



Oral History and Folklife Research, Inc.

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT AND JEANNE PEACOCK

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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The Peacocks were interviewed at their home in Eastport. The interview begins with Jeanne Peacock, and Robert joins a few minutes into the interview. There are a few minutes during which Robert is off-mic. Robert is the son of Robert F. Peacock, who owned the Peacock Cannery in Lubec. He operated the cannery after his father.

KJL It's April 19, 2013, and we're in Eastport at the home of Jeanne Peacock, and we're talking about the canning industry. Jeanne, do you mind if I ask what year you were born?

JP 1949

KJL So, just after the war

JP Yeah,

KJL So the canneries were in pretty full swing then, right?

JP Oh, yeah, they were in their heyday. Of course I didn't--I moved to Eastport in 1953. I only became aware of them as a young girl in the downtown Eastport area. That's where I lived.

KJL In 1953--so you were like three or four?

JP Yeah, yeah, well my dad had a law office downtown in Eastport.

KJL In 1957, excuse me, I'm sorry. So your dad was a lawyer.

JP Yeah, yeah. He was the municipal judge here.

KJL And how did he get--OK, it's your father in law that owned the cannery, is that right?

JP Right, my husband's family has been in the sardine industry for years since the early 1900's. They owned R J Peacock Canning Company. But he can tell you more about that.

KJL Ok, ok. Tell me about your father in law. What kind of guy was he?

JP He was a very energetic man; he worked in the industry all of his life after he graduated from the University of Maine. He also graduated from Maine Maritime; he went there during the war, and then was in the Navy, and after he got out of the Navy, he went to the University of Maine, where he met his wife, Nancy Hall.

(The recording is stopped for a few moments here, so Jeanne can get some water)

JP So, anyway, my father in law was very, very energetic, and he was an innovator, he would devise machinery to help the industry and, like, fiddle around and sort of invent things. He was very inventive. His true love was firefighting and emergency medicine. He was one of the first people to teach emergency medicine in the Downeast area and Charlotte County, and he really dedicated himself to that purpose on his off hours. He got the Jefferson Award which was a very prestigious service award in Maine for his volunteerism.

KJL So his true love was emergency medicine?

JP I would say. I mean, Bob could tell you more.

KJL He was an EMT?

JP Yeah, yeah. He was a trained EMT. He was very skilled. He was very involved in promoting the education of ambulance crews and promoting people to go into that field. Because around here, it's volunteer, mostly, for a while. Now they have professional EMT's on staff, but back when he was doing it in the '60's and '70's, there was a lot of volunteerism.

KJL Do you know how he got interested in that?

JP No, I don't. My husband could tell you.

KJL OK, Now, did you work in the canneries?

JP I worked in [the] cannery in Machiasport. My sophomore year in high school, myself and my sister, and another set of twins, actually--the [Roberts] twins--worked in Machiasport, we caught the bus early in the morning, and were geared in our plastic aprons, hairnets, with the little white placard that went over the crown of our head with the name of the sardine company and--quite attractive. We bandaged our fingers with tape and had to purchase a pair of very sharp scissors, which was what we cut the fish with

[At this point Jeanne's husband, Bob enters with the dog, Gabby. For a few minutes Bob is off mic, but audible]

JP So anyway, with our bandaged fingers, we would wait for the fish to come down a beltway and my sister and I were on the last table because we were new people to it, and the fish were quite slimy and itchy when they got to us and we never got off the minimum wage which was a dollar and a quarter back then, believe it or not, it was really low to think about, but no, it was work for us and it was a summer job, and we didn't mind. We did anticipate that we would be making more with piecework, but unfortunately, we never really got the knack of the people in your video--got the rhythm of it. Yeah, we didn't--we mostly cut our fingers and spent a lot of time running up to the office to get taken care of for that.

I went out with my husband that sophomore year, and he was running a lobster restaurant, so we'd go to the movie, and you know, I tried to wash everything off, I'd have scales on my arms when I'd get home, and I'd take a shower. Bob smelled like lobsters, and I smelled like sardines at the movie. It was a honorable profession.

KJL Now, why were the fish all slimy by the time they got to you?

JP Well, there were I don't know how many women on the line, maybe fifty women-- is that right, Bob, maybe fifty women on the line?

RP [Something like that]

JP Pulling the fish off, and that much action of handling the fish, by the time they got to us, they had many hands on that belt, so I think that's what made them more slimy.

KJL So you got to...

JP And, you know, if they were slimy, they'd throw them back on the belt, didn't want to pack them, so...

KJL So you got the dregs.

JP Right, right, but--I mean they were all--they came in fairly fresh, wouldn't you say, Bob, it was a fresh haul, but the handling is what made it mushy.

[Jeanne asks to check the news for a moment. There is a major news story unfolding on this day]

He was asking me questions about our dad, but you're better prepared to answer them than I am, Bob. How did your dad get interested in the EMT field?

RP He was always interested in the police, fire--he started with the fire department. There was no local ambulances, the undertaker--and probably the early, mid 60's he started the ambulance service in many towns in Maine and New Brunswick [] Biddeford, Bar Harbor, Castine [] and Deer Island, a lot of the small towns that didn't have a city fire department, police, ambulance, so he just got in to starting them up and teaching. He really--became a passion [for him] and he was police chief in Lubec for seven years, and he was on the fire department for forty-five, fifty years--over fifty years because they had his fiftieth anniversary.

JP There's a museum in Lubec, the fire museum that's named for Robert F Peacock.

KJL Oh, OK, in Lubec. I'll have to check that out.

RP So it was like a hobby to take his mind off of work, which was the sardine business, so you know, everybody needs a hobby, to do something.

KJL Now, what was the process like in the cannery?

