

threw back or you'd catch the ones I threw back, but it would average out. Another factor was when these lobsters would shed in June -- lobsters at that size would shed maybe twice a year. They would increase maybe ten or fifteen percent in weight each time they shed. That's when the females become fertile -- when they shed. They figured about ten to fifteen percent at that size would reproduce. So I felt sometime during the year I would give that lobster that break of increasing in size. Fifteen percent would have the chance of reproducing and then I'd catch that lobster. I felt that the industry, the guys, wouldn't lose anything and that's why I voted for it. When I did vote for it, I had a son and two nephews and three other men that were working for me that were lobstering. The following morning I come down and I told them what I did. So on the Council, the conflict -- the way they shafted me -- they thought I was not concerned about conservation, that I was being greedy. But I told them that one, too, about the lobster measure. But that didn't help either.

JM: Too bad they don't have more people who stand up for what they really think.

GM: Yes, there'll be an explosion one of these

nights at that Fisheries Council meeting.

[End of side one, Tape 3]

This is Jennifer Murray. It is February 10, 1987. This is my third interview with Mr. George Mendonsa.

JM: When did fishermen here start noticing the foreign trawlers off the coast? Do you remember about how early on?

GM: Well it's got to be probably close to twenty to twenty-five years that they started complaining to Uncle Sam to do something. Uncle Sam was very slow. For the first few years, while the foreigners were out there, you really didn't feel the catch of fish dropping. It takes a good ten years before you really feel it. Then it's too late. When the catch started to drop, Uncle Sam said, "We're trying to do something about it." But it seems like anytime something is being depleted, ^{it's because} you're catching the market fish -- the big size fish. And the fish you're catching in the early years, say when the big fleets are working on the fish, the spawn has already been set and the young are out there. Then the young start to increase in size and you begin to catch them. As you catch the big fish -- the spawners -- it seems like it's about six to ten years before you really notice or you can feel that the fish is being depleted. I guess that's why the statistics

are coming in on what the catches are and they don't really see it or really feel it until it is too late. The spawners have been caught and the young that are maturing are not there. That's when you really feel that something's wrong. If Uncle Sam was as active or as tough against the foreigners as Uncle Sam can be against the American fishermen, we'd have a good system.

JM: And if there were room for more fishermen to set some of the rules to really be listened to. I know it's a hard thing for the fishermen to all get together because you're supposed to be out on your boats.

GM: That's one of the problems [of] the fishermen. There's so many different types of fisheries that the only time they get involved in the fishery is when they feel it themselves in their own fishery. When I got involved with the conflict on the striped bass issue, yes, I was hollering like hell for help, but they didn't hear me. Now that they need help, I don't hear them either. That is one of the problems. I think in this country someday, maybe this is the wrong thing to say, but if someone ever organizes the farmer and the fishermen under one head, then they are going

to be heard. Maybe that would be bad because they could almost shut this country off with their food supply.

JM: What do you think of government subsidies for the fishing industry like they have in Europe?

GM: Well at this point, I don't know how they'd work it. Up to this point, most fishermen felt that they didn't want it or didn't need it. I just had a point that I wanted to bring up and I lost it.

JM: Well, you'll remember it again.

GM: [Chuckle]. One of the biggest problems in the fishing industry today is the insurance. There's boats going out of New Bedford that fish offshore, just their premiums alone are fifty, sixty thousand dollars a year. Not only the premiums are going up, but the protection they're getting is being cut back all the time. The same way with us -- our insurance is on the increase and our boats stay tied at the dock during the rough weather months -- our boats don't even leave the dock for five months. We tie up in the middle of November and we don't go out again until the end of April. Yet, during that time our insurance premiums are rough. As a matter of fact, this past winter, the way the premiums were going up, I was

considering dropping all the insurance for this time of the year because there's no risk to our boats. They're there everyday -- we don't even start the engines up. There's no risk. Yet we fight with the insurance company, but we don't get anywhere. Another thing is that the insurance companies are hiring a lot of retired Coast Guard men. The Coast Guard men don't have any idea what it takes to run a fishing boat or what's needed on a fishing boat. But these Coast Guard men know all the stiff regulations that they're familiar with from the Coast Guard service and they drive you up a wall. So that's another problem. They're making us put stuff on boats that's stupid.

JM: Like what?

GM: Well, like our blocks overhead for hoisting. They're making us put chains in those blocks as a backup system for what's up there. What's up there is capable of handling anything we do. The chain systems that they want us to put up there would interfere with the swivel system in the blocks. I told them that that would cause someone to get hurt because it would chafe the lines off. It's dangerous. Still, if the retired Coast Guard guy says that's what you got to have, then you got to have it. It

doesn't make sense. One guy told me that I got to have a fire extinguisher down in the engine room. I said, "I'm not putting a fire extinguisher in the engine room." He said, "That's what it calls for." I said, "Look, if there's a fire in the engine room (that's the place where it most likely would start), how am I going to get to the fire extinguisher if I'm coming from the pilot house? Am I going to go through the fire to get the fire extinguisher?" I said, "You're nuts." But that's where it's put. [Chuckle]. So anyway, they come up with a lot of funny ideas. I know I got one fire extinguisher. If the boat catches fire, I'm going to leave [laughs].

JM: Absolutely. You could swim in. Forget the boat. Those foreign trawlers were freezing all the fish right away, weren't they?

GM: Yes, they're processed.

JM: What effect did that have on your market?

