

Interview with Mary O'Rourke [MO]
Occupation: Net builder at Trawl Works
Port Community: Point Judith, RI
Interviewer: Lisa Colburn [LC] and Azure Dee Westwood [AW]
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INDEX: (minutes:seconds)

Interview

[00:00]

LC: The other thing is would you mind verbally saying you've read the consent form. What's your name, etc?

MO: My name is Mary O'Rourke. I have read the consent form and signed it and have agreed to what is in it.

LC: Thank you. So, the first part of what we're interested in is you. How you came to be part of Trawl Works. If I understand it correctly, you've been there 20 years or more?

MO: 1988 to this year, 20 years.

LC: I think Dave said you started out as a net maker, or you were part of it when he had his net making business?

MO: He still had Jamestown Trawl when I went to Trawl Works I believe. So I've been there 20 years this June.

LC: And how did you get into that?

MO: I fished commercially for five and a half years before that, so from 1982 until I went to Trawl Works, I worked on boats in Point Judith and Newport and New Bedford.

LC: Any particular fishery?

MO: No, whatever fishery, it was year-round, so whatever fishery was going on at the time; squidding in the summer and fluking and butterfish in the winter, codfish in the fall and spring, and whatever we were doing at the time.

LC: And how old were you when you got into it?

MO: I just graduated from college, so I had friends in the industry and I had gone a trip with a friend of mine on a boat out of Point Judith and just really thought it was the greatest thing going. So I ended up doing that. I have a double major in Art History and English, which has nothing to do with ... exactly, nothing to do with fishing at all or the fishing industry. I just really liked the community and just sort of felt at home there. That's where I am.

LC: And where did you graduate from?

MO: University of Rhode Island.

LC: And where do you live now?

MO: In Matunuck, South Kingstown.

LC: And is your family from here and you a transplant?

MO: No, my family is from New Jersey and I summered here. My grandmother was from Providence but I summered here from the time I was a little kid. So right after High School I moved here and I've been here ever since. But definitely not a native, because you're not a native unless you're born here.

LC: Do you have children.

MO: Just a foster child at the moment.

[03:12]

LC: Is your child at the age where you might encourage them to go into any aspect of the industry at this point?

MO: Oh, I don't think she'd want to get dirty like that, I don't think it would be up her alley at all, no, and it's not something I would encourage her to do. It's sort of a different situation because she's a foster child. If I had my own child, I don't know what I'd do at this point.

LC: And how did you, you said you fished... what was the process of learning to make nets?

MO: I was in between fishing jobs, I'd just gotten off the boat and there was an ad in the paper for Trawl Works, I had no intention of staying there; that was not my intent. I was going to go back fishing. And I just thought that I might be able to learn something that would be useful to my job, fishing, so I applied for the job and I ended up staying. I'm not quite sure why and sometimes I still ask myself why, but my boss has been extremely fair over the years and I felt some sort of obligation and I enjoyed the work I was doing there. It wasn't something I didn't enjoy. I did miss being on the boat, very much, actually, and found the, sort of, we work our days 7:30 to 4 or 5, depending on if you do overtime, which most of the time I do. I found the regular-ness of it distressing for quite a long time. I still sometimes feel like I'm trapped in a place with... you know your job is just so... you get up every morning, you go. With fishing, it's a lot different. I think people complain about fishing and the life that it is, but then when you're not living that life, you realize there's something to be said for coming and going sort of as you want. It's just a lot different.

LC: Do you ever go out on a boat now?

MO: Rarely, occasionally for a day or something like that, but not very often. I'm lucky if I get to go down to the Point with my job and spend a day on a boat working on a repair. I always really enjoy doing that.

LC: Where is Trawl Works located?

MO: It's right in Narragansett, off of Woodruff Ave., not too far from here, about 5 minutes from here. There's a little industrial park, it's in there. It's fairly close to the Point, but it's not down in the Point. In a way I wish we were down there, but we're not.

LC: You'd be at least breathing...

MO: Yeah, it would just make you feel a little more connected. Sometimes I feel disconnected. Because you're not physically near the boats or in the port itself.

[06:28]

LC: Now, are you married?

MO: Yes, I've been married for 23 years.

LC: Now what does your husband do?