JP Well, I only saw the floor side, but we were--my sister and I were opposite each other on the table, there were two women to a table, and a rubber conveyor belt brought the fish down by us, and I think there was hole where the guts went.

RP Yeah, there was a central beltway and the cans came in at the top, so you'd just reach up and get the cans you need, and then the next layer down would have the fish coming in. And the belt went around, so there was two belts with a paddle, so if the fish got to the end of the belt, they'd just go on to the other belt and go back. And the bottom layer took away the waste, the guts for the fertilizer or for fishmeal. It's a very automated system, except that you had one thing that was done by hand was putting the fish in the cans.

And then the carts would go around, usually two people pushing carts, and they would pick up the trays of fish--twenty five cans of fish--or fifty cans, depending on the size trays into a cart, so the carts went into the cookers, and another cart would bring around empty trays after they'd taken the cans for sealing [in the] sealing machines, and they take those trays and bring them back to the women, so you'd just go round and round

JP It was very segregated as far as sex--it was the women packing and the other jobs were almost all men.

RP In our plant it was more--the sealing machine operators were mixed. The maintenance was mostly done by men, one woman. The pickers were mixed. After the cans came through the retort, they had to cool down for twenty-four hours, 'cause they were pretty hot, so they'd go into the bins and pack them in the boxes by hand, and that was both men and women.

But the floor lady, the woman controlled it all--there was one control station, and by using conveyor belt switches you could turn them on or off. She could control the amount of fish coming on the belt, the amount of cans coming on the belt, and the amount of waste. But I only saw two male packers in my whole life, in all the sardine factories.

KJL Why was it so segregated, do you think?

RP Just, I think the women had a lot more manual dexterity to do them. The men certainly didn't. Men--the guys are all fishermen, you know, big hands. The women had smaller hands and had much more dexterity with scissors than the men did. That, I'm sure of, because I packed some. My family made me do that when I was fourteen for almost two months, just so I knew what it was like.

KJL So you did some packing yourself?

RP Yeah, fourteen. I did everything--ran the sealing machines and [picked off the end of the cartons], worked down a lot in the fish weirs, the sardine carriers, and we had the picklin g room where they put the salt into the fish.

JP [] pictures that your aunt had, pictures of the whole--all of the stuff are right here.

KJL Oh, my. When were these pictures taken?

JP I'd say in the '50's wouldn't you?

RP '50's and '60's []

JP I don't know if there's any stuff in there that you left out, Bob, you might look at it.

KJL These are the flakes that people have told me about.

JP These pictures are at Penobscot Museum. Cipperly Good already has a set of them and all of the headings.

RP So this is in the pickling room, and as the fish get flumes by water, then they get dried out as they go up the belt, and the belt's being controlled by the woman at the control station. So you can see the different layers of the belts here.

KJL Were there four different layers?

RP Yeah.

KJL One, two, three, four.

RP Because you had two different sized cans, If you were packing big fish, and mixed big and small, so you'd have small cans for the sardines, and then bigger cans for the ovals, for the bigger fish. So you could be doing two at the same time. It gave you more options.

KJL So you didn't have to separate them on the belt?

RP You'd have two flakes, so you just reach for the bigger cans or the smaller ones, and you put them into two flakes, and they'd come around and pick up all the small ones, then all the big ones, just keep them rotated.

KJL Now, how many people worked at the cannery?

RP Oh, two hundred and ten maybe, in Lubec. Six hundred in Portland

KJL Six Hundred where?

RP In Portland. It was the biggest sardine factory in the the world during the war

KJL During World War II.

RP Yeah, And then it got down--even in my lifetime they had four hundred working there. In the '50's. when I remember. But there was two hundred in Lubec. I had a hundred and--I kept running the factory for sardines until ninety--when was the last sardine in there? Ninety eight, ninety seven, and we still had a hundred and twenty one.

KJL So the factory in Portland survived until the late '90's?

RP No, it survived, but they didn't pack any sardines. It was just an office for and old guy that was a partner. It really stopped in the early '80's.

JP That'd be John Toft?

KJL John Toft, yeah.

JP John Toft was the inventor of many different innovations in the sardine industry.

RP He was an engineer [].

KJL He was a manager, or...

RP No, he was an owner

KJL An owner.

RP there was three owners--there was one owner of Peacock Canning, and that was RJ Peacock. When the Seaboard--which owned all the canneries split up because of the antitrust stuff that was going on.

KJL That was the syndicate.

RP Yeah, and when that split up, the owners of Seaboard bought out different factories, and there was a factory called the Gunrock Factory in Lubec, which my great grandfather bought that one, in 1928, and one in Portland, and then they bought a second one called the Union Factory in Lubec, and then they built a third one here in Eastport in the '50's--'54, '55 it opened¹.

JP No, it was the late '40's. I've got pictures.

¹ Jeanne Peacock suggests the date of the Peacock Cannery in Eastport needs verification

RP It didn't open 'til--I remember the day they opened-- '54. They started construction in '49. They actually started producing in '54. 'Cause I was five years old when they came in by boat the first day. And then there was one in Machiasport. They had five factories at one time. So they had over a thousand employees in all the factories at one period of time. Probably in 1950--I'd say '56 or '57 there was over a thousand.

KJL Why do you think the canning declined?

RP Canadians. [] Mid water trawling took a lot of it. The Canadians were so heavily subsidized, Connors, it was impossible to compete against them, then in the end that's what really--they went from 50--There were 52 factories in 1950, and down to one, two or three in the '80's, and the reason was the Canadian competition. And automation Couldn't get the capital in the United States to modernize the plants. It was really tough to--It was very labor intensive, the price of labor kept going up, people didn't want to pack any more, because it was manual labor. And it wasn't because of money, because the fast packers would make--when the minimum wage was four dollars an hour, five dollars an hour, they were making twenty. I know that for sure. I had a lot of them that were making nineteen, twenty dollars an hour, so they made good money, in a small town in Maine, you know you're making three or four times minimum wage, that's really good money.

