swordfishing on the Northern Edge of Georges Bank
    during the 1950's
Anchoring off Nomans in the summer
    Why McDonald gave up swordfish harpooning
    Depletion of swordfish
McDonald's work as a day dragger, 1987
    Species sought
    Changes in abundance and availability
    Day boats in Newport
Comparison of fishing boats, "then and now"
Species depletion experienced by McDonald
What McDonald likes most about his work
    Independence of being a fisherman
    The hardest part about being a fisherman
    Fishing in winter
The work day
Marine life seen on offshore fishing trips
Dead body McDonald pulled up in his nets

Tape I Side II

Strange things and garbage pulled in in the nets
The 200 Mile Limit and its impact on the fishing industry
Irreparable damage done to many species due to overfishing
Government involvement in the fishing industry
    Mesh size regulations
Nets and gear
Torpedoes caught in nets
The U.S. Naval Torpedo Station
Net repair
Biggest changes McDoanlad has experienced during his years of work as a fisherman
Species depletion and fish trap companies in Newport
Navigational equipment
Future of the fishing industry
Environmental issues
State Pier in Newport
Future of the fishing industry
Limited entry
Future of the fishing industry in Newport
    High priced waterfront property and its effect on the fishing industry
Impact of fishing industry changes on Newport as a community
Changes in the sociological makeup of Newport, R.I.
Perceptions of being part of an occupation that's very old
Depletion of most fish species
Way of life
    Uncertain work schedule
    What determenes the work day
    The kind of person it takes to be a fisherman
    Physical hardships
    Fishing as a dangerous occupation
    Superstitions, sayings, beliefs

Tape II Side I

McDonald's son's work in the fishing industry
Perceptions of occupation
Memorable fishermen
How McDonald feels about changes in Newport
Fishing in winter
Why McDonald has stayed in the fishing industry
Gear conflicts between draggers and lobster pot fishermen on the inshore grounds
Rules of conduct among fishermen

Interview with John McDonald for the Newport Historical Society's Oral History of the Fishing Industry in Newport, Rhode Island, conducted by Jennifer Murray on December 3, 1987.

MURRAY: Is it alright with you if I tape our interview?

MC DONALD: Yes. It's fine.

JM: I want to start out by asking some questions that will help me get to know you. I guess the first one is, where were you born?

JMC: I was born in Fall River, Mass., December 4th, 1927.

JM: How about your parents, where were they from?

JMC: They were mainly from Fall River.

JM: What country were their families from?

JMC: My mother was English. My father was Irish. I guess, eventually they settled in this country, I don't know how far back. All I know is they came from Fall River.

JM: What did your father do?

JMC: He was a stockbroker--a telegrapher in a stock broker office in Fall River, then in New York, then he was in Providence.

JM: Really? Did you move around?

JMC: No, no. I lived in the same house all my life until I got married.

JM: How about your mother, did she work outside the home?

JMC: Yes, she was a telephone operator.

JM: What were your parents' names?

JMC: My father's name was James E. McDonald and my father was Anna R. Brown, her maiden name.

JM: Did you have brothers and sisters?

JMC: Yes. I've got a brother that still fishes with me.

JM: Oh, nice. Now, how about school, did you go to school in Fall River?

JMC: No. I went to school in Warren. I graduated from Warren High School in 1945.

JM: How did that happen? Did you move to Warren?

JMC: No. I lived in Warren all my life.

JM: Oh, you did?

JMC: I was just born in Fall River and I was living in Warren. My parents were living in Warren and I was born there.

JM: How about your wife?

JMC: I've been married now for, let's see, twenty-five years I'd say. My wife came from Providence. She lives in Warren. She's the Town Treasurer in the town of Warren now. Anything else you want to know?

JM: And you have children?

JMC: Yes. I've got a daughter that just graduated from R.I.S.D. [Rhode Isalnd School of Design] and she's into fashion design. I've got a son that's quahogging for a living. He has his own boat and he goes bullraking.

JM: What I really want to know now, is how you got involved in the fishing industry.

JMC: When I was younger, I always fooled around the water with a skiff. I used to set eel pots and [go] scalloping and things like that. Then I had a chance to make a trip to Block Island in 1942. To me, that was something. In those days, they had a submarine net across the harbor; you couldn't get out. You had to go to the Coast Guard in Providence and get permission. They'd open up the nets in the morning. Certain hours you could go out and you'd have to come in in certain hours. We went to Block Island. We stayed there. We made a trip swordfishing and we got a few swordfish. The fellow that had the boat asked me, "Well, if you want to stay, you can stay," so I stayed all summer. That's what started me fishing. Of course, the first week I was on the water I was sick as a dog all the time.

JM: Were you?

JMC: Yes, I had to get acclimated to it.

JM: Who was that?

JMC: That was Henry Conklin. He's from Warren. He used to be a teacher in Warren and he was a boat builder, too. He used to build boats. I worked with him when I was in school. We built a couple of fishing boats. He had this small boat. In

fact, the boat's still around now. It's in Bristol. The name of the boat was "The Triton." We used to go swordfishing in the summertime. Then he got called into the Merchant Marine, so I got a chance to go on his boat from Point Judith in 1943 or 1944. I had to go the O.P.A. and get gasoline stamps. I was still in high school. I was only sixteen at the time. In 1944 I fished with this Howard Vars in Point Judith. He lived over in Snug Harbor. We used to go swordfishing all summer long. It was just the two of us. We fished down off Martha's Vineyard and off Block Island, down off Long Island. I was still in school at the time. I graduated in '45, but the summer of '45, when Henry Conklin was in the Merchant Marine, he asked me if I could get some -- you see gas was rationed and you had to go to the O.P.A. So I got five-thousand gallons in stamps. I was only sixteen at the time. In fact, they sent an investigator down my house to make sure I didn't have a car. It was during the war. When he came that summer we went swordfishing. Olie Olson and his wife fished with us. He's dead now. We had quite a successful summer swordfishing. We used to go codfishing sometimes in the fall. Then in 1948 we bought our own boat, my brother and myself.

JM: What is your brother's name?

JMC: James.

JM: Tell me about the boats you went swordfishing on.

JMC: It was only a small boat. It was only about thirty-six foot long.

JM: Wooden?

JMC: Yes, wooden. Oh, yes.

JM: With a gasoline engine?

JMC: Gasoline engine, yes. Nowadays, everybody has diesels. We have a diesel in our boat.

JM: Tell me how you learned how to catch them?

JMC: Well, you just went out and you had to look for them finning. A fellow ran up in a stand with a long harpoon and you'd throw them at them. It's just experience. If you're a good shot, you get them; if you don't, you don't make any money.

JM: Did you harpoon them?

JMC: I didn't, but I've done it. I've done it on our boat. On this boat, I used to steer and tend the fish and clean them. It's like anything, you start off and you learn a lot as you go along.