MO: At the moment he's working in marine construction. He's a supervisor for tug boats that are being built in Maine. But he's a merchant mariner. So for many years he was working on tug boats all up and down the east coast. So he was away 2 weeks on and 2 weeks off, was generally the schedule. Now he's away, however it works out, he doesn't really have a schedule. He's back and forth from Maine. Not so frequently, it depends on what's going on, his construction.

LC: There's actually a little similarity between being the wife of a fishermen and that dynamic of your spouse being away for significant periods of time.

MO: Exactly. When we first got married, I was fishing and he was away at sea, and so it was... you pass each other, literally in the night, sometimes. That only went on for a few years

after we got married, because I went to work at Trawl Works, three years after we got married. That part of it stopped. Yeah, it is very similar. I think maybe the period of time... depending on the fishery, the period of time he's gone is a little bit longer, but then he has 2 weeks off when he comes home, or did have 2 weeks off when he came home. So you have a schedule unlike fishing where you don't have a schedule. It makes it a little bit easier.

LC: Has he ever fished?

MO: No, no.

LC: And how many people does Trawl Works employ?

MO: Total right now, including the owner, eight.

LC: And has that been pretty constant over the last 20 years or has that ebbed and flowed and changed?

MO: There used to be more people that worked doing nets than there are now, but it is only like 1 or 2 now, it didn't go from 30 to like 8, so yeah, it's been fairly constant.

[09:05]

LC: And what about the people, are they like you, people that have been there for 20 years?

MO: Yeah.

LC: Or 10 years?

MO: No, there are people that have been there longer than I. So there are two employees that have been there longer than I have, plus the owners that has obviously been there since the beginning. The shortest amount of time that anybody has been there other than the book keeper is like 5 years. And the majority of us have all been there over 20.

LC: So what's the age range between the youngest and the oldest?

MO: The youngest is 26 and the oldest is 49. I mean the boss is older, but of the workers that's what the age range is. But the age range average is going up, because we've all been there so long, and there's not like I said, the shortest amount of time anybody has been there is 5 years and those are the youngest guys.

LC: With Trawl Works, what percentage of it is dependent on the fishing industry verses anything else?

MO: Oh, I would say the majority or it is dependent on the fishing industry. We do some other things because we carry a huge array of marine hardware and wire and rope... there are some walk-in customers from the public but not very many. So my understanding is it's a pretty niche business. We don't do a lot in say the rigging industry for tug boats or anything like that. So the fishing industry is our main source or business, definitely.

LC: I'm impressed by there being a constant base of employees at Trawl Works in spite of the very significant ebbs and flows in the industry. How have you weathered that? Have there been peak years financially... how have you been able to weather that?

MO: There have been peak years financially. And my understanding from talking to my boss this year is that we've been steady, plateau-ed for approximately the last ten years, but this year our expenses have gone up substantially and also I think our accounts receivable probably has increased substantially as well, so that's a sign of things that are going on....

LC: Accounts receivable?

MO: Meaning what's charged by customers and still on the books.

LC: Verses cash?

MO: Yeah. Not paid. A lot of that has to do with the dollar for one thing because we import a lot of our goods and the dollar is not strong and that's having a huge impact on the prices for us, what we're paying for goods. I would say it's sort of scary at the moment.

[12:27]

LC: Has the demand changed in spite of these fluctuations and management measures, and resource issues? Has the demand been fairly constant?

MO: I think the demand has been fairly constant. What's happening now is prices are rising due to the price of oil; the production of steel is getting more expensive. The dollar, you're importing, is driving the price of your goods up, all those things. So more is going out towards in trying to keep stock... overhead has gone way up, exactly. Plus employee overhead has gone up... the price of health insurance has gone way up. All those things factor into what the business does. You would need to talk to Bob more about than me but that's my understanding of what's going on.

LC: Is there any thought about trying to create some different niches to help protect?

MO: That's not really my department, so if there is, I don't really know. I think you're always trying to get other markets, but it hasn't been the majority of our business, whether that will change or not... I'm trying to think of... we do business with corporations that build things and need rigging, but I don't think it's the majority of what we do. I'm sure they are looking into things. I think the mood in the industry is not great.

LC: If it is something that is public info, can you give me an idea of what the revenue would be for Trawl Works, some general answer, \$10million business or...?

MO: I'm not sure to be honest; I'm not privy to that info.

