

Interview with: Douglas Miner
Occupation: Fishermen
Port Community: Point Judith, RI
Interviewer: Kate Yentes and Tarsila Seara
Interview Location: Douglas's Home
Date: 06/10/2010
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Transcription for Douglas Interview
6/14/10

KY: I have two release forms. So this one is the one that NOAA uses. We have a web-based archive that we put the oral histories on just so they don't get lost. We also put the Oral Histories on so they don't get lost, I don't know if you've heard of Voices from the Fisheries, it's a website...

DM: I haven't.

KY: OK. It's a website and a woman out of New Bedford is actually running it and basically it has interviews from, I know as far out as Maine. I'm not sure how far south they go, of all different types of fishermen. So if you don't mind being on the website, you just want to fill out...

DM: Alright.

KY: The two forms.

DM: So how do you know Ellen, did you interview her too?

KY: We did an interview with her too. Back in, shoot, I think it was 2007, my supervisor Lisa did an oral history with her and last, I would say in October, we did the survey with her, too. And then she told us about Junio.

DM: Yup. Junio Filipinni

KY: Yup, so we did this whole process.

DM: Yeah he's a good kid.

KY: He is. He was extremely nice and...

DM: He used to work with me. He quit fishing when I quit running the boat.

KY: [to Tarsila] Some of the questions are the same for the survey as they are for the oral history. So if you want to like, keep track of, or like write in the answers.

TS: Would you mind if I moved the computer?

DM: Nope. It's my daughters, she just bought it. She ruined her other one, so she saved up her babysitting money.

KY: You have a beautiful home.

DM: Thanks.

KY: So nice to be out of the city [laughs].

DM: The city of Wakefield?

KY: Providence. I live near Providence.

DM: Is that good enough for you?

KY: Yeah that's great.

DM: I don't know if I'm supposed to fill it all out.

KY: Just if you could sign it at the bottom. Its not down there, somehow it got cut off.

DM: Yeah actually I was thinking, my sister lives right across the street from URI. My sister-in- law. Biscuit City road.

KY: Thank you. So this is Kate Yentes and Tarsila Seara. And we're interviewing Doug Miner. And if you could please just state your address and how old you are and how you are involved in fishing in general terms?

DM: Douglas Miner, 120 Miner Pentway Stonington Connecticut. And I used to fish, I fished for 25 years and I finally decided to get out two years ago because the state of the fisheries and now I work on a tug boat.

KY: If at any time you want something off the record, feel free to turn that off, please. We've had that happen quite a few times. Or if you don't feel like answering something you could just say 'pass'. So how long have you been at this address?

DM: 47 years, I grew up across the street.

KY: OK, so you're from this area originally.

DM: Yes.

KY: OK. And can you tell me a little bit about when you were growing up, what it was like around here, it's still pretty similar?

DM: It's still pretty similar. It's built up a little bit more. It's a quiet area.

KY: OK and does anybody else around here fish? Or?

DM: Um, not very close. No people I know right in this neighborhood that fish.

KY: OK. And where is your family originally from?

DM: Stonington. Same place.

KY: OK, so you don't, do you know when they migrated over to the US or?

DM: My father's family came over in 1692.

KY: OK and where did they come from?

DM: They came from England. They originally landed in Salem. And then they moved to Stonington. I guess they built a second house in town.

KY: Wow.

DM: Been here for a while.

KY: And can you tell me about your family members, your wife, and you have just two children?

DM: Yup, two children. My wife is a school teacher and my son is in 11th grade and my daughter is in 8th grade.

KY: How much education have you had?

DM: Just the high school diploma.

KY: Have you had any other family members involved in fishing?

DM: No.

KY: No brother in-laws or?

DM: I actually, I had a cousin that fished probably 40 to 50 years ago. That's it.

KY: What made you get into fishing without having somebody in it previously?

DM: I guess I just liked working outside. And I tried it when I was young and I stuck with it

KY: How old were you when you first went fishing?

DM: 18.

KY: And how long have you been married?

DM: For 21 years.