JM: How plentiful were the swordfish in the '40s?

JMC: They didn't have longlining then. The longlining now, they catch swordfish that are very small. In those days, most fish would be a hundred-fifty to three or four-hundred pounds after you cleaned them. They were all good size fish. If you got a fish that weighed....two-hundred-fifty pound

average was a good fish. We used to go out and we'd get two or three a day. In those days, you'd get fifty-cents a pound, or sixty-cents, whatever it was, which was a lot of money in those days. If you got a couple swordfish, you had two or three-hundred pounds of swordfish, you had a hundred-and-eighty, two-hundred dollars for a day, which was good money after you took expenses out.

JM: It sure was.

JMC: In those days.

JM: Where did you sell them?

JMC: We used to sell them on Block Island and they used to ship them to New York. Then we used to sell them down at Woods Hole. He's out of business now, Sam Cahoon, in Woods Hole. We fished down the Vineyard a lot.

JM: Martha's Vineyard?

JMC: Yes. I call it the Vineyard. Out of Chilmark, Menemsha Bight, and then we used to anchor offshore or anchor into Nomans at night. We'd stay down there the whole summer, more or less. We'd ice up at Woods Hole and we'd buy our food and stuff there. I wasn't married at the time. When I first started, I was single, so I could stay away as long as I wanted.

JM: What an experience!

JMC: Yes. It was a lot of fun.

JM: A lot of hard work.

JMC: A lot of hard work, but it's something, once you get it in your blood, you can't seem to get out of it. I've been doing it all these years. Fishing changed quite a bit since then, though. The fish aren't around like they used to be. We had to give up swordfishing. They started longlining and then they got down to, I think we got twenty-eight cents a pound on one trip and that was it. We had to quit. We couldn't compete.

JM: When was that?

JMC: I'd say it was in the early '60s--'61, '62, like that. They were catching so many swordfish, they were just flooding the market. They could catch them all year round. Before we only used to catch them in the summertime. After September, you wouldn't catch any swordfish. Maybe you'd happen to see one on a rare day. I've seen swordfish in October off Block Island when I was codfishing, but we didn't catch them. We tried to get them but they were a little wild so you couldn't get near them. They catch them all year round now. They get a big price for them now, but their expenses are so high. Then they had the airplanes looking for them. They've got so now even the airplanes can't find them. They decimated them. Once in a great while you'd see a small swordfish on the

surface, but most of the time, the big fish, you'd see them swimming or finning or under water.

JM: Was there much competition between Newport and Point Judith, then, in the '40s?

JMC: No, in the '40s Point Judith was only a small place. There wasn't much of a fleet there. During the war there weren't many boats around because everybody was out fighting the war. What few boats were around were small boats. They weren't the boats like they've got now. They've got all these great, big steel ones and the big ones, they caught everything offshore. Now they're fishing inshore--a lot of these big boats.

JM: Really?

JMC: Yes, fishing in close to shore.

JM: What affect did the war have on the fishing industry?

JMC: There was still plenty of fish to catch, but there weren't the boats to chase them. There was plenty of fish around--all kind of fish.

JM: How about technologically?

JMC: Well, there's been a lot of improvements, electronically on the loran and all the other...radar, you didn't have that in those days. You just had the old-fashioned lead line. They had a few sound machines but not too many. Everything, technically, has improved so much over the years

that a fish doesn't stand a chance now. You caught plenty of fish. You could throw your net over anyplace and catch fish. Nowadays, you have to scrape around. The fish has just been caught up.

JM: What were you using for navigation on those swordfish boats?

JMC: All we ever used was a compass. You run out on a certain course in the daytime and you'd come back on that course. The end of the war they had these surplus lorans that came out of the aircraft. We put those in the boat. You had to count all the different blips in every function you had to go through. Now, you do everything, it's all automatic. It comes out on a meter. It's all done for you. In those days, you just had to count so many blips and it was really tough to get it. After a while you could do it pretty easy. It could put you right where you wanted to be. You could tell where you were in the fog or anything. So, it was very handy. Folks now, they won't go fishing unless the loran's going and the radar's working.

JM: What do you think would happen to people now who have learned with all this equipment, if they got stuck out there without it?

JMC: Well, that's it. A lot of them, they won't go fishing. Yes, they won't go out unless the loran's

working and the radar's working. They won't leave the dock.

JM: Did you ever have any close calls out there in the fog without the lorans?

JMC: Oh, yes. You have a lot of these steamers that come down and you have to be careful of them. Boats run close to you. We never had radar in our boat. You couldn't tell. Only if you heard a...you'd stop and listen. If it was calm or foggy, you could hear them, but other than that, it was like anything--you just take your chances.

JM: What did the Newport fishing fleet consist of back in the 1940s.

JMC: I'd say there was a lot of lobster boats here--small lobster boats fishing around here. There was a few draggers here.

JM: Day draggers?

JMC: Yes, day draggers. There weren't too many big boats fishing here. Of course, during the war, there weren't that many boats around. There used to be a lot of Gloucester boats came in here--mackerel seiners--and they were quite big. There was those hundred-and-ten-footers from the first World War. They'd come in here and they'd follow the mackerel. Of course, then they had the traps. The traps have been here for years. That was a big business here, trapping. There's was a

lot of different companies here, but of course now I think there's only two. It's Aquidneck and George Mendonsa. There was a lot of lobster boats here. There weren't too many draggers. There were a few--small draggers. But there was a lot of fish around here in those days. We never fished here. When we first started to go dragging, we fished off Block Island all the time, yellowtailing, and finally we started to fish around here. We fished way offshore with the boat and our boat is small. It's only thirty-nine foot. Of course, the boat was younger then and as you get older you don't get as foolish. [laughs] That's what happens. When you're young you do a lot of things--you go places you wouldn't think of.

JM: Like where?

JMC: Well, we steamed from Block Island all the way down to Nantucket near Roger's Shoals and fished all night--just the two of us--fished day and night. We were there one trip and there was seven or eight boats and we kept fishing all night and all of a sudden there's no boats. The one boat left said, "Gee, didn't you get the weather forecast? It's supposed to blow a gale of wind." We didn't know it. It took us about six hours to get to Nantucket, which is only an hour and a half run from there. It was blowing and the boat was taking

a lot of bad weather. When you're young, you do a lot of foolish things and we were lucky enough to survive--manage to survive, I'd say.

JM: You still have the same boat now?

JMC: Same boat.

JM: What's the name of it?

JMC: "Natater". [pertaining to or adapted for swimming] I've had the same boat since 1948. The boat's old. The boat's about sixty-five, seventy years old. It was built up in Marion, Mass. in the early '20s.

JM: Wooden boat?

JMC: Yes, it's wooden. Oh, yes.

JM: Who built it?