LC: I'm just asking in the context of is it public, and if it is, it'd be nice to know for a sense of magnitude. Are the other people that work there, are any connected aside from Trawl Works to the fishing industry, whether a spouse being a fisherman, or some other family history that is connected to the fishing industry.

MO: Not at the moment. Two of the guys I worked with had fished early in their careers before going to Trawl Works, but nobody is connected to anyone that is fishing now.

LC: But two of the ones still there had fished previously?

MO: Yep. And Bob, the owner, was involved in fisheries stuff; boat building and that kind of thing, for some boats in Maine when he was, I believe, he taught at URI then did some stuff with boat building, setting boats up for certain fisheries. So he was involved in that regard.

LC: Now, if for instance if URI is creating a turtle-excluder device for a research project, is that something Trawl Works does or are you strictly direct fishing industry?

MO: Well, you mean research stuff?

LC: Yeah, creation of different nets....

MO: The way the research works is if you're contracted to build something and you get the bid, you build it.

LC: So those are contracts you've gotten before.

MO: Yeah, we've done stuff for NMFS and the State of RI. That's all stuff that is sort of in our... we do, if we're asked or if we get the bid.

[16:44]

LC: Now how long ago was it, some of these questions are not necessarily all related at the same time, but the two men that did fish, how long ago did they make the transition?

MO: Oh, Pete has been there 25 years.

LC: So it was a long time ago that they made the switch. In terms of your relationship to the fishing industry aside from Trawl Works, do you maintain contacts with fishermen as part of your personal social community?

MO: To some extent, yes, I do maintain contact with people that I worked with from a long time ago, the ones that are still alive, but in any case, yeah. I see people if I'm out, it's not necessarily part of my social thing because I don't go out to drink on a regular basis, but occasionally you meet someone if you're out for a beer.

LC: You would say people that fish are not necessarily part of your inner circle of friends. Compared to Northern Maine, there are communities that were 90% involved in fishing. They joked about it in Stonington, out of the 1,000 people there, the percentage that were related to each other... heavy connections, social support, heavily connected, fishing community was all part of it. Just curious in terms of you and your life, how important have those social connections been for you, for people related to the fishing industry?

MO: I think they are important to me because I do consider it my community. Through work, I see guys everyday, I know about their families, I know how they are going fishing, I do talk to them, and I see them on a regular basis. If there are functions that the industry does, I go to them. Because it's a male dominated industry it's a little different. When you're asking women about if they see fishermen socially,

LC: Or their families.

MO: Or their families, unless I'm attached to their families, no, not necessarily, unless I happen to run into someone when I'm out. I think it's a little bit different; where if you were asking a guy about that...

LC: Very different.

MO: Very different. I have always, especially from when I was fishing, maintained a distance, not that I didn't care, but always have kept that separate. For a lot of reasons.

LC: The friendships in the fishing industry, verses?

MO: No, not that, just sort of kept myself separate, I just never got too close. I do have friends that are long standing friends who have also become friends of my family. I don't know quite how to explain what I'm trying to say. I was just always really careful not to get too involved with people because they had families and I just always thought its still work, it's a separate thing. So other than maybe having a beer when you got in, and then going in, that was it.

LC: Was that a male-female gender dynamic, being a woman in a male-dominated industry?
[20:53]

MO: I just always thought that I had to keep separated. Because at that point, I think, reputation was very important to me and I did not become involved with anyone I ever worked with and I felt very strongly about keeping that separate. It was work and that was it. Not that I didn't care about people I worked with, just for my reputation's sake, that's the way it had to stay. I didn't go out drinking or whatever. It was just the way I was about it.

LC: And were there any other female role models, and you don't have to mention names. In this community, have there been other women that have been in your position; you're a woman in a male-dominated industry and you have a respected position.

MO: Well that is always what it was about, respect. I need to maintain some respect; I wanted people to respect me for who I was. So in that regard, I kept people at arms length, that's just the way it is.

LC: Were there other women, have you found over the years that had a similar stature and had successfully maintained a professional...?

MO: Yeah, one of my dearest friends, and I'll say her name, Ellen Schomer, she's worked in the industry for a long time. She's not working in the industry anymore, but she fished for a long time. We actually met each other... we grew up in the same town in New Jersey but had never

known one another. I met her when she was walking off the boat and I was getting on; met her on the dock. I'd never met her before and we became very good friends and have been friends ever since.