GM: The different species the foreign trawlers were catching were scup, butterfish, squid and mackerel. It (the foreign trawlers) depleted the stock. Twenty years back, twenty-five years back, I don't think many of those species were getting into the American market. I think that stuff was being sent back. I guess the

biggest fishing fleet at that time was the Russians. The way they operated out here with those big vessels . . . no American could work that big and make money. I think they (the Russians) needed food for their people. I think that if you went to figure it all out profit and loss, I don't think that that was making money. It was a while back, twenty years probably or fifteen years, Uncle Sam built two of those boats. I guess they put them in the hands of American crews and they fished out here awhile. Well, those boats stay out there for months and months. The American fisherman is not going to stay out there for months and months because he's only twenty-four hours travel time from the fishing grounds to home. So why should he stay out there for months? He'd rather have a small boat that would make a six-day trip, eight-day trip, something like that, and come in and be home for a few days. Whereas the foreigners, those guys must have spent six months to a year out here without ever getting anywhere. The two boats that Uncle Sam built were a flop. The last I heard, one of those boats was up in Nova Scotia. I guess they got a bunch of aliens aboard to run it -- a bunch of Portugese. I

don't know what the reason was, but one night I guess just the Portugese were aboard. They all got bombed -- probably popping wine --

[laughs], and they just about destroyed the boat. They busted up a lot of the equipment -- the electronics. They went berserk. [Laughs].

JM: I guess they didn't want to go out.

GM: [Laughs]. So anyway, I guess that was the end of Uncle Sam experimenting with those big factory ships.

JM: Were those stern trawlers?

GM: Yes. There's a lot of stern trawlers today. The Americans got smaller boats that are working good for them. As a matter of fact, the boats they've been building maybe in the last half dozen years -- the American fishermen are happy with them. The old style -- what they call the side trawlers -- it's hard to get a crew on those older boats now because they don't like that type of fishing.

JM: What about during the seventies when they were taking the dredge from the Providence River and dumping it off Brenton Point? Didn't that have an effect on you?

GM: I'd say, during those years, we were catching more fish than we are now. When they were dumping off Newport, the ocean tides and

currents would flow from that area they were dumping in. The dumping grounds would flow in a southwesterly direction which would mean those filthy waters from the dumping would flow towards Block Island and Point Judith. The fish migrate (in principal) about the same as the birds. They come north in the spring and then they'll go south in the fall. That sloppy water would run right across the path of the migration of fish. That cloudy water which would be blocking (the fish) from the dumpsite towards Point Judith and Block Island. It would cause the fish to go out around that filthy water rather than take their normal path of migration. That hurt us. The fish were still here. I know to the east of us they were catching fish that we should've caught before they did -- say through Massachusetts. Another thing was, I talked to some of the tuna fishermen and they were catching most of their small tunas off Jersey. They'd travel up and down the coast, and they felt the tunas would migrate up the coast and that filthy water coming out of the Hudson River would go right straight offshore probably close to a hundred miles. These seiners felt that those tunas would come up to that dirty water and they

wouldn't go through it and that the small tunas wouldn't get up here to us. They were all caught south of that dirty water. Twenty, twenty-five years ago, in the traps here through July and August, we used to catch around a hundred of those big tunas -- five, six hundred or a thousand pounds apiece. Now last year, I didn't even see a tuna. Two years ago, we caught one tuna. I don't think we've caught seven or eight tunas in the past ten years. We used to catch a hundred in July and August in other years. But, to prove the point the tunas might go out around that filthy water, was down the Cape they're catching them. Now if those fish went out around that dirty water and by the time they got around that dirty water and made it back into the coastline, that's probably where they'd wind up -- at the Cape. So I say a lot of the fish won't go through the filthy water. Another thing I noticed -- I guess it was three years ago in June -- we'd be coming back into the harbor from hauling our nets and there was a body of pogies that were laying between Narragansett Pier, Beavertail (Jamestown) and the Castle Hill area in the mouth of the channel here. There was millions and millions

of pounds of pogies. We used to go right through them everyday. We could see them on top of the water, real thick. There were probably billions of pounds of them. Those fish stayed there for a couple of weeks. Those fish were headed up the Bay where they normally would go every year, but they laid there for a couple of weeks, and we couldn't understand it. One day we realized, coming down the Bay, when we got inside of Castle Hill, it was just like a line right across the channel of real filthy water. That's when they had that algae across there. Those fish wouldn't go through that water. Finally, one day we're coming in from hauling the nets, and we looked and we didn't see the pogies. We kept coming up the bay, and as we come up the Bay, we noticed the water had cleaned itself. So they waited for that clean water, and they finally made their trip up the Bay. So there are species that won't go through that filthy water. When they were dumping out here, we used to go by those dredge boats. Every single day they'd be carrying that dredge material and dumping it. When you get the tide falling out through the channel and you get a southwest wind -- you get the tide and the wind going in opposite directions

like kind of fighting one another -- the sea really builds. The tide will build that sea. The dredge boats going out through are loaded heavy and they bury into the sea and the sea would go down through the dredge boats

and out the back end of the dredge boats. You could see all the mud come flying out. So the dredge material was being spilt right from Castle Hill on out. There was lots of times before they got to the dumping grounds that they had spilled a lot of the dredge material. I know some of the lobstermen that had their lobster traps out here. They come out there certain days and start pulling up their lobster traps and couldn't get them up. During the night those dredge boats had to be intentionally dumping before they got to the dump site -- dumping when no one was watching them. At night they could get away with it. So I say a lot of that dredge material was dumped before it even reached the destination that they were assigned to. A lot of the lobstermen, their traps got buried under that muck. They never did get their lobster traps back.

JM: And they never got any compensation?

GM: No. They never got nothing.

JM: What about that Argo Merchant Spill? It was about '76, I think it was a Greek (vessel).

GM: Oh, the tanker, the oil. It certainly made a mess. I don't think it hurt as far as the fishing goes because that stuff dissolves itself in a matter of a week's time. But it certainly made a mess. The only thing I noticed about it was in those years we was using a lot of manilla rope. The manilla rope that was on the surface of the water, the oil just ate it up, kind of dissolved it. If the ropes that you were towing the boats with dipped into the water when you were going through an oil spot, then it was sloppy. You got it all over you. It was a mess.

JM: I bet it was. You don't use the manilla now, do you?

GM: No, no.

JM: How about the oil drilling off the Georges Bank in the 1970's? What do you think about that?