JMC: Oh, I couldn't tell you who built it. It was built in Marion, I know that. It's still a good boat. It's good for what we want. We could have got a bigger boat, but if you get a bigger boat you've got to fish harder. You've got more expenses. The boat's all paid for so we make a living at it.

JM: Were you involved in any of those other fisheries: the lobster, the fish trap industry, seining?

JMC: No, I wasn't into that. We used to go codfishing; handlining for codfish. We'd stay out there a couple of days in the fall and in the spring and then in the summer we'd go swordfishing. Then we started to go dragging so we gave up the codfishing

and we went dragging all the time.

JM: What did you do in the winter?

JMC: We used to go dragging for fish. We fished off Block Island--yellowtailing. We spent a lot of long days there waiting for the weather to break. We'd go over there and we'd stay there three or four days before we'd get a good day and try to get a trip of fish out of it. Then, after a while, we just gave that up, too, because we'd spend too much time over there. We started to fish around here and we found out we could make a living here in the wintertime.

JM: Are there any cod left?

JMC: No. There's no codfish around here. You could catch codfish in this river [Sakonnet], you could catch them over Narragansett Pier, you could catch them in the West Passage, Beavertail, everywhere, but you can't catch a codfish to eat now around here.

JM: Did you see any haddock out there?

JMC: I've caught haddock, yes. I've caught Haddock right alongside of Block Island. We used to catch them off there. Yellowtailing, and you'd catch a few, not many. I've caught them up here in the river, but I haven't caught one lately. Occasionally, you'll get one that will stray in here. The same way with the yellowtail--you'll

catch a stray yellowtail. It was good fishing here in the wintertime. We used to catch a lot of codfish here, but they're gone. You don't see them.

JM: How do people feel when they spend a long time learning where to go and how to fish successfully and then it's gone?

JMC: There's nothing much you can do about it. I mean, all the places we used to go, we knew where to go, the fish just are not there. I wouldn't want to start out now. To go in the fish business the way it is now, you've got two strikes against you. There's a lack of fish and everything else is so high, upkeep of the boat and repairs and everything like that. It's tough. It's changed over the last thirty or forty years. There's a lot of young guys at it now, but they've got these great big boats. They've got big payments to make. Every so often you see some of them that are going belly up because they can't make the payments. The expenses are so high.

JM: So, your kind of fishing is, you're home every night.

JMC: I'm home. I go day fishing now. I go out early in the morning and make two or three tows, come in, take the fish out--whatever we have--that's it.

JM: How early in the morning?

JMC: We get up four or five o'clock. We're down here before the sun's up.

JM: Where is your boat docked?

JMC: We're tied down to Long Wharf, the State Pier. I guess we've tied about four or five different places here as they pushed us out. You don't remember, but George Lewis used to have a place right here in Norton's Shipyard. You know where Norton's Shipyard was?

JM: Yes.

JMC: Right next to that was George Lewis. We used to sell fish there years ago and we used to tie the boat there. Then we used to tie it where the Newport Yacht Club is. Then we tied down to Commercial Wharf here. It used to be Johnson Brothers. We used to tie there. We rented the dock there. We finally ended up here now. We rent the space from the state. That's the last place, unless you tie at Parascandolo's. We could tie there, because we sell our fish there, but the only thing is, there's so many boats, they're moving boats around all the time. We have a permanent spot [at State Pier]. We just come in, put our lines on the boat and that's it. Nobody ties outside of us or inside of us.

JM: Were the Greek lobstermen gone when you started?

JMC: Oh, no. They were here.

JM: In the '40s.

JMC: There was a lot of them. Johnny Demitares, he died a few years ago. Matter of fact, when I used to go to Block Island, there was a couple that come from--the Goodes--that used to live here in Newport. They used to go over there fishing, codfishing. There was a lot of old-timers here; Alex.

JM: Alex Parris.

JMC: Alex Parris, yes. We used to sell him bait. They're all gone now. There was John Mathinos. Of course, he passed away just recently. His father had the shipyard down there. There's still a lot of fellows lobstering. I guess they make a living at it.

JM: How about some of the Gloucester fisherman who came here in the '40s.

JMC: Well, most of them it was only transient. They'd come into Newport Harbor and sell. In bad weather, they'd tie up here and then they'd go down off Long Island. It was a stopping place on the way. Some of the lobstermen, the newer lobstermen now, came from Massachusetts and they fish out of Newport now. They live here

JM: The offshore people?

JMC: The offshores, yes. They never used to go offshore until--I can't think of his name, from

Westport--started it, that doctor. He went offshore in a little boat one time and caught a lot of lobsters and everybody got into it. I guess now you can still make a living at it. They caught a lot of lobsters when they first started. Of course, now it's dangerous. You saw what happened just this past week. There was one that was lost before that.

JM: A lobster boat?

JMC: Yes, a few years ago. Remember, they had that big storm and they tried to sue the government. Then the Lobsta One out of Point Judith capsized. Freddy Jones lost his son on that boat that capsized from Point Judith a few months ago.

JM: Have you ever taken an offshore trip, far offshore like that?

JMC: Oh, yes. I've swordfished on the Northern Edge off Nova Scotia, up that way.

JM: When was that?

JMC: It was back in '52, '53, I think; '54. There weren't any swordfish around down off Nomans and down off the Vineyard. The only place you could get any swordfish was up on Georges, so we tied the boat up and went aboard another boat for a couple trips--two or three trips.

JM: A Newport boat?

JMC: No, no. It was Gay Head. There was all Indians on

it. Walter Manning, his son, and Jesse Smalley. We went aboard because we were young and we could see all the swordfish. They had a good striker.

JM: They were Indians from the Vineyard?

JMC: From Gay Head, yes.

JM: Did they really know a lot?

JMC: Oh, yes, they knew a lot about swordfishing. That was all they used to do in the summertime was swordfish. A lot of boats down there. We used to anchor into Nomans. There used to be thirty or forty boats there at night. Now you won't see a one there in the summertime. We gave it up. We had a swordfish stand--I guess it was seventeen, eighteen foot long on the bow of the boat and a big topmast. Took it all off. When they did the redevelopment down there, we had the thing there and they buried it so we never bothered anymore. Harpooning's a dying art. It's not that the art has died, but it's the fish have died. The fish aren't there. You can go out cruising around all day and you're burning up fuel and you can't get a swordfish. If you get a swordfish now, the prices are fantastic, they're so scarce. I mean, they're getting four or five dollars a pound for them. If you're lucky, you get a two-hundred pound swordfish. What do you get? You get pretty near a thousand dollars, right there. My brother and I,

going out, got nine swordfish in one day, just the two of us.

JM: When was that?

JMC: It was back when we were swordfishing down off the Vineyard. You could catch a lot of swordfish down there.

JM: You and your brother started fishing together, did you say, around 1948?