LC: And she's a fisherman?

MO: Yep, for many years, up until many years, up until last year she was still doing transits. [23:04]

LC: She maybe went to Alaska or...?

MO: No, she fished in Provincetown, she fished on the Cape, she fished in New Bedford and she was out in Hawaii for a number of years. She moved to Hawaii for about 7 years and then came back here. I don't think she really fished out there, or if she did, it wasn't much. She fished pretty steadily and scalloped.

LC: Dave described her that she would come and go out of Point Judith but always maintained in some capacity involvement in fishing.

MO: Yep, exactly. So she was in the industry for quite a long time and I think finally now, she's finally gotten out of it or thought she has to do something else.

LC: We would very much like to talk to her.

MO: I can give you her number. And I'll tell her I talked to you.

LC: And it's Ellen...

MO: Schomer. S C H O M E R. And her number is 377-8144. She's in Westerly. Or right outside of Westerly.

LC: Great, thank you. Sometimes it's been a wild goose chase. Sometimes we'll be given a name and that's it. [More conversation about difficulty finding people].

MO: Ellen, it's very odd that we grew up in the same town, not any connection to fishing what so ever, at all.

LC: And you didn't know each other then?

MO: We did not know each other then. I think there's four years difference in age; she's four years older than I am, so we would have missed each other in school and just... very odd the happenstance, yes, serendipitous.

LC: Are there other women that you're aware of in the Point Judith area that are fishing or involved in other aspects of the fishery? That seems to be less and less. It was always not a huge proportion of people involved in the fisheries but it seems to be we're finding it less.

MO: That women are?

LC: Women's involvement in general.

MO: Actually fishing or...?

LC: Any aspect. But yes fishing in particular.

MO: Well, Andrea from the Bait Company, she's a major player in Point Judith. There were a few women around here and there, sort of transit, but I am not aware of any at the moment, though there may be some women fishing but I might not be privy to that.

[26:45]

LC: Aside from you and Andrea, have there been other women that were in your central key positions of shore support?

MO: At the Bait Company it's mostly women who string, there are guys too; Ellen worked for Andrea too. And then I'm sure in the fish markets, there were a lot of women who cut fish. There's a lot less of that now because of the cutting... I don't think there's as much going on as far as processing goes and women may not anymore be in those positions, I don't really know. Maybe in New Bedford more. There's a woman I know, her name is Barbara, and she does still

cut on occasion and I can't remember who she cuts for, but she works at the airport now. She was a really good fish cutter, but I think a lot of places cut back on that kind of thing.

LC: What are they doing instead?

MO: They are not processing as much I don't believe as they were. I don't know if it's being shipped somewhere else, maybe all that is being done in New Bedford or New York, I don't know. I'm sort of out of that part of it; I don't really know what they are doing.

LC: And what percentage of Trawl Works business is dependent on Point Judith fishermen?

MO: Well, we have customers all up and down the east coast, from Maine to VA, Maryland and that area. Point Judith is a big part of our business, but I couldn't say percentage wise, but I imagine it's a pretty good part.

LC: Would you guess that it would be more than half, you would never be quoted on that, just to give me context.

MO: To be honest with you, I'm not sure; I wouldn't even want to say. We have a varied customer base, certainly Maine is less than Point Judith and New York is less than Point Judith, but what all those other parts add up to, I'm not really sure.

[29:27]

LC: And where would Trawl Works fit in terms of other like businesses between Maine and... did you say Virginia?

MO: Oh, you mean similar businesses?

LC: How many are there, just that you're aware of, ball park?

MO: That do real similar things? OK. In this area...

LC: Anywhere in the northeast.

MO: I'm trying to think... that do the full range of business?

LC: Yeah, or that you might consider roughly comparable in terms of what they offer.

MO: Well, there's at least four I can think of. Further down than New Jersey, but four or five, six... I'd have to look, I'd probably think of more.

LC: It just gives us a rough feel for along the eastern seaboard, are there multiple ones in Rhode Islands or is it spread out, and if one goes... sometimes I'm thinking in terms of the overall vulnerability. You lose one here and how that impacts that area and everybody else, it's always a ripple effect.