GM: I'm an inshore fisherman. I fish in Rhode Island waters. We never noticed any bad effects from the research vessels coming in and out of here. What work they was doing out there, I don't think had any effect on us. I don't think it had too much effect on the

offshore fishermen -- unless they might have drilled and left pipes sticking up out of the bottom. That would be like leaving trash in a clean area -- pipes sticking up where the fishermen wouldn't be able to fish because if you have those big pipes sticking up, there's no way they could drag their nets through there. I think that would probably be one of the major complaints of the offshore fishermen.

JM: You mentioned last time the enforcement of the 200 mile limit isn't all that great -- that the foreigners are still out there.

GM: Today they have marine biologists -- Americans -- aboard each one of those boats (foreign fishing vessels) from what I understand. Certain species of fish are on quotas. I guess these biologists are keeping statistics on what they're taking (the foreigners). I think I read not too long ago where one of the boats had put down a certain figure on squid, and they were found to be way over on their squid catches. The foreigners are interested in the squid, the American market is not that great on squid, so Uncle Sam has been letting foreigners take squid. About six months ago, the Spaniards -- the biggest consumers of squid or the biggest market -- wanted their catch

increased. The American fisherman was fighting to keep them at the same level or cut them back some and let the American fishermen catch the squid and sell it to them (the Spaniards). That's how it was left. It is a good fish to process. The quality after the squid being frozen is good quality and it is an easy fish to handle through freezers. My point is, if there is a lot of squid out here and the Department of Commerce can set up a good trade system with the squid, then the American fishermen can keep busy catching the squid. There's good money in the squid through this exporting. By doing this, this is a good step in conservation for other species because while the Americans are busy with the squid they're leaving other species alone. If there are other species that need steps in conservation, this is an excellent way of doing it. I told this to several of the guys that were going to this meeting at the federal level. I guess they brought that point up and I think that's probably one of the points that made the Department of Commerce keep the foreigners at the quota that they had set a couple of years back.

JM: What other species need conservation?

GM: It's hard to figure. Up until 1950, we used to catch a lot of weakfish -- here in the Bay and in the traps. They're always small. They're maybe a pound apiece. Once in a while you see a big weakfish maybe go ten pounds, but it was very rare to see a big weakfish. From 1950 on back, you saw the big volume of young weakfish, --a pound apiece. We used to catch ten, fifteen thousand pounds a day of these weakfish. From 1950, they just disappeared. We got to around '75 (1975) -- a period of twenty-five years. Through that whole twenty-five years, I probably saw maybe five hundred pounds of weakfish -- total -- for twenty-five years. We felt, "Well that's the end of them, they're gone, they've been depleted." Then all of a sudden, roughly ten years ago, in July and August, we started catching weakfish. We started catching twenty, thirty thousand pounds a day and no one knew where they came from. What I couldn't understand was, these fish were depleted and all of a sudden they bounced back just like overnight. The previous year we didn't see any weakfish at all. Then all of a sudden, in one year, we're catching twenty, thirty thousand pounds a day. The funny thing about it is, the fish we're catching are all

ten pound fish. Now to get to ten pounds, it would probably take maybe six, seven years for the fish to mature to that. If a species is depleted, you think that someday, if they ever bounce back, you start seeing some young and you start seeing some young ones start to mature. But all of a sudden, they come back and they're like six, seven, eight years old. No one had ever seen them or had any idea that these fish were somewhere. Of course, the last couple of years, they been dropping down a little bit.

JM: Same size?

GM: Yes, they're all big. [Chuckles].

JM: What do the scientists say about something like that?

GM: One of the problems with the Federal Government is the Federal Government gets involved in research like the striped bass thing. The Federal Government, I think it was something like four million dollars they appropriated for the study of stripers. The first thing they do is they go out and hire a bunch of biologists, and they get a whole staff going, and these guys probably make thirty, forty, fifty thousand dollars a year apiece. Now they've been studying the striped bass for a few years

and they keep coming back and saying, "Further study is needed." Now that tells me that they're protecting their jobs. Because the minute they come back and say, "The striped bass are in good shape, no further study is needed," they've all lost their jobs. I know they're wrong, but it doesn't do any good. I take them out on the boat and I'll show them what goes on. They just look amazed. You saw the report that that Gary Shepherd sent. They just looked at it and they scratched their heads. The only way you can learn about the fisheries is go out there.

JM: And the government listens to them more than to you.

GM: Yes, and they also listen to the sports people. That's the problem. The sports people can lie like hell and they do lie like hell. The commercial fisherman tells the truth, but it doesn't work. It doesn't work.

JM: Now, we had talked about your operation and we got as far as catching the fish, getting them out of the nets. What happens after that? If you could explain the operation -- where you bring them in and take them off the boat.

GM: We fish about forty-five minutes to an hour outside Newport and --

JM: What are those places called, are there names?

GM: Yes, where we set the traps?

JM: Yes.

GM: Well, most of our fishing is done right off south of Newport. Where we have our licenses runs off of Ledge Road in the southeasterly direction. There's other companies that have nets out here that fish off of Seal Rock. But in general it's south of Newport.

JM: That isn't Coggeshall's Ledge out there?

GM: Coggeshall Point. There's Ledge Road. They call it Land's End today. I guess the names keep changing. Originally Land's End was Coggeshall's Point. There also is the Coggeshall's Ledge out there that's under the water off to the southwest of Land's End. But the traps are set just off of Newport in the spring, late April, May. All the fish companies used to fish out there the whole season -- that general area. Certain months you're fishing closer to shore, then other months you'd fish further off the shore. It all depends on the migration. In 1947, we come into the dock one day in early June and we had very little fish and the Bucolos, they're at the dock. They used to handle the selling and shipping of the fish, while the Mendonsa's of

Tallman and Mack caught the fish. So we come in in early June and hardly nothing -- which you expect at that time of the year. Our partner said to me, "Jesus, looks like the spring died quick this year." I said, "Well, same thing every year." So we come in for a few days, the same thing -- hardly no fish at all. So finally I come in one day and I said, "I think I'll take a trap and set it down Narragansett Pier," and Bucolo said, "What're you going to catch down there?" I says, "I don't know, probably nothing. That's the way it is trapping -- every July and August it dies." So he said to me, "You're not going to catch nothing down there. It's the same old bologna year in and year out."