JMC: Yes, that's when we bought the boat. I fished before that, but's the first time --

JM: Had he fished before?

JMC: No. He graduated from college. Then he was working down to packing fish over to Point Jude. That was back in '43 or '44. That's when the place was--there wasn't much there.

JM: During the war.

JMC: Yes, during the war.

JM: So, you go out early in the morning. What are the species you're going after now?

JMC: Now we catch a few flounders and we get a few lobsters. A few whitings are starting to show up now. We save all the skates for lobster bait. That's about it.

JM: And this is a year round thing?

JMC: Oh, yes. We do it year round.

JM: Now, are there many other day boats?

JMC: Yes. Let's see....There's "The Rainbow". There's

not too many. There's Albert, there's myself. Albert's been fishing as long as we have. He's got "The Elizabeth K". There's two or three other little....That's about it. There's only three or four boats. Before, there used to be quite a fleet here. There was Dolph Taylor. There was Normie Brownell and there was all the Fougeres. There was a lot of boats here then. We used to catch a lot of whiting. We used to fish a lot for whiting. Go out and get twenty-five, thirty barrel like nothing. But now, they catch them before they ever get in here, these big boats.

JM: They catch them on the offshore grounds.

JMC: In fact, we don't even put the whiting net on anymore. What few we catch, we catch with our big mesh and we don't get that many. Unless they're worth good money, we could put another net on and catch them if there was any amount to catch. The last few years there hasn't been many whiting around. Of course, when the Russians came in they decimated everything. The boats they've got now, compared to what they had during the war, it's like night and day. They're so big. Oh, my God! They go fishing now, they've got all the comforts of home. They've got VCRs and everything. In those days you didn't have that.

JM: It's really something.

JMC: In those days, boy, you were crammed aboard a little boat and you took a lot of bad weather, pounding and everything.

JM: There weren't many conveniences on those boats.

JMC: No, there weren't any conveniences. No, not like they have now.

JM: What kind of volume do you bring on these grounds now?

JMC: It used to be, we could go out and get eight, nine-hundred pounds a day, a thousand pounds. Now if you get a couple hundred pounds, you're doing well--two or three-hundred pounds, three or four-hundred maybe, especially this year here. Last year was fairly good. This year, there's just no fish. They've got a measure on them, too, for catching flatfish. I think it's eleven inches in Rhode Island. Still, we catch a lot of small ones because we've got the big mesh and they go through our net. Of course, that's for the future, we hope. The big boats out of Point Jude, they're fishing all up inside here. I say inside, they're all along the Narragansett Pier, around Beavertail and all that. Those are spots they never used to go before. We used to fish there. We'd catch a lot of fish there, but now they found out there's fish there, they come up and in just one or two years they've wiped it right out. They pound and

pound and you wouldn't believe the size of the boats that are fishing there. The boats that should be offshore fishing--but they won't go offshore. They're day boats now. They fish like we do. Or they go a little harder than we do. I'd say harder than we do, because they've got to pay for their boats. They've got big notes on them. Our boat's been paid for for years. I'm almost ready to retire, anyway. My brother could retire. He's sixty-three, sixty-four.

JM: Is he?

JMC: Yes. I'm sixty and I've got two more years. Now you might as well say we're gentlemen fishermen. [laughs] If we had to depend on this for making a living, I couldn't do it right now. The last year or so, it's really gone downhill.

JM: What do you like the most about it?

JMC: You're independent--no one to tell you what to do. You can go to work when you want. Mostly, you go to work when the weather's good. If the weather's bad, you don't go out. You have a lot of days off, in the wintertime especially. Summertime you go about every day because in the summertime the weather's good. You start to see the weather get bad from now on right until spring.

JM: What's the hardest part about it?

JMC: Getting up these cold mornings when it's below

freezing and the winds's blowing. You've got to get out there and you got to get on deck and put the net overboard and you got to freeze your butt off. [laughs]

JM: What's it like out there?

JMC: It's cold. It's cold. Yes, it is. I go home and I get in the house and I say, "Boy, it's warm in here." "Why don't you put the heat up, I'm freezing. I'm freezing." I go, "Gee, I'm hot." With being outside all day it's a change.

JM: Do you have to go to bed really early?

JMC: I don't go to bed before eleven o'clock. As you get older, you don't sleep as much. I never did like to go to bed early. If I went to bed at seven or eight o'clock, I'd be up at one or two o'clock in the morning. So, I don't go to bed before eleven, unless I'm real tired. Then I might go at ten. I get up at three or four. Summertime, you get up early. When you're young, you hate to get up in the morning to go fishing. I used to hate to get up. As you get older, it's just automatic. You wake up before the alarm goes off. You wake up and it's a routine you've been doing all your life so you just pop up. That's it. You do it and do it and do it, think nothing of it after a while.

JM: You must see some life out there that a lot of us don't see.

JMC: Yes, you do. Especially when we fished offshore there swordfishing. Whales. All kind of whales and all kind of sharks and everything you can think of. They're still out there. Oh, the whales are still there. Occasionally you see them. Off Beavertail you see a whale once in a while.

JM: How big of a whale would you see off Beavertail?

JMC: Oh, you see the finbacks mostly. If there's any herring around they come and feed on the herring. Off the Northern Edge there, you saw any kind of whale you can think of. You'd lay there at night. When you're drifting, you could hear them hissing and flapping their tails and doing everything. They follow the feed most of the time. This past winter I saw dolphins up here in the bay.

JM: How far out? Right here in the bay?

JMC: In the bay, I've seen dolphins. Yes, yes, yes.

JM: What about the leatherbacks?

JMC: Oh, the turtles. Yes, you're talking about turtles, aren't you?

JM: Yes.

JMC: We used to see a lot of those, swordfishing. You could see them out there swimming around. We never bothered with them, though. I guess occasionally they get caught in the traps now. When they come in sometimes they catch them in the trap. We even caught the small turtles like that. You catch them

sometimes. Once in a while you get one dragging. Not in here, but when we used to fish down around the Vineyard. We used to go dragging down there and you'd get the doggone sharks that come up and bite your bag as you're taking it up and lose all your fish. They used to do the same thing with the swordfish. They'd try to eat the swordfish up on you when you're tending them.

JM: What's the strangest thing you've ever pulled in in your nets?

JMC: Well, I wouldn't say strange. We caught a guy that jumped off the bridge one day.

JM: You did?

JMC: Yes, we caught him the following spring. He was standing right up in the fish.

JM: That's a strange feeling.

JMC: He was only a young fellow, too. We called the Coast Guard and they came down. We took the whole bag and we tripped it and said, "You can have everything." I wouldn't touch the fish. The fish were alright, I guess. See, occasionally they jump off [the Newport Bridge].

[end of side 1, tape 1]

JMC: [If there's] a marine accident or if someone jumps off the bridge, if they don't catch them right away, you're liable to catch them three or four months later or whenever.