MO: Well, there are three I can think of in RI. They don't all build nets and some don't carry a huge amount of hardware so it's somewhat different. Then there are other ones in Maine and in New York, there's one at least, a good size shop. And then New Jersey, there's a couple, southern NJ.

LC: And where are the ones in RI? What are the names?

MO: There's us, there's Superior Trawl, and then there's Wilcox Marine.

LC: And where are they?

MO: Point Judith, all in Point Judith. Those are the three big ones that I can think of, probably other places open in Bristol or something, small marine hardware places I'm not aware of, but those are the three big ones in RI. Then you have Sea Gear down in New Jersey, and Gear Works in New York, they are in Riverhead, NY on Long Island. Trying to think of what is in Maine... there's a bunch of different small shops; some concentrate on the shrimp fishery... Coastal Marine is one, and then there are some other ones too, but those are all I can think of at the moment.

[32:38]

LC: An aspect of fishing communities that we are legally obliged to understand, but for which it's very difficult to get real information about is the processing community. A lot of that has to do with the fact that we're Federal government and you start asking questions and people assume it's INS related, so we're really trying to get a sense of, in a fishing community, there are the fishermen, there's the shore support, there's processing and they are all effected by changes in the resource and when management regulations occur. This has been so difficult to get any type of sense around what's going on, and I've been very hesitant to poke around in that in the point Judith area. I would be wondering about your general sense and please don't feel like you have to answer anything that you think would be problematic for people working....

MO: I don't know that I could answer that. There was a processing plant in the building across the road from where we were located and it's been closed for quite awhile and a lot of the people that worked there were Central American.

LC: Lots of Mayan's in New Bedford.

MO: And Guatemalans. Actually there's a lovely Guatemalan truck driver that drives a fish truck that sometimes picks things up from us, pallets and stuff going somewhere. I haven't seen him in a while. He was from a place in Guatemala that I had been to last February, Quiche, he was a really nice guy. I know there are a lot of Central Americans but I don't see them so much.

LC: And there's a good reason for that, it terms of them being silent members of the community...

MO: And with good reason.

LC: Where are these processing plants? I know there's the one down in Point Judith, the big one...?

MO: Like the Co-op where they take out... and then there's Town Dock, which is the other take-out place. And then I think there's some stuff up in Quonset too, though I'm not really sure what they do up there. For me, it's not part of my regular stomping ground so I'm not really sure what they are doing. I know things have changed a lot in the processing industry too, like where they process, like I was saying before, I'm not really sure whether a lot of the stuff is still being done in New Bedford, I'm not aware. If I remember correctly, there was an INS thing that happened at some fish plants up there last year that scared the hell out of people. It really pisses me off, but that's another story.

[36:14]

LC: The real frustration is that when you're looking at communities and you put the whole legal or not aside, we don't go there. And you're looking at the importance of the income that these people are making from what they are doing and how the loss of their income effects not only them, but people in another country.

MO: They say that in places like... remittances are a huge part of the Gross National Product.

LC: Yes. So, how do we begin to get at that in some way in which we can then write about that in an Impact Assessment. It's a missing bit of information. Azure and another person have worked with us through URI for CMER, for several years trying to create community profiles of the fishing communities. I think there were about 160 communities where they collected information, demographic info, level of involvement in fishing and what not, and the whole section on subsistence and processing is... we know there might be a processing plant, but who are the people that are dependent on that.

MO: And they're not necessarily going to talk to you either. That's one of the problems. I think a lot of the times they are temporary workers or they get hired through employment agencies. My sense was that a van would bring a lot of the people to work and whether they were

always there or there were different people every day, I didn't know. They used to play soccer at lunch so I used to see them out there playing soccer. That was quite awhile ago, that building has been vacant.

LC: Do you feel, in terms of what you're doing in your position, that you've been accepted as an equal?

MO: Some days yes, some days no, depends on the day I think. It's hard to say, I try not to think about it too much, the whole gender thing, I don't know, I just don't think about it. Some days you're like, well, what's the reason this is happening? Is it because I'm me? And other days you're just like who gives a hoot. I think working in a male-dominated industry makes you pretty hard, other times it makes you pretty angry, so I don't know how to answer that. I would hope so. I think as a woman you always feel like you have to work twice as hard; I don't know what I'm trying to prove, but you just always feel... even after... I don't know that the feeling ever goes away; it hasn't gone away for me.