JP For a long time though, they were kept down, though as far as their wages because they were clumped in with [agricultural] workers, so they got straight time, they never got overtime. That's what we heard last night.

RP No, that's not true. Absolutely not true.

JP Back in the '50's?

RP Well, certainly from '61 on. I can remember my father coming home and bitching about the overtime because the guy came in late with the boat, he missed the tide, and the women were all waiting, and he had to pay them minimum wage while they waiting, because they punched in, because they thought the boat was going to get there and then they got on a sandbar, it was just outside the factory and they couldn't get over it for like five or six hours. So everybody stayed until midnight, they started working at noon to get the stuff packed out. They needed the product bad.

KJL They had to wait for the tide?

RP Yeah, so they got their overtime and piecework, so he was not happy about that . Almost all these factories you could get in at low water, but you couldn't pump the fish out in low water. It was too much of a lift for the pumps to lift the fish, so they had to wait until the tide got up to at least half tide [] at our plant. Otherwise you just mangle the fish in the pumps. There's a limit to the lifting capacity in a vacuum pump, an eight

inch vacuum pump. But in later years--probably '84--'83, '84 they started getting the real big vacuum pumps [phone rings, Robert answers, gives the phone to Jeanne]

KJL Susan Calder showed me a photo of the truck that was used like a bus. Was that gone by the time you worked at the cannery?

JP I went in like a school bus into Machiasport

KJL I was asking about the bus, or the truck.

RP We had three Ford Econoline vans, twelve passengers, and they had Woodys back when I was a kid, one of which is here in Eastport, still. Jim Blankman's Woody, downtown is from the North Lubec Canning Company, went by my house every day. So that still exists. It's all been restored. We had busses and we'd hire the girl that was the farthest away, so that one girl that was in Dennysville, one in Jonesboro, and one in Machiasport. And we'd pay them as drivers, get them licensed and they'd pick up the packers coming in, so it was free transportation for the women, and then we had a day care set up at the plant if they wanted, if we had fish on Saturday. We always provided day care for all the packers, so we'd have twenty kids there, upstairs. It was a licensed day care facility. Usually two high school girls would come in and take care of the kids.

KJL When was the day care started?

RP Oh, that was in the '50's when I was a kid.

KJL In the '50's.

RP Yeah, 'cause I used to go over--I lived in the apartment right next door, three feet away from the day care, when the kids were in there, so we'd go over and play with the kids.

KJL That would have been pretty progressive for the '50's, wouldn't it?

RP It was very progressive. You had to to attract workers. It was very progressive. Good money, free transportation. A lot of the packers were older, so they didn't have kids. It wasn't a big thing. But on a Saturday, some of the packers would be taking care of the grandkids. It was usually the grandkids that they'd bring in. And they'd bring them down and let the kids pack with them, they'd be five, seven years old. They could pack sardines for a few minutes with Granny, then they'd go back up to the...

KJL In the '50's?

RP I would say that was '50--Let's see, I lived there 'til '56, so '56 I remember going across. I would have been five or six years old. But in '59 we actually had an after school day care, so that the kids could come there after school. The school bus brought them right to the plant, dropped them off, because the parents would be--both parents

would be working. And there was nobody to take care of the kids, so they just dropped them off at the plant, and they'd go up to the day care side.

And usually it was older kids and younger kids, so the older kids more or less took care of the younger kids. There was a supervisor there, but it was a fun time. We had a swing set across the street from the plant, and a sandbox type thing they put in for the kids. They could take Tonka Toys over and dig in the sand. The kids all liked that. It was interesting.

KJL Now, did your dad ever talk about earlier decades, the '20's or '30's, children actually working in the factories?

RP When I was a kid I worked in the factory from the time I was--Everybody did, you know--when you're twelve, thirteen, start working in the plant. It was common. They put you in places that weren't--picking off--you could pick off cans of sardines and put them in boxes. Everybody wanted that job. Kids wanted it because you could make--Then it was only seventy five cents an hour, which was the same as adults were making. The adults were on piecework, so in fact they were making better than that, but the kids got minimum wage. We'd pound away at it for a couple of hours, 'til you got tired of it, then leave, you know. But it was a good way to make money when you were a kid---go to the movies or something. And they didn't mind if the kids came in that area. There was some other areas where there was machinery, anything that was moving they wouldn't let you in there. Anywhere there was--like that area was all manual. You'd pick up the box, put it there, take it over, put it on a pallet, so you know it was common.

KJL Kind of like having a paper route?

RP Yeah, exactly. So you could come in after school, yeah. I worked there off and on. We lived there, I mean literally lived in the sardine plant, but the kids were always there from--after school there would be one or two kids always working. They didn't have to, they wanted to [].

If you were sixteen you could officially work. Usually the parents got the money, then parents paid them. From sixteen on the kids would come in and work in the non industrial areas, then at eighteen they could go into the--actually I think it was seventeen, then they made it eighteen, where they could work round machinery and stuff.

KJL So sometimes kids would come in and help their parents or grandparents.

RP Yeah

KJL And their production would go on the record for--

RP Not up in the--when the women would come in on a Saturday, or something, and the kids wanted to go up and just play for an hour and see what Grammy does, that kind

of thing, but as far as actually doing the work, yeah, there was a lot of that. People were poor, and they needed to make money, and that's the way it was done, you know. And the state knew what was going on because they'd check []. If there was a kid in the industrial area, and they weren't right with a grandparent or parent, then you'd get in big trouble, so you made sure that that just didn't happen.