JM: Yes, you see it all.

JMC: You see it all. Oh, yes. We catch everything from beer cans to coal. We catch a lot of coal in the Bay, too.

JM: Really?

JMC: Yes. It used to come off the barges.

JM: Is there a lot of garbage down there?

JMC: The most garbage you'd get would be bottles, beer bottles. And old shoes. I've even caught a billfold with money in it. You never know what you're going to find. You keep dragging stuff up and you throw it back over again, what you don't use. You catch bones from animals. You'll catch cats. You'll catch seagulls or whatever's down there. You never know. You could be surprised the things that come up with the fish. I used to catch a lot of sailor hats out here. You know, they'd blow off the guy's heads. Anything you can think of.

JM: Anything from the yachts?

JMC: Oh, yes. We've caught sailbags and we've caught halyards. Anything that goes to the bottom, we'll catch it if it's there.

JM: What affect did the two-hundred mile limit have on you?

JMC: When they imposed it it was good, because if they didn't do that--the foreigners, they come over here

and they'd cleaned right out. We noticed a difference right after that and it took a few years for the stuff to start to come back. Even now, there's so many big boats fishing that the fish can't come back fast enough. I'm not saying it's never going to happen, but I don't think I'll see it in my lifetime when the fish will come back like they used to be. They're catching so much small, they're killing half the fish. They drag these small bags around and they look for butterfish. They'll fish on butterfish, and they'll have to throw half of them away to save half. It was the same way with the yellowtails. They used to catch small yellowtails like that. They just kill them after a while. Now yellowtails are scarce. We used to catch a lot of yellowtails before, but now they're not around.

JM: How do you feel about the involvement of the government and the scientists in the fishing industry?

JMC: I suppose it serves a purpose. Sometimes you get too much government regulations, but that's one thing--they have recently. I guess they're trying to do it for conservation reasons. It's not like the farmers, the fisherman isn't subsidized. They don't get a subsidy for catching fish, or not catching them. I suppose it has its good points,

especially the conservation part of it, trying to preserve the different species.

JM: Are most people obeying the mesh size regulations?

JMC: Well, you have to have a certain mesh for a certain type of fishery. Every once in a while, the Coast Guard will board some of these boats and catch them. They've got a liner inside their bag. It's a fine mesh and it will stop a lot of fish. Some guys say they can't make a living without the fine mesh. What you do, you catch a fish that can't get out and it's going to die, it's so small. With a big mesh, they'll filter right out the bag and they'll escape to grow up again. You'll damage some fish. You lose a lot of fish even without big mesh. We take them up and we try to get the small flatfish overboard as soon as we can. Years ago we used to save them for lobster bait. Now, it's against the law to save them. I wouldn't save them anyway, because you're just cutting your own throat. Let them go, and they might grow up to be a little bigger and you can catch them later on.

JM: What kind of regulations came out of that that you've had [to follow]?

JMC: It's the size. You can't bring in fish under a certain size. It's a good thing. It's like the lobster measure; they've moved the lobster measure. They keep making it bigger and bigger.

The first year you get the big measure you say, "Boy, there goes a lobster I could save last year." You have to throw it over. It affects everybody. I suppose in the long run, it gives a chance for the fish or lobster to spawn--release some young.

JM: Your method of fishing is all otter trawls?

JMC: Otter trawls, yes.

JM: Has there been any change in the technology?

JMC: It's fairly stable. They might have designed a new net to catch more things off the bottom. Basically, when we first went fishing we had the old Wilcox flat net. All it did was [have] long, low wings on it and an opening up in the top. You'd catch a few codfish and things, but it was mostly for bottom fish. Now they've got these box nets with the high opening. They're wide and they'll fish the bottom. You can catch stuff off the bottom and on the bottom. It depends how you want to work the net. You can adjust them different ways.

JM: Were they made of cotton when you started?

JMC: Oh, yes, when I first started it was cotton. A net wouldn't last you at all. It was made of cotton. You'd have to dry it out and you'd hang up on stuff and it would rip to shreds. I've had the same net on there now for about four or five years. I just

repair it a little--unless you lose it, hang it on something on the bottom. You can lose a net. We used to lose them on torpedoes here up in the range. Caught a lot of torpedoes up here.

JM: Are there any left?

JMC: There's a few--not too many. I think the last one we caught must have been lost during the second World War. It was buried. In fact, we couldn't get it up. The diver went down and said, "Well, it's not a torpedo." "It's got to be something." He said, "It's got propellers on it but it's not a torpedo." We dragged it from up above Halfway Rock all the way down to Newport Harbor. When we came around the end of Goat Island, it hit bottom and it ripped the bit right out of the boat because it flexed up. So here was the torpedo in the net sitting down, and the net was floating right in the harbor. We said, "We better cut all the cans off the net so nobody [unclear]." We put a buoy on it and we put it down. We had a big boat go out and pick it up. He picked it up and he had the whole torpedo there, but half of it hit the bottom of the boat. It broke in half, so we just brought the back end in. It was the propeller and the tail end of the torpedo. I've caught some that have been buried in the mud. They float right up and they're like new. They lose them up there. They

used to give you a reward for them. If there's any damages, they'll pay for the damages as long as you're not in a restricted area. If you're in a restricted area, they pay you half because you're not supposed to be there, but they never would have got the torpedo back. They have sounding devices on them where they know where they go. Every once in a while they'll lose one and you'll see them up there looking for it. During the war, a lot of the aerial torpedoes used to drop here. There used to be a lot of them out here in the range off Newport. They used to lose a lot of torpedoes. We've caught them out there, too. You get into one of those, boy, you know you've got something because they're heavy.

JM: Yes, I'll bet they are.

JMC: They're twenty-one inches round and they're seventeen, eighteen foot long. They're great big, heavy things.

JM: The Torpedo Station was in full swing.

JMC: Yes, they were. After the war, they closed it up, but up here at the base they were still working on them and they were firing them out here. In fact, now they don't use the pier anymore--the firing pier, occasionally--but most of the time they fire them with the range boat. They have a boat they fire them from. We've cleaned that bottom up

pretty good up there. There used to be a lot of junk up there--even when they built the breakwater we used to fish there before they had the breakwater. when they started to build that, you'd catch more doggone cups. We'd catch cups out of these destroyers. I can get a bucketful of cups there. I give them away.

JM: Souvenirs.

JMC: Souvenirs, yes.

JM: Getting back to the nets, do you repair your nets yourself?

JMC: Yes. We do all that.

JM: How did you learn to do that?

JMC: You just pick it up. You learn through experience. I build my own nets sometimes. Sometimes I'll take them home in the winter, put them down in the cellar, rehang them and make them look like new again, and they're good for another few years. It's not like when they had the old manila nets. They just rotted out on you. It would take one summer and it would be gone. They wouldn't last at all.