JM: Which Bucolo was it?

GM: That was Mariano Bucolo.

JM: Senior?

GM: Senior, senior. They're all dead today these Bucolos. So anyway, we kept coming in for a few days and no fish. I mentioned again we ought to take a trap and set it down there. Finally he said to me, "Well, it's a lot of work. If you want to do it, go ahead and do it, but it'll be a lot of work for nothing." I said, "Probably is." So we set a net down

there.

JM: What did you hope to --

GM: I had no idea what was going to happen. If we continued to fish the same routine that Tallman and Mack had fished, we knew what to expect which was nothing. So we took a net down there and we set it and it was unbelievable. The boat couldn't carry the fish for about a month. Day in and day out. And, of course, around the whole waterfront, George Mendonsa was a genius. The bars was talking about George Mendonsa, the genius, the smart fisherman. I had no idea -- it was just an accident. We caught some fish down that place and it was during the dead season. Beautiful fish.

JM: What were they?

GM: Scup and butterfish. That's about what you'd catch down there. So every year when it comes June and July, that's where we go. But that has slowed down, too, a little bit. Our competitors went down there when they saw what we was doing. For years they didn't catch anything. They were close to us, they didn't catch anything. Finally they gave up down there. There was a little trick to setting down there that was miracle that we found. It was an accident the way the net was set that it

turned out that way. You could put a net down there and it wouldn't fish, but when I realized that the other guys weren't catching fish and we were, I said it didn't make sense. But then when I started studying things and I found out . . . Now I know why.

[End of side one, tape 4.]

JM: What did you study about it?

GM: If you have a net there by yourself and if you're doing good, you just assume there's fish there. But if you're not doing anything, you say there's no fish running. But if there's other nets in the area that you can compare, well then you try to figure out why are we catching fish and why aren't they? Sometimes by having competition you can learn.

JM: What were you doing that they weren't doing, or can't you say?

GM: (Laughter) No. It was funny.

JM: Are there things like that that you have with all your experience . . . that you just have a strong sense of?

GM: Yes. The greatest compliment I ever got in my life -- I didn't hear this, but I was told about it -- my father who was around ninety, was standing on the dock one day and Bucolo, the partner, was talking to him up on the wharf.

I'd come in with a boatload of fish by myself. My brothers were out there with the other boat putting more fish on the other boat. When I come in, I got the boat all ready for unloading. I got the conveyors into position and (was) running the winch by myself which was no big deal, but they thought it was something -- that one guy was doing all this. So Bucolo said to my father, "You should've made a couple like that guy." And the old man said to him, "I was a good fisherman, but I don't compare to him." That's the best . . . Someone told me about this. When we bought Tallman and Mack, the old man was working for John F. Mack where he had fished all his life -- he was the captain there. But he didn't own anything in John F. Mack. So we bought Tallman and Mack in '46 after the service (World War II). The old man bought into the company with us. When it come time to go fishing, the old man goes to work for John F. Mack. We said, "Where you going?" "Well," he says, "I've been with John F. Mack all my life. I ain't leaving John F. Mack." We said, "You're going to be our competitor over there. You're going to go over there and catch fish for him after we bought Tallman and Mack and you're an owner." He

wouldn't come with us. [Laughs.] Shows you what kind of a guy he was. But then finally he did come over when the guys he was working with over there -- he was an old man and a bunch of young, wild kids were over there and they insulted him a few times. So he got out of there.

JM: Are the crews as good these days as you used to be able to get?

GM: No, no comparison. The guys that we had years ago -- of course, I was young too . . . Well, I never missed a day. We used to go nightclubbing and have a few drinks and wake up with a big head, but those guys would all be there. As a matter of fact, a lot of those guys in those years they'd go out and get drunk and get bombed, but they'd go down the wharf and sleep on the boat. These guys today wouldn't show up. Another thing too, was that those guys in those years when I was in my twenties and thirties, if there's a guy working alongside of me, he wasn't going to let me outshine him. And I wasn't going to let him outshine me. But these young guys today, if you work and hustle, they'll just look at you and watch you work and hustle. They have no pride to try to make themselves equal.

Any place I ever worked, I always heard, "Come back. You can get a job here any time." Of course, there wasn't many places I worked other than fishing. But these guys today have no pride in trying to be known as a worker. They don't have it. Also, too, you find, even with us there's a few guys there that puff on that marijuana and stuff and they are absolutely stupid. There's nothing that can get through their heads. They can be there for years and years and they know less today than the first day they started. They don't learn. I say it's that junk that they're taking.

JM: It's terrible. What do you do about that?

GM: All I tell them is that if they get hurt out there on the boats, and they wind up in the hospital, I'm going to have them tested for any Marijuana or junk before they can come back on the company. I've seen a few of the guys on the job on a boat puffing marijuana back there in the stern of the boat -- you know what they're doing back there. So I hop on them and I tell them. I say, "If you guys get hurt, just remember, I'm going to have you tested." They just look at me. It slows them down. You can see the way they're hanging around with one another, what's going on. You can sense what

they're doing. They don't learn. Things happen quick fishing. Instinctively you react. You see something, you jump. If a guy is in a position that he needs help right quick, you jump and do it. With these guys, a guy could be in a little jam or something that he needed help right quick, but by the time they react to help this guy, it's all over. As a matter of fact, kiddingly, I say to those guys, "If I ever fall overboard, don't even come back to get me because by the time you guys react to come back to try to save me, it would be too late. So just keep going home." That's what I tell them. [Chuckle].

JM: What effect does [it have] if someone has a really bad hangover? That can be kind of dangerous.

GM: No, the hangovers -- I've seen lots of guys with hangovers. I say the hangover's not as bad as this other stuff. No where's near as bad. Of course, if the man is still drunk, you wouldn't let him on the boat. But if he's just feeling miserable from a hangover, that's different.

JM: He can do it . . . So after you take the fish in, you bring it back into --

GM: Oh yes. That's where we started.