They'd know downstairs in the packing room, you know, where they were picking off-- not in the packing room, but in the pick-off room, where they were picking off cans of sardines. It's impossible to get hurt in there, there's just nothing moving, so--

KJL So there was a distinction made between the industrial area and--

RP Yeah, they were separate areas, they were separate rooms.

KJL --And areas where it was just handling. OK, and the industrial area was an area where fish were cut, there was machinery--

RP There were scissors, there was machinery, rotating machinery, you could get your hand caught in a belt or something like that, especially somebody smaller. So they just didn't want you near that, you know, really careful about it. A lot of rotating machinery, with the sealing machines, the belts, you know. But it was fun. It really was fun growing up there, in a plant.

[Jean returns to the table. There is some mic noise here, as the mics are adjusted again] The kids all--I was telling him how the kids like to come in and, we'd go down and we'd pick off, and we'd go down where the fish were fluming through with water. There'd be a trough with the fish going down it, and there'd be all kinds of fish in there other than sardines. And sometimes there would be pure sardines, pure herring, and nothing else. And other times the weir would catch a mixed bag of mackerel--particularly mackerel, occasionally flounder--mackerel, flounder, and salmon. I saw three or four salmon when I was a kid. Kids just come in and pick them out of the flume--take them home, and everybody's happy as could be because you'd get a ten, twelve pound salmon. And then there was no aquaculture, so it was just unheard of.

JP They were the Atlantic salmon

KJL Salmon was something rare.

RP Very rare, but it was definitely around. But mackerel was very common. Come in and pick out--parents would sit them down with an empty salt pack, and say, "Fill it full of mackerel," and take it home, you know, the kids would all come in. There's nothing moving except water. They just sit there and pick out mackerel and that was dinner for the next two or three days. It was all free. They didn't want the mackerel mixed in with the sardines, so [it was] killing two birds with one stone, you know. So there was a lot of that

KJL Why were the salmon rare?

RP They didn't go in the weirs very often.

JP We had some of the best salmon rivers in the U.S. here []

KJL But they didn't get trapped in the weirs? [There is a little bit of noise through this section].

RP Not very often. I'm saying once a summer you'd see one. They were prized.

KJL Did they fight over them a little bit?

RP The kids would, I don't know about the adults. [Robert tells the dog to lay down] It was real interesting growing up here. I worked there until--my office is still in the factory.

KJL Do you mind if I ask what year you were born?

RP 1949.

KJL 1949.

JP Sixty-four. No, you're not sixty four yet, your birthday's coming up.

RP I'll be sixty-four next month. May 12th.

KJL And you were born here in Eastport?

RP No, I was born in Bangor, but I--the first couple of years was at Orono. My mother and father were going to college.

KJL [to Jean] And where were you born?

JP I was born in the same hospital. Eastern Maine. My father was going to the University of Maine at that time as well.

KJL OK.

RP And we moved to Lubec when I was two. And we moved into the factory. And I lived there until I was six, and then we moved out to West Lubec. But my office today is still--was my bedroom when I was two years old. I didn't come very far in life, you know. Actually I was in my office yesterday.

KJL That's in Lubec.

RP Yes.

KJL OK

RP See the Boston Whaler sitting out here, that's so I can commute. Because to drive from here around is an hour, and back an hour, so two hours a day commuting, I can get in the Boston Whaler and be there in five minutes--literally in five minutes.

KJL How can you get there in five minutes?

RP In the Boston Whaler, by boat

KJL Oh, Boston Whaler, OK.

RP Just jump in and you're in Eastport. So as soon as the weather gets better, like in another week or two, I hope, when it gets warmer, I'll put the boat in the water, just go by boat. It just saves so much money and time. And there's no cops around if you want to go speeding across, you know.

JP You want the tape off now (laughs)

RP But it gets me on the water every day, which is good.

KJL Sure, yeah.

RP So I still pilot ships full time, so--

KJL Did you work on the sardine carriers?

RP Yeah.

KJL Tell me about that.

RP I didn't do any seiners, other than--well I made a few trips on them to see how it was done--but I worked on the carriers a lot. Both in the sardine business and the salmon business. I converted the carriers over to--in the winter when we weren't doing sardines, I carried fish feed for Connors. out to the salmon pens. And it was moist feed in forty pound totes. We'd fill the carriers up with them, take them out to different pens and drop off the feed, and then bring the empties back. And that was--we did two tractor trailer truckloads a day of feed, so both boats were running literally from four in the morning until nine at night seven days a week.

KJL This was for the fish?

RP For salmon.

KJL OK, this was aquaculture.

RP Yeah.

KJL OK.

RP And then when the herring would come, we would take one of the boats off the route and go run the herring with it. And then we also used both of them as the pilot boats, so when the ships would come, we'd take one of them and go pilot--as a pilot boat. So the sardine carriers were more used in the last ten to fifteen years of their existence than they were in their entire career. And they ran every day, almost twenty-four hours a day.

KJL So as the market for the sardines declined, the sardine carriers were put to new uses.

RP No, the sardines were never year round, ever. It was very seasonal. So what do you do with a really qualified boatman when you've got ships coming year round bringing--they need the pilot boat, and these were perfect double ended pilot boats. They're very heavy, and they ran beautifully along side a ship. And with the rounded stern on them--they were double enders, you know, both ends came to a point, you could peel off the ships, whereas with a modern square end dragger or a lobster boat, that square stern, you can't bend that. If the ship's sitting [] with the wind going slow while you get the [pilot aboard?], you can't get away from the ship []. So you try to go ahead and you wrap yourself around the bow of the ship, or you try to go astern, and here comes the propeller and a light ship coming at you. They're terrible and they're light because they're plastic, fiberglass.

These boats here were extremely heavy, probably four times the tons the plastic boat is--four times the weight. And they were seventy foot long, which is a lot better for the swells. They were designed over many years to work in the weather here, so they're much better boats. This is probably the best pilot boat there ever was in Maine, right there. The gray one, yeah. She's still exists, she's a yacht now.