JM: It must have been expensive.

JMC: Yes, it was. It was all the work involved in making one and then you didn't you get the life out of it like a net would today. Today a net will never rot. It might chafe out after a while or

wear out, but it will never rot out. And they used to rot. They'd get so tender you could pull them apart. You'd hang up and you'd lose your belly on the net. Of course, that's all they had then. They didn't have nylon during the war. They developed that during the war, but it wasn't incorporated into nets until after the war.

JM: When did you change over from gas to diesel?

JMC: Oh, I've always had the diesel in this boat. This boat, when we bought it,had a General Motors diesel in it and we've had the same engine in there now for -- Of course, we've overhauled it maybe four or five times in forty years.

JM: What would you say is the biggest change in your kind of fishing in the years that you've been involved in it?

JMC: The biggest change is the lack of fish. That's the biggest thing. If it wasn't for the lack of fish it would still be a good business. It's just the fish aren't there. That's the big difference.

JM: How are the other fisheries that are based right here in Newport getting along?

JMC: Even the traps, I think the traps have noticed a big drop in the fish. They don't catch them like they used to. They'll have a few good weeks, but it's something you can't predict. In the spring, if the wind's northeast or something, it holds the

fish off. They won't come in. There's a lot of variables you can't predict. You may think, "Gee, there's not a fish left in the ocean" and then all of sudden they'll come in and they'll be all there. The fish will be there. It's unpredictable.

JM: What kind of navigational equipment do you use on your boat now?

JMC: We don't really use much. We've got a sound machine, a compass. [When] we're fishing out around here in the bay, you know, we use all ranges. If it becomes foggy, we know the bottom and we just put the sound machine on, follow it in. Of course, when we were swordfishing we used to have the loran on the boat because you needed it out there. You wanted to go to a certain area you could -- Even dragging, we used to drag offshore and we'd use the loran all the time. Now, a lot of boats, that's all they use is the loran to go to certain spots. It's good for hang-ups. You know where all the hang-ups are on the bottom. But around here we just use ranges on the land so we don't need it. We're just day fishing now.

JM: What do you think the future of the fishing industry is in general? That's a very big question that can't be answered quickly.

JMC: It doesn't look too promising right now, I wouldn't

say. In other words, it's like a piece of pie: before you had two or three people eating that pie and now you've got twenty people eating the same piece of pie. There's just too many boats working on what few fish there are. That's the big difference.

JM: What effect do you think the environmental problems have?

JMC: Well, I suppose the pollution, I guess it effects--like the quahoggers, they're having a big problem. With all these metals and stuff, half the Providence river's closed up. I guess it effects it, although they say the Bay now is cleaner than it was a while back. There used to be a lot of ships stationed here and there was a lot of pollution. The ships used to pump oil overboard. They had a couple of big oil spills here one time. They had a couple of tankers in here. The whole harbor was covered with it. We had it all over our lines and the boat was covered with it. In fact, I guess they had a suit against the oil company. They paid about everybody in Newport. They gave them money because of the damages and whatnot.

JM: When was that?

JMC: Oh, that was twenty years ago, I guess. There was a tanker that --

JM: That wasn't that Argo Merchant thing, was it?

JMC: No, no. That one was down off the shoals of Nantucket. No, this was right here. I think it was coming in here and it hit another tanker or it hit the bottom or something. Anyway, they had quite an oil spill. The whole harbor was covered with oil.

JM: Was there a fire?

JMC: No, there was no fire. It was just a major oil spill. The oil was like that [gestures how thick oil was] in the harbor. Everything was covered. It was like tar. It was bad.

JM: You wonder how long it takes to get over that.

JMC: It took a long time. It killed a lot of lobsters. That [oil] settles to the bottom. It's been pretty clean lately, though. I think it's improved a lot. Now if only they can get rid of all this pollution that comes from the upper Bay. I mean, most of these sewerage plants now, they're taken care of. Some places aren't, but a lot of places are doing a pretty good job at it, I'd say. They used the Bay as a sewer. Everything goes in and it can't flush itself out quick enough. I think the reason why the fish aren't here, I don't think it's so much the pollution. I just think that the fish have been caught up. Every year they tag them and we send the tags in. One report says there's going to be a lot of fish. I say, "I don't know where

they're going to come from." Then another one will say, "They're scarce." I believe the one where they're scarce. That's it.

JM: Locally, with the docking and the State Pier, do you think that that's going to stay here?

JMC: Oh, I think that was the best move the state ever made when they bought that pier, because that would have been condominiums and I don't know where these boats would have tied. You'd have lost half the fleet here. The fleet would have to leave because there was no place to tie. We could have tied down to Parascandolo's, but that's one boat. There's a lot of boats that tie out there--a lot of lobster boats. You could always find a place to tie in Newport. Years ago it was no problem. Newport was a real fishing town. They had Sullivan's Coal Dock down there. It was really marine oriented. Well, it is now, but it's mostly yachts. They think it's a novelty to see a fishing boat. They say, "Oh, look at that." They come down to the dock and say, "Oh, look at that boat. They just caught something."

JMC: Do they ever want to go out with you?

JM: Oh, yes. I have people who come down. They look at you and they say, "My God!" One guy down to Martha's Vineyard came down and said, "George Washington must have been in this boat, or Abraham

Lincoln." You know, they kid you. But you'd be surprised. A lot of the tourists come down there and they ask you questions and this and that. To them it's something different, especially if they come from away from the water. But to someone that's been here all their lives, they take it for granted.

JMC: Is there room for new people who want to get involved in the industry?

JMC: To get involved, you have to have the fish. The fish aren't here. Anybody starting off now, if I bought a boat now and I didn't know what I knew, I'd be in the poorhouse because the fish aren't there to catch. They're just not there. The market changed. I could see it over the years. You could see it gradually going downhill. Every year it gets worse than the year before. It's getting so now that you -- I'm concerned, but there's nothing I can do about it. I'm just putting my time in now until I retire.

JM: What do you think of things like limited entry? Of not allowing so many people?

JMC: Well, it's got its advantages, but this country has always been a free country where you could do what you wanted to do. They have that on the West Coast, I guess, for salmon and things like that, but on this coast there's nothing. It's just the

fittest survive. That's it. The best fisherman are going to make out and the guys that can't make it are going to drop by the wayside. As I say, it's tough starting out now. There's still a few new boats being built, but they're fishing offshore. They've got a lot of these new boats now that are freezer boats. They go out and they stay for a week or two and they freeze everything right aboard the boat. They have big crews. Up in Alaska they've got a lot of fish. They've got those freezer boats up there, too. You might as well say it's virgin territory, because it hasn't been fished for years. They just really started to fish the last couple of years. Around here, no matter where you go, you can go to New Bedford, anywhere, you'll hear the same story. The product isn't there anymore.