JM: That's all right.

GM: [Chuckle]. We put the fish aboard. We can load the boat up with a hundred thousand pounds of fish in about twenty minutes. [We] Put the fish on the boat, then we come back into Newport -- into the dock. At the dock, we have all the facilities for unloading like conveyors, ice, and boxes. On the way in, during the month of May, when we're catching a lot of fish, my son stays at the dock. We call him [with] what we've got and from that he determines what species we've got and where they might go. If he has to get trucks, he starts contacting the trucking company. They get the trucks down there. By the time we get there, we have trucks ready, so once we start unloading the fish, he's already started talking to the buyers and he's got the destination pretty well figured out where some of these fish are going. Then he gets the trucks that are going to those areas -- say North Carolina, Virginia, New York, or Philadelphia. So once we start unloading the fish, the men will start putting the fish right into the trucks. By the time the boat is unloaded, the fish is already on the trucks. It's not laying around in the building where

you have a long day. By throwing it in the trucks, it shortens up the day.

JM: And that's all mechanized now?

GM: Yes.

JM: And it wasn't when you started, was it? Wasn't most of it done by hand?

GM: Oh yes. For years, we used to shovel the fish off the boats with scoop nets and dump the fish in buckets. Each bucket would hold about a hundred pounds. You had a man on the winch and the guy hooking up the buckets. You had two men on deck shoveling fish into buckets. Then you had one man walking around with a hook and he'd hook up the buckets and there's a guy on the winch. So there was always four men on the boat unloading. You'd heist up a hundred pounds at a time, then you dumped it on a table and there was usually six men on the table that sorted out the fish for sizes and different species.

JM: Different things come in at different times of the year?

GM: Yes. During late April and early May, the first fish to migrate north is the scup and striped bass will migrate about that time. But we stay away from the striped bass because of the regulations. We can set these nets where

we can not get involved with striped bass and we can also set these nets where we can catch them. With the regulations there is, during the northerly migration of striped bass, we keep away from the stripers because we're only going to waste a lot of time where we could have other nets that we would be catching maybe squid and scup. The first migration up would be the striped bass and the scup. Then somewhere around the fifth of May would come the squid. The tenth, fifteenth of May would be the sea bass, flukes and mackerel. Then as the migration continues into May, the fish will start running smaller. The best quality and the biggest scup will run in early May. By the time you get to the fifteenth of May, there's lots of times where about ten percent of the fish is marketable -- a good size -- and the scup -- mostly the scup -- there'd be a lot of young scup coming then. Then we have what we call a sifter. We put the sifter on the net and we move the boat off the net a little bit so there's space between the net and the boat. We put the sifter in and then we dump the scup into the sifter from the net. They swim around inside the sifter until all the little ones go through. Just the big ones remain. Then we

haul the sifter -- we take the big fish. I've seen times where we put a hundred and fifty thousand pounds of scup in a sifter and wind up with about four, five thousand pounds of big fish. The little ones escape alive.

JM: That's great.

GM: Anytime that we could let the fish go alive, we always did. There's lots of times when we'd get out there and the weather would be real nasty and we wouldn't be able to handle the sifter. We wouldn't haul them then. We'd come back because you'd only load the boat up with a lot of young stuff that had no value to you and you was killing it. There's lots of times you couldn't haul the nets because you'd have to have pretty decent weather to handle the sifter. You couldn't go out there in real nasty weather and do it. Sometimes, using the sifter, you would lose the squid because the squid would go through the sifter too. You'd lose some good fish also with the sifter. But then the sifter, too, would pay off for you. Years ago when there was plenty of fish, you'd go out there and load the boat up or maybe not load it up, but put maybe twenty or thirty thousand pounds on the boat. You'd come in and you'd work for hours picking the little ones

out of the big ones and say out of thirty thousand pounds you'd probably wind up selling five thousand pounds. Then you'd have a whole bunch of little fish that you'd have to go to trash. So you'd only wind up with four, five thousand pounds of fish that you'd market that day, and you went through a lot of work. By sifting the fish out there, the only thing you'd put on the boat would be this four, five thousand pounds. By sifting, you could go haul another net and sift the second net, whereas if you took all the trash, you'd have to come in after the first net and you'd only be accomplishing say four, five thousand [pounds]. But you could go through maybe two or three nets and sift the whole three nets out and at the end of the day, you'd be marketing maybe fifteen thousand pounds of good fish. What counts is what you'd accomplish at the end of the day by sifting the fish.

JM: Is that a pretty new thing -- the sifter?

GM: No, we've been using it for quite a few years. The other companies . . . Down at Sakonnet, they've only been using it maybe about two, three years now. As a matter of fact, I gave them the specifications on what our sifters were. I felt that I didn't like to give our

competitors any information, but --

JM: But something like ^{that} could help you.

GM: Yes, I knew that if they released the young alive, maybe someday I'd catch some of them. It was good for the fish stock. There's still one company that does not use a sifter. They wind up with a lot of work and a lot of junk at the dock. I don't want to mention the name.

JM: So it's all sorted out at the dock and then it's marketed immediately. You said that the biggest market for the scup was in the South.

GM: A few years ago they was coming in day after day with maybe fifty, sixty, seventy, a hundred thousand pounds of scup. If you put all that scup into the Fulton Fish Market, they'd pay you back hardly nothing. Maybe say twenty cents -- we'll use that figure. Of course, the market would be loaded with scup. When the buyers come into the Fulton Market like two, three, four o'clock in the morning, they look around the market and they see all these boxes of scup. These sellers in New York more or less have to plead with these guys to buy the scup so they can push it all out that day. These buyers, when they see that big volume, act as though they're not too interested in buying the scup and, of course, the scup sells

cheaper. The guys eventually gotta keep cutting the price to get rid of it. They know the following day there's going to be another load in there. If you come in with fifty thousand [pounds of] scup and you put maybe ten thousand into the New York market, you can take the other forty thousand and you can sell it down the coast somewhere. That fish does not get into the market. And New York controls the price. So if the fish is limited in New York, instead of getting the twenty cents, you might get the thirty. Then you can say to the people you're selling to down South, "I'm getting thirty out of New York today." Then you can get the thirty from them. But if you put the big volume in, you're going to hurt yourself. So a lot of people today are avoiding New York because New York controls the whole price.