KJL And where is she at?

RP The owner--I sold her for ten thousand to a couple in North Haven. They lived on it for a couple of years, and then they sold it to a guy for five thousand. And he put seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars into that boat in the late '80's, early '90's, and geez, probably the nicest yacht in Maine right now. And he's now eighty-five years old. He's trying to sell it for maybe a hundred thousand dollars. So she's still around [].

Another one that we used was the Medric. We had nine boats, but the Medric and the Grayling were the two that we used as pilot boats and fishfeed vessels. And when I say "worked hard," I mean they literally worked seven days a week year round unless it was a really bad storm, for the last ten years of their existence.

So the guys were making great money. They were making a thousand bucks a week, you know, because they were doing so many different jobs. They were long hours, but geez, they never made money like that in their lives. They were really happy with the whole situation, you know. I had one boatman here, made sixty-two thousand. That was in the early '90's. That was a lot of money in those days. So they were pretty happy with the whole thing.

JP Which boat was that?

RP On the Grayling. Leonard Ritchie one year made sixty two thousand bucks, and he was retired game warden, so he had his pension. And he just--he'd never seen like that in his life and he thought that was a great thing, you know. One of my boatmen just died two days ago, or they found his body two days ago and []. [Carl Stover?] He was just here a month ago.

You know when you're doing pilot boat work, you're putting your life in these guys' hands when they're coming alongside of a ship, to get the swell right and the timing right, not to cut your legs off when they come alongside. They've really gotta know their stuff. You put your life in someone's hands four or five hundred times, you get to trust them pretty well, you know, and they trust you.

My boatman that worked on the [Mendrick], they're still running--the new [Mendrick], it's a plastic pilot boat that we use now, because these boats got to be such a maintenance nightmare.

KJL Now the pilot boats guided larger ships in?

RP No, they'd take the pilot out to the ship on the pilot.

JP So the pilot had to--

RP You climb up a rope ladder, and then you go up on the bridge and guide the ship in. []

KJL Forgive me, I should explain. I grew up in Nebraska [laughs]

RP Ah, OK.

JP Most people don't understand what a pilot does.

KJL Were the captains kind of an elite class?

RP Very much so. The thing is, they had to be willing to work anytime, day or night, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. And you've gotta be able to get ahold of them, make the plans for the pilot boat trip out. Gotta go in any weather. And then

handling the forty pound boxes. We'd carry five hundred boxes of fish feed, That's five hundred boxes they had to load on and load off. They'd load them out of a cage we'd lower down fifty boxes a a time, and they'd put them in the hold, and put them on deck. But they all had to be handled, and then when you unload them onto the sites. So sometimes if we had an older captain, we'd send a young kid, an 18, 19 year old strong kid with them, just to do the physical work, you know. But learning the tides around here, you know, twenty foot rise and fall in tides--the currents and the tides, it was all memory

My last--the two captains I have right now, I sent them to school, they're both licensed captains and they were the only two that had any formal training, with the exception of the game warden, he was Lennie Ritchie and he knew his stuff, but the rest of them were all self taught and it was an apprentice system where you ride on the boat for a couple of years, getting started, and then they start like [] steer, you know, and take five or ten years, you know before they get up to captain. Everybody wanted it. It was very sought after--and still is--job, you know, 'cause the money's good.

KJL Was there ever any union activity at the--

RP Never. To this day there's none.

KJL Why do you think that is?

RP Because the hours are so erratic. If there's no fish--what's the union gonna--how you gonna force union wages onto--just drive the owner into bankruptcy. You don't want that. A lot of it was how people got treated, which was very good. I've been at this literally sixty-two of my sixty five years in this business, and if you treat people really good, and they know you're doing the best you can for them, keep them in the area, and keep their kids working and then they won't unionize, they just won't. They hate unions. The ILA came here and tried to organized the longshoremen here and they got literally, physically thrown out of town. and when I say physically, it was nasty.

KJL This wold be the longshoremen?

RP Yeah, the international longshoremen. It's the most popular union in the US next to the Teamsters. If the ILA decides to strike, the US shuts down, I mean it literally shuts down, 'cause almost every port in the country is ILA. And then if the Teamsters decide to strike, it used to be they could shut the country down, now they're only about thirty percent of the truckers, but at one time they were running at about ninety percent, but they can still make a mess of things, 'cause nobody's gonna cross a Teamsters picket line.

So, growing up, you know, I knew there was unions. I was a member of the AFL-CIO for [] my shipping, I was a captain on a tanker, for forty years, about 38 years, so I know the unions real well. The seaman's union was pretty strong, but never []. I think in Canada, they had--especially in Newfoundland they had a lot of fish plants, not

sardine plants, but in the fish processing plants, most of them are union. Fishworkers unions, Food Processors and Fishworkers Union, something like that. And a lot of that has to come from the way the people were treated in Neewfoundland, because it wasn't part of Canada until the '40's and it was pretty hard and they unionized, but I never heard of a plant in Maine. There was no union activity to my knowledge, ever. You gotta treat your workers good, or they'll unionize, and then you've got real problems. Not problems, but--they'd put you out of business, because you just can't afford it.

I would do anything I could to keep the people working; I packed socks in beer cans, I did luggage in codfish cans, belt buckles in mackerel cans. When different stores were going to move from one location to another I packed--sent all my packers down in busses in the winter to help them move all the items from one store to another store and catalogue it all, and get all the computer tags and UPC code stuff ready. I was always looking for work for people to do when we didn't have fish. So they all appreciated that, you know. Just before Christmas, they'd get a check for going out working two days in Bangor for some store, and they'd get a five hundred dollar check and it's like "Hey, Great!" Plus they get to go shopping in Bangor, free transportation up and free transportation back, and a free motel room while they're there.