JM: With the prices people have gotten for property on the waterfront here, what do you think the future of the fishing industry in Newport is?

JMC: I think another fifteen, twenty years you won't see hardly anything here for fishing. You might see a few lobster boats. As for dragging, I suppose there will always be someone doing it. If Parascondolo ever goes, if the boys take the business--sometime it will get to be that there won't be enough fish coming in and someone will

offer them a big price, they'll take the price, take the money and run. See, the values have gone up so much. It's like anything. I used to fish out of Block Island. You'd go over there and you'd buy a lot for a couple hundred bucks. You go over there now and land values are out of sight. All of these people come from New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut and make a lot of bucks and they just buy it up. It's a bargain here for them compared to the prices where they come from. That's what happened here. You can go down this dock, there used to be a lot of fishing boats everywhere you went, but now it's only concentrated in one or two spots. Bucolo, he's sold out down there. He's gone. Well, they've got the Mack Trap Company still there-- Mendonsas. Then they've got Parascandolo. They're the only ones that buy any fish now--Parascandolo's. You've got Ronnie Fatulli--he handles all the lobsters. It's changed quite a bit. It's changed a lot.

JM: What affect do you think that has on a community for things to go in that direction?

JMC: It's another generation. The people aren't involved in fishing. They probably think nothing of it because they weren't involved in it. The city of Newport, there were a lot of people involved in the fisheries. It's changed. There

just are not that many people involved in it anymore. New people have moved in and now it's getting to be a -- Well, some people just live here in the summer and they go somewhere else in the winter. It's a trendy place. That's what it is now. It's trendy, right? It's nice, but you've got a parking problem. They're going to remedy that when they put this new parking garage up, I hope. But it's changed. Maybe some people might say it's for the better, but I don't. I think they've over built in the city of Newport. They've done too much. They've changed the character of the city a lot. Well, of course, some of it's for the best. I remember Thames Street, we used to walk down there and every other place was a bar or a Greek restaurant.

JM: Yes, it was pretty bad I guess.

JMC: When the Navy was in here, there would be fights. It was a sailor's town, let's face it. That's the way it was, and they changed it. They changed it quite a bit. Now it's more or less a yachting place than it is a fishing town. There's still a few fishermen left, but gradually they die and there's not too many people replacing them.

JM: You're part of an occupation that goes way, way back.

JMC: Yes, sure. It's gone back for years. The port of

Newport has been a fishing port back since the Revolutionary days. I'd like to have been fishing here then. The fish must have been really deep. Plenty of fish.

JM: It sounds like they were.

JMC: Oh, I've seen places in this Bay where you could catch all the fish you wanted. Now you can't do it. I can go to that same spot now and there's nothing there. It's just that the fish aren't there. I don't think it's so much the pollution. I think there was more pollution before. Now they're making an effort to keep the Bay clean. It's just that the fish have been overfished. It's just too many boats chasing what few fish there are. That's what it's come to.

JM: What is it like with your schedule being so different from everyone else's?

JMC: You don't have any set hours. We more or less have to be to work at a certain time because --

JM: All the time.

JMC: All the time. You get there every morning, early. I've seen us go out at nine o'clock or so, but that's because of the weather. Maybe the wind will be blowing too hard and it will die down, or there's thick fog and the fog will clear and we'll go out. You usually go out early and you make your tows. You come in one o'clock, two

o'clock--whatever--and take your fish off. That's the end of your day, unless you've got a net to fix or something like that. But that doesn't happen too often.

JM: Could you make plans easily when you had to be out there when the fish were there?

JMC: Whenever the fish were there, we fished all the time. The fishing would come first with me. Nowadays, if I want to do something, I'll take a day off and do it. That's it. I could have done it then, but when you're young and ambitious, you're going all the time. You don't want to stop. "Gee, we better get those fish. Catch them. Catch them. Catch them." Then you look at your priorities in life. After a while you think, "Well, maybe I should step back and look at it and do the things I should have been doing." That's what it is. When you're young you go all over the place. When you fish offshore it's a different life. You're out there all the time. I've fished on boats where you go out there and you fish six or seven days, day and night. You come in, you stay in one or two days, and you're gone again. It's like another world. It's completely another world. You get back and you look at all the people and you say, "Gee." You wonder what's going on. It seems like you've been gone for a month. You go

for a week out there. It's so lonely out there. It's quiet. Not quiet, but you're away from people. It's quite a life. It's a hard life, though. It's tough.

JM: Does it take a certain kind of person to be able to do that?

JMC: Oh, yes. I think so. Yes. You have to like it. You've got to have a lot of stamina because it's tough on you. As you get older you notice a difference in your body. You get more aches and pains. It's like anything; you start to wear out.

JM: What are some of the physical hardships that come from a life spent on a boat?

JMC: A lot of people end up with rheumatism. You get a lot of damp and cold all the time--changes in temperature. It's dangerous, too. I almost lost my leg one day. I got it wrapped in a winch and almost tore it off. I got hit in the head with a block once; I've got a scar above my hairline. I was taking fish out down here. It's different. There's a lot of accidents. A lot of guys get killed on boats. It's a dangerous occupation. There's all kinds of things that can happen. Guys get caught in the shafts doing work on a boat. There's so many different ways you can get hurt. There's the machinery, and it's very dangerous. You have to be careful. Sometimes when you take

things for granted, that's when it happens--that's when you have an accident. That's what happened to me. I just got careless and got my leg wrapped up and I was going around in the winch.

JM: When did that happen?

JMC: Happened about ten years ago.

JM: That must have been a shock.

JMC: See the difference?

JM: Oh, yes.

JMC: Feel my ankle. I had four turns around there. There was a big bag of fish and I went around. It was up in the Bay.

JM: Your brother was with you?

JMC: Yes, just the two of us.

JM: That's when you know you shouldn't go out alone.

JMC: A lot of boats, now the fellows go alone because they can't make it with two guys and it's very dangerous. It's very dangerous. Something could happen to you and you could fall overboard. I've gone overboard. I slid right down the cables. I was just lucky enough to hold on and pull myself back. My brother helped me get aboard the boat--[it was] in the wintertime--otherwise, I would have been gone.

JM: Was that in bad weather?

JMC: No, it's wasn't so bad. It was just rolly and it was in January or February. I went to grab the

wires and tie them up on the stern. I was holding a wire and the boat took a roll. I didn't let go of the wire and it pulled me right overboard. I slid right down the cables. I had one of those big heavy parkas on and all I could see was the daylight from underneath the water. Boy, I shimmied up that wire and my brother stopped the boat. He got me up on the railing. He had a heck of a job pulling me aboard. I got aboard, went down and changed my clothes and went back fishing. That night, I got home, I was all black and blue--my whole body--from the cable. It's dangerous. That's why, if you go by yourself, and something like that happens--you can get hit by a block, you can get hung up bad, or break a leg. It's dangerous.