LC: I think I forgot to ask you what your position is, for the record. You're head of...?
[39:49]

MO: I'm not head of anything, I'm a trawl maker and a trawl designer, I'm not the head of anything, so that's what I do. It's a small shop; I don't feel like I'm the head of anything.

LC: What kinds of tools do you use everyday?

MO: These [refereeing to her hands] and net needles. That's about it.

LC: What size net needles?

MO: Anywhere from 7 inch or smaller depending on what size twine you're using, up to 14, 16 inch depending on what size twine you're using. But those are pretty much the tools, your hands and those. I use a pneumatic thing that pulls these things called stainless bands to get them tight, but other than that, that's really the only machine that we use, everything else is hands.

LC: No net machines?

MO: No because the netting is actually bought pre-made for the most part and when you buy the netting it comes in bales almost like a bolt of material, and then with our net design, it's almost like a pattern and it tells us how many meshes wide and how many meshes deep the pieces to be. And that's cut out... oh yeah, we use pocket knives too, that's the other thing we use... so those pieces are cut out and all sewn together by hand. And then there's something called selvedge which is all hand knit out of polyester. That's all hand done too. But that would be a webbing that we hand knit ourselves but its small sections, not too deep. The major parts are pre-manufactured; the webbing itself, we're not knitting every single mesh. No, no, generally the netting is a green color... like if you came into the shop one day, you could look at a net that was spread out on the floor and everywhere there's an orange seam, that's all hand sewn, anywhere there's white polyester, that's all hand sewn. It's pretty labor intensive. I think for the business, it's the most labor intensive part of the business. Where the guys that are going wire rigging, its short stabs. They have a project; someone comes in and wants a 20-foot piece of wire with the eye on each end. But then if you're going to do a whole net its hours and hours and hours of work.

[42:30]

LC: How much does a net cost? Let's say a groundfish net or...?

MO: Well let's just say, for 250HP, a small flat fish net right now, if it's done with a stainless steel frame and stainless steel wire in the sweep, all 6-inch mesh, it's going to be around \$4,300 with no cod end, with floats, everything but the cod end. And that's probably going to take about 48 hours.

LC: You usually have more than one person working on the net, or do you see it through the beginning to the end?

MO: Dave and I, there's another guy I work with, and then owners' son fills in periodically to help us out if we get real busy, but Dave and I generally work side by side. It does go a lot faster, and you sort of anticipate the next move, if somebody finishes one thing before the other person, then you get onto the next thing and set up for whatever the next thing is you have to do. So it's not really an assembly line, but you do know what the process is.

LC: There's a synergy around it...

MO: Yeah. We've been working together for five years. And then before that, there was somebody who had worked there for 10 years, and we'd worked together for quite a long time. And you do, you get used to working with that person and anticipate the other persons move to try to get the job done as quickly as possible, so that's kind of how it works.

LC: Can you describe some of the bigger nets that you might do and how much the value of those costs?

MO: Yeah, let's see, a boat, 700HP, say a whiting or squid net, probably now close to \$10,000. I've really seen in the last few years... our prices stayed static for a long time. The labor price went up a little bit every few years, but now, I can't throw out a figure. Someone would come in and say, "How much would that cost, can you just give me a ball park?" I can't ball park anymore because prices have changed so drastically in the last few years and they are constantly changing. On a monthly basis. So it's real hard for me to throw a figure out there, but something for that kind of horse power would be around \$10,000. Depending on the twine type and exactly what kind of hardware.

[45:25]

LC: How long would it take to make that?

MO: Something like that? Probably 90 hours. Labor is kind of a weird thing, because we're not just doing that, we get interrupted during the day, you're helping a customer, and someone comes in for a piece of webbing. But we'd like to think we have it figured out, exactly how long, if we could actually sit down and just work on that particular project without any interruptions.

LC: And would that be 90 hours one person, or 90 hours...?

MO: No, that would be 90 hours total.

LC: 90 person hours.

AW: I wonder, as a woman working on a fishing boat, were any of your experiences, the reason why you stopped fishing? Or in a sense, were any of your experiences, as a woman, that may or may not have been positive, the reason you stopped fishing?