KJL So you would help the packers find work other places when there wasn't fish?

RP Yeah, because they were very good at piecework. They're all very smart, they're hard workers, and they were dependable, so you could sell that--all those assets to other companies, for all kinds of different stuff, you know. We did agricultural stuff, a lot of relabeling. We got two tractor trailer loads of peas one day that showed up at the plant, nobody called ahead and said that they were all mislabeled, they had to take all the--there were paper labels on them. They had to take all the labels off and relabel them. And they figured it would take a week, and we had it done in six hours. Two tractor trailer truck loads, stuffed--forty footers right from end to end, containers. And the FDA guy came down to check them to make sure that they were relabeled correctly, he kind of watched that. He couldn't believe it. He said, "Jesus Christ them women know what they're doing!"

KJL What were these?

RP Peas. Canned peas.

KJL Oh, peas.

RP So they basically had to cut the old label off and then wrap the new label, glue it on, you know. And then make sure that every box got repacked with the right codes, so that you had--you didn't mix the codes in the boxes. They sent the boxes and the labels in another tractor. Then you had to get the right code off the old box and stencil it onto the new box, which is all the stuff we do in the factory anyway, you know, so it was easy []].

That got us into doing a lot of that. We did a lot of work for Mardens. Mardens would get something and it was all screwed up, and we'd sort it and repackage it, whatever had to be done to get it correct.

KJL You had a whole semi load done in six hours?

RP Two.

KJL Two.

RP Two. I had a hundred and twenty people working on it. They were just shocked, you know. They were dealing with Mardens and Mardens got--that's where they ended up going. And Mardens said, Geez if you can do that, there's all kinds of stuff we got that comes in--they're buying distressed lots for various reasons, not just for fire or flood, or overstock. They got a lot of stuff that was mislabeled and needed to be relabeled to get it correct so the FDA would [].

KJL So when you did that did you--did the client pay you and you paid the workers?

RP Yes.

KJL OK

RP Yeah, but I never took a dime of profit out of it, it was just to keep them--

KJL I was just trying to figure out how it worked

RP Yeah they'd come in and say--I'd send them a bill and say, this is how many hours we had and this is what we're paying them an hour. [] My guess is that it's going to take so many hours. This is the hourly rate, do you want to pay it or not? If you do, we'll start. They'll say yes. No money ahead of time. Trust everybody, you know. Never got stuck.

KJL When you told them how long it would take did they--

RP No, they told me how long they thought it would take the first time. I didn't, I said, "Yeah, Okay." They agreed to the price, and I did it for like--I think it was about twenty five percent of what they projected, so they were just shocked. They didn't know what they were dealing with, and the skill set of the people. So, we did a lot of different things. I was telling about the socks in the beer cans.

JP Oh, canning--

KJL I didn't quite understand that.

RP A company making clothing

JP They're novelties, right?

RP Novelty stuff for--This was for Nordstrom, and a company in Marblehead was trying to get socks packed in beer cans and none of the round can closing companies would--we didn't have round can closing equipment, so we packed the socks in the beer cans, and then took the cans to the canning company which was in Whiting. It's still there now. They do the Bar Harbor brand canned products, and we cleaned their machines up really good. Steam cleaned them all, got all the grease off of them--and it's edible grease, but you don't want any kind of grease in the can--and we sealed ten thousand cans of socks in one day, you know, because they were all packed, all we had to do was put them in. Put them in beer wrappers so you get a six pack of socks--three pair of sock in a--I've still got cans [] (Laughs). I mean it was just an example . So that kept sixty people working for a week. It wasn't just--there was all kinds of different--luggage and--ant they found that real interesting, and it made the papers, and it was a big thing, you know-- "sardine company packs socks." (Jeanne laughs)

KJL (Laughs) I hadn't heard that story.

RP Oh, yeah.

KJL So was it very hard to find enough workers?

RP No, with the bus system we had, we were pulling workers from anywhere from Pembroke and Perry, down to Machiasport, Cutler, Jonesport. One from Jonesport, but one from Jonesport, over, so busses would come in and just pick up people all the way, and take them home. The bus system is really what saved us on that. There's a certain class of people that are smart and--

JP Resourceful

RP Resourceful, they don't want to work full time in a factory, year round. They like that part-time piecework, they can make good money at it, but it's just that they don't have the education, the education level was too low for them to really get into a lot of technical jobs, so they found this as a good way to make a living. And a lot of the women, I mean, stayed until seventies, eighties. We had one in the nineties, and come down from the nursing home. She called me up and said, you know, "Your great grandfather guaranteed me when I went to work here as long as the name, Peacock, was over the door, I'd always have a job." And I didn't know her when I came back from shipping. Actually I'd never--I'd seen her a few times, but I didn't ever talk to her, because she went to work for the other company in town when I was a kid. But she said , "He said it," and I said, "Okay, so I sent a--after everybody else came in, I'd send the bus up to the nursing home, pick her up, and her sister, and bring them down, and they'd pack for two or three hours a day. And they're making--more than making their wage, so they're happy, so I'd pay them and take them back whenever they got tired.

And it didn't screw up the bus system, it was only half a mile away, you know, so--and they were all happy, I think it made them both live a long time because they lived--both lived until ninety-six and ninety-three.

KJL And they packed until they were--

RP No, one packed until she was ninety, they other packed until she was eighty-seven

KJL What were their names?

RP Ethel and Edna. I'm trying to think of their last name. I think it was Cassidy, I can't remember, but I got the record at the factory. I got a photograph of me and the two of them at the factory, yeah. And they were happy, yeah.

KJL When you say they made their wage, you mean they made enough piecework to--

RP To cover the minimum wage.