JM: Your price is set by New York now?

GM: Yes, the whole Atlantic Coast is controlled by New York.

JM: Who does the trucking? Do you have your own trucks?

GM: No, we don't own any trucks. One reason is, during the spring of the year, when you're catching a lot of fish, if you send out three truckloads today -- three trailers -- and

they're over the road maybe to New York, Philadelphia, or Baltimore, and then the next day you're coming in again with another two or three truckloads of fish on the boat, then you've got three trucks on the road you got to own. Then for the second day you probably have to own another two or three trucks. You could wind up with six trucks.

JM: That's a lot of money.

GM: That's right. They go maybe a hundred thousand dollars a piece today. Then after the month of May, you're lucky if you can fill up a half a truck. For one month out of the year, you've got maybe a half a million dollars invested in trucks and eleven months out of the year they'd be just sitting on the wharf doing nothing. It's smarter to pay the trucking companies to carry your fish because as you need a truck, they'll send you one.

JM: Now how about the sea bass? Where is that marketed?

GM: They're tough in New York as far as price goes. If you have a species of fish that there's not a big volume on the market, New York will pay you a fortune for [that] fish. Like sea bass -- you don't catch a big volume of sea bass -- years ago we did. If you come in with maybe a

couple of thousand pounds of sea bass in early May, you can ship that into New York and get probably triple or quadruple the price that you will any place else. That's what's good about New York. It's almost like if something is in demand, it's unbelievable what they'll pay you. You couldn't get that any place else. So that's why you gotta kind of play with New York. But they'll burn you. When there's a big volume there, they'll be tougher. We had an incident a few years ago where we shipped maybe to about four guys in New York. Four or five handle our fish and you can send them in so many packages a piece of scup, of mackerel -- all different species. They all get a few of each variety of fish. The next day when you get your returns back (because you never know what you're gonna get paid when you send the fish into New York on consignment), one guy will pay you the twenty cents for scup, the fifteen for the mackerel, the thirty for the sea bass and those whole five guys will be identical. You say, "Why the hell to we send to these four, five different guys if they're all gonna pay the same thing." Of course, what they do in New York, these guys say, "Did you get any fish from Tallman and Mack today? Yes,

I got fish from Tallman and Mack. What are we going to pay?" They all get together on what they're going to pay. A couple of years ago, there was a guy that was calling us all the time and he wanted our fish. We didn't want to get involved with shipping to any more houses in New York because it's a pain here loading the trucks. You got to put this guy into the front of the truck, this guy number two position in the truck, another guy number three, and if you have different varieties, they'll say, "How come you gave this guy all the good fish and you only gave me two packages?" Anyway, this guy wanted our fish, and we was getting the same consistent prices from all these guys all the time, so we tried this new guy. Right away this new guy is paying us more. He's sitting in on the meetings, but he's sending us more money than the other guys. He wants to get in with us. So then you use this against him. You say, "Look other people are paying us this and they're paying us that." Then the guy that's paying you the best price, you're sending him more and you're cutting back on the other guys. Finally, the other guys all got together when they only had a handful of fish apiece and this

other guy had the big volume. The other four, five guys tripled or quadrupled the price they sent back to us. They wasn't getting burnt because the checks were small because the volume of fish was small. The guy that had the big volume, when he found out what we got back, he had to pay us the same thing. He had to send us back more money than what the fish was actually sold for. This is what they do to one another. When one guy steps out of line, they burn him. [Laughs.]

JM: So what happened to him?

GM: He paid us.

JM: Do you still sell to him?

GM: Oh yes. We still sell to all the guys. But that's what they do to one another. They have to be careful amongst themselves.

JM: I wouldn't want to work there.

GM: [Chuckle.] I guess if you step out of line too far, you float down the Hudson.

JM: No thanks.

GM: Oh yes, that's happened there.

JM: Do you know of anyone that's happened to?

GM: A few years ago, I can't remember -- it was over ten, fifteen years ago -- there was a few of those guys where the bodies were found. I say the stevedores there that unload the trucks

-- that's all controlled by the rackets in New York. They are tough. They unload your trucks and you don't say anything.

JM: What about the quality of your fish -- the way it's caught compared to trawled fish?

GM: We have the best quality. There's lots of times we're unloading fish at the dock, if it's a cool day and a cloudy day, the fish are still flipping at the dock. They're going into a box and some of them are still flipping. They get iced. We can get fish down to North Carolina less than twenty-four hours after it stops swimming. Whereas, these boats that go offshore, if they're out there for eight days, the fish they caught the first day, is eight days old before they even come home. Then when they do come into port, they go to a wholesaler and that takes another day -- unloading the fish. Then the following day, the fish goes over the road. So the trawlers -- the offshore fishermen -- their fish could be ten days old before it gets to its destination, where our fish can be there in less than 24 hours after it stops swimming. There's no comparison. We don't get paid for our quality either.

JM: You don't?

GM: No. They talk about quality down there in New

York and those places, but when we get a volume of fish in there, today it can be high and you're anticipating, "I hope that our fish is the only fish on the market tomorrow morning." Then when tomorrow morning comes, you get the whole line, "Oh Christ, there's plenty of fish showed up in Jersey. They hit the fish in Jersey and they hit them there or they hit them in another place." Then you say, "But those are dragged fish." And they say, "Well, we know the quality is not as good as yours, but we can't pay you a big price because if there's a big difference in price, the buyers will still go with the dragged fish." So that's what you hear.

JM: Is any of your fish sold locally?

GM: Any volume that's sold locally is the from the New Bedford, Fall River and East Providence area. There's lot of Portugese people come across [from Portugal] the last few years. Out of that area, there's about fifteen or twenty peddlers that have pickup trucks. They come down and they buy fish from us and they peddle through the Portugese area. So they're the ones -- as far as locally goes, that's about it. Not much of the fish we catch is the type of fish that goes to be filleted and processed.