MO: I'm not saying I had any experiences that were negative per say, as a woman. Sometimes I feel like, the whole gender thing we were talking about before, I sometimes feel like I had less of a problem. Of course initially, always, you had to really prove yourself. But I was so fond of the guys I worked with, even if they weren't always the best people or whatever, I just really enjoyed their company. I have to say; once you got your foot in the door it was okay. It was getting your foot in the door that was hard. Initially, you ended up on dumpy boats; I always have to give credit to the guys that were willing to give me a try. But that is not why I left. I don't know why I didn't go back, I regret it a lot of times, but that was just the way it worked out. Like I said before, I thought that I would learn something I would use and I ended up liking the job enough that I stayed and that's sort of how it went. It was very hard work, sometimes it was just heinous and you were like, "when is this trip going to be over" but I think everybody felt like that, it wasn't just me.

LC: What is it you liked about that?

MO: Because when you got home, it was like “oh, we did it!” Even if you had a bad trip, it was like, here we are, we walked off the boat, everything is OK. and it was just kind of a cool feeling.

[49:14]

LC: What were your feelings about being however far out you were and knowing that if something went wrong, it takes a certain kind of person to be comfortable.

MO: To be kind of dumb about it. I guess you could say, I never really thought about it that much. I remember a few times being nervous because the weather was really bad, but I don’t ever think I was... I just never really thought about what could happen. And there were plenty of things that could happen, believe me, but I was just lucky none of them happened to me. I think luck has something to do with it; dumb luck has something to do with it. I think I was a lot younger too and you’re not thinking about all the things that can happen to you at that point in your life. And it’s real easy to be nostalgic about it now; it’s a long ways away. And I think the industry is a lot different now. I think its much more of a grind than it used to be and I think regulations have taken, if there was any fun, its gone. I know guys who have fished their entire lives, and they are just tired, and they are tired of bullshit, and there’s a lot of bullshit.

LC: From your perspective, is it the management measures or the resource problems, or... there’s that tension and that perspective that people have. Some fishermen feel strongly that the resource is just fine and the government is trying to control things. And then there’s some people that think there is really a problem with the resource and management is in response to that. You know what I’m saying?

MO: I think it’s like anything in government; somewhere in the middle is the truth. I have a lot of feelings on this issue, and I don’t want to come off sounding really angry, but I think it’s changed the industry in a lot of ways, not necessarily for the good. We see it all the time. I think it’s become more and more difficult, and regulated to the point of ridiculousness. And I think there is an adversarial relationship between regulators and fishermen and I don’t know how you change that and I think there’s problems with data, I have absolutely no question that there are problems with data, and I think it’s the problem of working with a system; government is a system and it doesn’t take into account the human side of things. And I also think that government refuses to believe that anecdotal evidence is actually evidence. Fishermen know what’s going on, and that isn’t necessarily taken into account, because its science, scientific, it’s black and white, there is no variation.

LC: So you can imagine from our end being social scientific!

[52:46 – Battery died on recorder]

[00:00 – new recording session after plugging in recorder battery, Part2]

LC: I’m wondering what your perceptions are of some of the fishermen you see, the issues they face now compared to five or ten years ago. There are a lot of things, changes in mental health issues, it could be more people are drinking, people that didn’t drink, but I’m not focusing on that, I think you understand. What health or mental health issues appear to be more present, from your perspective, than they used to be?

MO: I would have to say depression, but that’s not necessarily clinical depression, but people are depressed.

LC: Less optimistic?

MO: Not optimistic. I’m finding myself, this year has been not good, I’m really feeling like something that I have done for a long time and really care about and love, might not be there for

me to do in the future. Which is probably me being a real downer, but I just don't have a good feeling. I don't know if that's just because I'm around people who are not having a good feeling and I'm getting sucked into that black hole, or whether it actually. We're seeing changes that don't make you feel real optimistic.

LC: How long ago did you start recognizing that you were beginning to question the future?