KJL To cover the minimum wage.

RP Because even if they didn't make minimum wage, new packers, or [], you still had to pay minimum wage, at least, and so it was called "making the wage." So if you had "x" number of cans in a certain period of time, or over an hour, then that was piecework. We had people in their seventies that were the fasted packers we had. Once they get that rhythm going--you have to--

JP That's the name of his video tape on canning. What's the name of that?

KJL Oh, the presentation, the title was, "Everybody had their own rhythm"

JP That was a quote from--

RP Some were jumping up and down, some back and forth, some never moved a friggin' muscle, it was mazing, you know. Some moved their arms. They all did what over time they felt was comfortable and they wouldn't get carpal tunnel.

JP Did you ever have women get carpal tunnel? Because they were saying last night that nobody remembered that sort of injury and you would think with such a repetitive job, using your hands, that they would get that. But the year I packed, I wasn't aware of it.

RP I took over operations when I retired from the tankers in '88, '89, and I didn't have a single packer case in either the salmon or the sardine business, ever.

KJL A single what case? Carpal tunnel?

RP Yeah, repetitive motion case. I did have an office worker who--Tammy-- who got injured, but what I'd do is if somebody got injured or was on workers comp, which wasn't very many, maybe four, they always came back to work. If I had to send an ambulance to their house every day and pick them up, they were going to work. (Jean laughs) Literally, I mean, literally I did that once, and everybody saw that, and they thought "Oh I guess we don't want to do that." But they can answer the phone from the stretcher, you know, give them something to do.

JP What a hard ass you are.

RP No, I think they--it got people back to work and gave them a sense that they could still work and it's legal, you know, so I said, "OK," you know. So I literally sent the ambulance to somebody's house once and had them picked up and brought down. They ended up sitting in a wheelchair and answering the phone and liked it and she ended up working in the office for the rest of her career, she couldn't get back on the line.

We had cases where I knew people were hurt at home. One woman was claiming that she hurt her elbow at the factory and she was milking a hundred cows a day, she and her daughter. So I know that she--what was going on, but I made her come in and work, you know. She didn't want to do that, because she wanted to be home milking her cows and getting paid for it, you know. So eventually she got off of comp, you know. If you treat people right, and you give them as much employment as you can, they'll treat you right.

I've heard many, many times, people say you can't get anybody to work. I never found that, ever around here. It doesn't matter who it is, you treat them right, they'll work. And I see--we've got immigration here now, from Honduras and Guatemala, in Washington County--very heavy, extremely heavy because of the blueberry industry, woods harvesting, and wreath making, and they all work their buns off, you know. They want to save money; it's a good way to make money.

When I was doing sea urchin--I wasn't doing sea cucumbers, another company was, but they were doing it in my plant, and we had a very high number of natives and Hondurans and Guatemalans--Venezuelans, one Argentinian, one Chilean.

KJL In the cannery?

JP They were doing the sea cucumbers for--

RP Three years ago?

JP [Name?]

RP [Name] He moved it to Portland, and actually just got booted out of there, but his workers down there are all Cambodian or El Salvadoran. But he's had some of the same Cambodians working for him for ten, twelve years. So I mean, it's just a new wave of immigration, the Irish came, the English came, the Scottish came. Everybody came, and we just keep getting these waves from various countries--almost always for economic reasons. A few for political or refugees, but mostly economic.

KJL Was there migrant labor working in the cannery?

RP No, not until the last ten years

JP A lot of the packers were Irish that settled here in the--

RP The families they were second, first--nobody was first generation, there was a lot of second, third generation Scottish and Irish in Lubec and Eastport both.

KJL I've heard about some of the migration from Rathlin Island in northern Ireland.

RP Yeah, but like I said, by the time I was a kid--no immigration to Lubec that I can remember--anybody, until the South American immigration ten years ago--ten to twelve years ago.

KJL South American?

RP Yeah, Honduran--Central and South America.

KJL Oh, Central America.

RP Yeah, and South America.

KJL Ah, and South?

RP Yeah, Venezuelan. The Venezuelans were pretty well educated--three or four of them retired air force helicopter mechanics. They were all--most of them were older and retired, and just came up to the states to get away from what was going on in Venezuela--Chavez []. And that--you should listen to them, listen about what went on with Chavez []. It basically became a war zone. Not because of political strife, but because of [the climate]. They just lost control of society. They just wanted to get away from it, were scared.

We had a woman from Argentina who was a political refugee. She was in her fifties--late fifties. A Peruvian woman who came up because her husband was a Chilean engineer, he had a stroke. And that's Monica's Chocolates in Lubec now, she runs a business there. She worked in the plant, and started a chocolate factory--

JP Well you had a little economic engine going there for a while, she had--Monica's Chocolates was upstairs, the sea cucumber was downstairs, our salmon company was upstairs, the salt company was downstairs, and then the sea glass stained glass was downstairs, and the art shop there now. Just like a little incubator for new businesses.

KJL Yeah, I think I remember being in that chocolate shop once, a couple of years ago.

JP That's a real success story. She's employing, what, ten now?

RP Eight full time, two part time.

JP Yep. And actually there's two chocolatiers in Lubec.

RP Both of them were partners. One was my foreman in the plant, and Monica, and then they came from very different cultures. Monica's very bright, and very aggressive, and the other guy is a very hard working guy.

JP You're on tape (laughs)

RP Yeah, very hard working guy, and their culture was so different that they just split off and made different companies, and they're both very successful.

KJL They started out working together.