Most of the fish that's consumed in this area is filleted. Mostly the scup, the butterfish, the mackerel, the squid -- all that is whole fish that goes into the market. But the Portugese people like the fish with the bone and the skin, whereas the people that have lived here all their lifetime are interested in fillets.

JM: That seems to be what people are prejudiced for in this part of the world. There are so few fish that we eat here.

GM: There's a lot of fish consumed here. The foreigners that come here, they've educated the Americans on lots of species. There's lots of species that we used throw away years ago that had no market value at all.

JM: Like what?

GM: Like monkfish. Then there's the bonita. We catch a lot of bonitas in the summer months.

JM: Is that in the tuna family?

GM: Yes, they look like a small tuna -- like a big mackerel, but a small tuna. These peddlers, when we start catching bonitas, fight over the bonitas down our dock. There's lots of times that we don't have enough bonitas to supply them all and we have to share it. That fish is sold whole -- round -- it's not filleted. We

could sell that fish here and get a dollar a pound. If we took the bonita and shipped it to New York, in most cases, they wouldn't give you fifteen cents. So it's the nationalities that consume different species.

JM: Who does eat all these fish?

GM: The bonitas?

JM: Yes, the bonita.

GM: The Portugese. You figure in this area, between East Providence and Fall River and New Bedford, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if [there is] a quarter of million Portugese people. As a matter of fact, when we come in on a Sunday, these Portugese people come down to the dock and there are so many of them parked on the dock, we can't even move around on the dock. There's hundreds of them.

JM: Right down here?

GM: Yes.

JM: On Spring Wharf?

GM: Yes, on Spring Wharf. They come down and the fish is coming up the conveyor and we have to have the conveyor screened in. We have mesh over the top of it because they all have their hands in it. They look down at the boat and of course, they know that there's only a few bonitas and they know they better start

grabbing. I'm telling you, you get pushed around that dock from these women. You try to stop them from grabbing the bonitas, but you can't do it because you know if they don't grab, they're not going to get. So they start grabbing bonitas, and after a while there could be thirty, forty women running around holding bonitas. We have a guy that's selling the bonitas and weighing them and after a while he looks around and he says, "Who the hell's paid around here and who hasn't?" You don't know who's paying and who hasn't. You talk about a mess. You laugh. You have to laugh. But we know that we get beat down there [laughs].

JM: What does bonita taste like? I've never had it.

GM: I know a lot of people have taken bonita and they steam it and they make tuna salad out of it. They say it's better than the canned tuna you get. The Portugese take it and steak it and they broil it and season it with vinegar and hot pepper and garlic and that kind of stuff. It's good.

JM: It sounds great.

GM: [Laughs].

JM: How about the mackerel?

GM: The Portugese, in the spring of the year, when

the bonita are not running, these peddlers will pick up mackerel. That's what they peddle around. Didn't I tell you about mackerel?

JM: No, no.

GM: I talked to someone recently about mackerel. Years ago, mackerel was a big seller. We used to catch scup and mackerel. We wanted the mackerel and not the scup. The scup was cheap and the mackerel was an easier seller and a better seller. Then all of a sudden, the mackerel disappeared for about ten years. Around the Gloucester area there was a lot of canneries and up in Maine there was a lot of canneries. There was a fleet of boats that used to come in here in the spring. They were seiners from Gloucester. When the mackerel started migrating up the coast, these boats would all go down to off Virginia and start fishing there. They used to catch hundreds of thousands of pounds of mackerel a day. The mackerel would go to the canneries and some went to the market. Then when they disappeared, a lot of these canneries went out of business and the public got away from mackerel. Maybe the last fifteen years or so, mackerel has bounced back. They're beautiful fish, but the market isn't available anymore.

The canneries all closed. If you put a few mackerel in the market, the price drops right down to nothing.

[End of side two, tape 4].

JM: There's still a few mackerel consumed.

GM: Years ago, we were happy to see a few mackerel and we were kind of disgusted looking at scup because of the value. Now it's the other way around. Now the scup is worth sky high and the mackerel is down. The market is completely reversed.

JM: You never know.

GM: A species does disappear and it does come back. The people that consumed the mackerel all died off or something. It's hard to get the people back onto it.

JM: How about your squid?

GM: I guess there's a few squid being sold in this country. I guess the Spanish are the ones -- they buy most of the squid. They sell it throughout the world. They use it as an export themselves after they buy it. They've got big boats out here that are fishing on squid.

JM: Do you catch much?

GM: Yes, we catch a few squid. Four years ago, we was loaded with squid. Unbelievable. Evidently they must have just hit this area.

We had nets out there. We couldn't get them up -- they were loaded with squid. Squid in the net is one of the worst fish there is to handle. They sink down in the net just like lead. We have to haul that up. I had this rig that if we ever got into something like this, we could bring the weight of those fish up by power. One day out there we had this load of squid and it was unbelievable the strain that was on that net. It was cutting right through our fingers and we couldn't even budge it. This power system is slow and you got to be very careful. You're worried about the net busting. That's what happened to us. We had so much squid that the net busted right in half and of course the squid all went. We had days of handling fifty, sixty thousand pounds of squid which is unbelievable in those nets. The strain on those nets and the boats are all leaning over -- the boats that we worked on. You think that they're gonna sink with the strain. We had two nets that spring that busted wide open on us. We brought in a lot of squid that year. There's another species that for years disappeared and now the foreigners out there are doing a big job on squid and so is the American boats. There's a Joint Venture

out there at sea where the Americans catch squid and they go alongside the foreign boats and they transfer the fish out there at sea. The Americans aren't even bringing the squid to the dock. Here's a species of squid that seems like everyone's working on it pretty heavy. The fact that squid only lives for a year and a half, you'd think that they would be wiped out. How can they continue to catch these thousands and thousands of tons of squid, when the survival rate for the ones that are not caught -- they only survive a year and a half. They've got to reproduce in that year and a half's time, and yet there's plenty of them. So how do you figure conservation?