KY: And you said you liked working outside? What, were you working down on the dock, down near docks that made you want to try out fishing?

DM: Actually I started off I delivered fish for a little while. And drove a delivery truck.

KY: What other industry jobs have you had?

DM: Well I cut wood for a while. And I did carpentry work for a while.

KY: And did you start out as a sternman on a boat? Or did you start out as a captain?

DM: I started out as a deckhand.

KY: OK. Do you remember how old you were when you started? Was it at 18?

DM: I was 18 when I started fishing. I probably took my first boat as captain when I was 20.

KY: And have you always fished? You used to fish out of Point Judith?

DM: Yeah. Point Judith

KY: And have you always fished out of there?

DM: No, I spent probably 7 years out of Long Island and probably 7 or 8 years out of Maine. A short while in Boston, and a little bit out of Gloucester.

KY: What was the reason for the different ports?

DM: Well I've worked on, I think, 5 different boats and the whole time I've been fishing different fish and you make out better unloading them in different ports. And they're close to the fishing grounds, also.

KY: What species have you targeted?

DM: Squid, whiting, all different groundfish species, herring, mackerel, swordfish, tuna fish. I've only been involved with trawling. And I did a little, one summer of long-lining also.

KY: What made you stay with trawling and not get into a different fishery?

DM: The money was always good and I liked the people I worked with. And scalloping always sounded like it was really hard work and tough on people too. I had no desire to go lobstering.

KY: What type of, so you just fished on trawling boats? But what was the size of the boats?

DM: When I first started I was on a little boat that was 60 feet. And I was there for 6 months and all the other boats had been 84 feet and up. 84-94 feet.

KY: And have you ever owned a boat, or just been captain?

DM: No. Just been captain.

KY: And what was a typical trip like? The duration of the trip, who decides where you go fishing?

DM: The last 6 years I've fished I did mostly squid and whiting and they were three to four day trips. I'd have 80 days to go groundfishing for the year. Those trips would be 7 to 10 days.

KY: And what was it like being out on the boat? What time did you guys get up, how long were you working?

DM: There was only one boat I ever worked on where we ran a watch where we actually worked for 8, slept for 4. All the other boats you pretty much got up every time you wound the net up. So you worked around the clock.

KY: Where did most of the crew come from?

DM: Most of the crew I've worked with was either from New Bedford, Connecticut, or Rhode Island.

KY: How many crew were on a boat when you were?

DM: They ranged from three to six.

KY: How easy was it to obtain competent crew members and keep them on your boat?

DM: It was getting tougher all the time. Towards the end of my fishing career, the crew was getting harder to get.

KY: And was there any reason, were guys jumping around on different boats trying to make more money?

DM: It seemed like the young people weren't getting involved in fishing anymore. Mostly the older people were sticking with it. Gets a lot of bad press for fishermen since not a lot of people are getting into it.

KY: Would you advise a young person to get into fishing today?

DM: No, probably not.

KY: And why not?

DM: Just, the regulations, it's getting tougher to make a living.

KY: And would you still be a fisherman if you had your life to live over?

DM: Starting out now? I would probably be getting on a tug boat. I'd still be working on the water. I probably wouldn't fish, though.

KY: And what do you do on the tug boat?

DM: Right now I'm a deck hand and I'm working my way back up again.

KY: What does the tug boat you work on do?

DM: Well the boat I'm on is 117 feet. And you push around a 400 foot petroleum barge. They send us anywhere from Texas to Canada.

KY: And how long, so you might be gone for long periods of time?

DM: I'm working six weeks on the boat, and three weeks off.

KY: Wow, ok.

DM: Which is longer than I really want to be away from home, but it's what I'm doing.

KY: What were the greatest challenges when you were fishing?

DM: The greatest challenges...I guess the big thing I was always concerned about was not getting anybody hurt and making money for the crew. I had one guy get hurt and I felt pretty bad about it.

KY: Were they, are they going through any safety training?

DM: No, all fishing boats they have to have a monthly safety drill. And you have to have 2 people with first aid and CPR on the boat. That's pretty much it.

KY: For you, what makes a good fisherman?