MO: I think it's been off and on. I think you see things in the industry that have happened; regulations have come in and guys are "ahhh!" but then everybody figures it out and they go along, and something else comes along and, yeah, adapt. Guys are good at adapting, they are pretty clever. I think now I just feel like it's a black hole, and I don't know whether it's just my mood of what it is, but I'm not feeling very optimistic about the industry. I've seen a lot of guys I know, get out. They've gone tug boating; they've just decided they just couldn't do this anymore. There are a lot of guys that have boats and are up to here and are drowning in debt, and it's really difficult. It causes a lot of stress and it's already an industry that is stressful; stressful on the body and on the mind and to add that whole scenario to it. Fishermen are businessmen, they are not just fishermen. It's a combination of the two; it's a stressful job and a business too, the owners anyway, the captain/ owners, it's extremely stressful. A lot of the crew, I think the community has changed, there are a lot of people I don't know, or don't recognize. And for a long time, I knew everybody.

[04:25]

LC: Is that crew, or who are the people, there are not a lot of new people coming into the industry?

MO: No there aren't, and at a certain level, they need bodies to go, and if there aren't the regular bodies available, there are the bodies you don't know that just pop up, there's people around.

LC: Mostly crew you're talking about. That's a real issue in most ports is having qualified crew.

MO: Exactly. Because if you don't, it's dangerous, even more dangerous.

LC: So I guess your comment about depression would feed into money problems, a lot of people are facing that, they have big boat mortgages, things like that. Do you see any particular health problems that people might have, marital problems, that seem to be more than in the past? Just a little context to that: if you're a lobsterman in Maine, ten years ago, things have been good off and on up there, but the way it was described to me, was ten years prior, you'd always have a sternman. Now, given fuel costs and all these other things, you might not. Or you might bring somebody who doesn't have the background. I heard a lot about some very serious back trouble.

MO: I know lots of guys with back trouble.

LC: There's the occupational hazard of doing something, then there's over time, how that might have shifted in relation to the changes in the industry.

MO: That's very interesting, I'm not really thinking of it in those terms. But if guys are going with less crew; say you used to go with four and now you're going with three because the fuel price, which is happening. You're doing more work, so probably, yeah; physically your body is taking more of a beating. Have I seen guys come in crippled? Not exactly, but sore, yeah. Going to the chiropractor, yes. But is that also because of their age, because the majority of the guys are older than they were, and there are not a lot of young guys that are fishing. Most of the guys I see are my age or older, in their 40's, 50's. And as far as their home life goes...

LC: It's already a complex and unique situation in the beginning, that if you look at it now, have you seen marriages break up, do you have sense about the family dynamics?

[07:36]

MO: I don't have a real sense of that, I mean, someone is always getting divorced, it's just the way it goes...

LC: Higher in this population than in other?

MO: It would be totally anecdotal, I couldn't say for sure. Just that guys are unhappier. That would be my general feeling, not as excited about the industry as they were. They are going through the motions; they have to do it, it's what they do. And "what are we going to do if we don't do this", kind of thing. It sounds all bad, it's not all that bad, but that's...

LC: Very real concerns.

MO: I think the marine industry in general was always a place you could go if you weren't the norm. The normal person who is going to put on a suit and tie every morning and grab his brief case and go. And you didn't necessarily have to have a college degree, although there are plenty of guys I know that do have college degrees and are really, really smart. And just chose that life because it was something they enjoyed doing. And I think it's just not as enjoyable as it was for a lot of people. But it was also a place where people could go and fit in, that could not fit in some other part of society or whatever.

LC: If you could sort of look retrospectively over however long you want to, and if you could just rattle off those that you know have left the industry, what did they do, where have they gone next?

MO: Most recently, tugging. So they've stayed in the marine industry but have gotten out of the fishing industry. Because they had hours, they could get their Z cards and go tug boating. I've seen guys go to carpentry, which was always the fall-back position if things were slow in the industry; you went to go bang nails. Now with the economy changing, what are people going to do; I have a lot of worries about what happens to people who have worked in the industry and have either opted out by doing that, what happens when the bottom falls out of the carpentry industry? But I think most recently a lot of the guys I know have gone to tugging or ships, because that's sort of a viable option if you're still on the water, you still get a block of time off. It's more routine, and yes, it is a regular pay check, they take your taxes out, fewer worries in that respect. That's where I've seen a number of people go in the last couple years, they are going somewhere else. People come and go in the industry too, it can be kind of transient, but there are the steady players that we see over the years. I've seen a few of them go away too, that kind of makes me sad.

LC: I think we did it.

[11:19 – End of interview]