JM: Now what about the herring that you catch? What kind of herring are they? Are they alewives or the other kind?

GM: You've been doing your homework. In the spring of the year, you probably notice around these ponds like down at Newport Beach, the alewives come up the fresh water streams. You see the kids down there catching them in late April. The fall of the year is when you catch the herring. Like this time of the year now (January), there's herring in these waters. They're a cold water fish. I guess this is

about as far south as they migrate. Those herring come from up north, while the alewives come from the south. There's no market value for the herring. Years ago, we used to catch a lot of herring in November mixed with codfish. We used to sell them, but there's not that much money in them.

JM: Who would use them?

GM: In those years, they used to take and make Slim Jims [with them]. People used to chew on them with their beer. [Chuckle]. You don't see that anymore either.

JM: I think they still sell those.

GM: Europe. I guess Europe is a big consumer of herring. But then again, too, up north up in Maine, the offspring of that herring is the sardine. I guess most of those canneries up there, they've shut down too -- the way they used to process those sardines.

JM: You mentioned fluke the other day. You see that at the fish market here every now and then.

GM: You don't see too many fluke in this area. There's three species. There's the yellowtail, there's the blackback and there's the fluke. The three of them resemble one another. The fluke -- they're flat and could grow to be about

half the size of this table. They could be up to fifteen or twenty pounds. When you fillet the fluke, that is the real fillet of sole. They could be that thick -- the fillets -- an inch thick. When they fillet the yellowtail -- that's the fish that's most processed around this area for fillet. That is fillet of flounder. But that is a yellowtail. The blackback is another species that is filleted in this area too. They sell that for fillet of flounder. A lot of people go into a market and they'll ask for fillet of sole. I'd say 99% of the time, they're not getting fillet of sole -- they're getting fillet of flounder which is from the yellowtail or the blackback. But the fluke, which is the real fillet of sole, is usually shipped out to New York because you get a better price. Down South, they'll pay a better price for the fluke than what they'll get around here.

JM: Do you get much of that?

GM: Yes, in late May we get a few fluke.

JM: What do you mean by a few?

GM: If we catch three or four thousand pounds of fluke, we consider that good. This past year there was an increase. This past May there was an increase in fluke, but there was a lot of

small ones. So maybe they're bouncing back a little.

JM: Are most of the butterfish that you get exported?

GM: We haven't caught that many butterfish in recent years. What butterfish we've been catching has been going into New York. There's boats offshore here now -- draggers -- that are catching a lot of butterfish. They're bringing them in as they are. They're not sorting them out and they run all different sizes. Over in New Bedford, they've got a machine where they can run these butterfish through and they're graded. The Japanese are buying them things by the millions. As a matter of fact, last week I heard that the prices for the butterfish were something like eighty [cents], ninety [cents], a dollar and a dollar and twenty for the big ones. That's unbelievable. I guess the Japanese are paying that.

JM: You mentioned last time about having freezers that you had your bonita in in New Bedford. Do you still have a place there?

GM: We don't own a freezer. What a freezer does is, you can call a freezer up and they'll process it for you. To process fish -- probably the first month -- to get the fish in

and do a real good quality job of freezing, it'll cost you somewhere around fifteen cents a pound. [It's] What they call I.Q.F., which is Instant Quick Freeze, which is the best way of doing it to get the quality at the end of this thing. To get I.Q.F. in the first month of storage, they charge you about fifteen cents a pound and every additional month from then on, it's roughly about a cent a pound while it's being stored there. So if you have fish in there for five or six months, it'll cost you about twenty cents a pound, in five or six months time.

JM: That's a lot.

GM: But then again, this past year, we was thinking about freezing some of the scup. Every year, when it get's into July and August, we have lots of buyers. They call us wanting to know if we froze any scup. When the scup gets scarce, you get all kinds of phone calls. There was a time this past May when we had a few extra scup and the price dropped down to around thirty-five, forty cents. At that point, you begin to wonder, should you freeze or not? We sold the volume of scup roughly around those figures. About three months later, scup was selling for a dollar seventy a

pound. We know if we had frozen some of those fish that we got the forty cents for, even though it cost us twenty cents, if we sold for sixty later, we'd be equal in the price we would have got at the forty. I know that we never would have got the dollar seventy because you wouldn't get that for frozen fish. A dollar seventy was the price for fresh stuff that was being caught. We've been kind of kicking this thing around and I think this year we might freeze some. So even if we sell it for a dollar -- we should get a dollar for frozen fish. But when you sold for the forty, by the time you took the freight out and the box out of that forty cents, you probably got a twenty cent profit. So if it's still selling for forty, if you sell for the dollar, even though it's going to cost you sixty, that means you're going to put twenty cents out of your own pocket. Then you figure the forty, so you figure roughly sixty would have given you the same thing you would've got. So you got to figure from the sixty. At forty you may save twenty cents clear. At the dollar, you're doubling the profit. You make forty cents clear when you figure it out. Even though it's going to cost you a little bit to freeze, at a

dollar you can double your profit than at forty even figuring in the freezer cost.

JM: Do you have it all processed in New Bedford?

GM: No, it's not processed. The scup and butterfish and mackerel are not processed. The whole fish is frozen, so it's not processed.

JM: Oh, I see.

[End of side one, tape 5].

[Today is] February 11, 1987. This is my fourth interview with Mr. George Mendonsa.

GM: The other day I made a statement that there were fishing boats -- I want to make this clear that they were not Rhode Island boats. From a period of over twenty years, from 1950 to maybe 1970 or a little beyond, that were catching lobsters. At least twenty-five, thirty percent of their catch were egg-bearing lobsters. They brushed a lot of those eggs. I saw the lobsters come in. I even helped unload them. I had nothing to do with the buying of them. I [was] just giving the people a hand unloading these lobsters. Most commercial fishermen, through their experience, can look at a lobster and they won't be right a hundred percent of the time, but the real experienced fishermen can tell if a lobster was brushed. Of course, he can't positively prove it.

JM: How can you tell?