DM: I guess you have to be determined. You can't give up too easy. You know it's not always easy.

KY: Anything else? What made you a good fisherman?

DM: What made me a good fisherman? I don't know, it's nice if you catch fish. I guess, if you consider it you make money for you and crew you're a good fisherman. You have to treat the crew fairly too. Some people are pretty miserable to work for.

KY: How were the trip profits shared on the boat?

DM: A percentage. The last boat I ran the boat owner took 5% off the top, then we paid expenses. Then it was split 50/50, what was left. So you should call it a broken 50. And the crew usually ended up with 8 to 10% of the gross stock.

KY: What are some of the pros and cons of being involved in fishing?

DM: It's a pretty independent lifestyle and not locked up inside all the time. You pretty much fish wherever you wanted years ago. It's pretty regulated now. You get to go to different places, too.

KY: Was Point Judith, in your kind of later years of fishing, your home and your port of landing?

DM: Yes it was.

KY: OK. In your opinion, what years were best for the fishing industry?

DM: My best years were probably the mid-90s, money-wise.

KY: And was that because you were catching a lot, or you had more days to go out?

DM: The prices were good; I had enough days, pretty much fish where I wanted.

KY: What kinds of affects do you think the present regulations are having on the industry?

DM: I think they're starving everybody out of business. They're just making it tougher and tougher to make a living.

KY: What regulations when you were fishing affected your fishing activity?

DM: Can you repeat that again?

KY: When you were fishing, what regulations affected your fishing activity?

DM: They limited the days I could fish for groundfish. The twine-size, which really wasn't that big of a deal since it's the law, but that and then you had to start logging the areas you fished to declare where you were going to go before you left the dock. And if you wanted to change some of the areas, you'd have to come back in, re-declare, and then go back out. Which doesn't really make much sense if you're 180 miles off shore.

KY: Were there any, despite those regulations, were there any that affected your family at all? Or your income?

DM: They didn't really affect my family too much. I guess the income was affected, like the by-catch; you couldn't keep the by-catch. You know if you could keep some of that and the last part of it. You're picking some of the cheapest fish I caught out of the bag of fish and throwing over some of the most expensive ones because I wasn't allowed to keep them, which was kind of a waste.

KY: Right. Because they were already dead?

DM: Dead, pretty much.

KY: So you haven't felt any, like, regulations haven't caused any strain within the family; you were able to keep fishing separate?

DM: Well, you know the last part of it, the money was getting worse. So I guess you could say a little bit of strain there. The last year I fished I made about 30% less than the previous year, which is a pretty big pay cut.

KY: And that price drop was because of the price of fish that you would get in port?

DM: Well the money I made with the combination of the regulations, the price of fuel. Fuel went up.

KY: What are some of the ebbs and flows in the fisheries for you? When you first started out, was it always good for a period of time?

DM: When I started you could pretty much go wherever you want, you could catch whatever you want, which was nice. And the last part of it pretty much was waiting for them to tell you where you can go, what you can catch, and how long you have to catch it.

KY: And then you also had to start logging in a lot more. That's one thing Junio said is that wherever you went you always had to log in.

DM: When we were ground fishing, you're 24 hours a day, from when you leave the dock until you, when you get in. Like wearing an ankle bracelet.

KY: What is the timeline for you when things began to change in terms of your financial stability in respect to fishing?

DM: Probably around 2008 or 2007 is when I really just thought I had to make a move. Because I, I couldn't see fishing getting any better. It's time to bail out.

KY: When you left the industry, you didn't have a boat that you had to sell or permits or anything?

DM: No. I was captain on a boat, and I found somebody to replace me before I left.

KY: OK, so you actually found someone?

DM: Yeah. I found a replacement. The owner had always treated me fairly so I figured I at least owed him that.

KY: What do you think the future holds for fishing?

DM: I think its going to be tough for the next 5 years. But I think it will eventually rebound to where it will be good again. Maybe not for 10 years.

KY: Is your social network fishermen?

DM: Actually I haven't really talked to anybody I used to fish with since I've gotten out of it. Just the one guy Dan Macieski.