JM: Do people talk about it much?

JMC: Well, we all know it's dangerous. With these fellows that go by themselves, I think they're taking a big chance. It's a big chance.

JM: How about some of the superstitions--or not really superstitions, but sayings and beliefs?

JMC: You can't leave on a Friday. They say that's bad luck. You can't leave a hatch cover upside down. Those things you learned from the old-timers and you carry it on. You just don't turn it upside down; you keep it right-side-up.

JM: You're darn right.

JMC: Why challenge it.

JM: I wouldn't do it.

JMC: Different things they think of.

JM: How are people learning who are getting into the industry today?

JMC: The only way you learn is if you've got someone who's interested in it--they go aboard a boat and they pick it up. If they think they can make a go of it, they'll stay at it. That's the way it is. They had a school down at U.R.I., but they dropped it. My son went to it for one year. It's all about fishing, but they didn't have enough interest in it.

JM: That's too bad.

JMC: So they closed it. My son's fished offshore on a few lobster boats. In fact, he went with Paul Bennett on "The Hedy-Brenna". My son is twenty-one.

[end of tape 1, side 2]

JM: How do you feel about your son's involvement?

JMC: He enjoys it. I don't think he'd like to make it a full time occupation. He's doing it now because he can make a pretty good living at it--more than he could if he was working at a regular job, but he doesn't have any benefits. He has to pay his own Blue Cross. He's got his own boat. He paid for

it. He's got a nineteen foot Sea Horse with a 250 horsepower motor on it. He does alright.

JM: It sounds like there's a good living to be made on that.

JMC: It's tough. That bullraking is hard. You pull that thing all day long and you've got to pull it up. It takes its toll after a while. It's hard work. I've done it when I was younger. I went out with him a couple of times; that's enough for me. I've got calcium on my vertebrae and everything now.

JM: How old is he?

JMC: He's twenty-one.

JM: What would you say you got from your work that you couldn't have gotten from anything else?

JMC: It's given me a good living all my life. I've been independent. I've never had to work for anybody. I never collected a penny of unemployment all my life. I mean, my home is all paid for and everything. It's treated me well. I could retire now and I wouldn't have to worry. That's when you could make a good dollar, but now it's changed. It's changed a lot. Like I said, the product isn't there to catch.

JM: Well, I've asked most of the questions that I had thought of. What would you like to add?

JMC: I guess a guy you ought to see is that Louis

Gaspar. He works down at Parascondolo's. You ought to get a hold of him. He'll tell you about the old times.

JM: Yes. I've heard a lot about him.

JMC: I was talking to him today. I said I'm going to go up and see you. I said, "You ought to go up there, Louis." Get in touch with him. He works down at Parascondolo's. Call up Parascondolo's and ask them if you can see Louis. In fact, he's repairing the traps now. He fixes the traps. He'd give you a lot of information. He knows more about it. He's lived here all his life. I don't really live here, but I've fished out of Newport all my life.

JM: Any other people like that that you especially remember?

JMC: Most of them are all gone now. The old-timers--Normie Brownell, Dolph Taylor. George Lewis, he could tell you but he's gone. Of course, if they came back now and saw this city they'd turn around and say, "Gee, where's Newport?"

JM: I say that myself.

JMC: How long have you lived here?

JM: About twenty-years.

JMC: Oh, yes. See, you notice the difference then. The first time I came down here was 1942. You can see the change. Like you say, some is for the good and some is for the bad. I'll tell you, they've made

it too trendy. Well, they've done a lot of good things here. Like what they've done down towards the Point--they're taking a lot of those old houses and fixing them up; they're nice. It's good to see that instead of see the regular shingles on them instead of asphalt shingles. There's a lot of good improvements. Of course, it's the price. It's a high-priced town now. Real Estate has driven a lot of people out of here that originally lived here. The price of property is so high that they can't afford it.

JM: Are you going to be fishing all winter?

JMC: Oh, yes. I've been fishing every winter as far as I can remember. Sometimes the fishing is better in the winter, if you get it just right and the fish come in at a certain time. The thing in the wintertime is the weather. You hear that wind blowing in the morning. We used to fish when it was bitterly cold. When you're young you can take it. I've seen the fish freeze on deck before you can get them in the barrel of water. That's cold! It's been so cold I'd take oil and kerosene and wrap it on the winch handles and light them up so they won't freeze. I mean cold! Ice all over the boat. We don't go like that anymore because the fish aren't there to catch. Why kill yourself? It can get dangerous, too, when it gets icy like that.

JM: When it was brutal like that did you ever think of doing something else?

JMC: No, we didn't know any better. [laughs] I'd been doing that right along. Sometimes you say, "What the heck am I doing here?" But then if you get a job ashore, and the pay and all the hassle you have to go through....After you've been independent all your life, it's hard to get down to a set routine. You can come and go as you please. Of course, the boat is a big headache. Every year you have to haul it out. You've got to spend money to fix it and it's something you have to do every year. Especially when you have an older boat, you go through a lot of expenses repairing it, doing this, doing that.

JM: That's in the spring that you do that?

JMC: We usually do it in August or September. There's a slow period after the lobsters have gone. There's not much going on so we take a week or so and haul the boat out and do all the odd jobs we have to do. In the meantime, if anything comes up and you do break down, you have to stop whatever you're doing anyway. Sometimes you have to overhaul the engine or something. Everything comes to a halt. You have to take care of that first no matter how many fish are out there.

JM: One thing that I did forget to ask you was, are

there any conflicts between boats like yours and lobster pot fishermen?

JMC: Oh, yes, yes, yes. There's a lot of conflict. A lot of conflict. Some of these new fellows that come in dragging, they'd drag where guys got pots. We try to stay away from them. There used to be a lot of guys that came down here and set pots all over where we drag. In fact, they still do. They set pots where we drag, but we try to stay along the edge of them. Once in while you'll catch them. You'll catch their pots. We had one guy one year who came down, blamed us for getting into his pots. I can't blame the guy, but I'm pretty sure he sent someone down and they poured sand in our engine--ruined our engine. There's a lot of conflict. There was a lot. We get along with most of them. We know where they set their pots. They know where we drag, so we try to stay clear of it. Some new guys come in and they'll drag them up. Oh, gee, they'll have a war going. A lot of these Point Jude boats came down here and dragged a lot of pots out when they were fishing out here. They dragged where they never dragged before. Where the lobstermen had pots there, they just dragged them up. That's what happens sometimes.

JM: I really want to thank-you. I really enjoyed this.

JMC: Yes. Did you get enough information?

JM: Well, I'm going to think of five-thousand things when I go over your tape.

JMC: Plus, you'll get a consensus between me and what everybody else will tell you.

End of Interview

NEWPORT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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DATED: December 3, 1987

John R MacDonald
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