KY: Who would you consider in your circle of friends? People you met through your kids' school activities? Or just people around here?

DM: Mostly coworkers now that I work with. Neighbors, friends from around the neighborhood, people I went to school with.

KY: Are you involved in any way in the fishing community?

DM: Not anymore.

KY: When you were fishing were you part of any organizations?

DM: No. Nothings changed much.

KY: So what has it been like being a fisherman with a family?

DM: It's the only life I've really known. It's a lot of time away from the family, that's probably the toughest part.

KY: What about trying to be in a relationship when you're further away? Or dividing, let's say, you come home, how do you divide up household chores, or discipline?

DM: I actually have always done a lot of work when I'm home to give my wife a break. She does all the work around the house when I'm gone.

KY: And does she have any positive or negative feelings about being married to a fisherman?

DM: She sometimes complains that I'm gone a lot. It has been a pretty good lifestyle, though. I was able to keep my wife home when the kids were little. She's a stay at home mom. I could afford to do that. I like to think it made a difference.

KY: A lot of people think that it's a great benefit for their children. So what did your parents do for work?

DM: My father was construction. He did stone work, he built break-waters.

KY: So he was still kind of on the water. And what about your mother?

DM: My mother, when I was little she was a stay at home mom. I guess when I got in high school she worked at the hospital.

KY: And did you do all your log books or your bookkeeping or did you wife help out?

DM: I did all the paperwork on the boat

KY: And as far as finances were concerned, did you guys share that task?

DM: The household? Yeah, she took care of most of the bills at home. I just put the money in the checking account.

KY: OK. Are you aware of any festivals or anything around here for fishing or in the Point Judith area?

DM: Just the Blessing of the Fleet, I guess.

KY: And did you ever take part in that?

DM: I believe once.

KY: Do you think it's kind of going by the wayside? Like, not a lot of people are participating?

DM: Yeah I do, I do. You know, when I started fishing the people would drink on the boat and it would be like a party atmosphere. The insurance companies frown on that now, so you can't do that.

KY: Was there boat insurance when you were fishing?

DM: Yeah.

KY: And did you have any health insurance?

DM: Yeah, I've always had health insurance and it was very expensive. When I was captain of the boat, the boat owner usually paid my health insurance for the whole family, which is a pretty big bonus. 18,000 a year is the last part of it.

KY: Why did you choose to have health insurance?

DM: You have to have health insurance. If you get hurt or if your family gets sick.

KY: I just asked, but um, some people up in, because I'm looking at Maine also, can't, just can't afford it so they just don't get it.

DM: That's my son, Eli.

KY: [to Eli] Hi. [to DM] Do you know what kind of coverage it was or what made you choose that kind of coverage or did the boat owner just kind of say 'oh this is it'?

DM: Well I usually had Blue Cross. And when I was purchasing the insurance by myself, I couldn't get in a Delta Dental Plan. Last autumn the boat owner put me on this company plan where I had Delta Dental for the whole family.

KY: What are health issues specific to fishing? Both physical and mental health issues?

DM: There are a lot of people with carpal tunnel I guess. I think it's actually overall a pretty healthy lifestyle. You're outside, you're doing hard work.

KY: Did you have any physical health problems related to fishing?

DM: No.

KY: No? You're very lucky. And in your opinion how important is it to have health coverage?

DM: I think it's very important.

KY: And just because there is a lot of safety issues or a lot of things could go wrong?

DM: Well if you have a family then you have to be able to take your kids to the doctor and not worry about paying for it. Me, myself, I've been to the doctor maybe 3 times in 25 years, so.

KY: Has anyone in your household experienced any mental health issues such as maybe stress, anxieties in relation to fishing?

DM: No.

KY: And have you noticed any negative characteristics around the fishing community? Such as drugs, just in the general community, drugs or alcohol?

DM: I've been fortunate, I've always worked on good boats and we've never had a problem with any drugs. But some of the boats have a reputation for having problems, and they weren't the people I worked with and I usually didn't associate with them.

KY: How do you think fishermen are viewed from the outside community?

DM: Negative perceptive. I don't think many people think too highly of fishermen. You hear about the bad fishermen, you never hear about the good ones.

KY: Just in the community in general, have you, did you see any anxiety or stress with other fishermen? Any, like was there high rates of separation, divorce, stress, anxiety?

DM: I wouldn't say divorce is any higher than anywhere else. But, you know, for the past few years quite a few people I know have lost their boats so that's got to be a lot of stress there.

KY: Do you think that when you were fishing that it allowed you to get the healthcare that you and your family needed? Like the coverage was...

DM: Yeah because, like I said, I paid my health insurance and I worked with a lot of people that didn't have health insurance and it definitely affected them. They wouldn't go get looked at when they should have.

KY: So you said you have been to the doctor maybe three times in the last 25 years, is there any reason?

DM: If I get hurt.

KY: So you don't go for like regular physicals?

DM: Well for the past couple years I've been getting a routine physical every year. But the last two years, other than that it's been about three times.

KY: Do you think that alcohol and drugs abuse are more or less common in people that fish or do you think it's, you know, it's present in any industry that you're in.

DM: I think its present in any industry, but fishing is a pretty hard lifestyle, too, so. A lot of people drink as much on their few days on land as the other people do on, spaced out over the whole time of the week.

KY: And with your job now, do you have healthcare?

DM: Yes.

KY: Is it comparable to what you had when you were fishing?

DM: Yes, about the same.

KY: Is there anything else you want to add to this part?

DM: Nope.

TS: I didn't get his age, do you have the information? I'm sorry.

DM: 47.

TS: Ok I wasn't sure that you said that before. Have you done anything else to earn money since your left fishing or you've been tug-boating since you've..?

DM: Just tug-boating

TS: When you were fishing, did you attend any public meetings where fishery management issues were discussed?

DM: Just a few.

TS: Any in particular that you remember?

DM: I was in herring fishing when I attended a few of them. Pelagic and trawling meetings.

TS: You said just a few, how many?

DM: Three.

TS: And did you talk at the meetings, present ideas, debate issues?

DM: No.

TS: You said your tug-boating now. Did you need some additional training to get this job?

DM: I took some classes. It just made it easier to get the job. It increased my pay a little when I started.

KY: Did you know anybody that's doing tug-boating. How did you decide?

DM: There are probably 14 people I know that used to fish that bailed out and are all working on tug-boats now.

KY: And have they left because of management decisions then trickling down to affecting their...?

DM: Pretty much, that's why most of them have gotten out: money. The bottom line and money was getting worse and the regulations. Consistency, I guess.

KY: How did you learn the skills you needed for fishing? To rise up to be a captain?

DM: Well when I first started I got a book, The Commercial Fisherman's Handbook and I read that and I taught myself how to mend before I even started fishing. And then I just worked my way up.

KY: What are some hot topics around fishing communities now?

DM: Now it's probably the regulations.

KY: What about when you worked in fishing?

DM: Probably still the regulations. Everybody's talking about the laws and how it's going to affect them.

KY: Are you aware of any superstitions that the fishermen have?

DM: There are all kinds of superstitions, I guess.

KY: Yeah, like what?

DM: Tipping deck plates upside-down is bad luck. Black sea bags are bad luck. I didn't believe that one.

KY: Did you believe any of them?

DM: Not usually. The black sea bag one I kind of believed that, though. First time I brought a black sea bag the captain and I both got food poisoning. The second time I brought it we dragged up a dead body in the net. And I never brought it back after that.

KY: Oh my gosh. What was that like to bring up a dead body?

DM: A little weird.

KY: Yeah. I mean, you had to call the coast guard?

DM: Yeah.

KY: Wow, have you ever pulled up anything else interesting?

DM: Yeah you get all kinds of stuff. Nothing real interesting, I guess. Little boats, artifacts.

TS: Mustard agent.

KY: The guy who just pulled up a, was it a canon ball or something and with mustard gas?

DM: Yeah we dragged up torpedoes and depth chargers and stuff too.

KY: That's all of our questions.

DM: Ok.

End Interview