RP Yeah,

JP Bayside Chocolate and Monica's Chocolate

RP Well, it was Seaside Chocolate first, and then they split into Bayside and Monica's

JP Who'd think you could go to Lubec and get two different chocolate makers

RP But, you know when I was a kid there was immigration in this area--particularly to Campobello, Grand Manan, and now Deer Island. Grand Manan and Campobello where a lot of the Canadian soldiers married British Irish, and Scottish war brides, then they came over, so it was kind of that phase of immigration. And a lot of them worked in the plant--in the sardine factories. In Campobello [it was] called Welch's, it was one of Connors' operations. On Grand Manan they had some French Canadian immigration and then a lot of Dutch immigration in the '60's. And then in Deer Island now its Filipino immigration for girls to work in the salmon plants.

KJL Filipino?

RP Yeah, and most of them married into the Deer Island society, so it was very common. And then a lot of Newfoundlanders came down to work in the plants, or to be nurses. In Newfoundland they're making nine, ten dollars an hour, this is five years ago, as a nurse, as a RN, and they can come to Machias or Calais and they're making twenty-five dollars an hour. It's higher than that now, but that was back five or six years ago. It was just--go in the ER one night, and every nurse in there was from Newfoundland. Three of the four had married local guys in Machias.

So there's waves of immigration that come here for really funny reasons, you know. But the Canadian medical system made great training. But just--the money just wasn't there in Newfoundland, especially outside of St. Johns, in the outlying ports, you just couldn't make a living, so they see the wages down here. They speak English, although it's an English that I can't understand sometimes when they get talking with each other, you know.

The Honduran--I would say the biggest immigration in Washington County in the last--I would say since the 1940's has to be the Honduran, Guatemalan immigration up here, It's huge.

JP Yeah, I don't even remember that being there when I was at [] in the 1990's,

RP That's recent. I'm saying it's the last ten years.

JP Beyond 1994, I would say, that most of them have moved here and established families.

RP The Guatemalan civil war and crime in Honduras is what's driven most of the people to start looking, and the economic ability to work with your hands and not have to have so much English. So if you're working in the woods running a skidder or cutting wood, or you're working making wreaths, as long as you have a foreman that can speak English and Spanish, then [] make a living. So that's a whole aspect of life here that's definitely changing the cultures quite a bit--particularly in Milbridge, around the Milbridge area and here in the reservation there's quite a few Hondurans.

KJL Yeah, I've met some of the [workers] down at Milbridge.

RP So it's having an effect.

KJL How is it changing the culture?

RP It's given a new influx of workers that want to work. So--particularly in the wreath business there's a very intense, short period of time--two months, maybe two and a half months. And they were always having trouble getting labor and had to import a lot of labor from all over, and now that's kind of dropping because these are permanent residents now, so it's more a local based people that you can depend on, that you know,

that kind of thing. In the woods industry a lot of people operating skidders in Washington County are Hondurans that came out of the Honduran woods industry, running the same brand of skidder down there, and they get up here, and they can work. Or running harvesters that grab the tree and [] put it back to the skidder to skid it out, and I know three people that are running the really sophisticated Swedish harvesters that did the same thing in Honduras, and came up. One in Peru and two in Honduras. So they get up here and take jobs nobody else wants. They take them.

So there's a lot--It's changing I think, the perception of work, and who's willing to work, and who isn't, and what you're gonna do to get work. In all the natural resource industries--fishing, woods, it's making a big difference. On a lot of the boats now, you starting to see Hondurans particularly working on the back of boats, the scallop draggers, you know, picking the scallops and stuff, which is a change.

KJL Now, a couple of the reasons I've heard for the decline of the cannery industry is overfishing and government regulation.

RP Government regulation, certainly but overfishing, was never an issue, never. Anybody that tells you that doesn't know what's [good]. Because you look at the amount of tonnage being caught it's the same--goes right back [] it's the same. It's just where the fish are being landed. If they're going to New Brunswick, right, then you know is that overfishing?

KJL Maybe I'm using the wrong term wrong term--fisheries management.

RP Yeah, because they allow midwater [trawling], which allows you to catch fish on the surface that have [] in them--for the lobster industry and for freezing and overseas sales. That hurt the sardine industry, for sure, but there's o less fish, you know, it's the same tonnage. It's just where's it going and how is it being caught. So there's a management issue, not an overfishing issue.

KJL Landed in other places?

RP Yeah, Gloucester, New Bedford and up into Brunswick. There's no processing plants left in Maine to handle the stuff. This state is so hard to do business in. It is the toughest state to do business in in the United States, and I've done business in a lot of them. It's getting better, much better now than it was in the past. Every time you dealt with anyone in state government, you're basically treated like a criminal, if you're trying to be an employer. After a while you just say, well "Hell with this," so--yeah I employed a hundred and twenty, a hundred and thirty people full time, year round, and after a while you just say, "Why am I beating my brains into the wall?" I still employ that many people, but just not here.

KJL Did the seiners have a very big impact?

RP They sure did on the inshore fishery, but the mid water trawling is what really affected--

KJL Mid water trawling?

RP Yeah, it's when you have two boats--maybe one, but usually two--the pair trawling, and you can set your net down low so you can catch fish down a hundred fathom or fifty fathom--no, no a hundred, probably fifty fathom on up to the surface day or night--usually at night, but sometimes in the day; where the seiners had to wait for the fish to come to the surface, and the weirs had to wait for the fish to swim along the shore, so it was a very selective fishery. If you get a weir full of fish and you can't sell it, you can let it go in the old days--or sell it for lobster bait or something, but you could make sure the fish were the right quality to go to the plants, the sardine plants.

If you're midwater trawling, the reason they're down there, they're feeding; they're full of fish feed and you cannot retort them. A fish with feed in its stomach, it'll just blow up in the can, so that's a big issue in management--not the amount being caught, but how it's being caught and when it's being caught.

KJL What would happen while they're feeding? I'm sorry.

RP If there's feed in the herring's stomach, and you cut it and retort it inside of a closed can, it'll blow up inside the can, so it just makes a mash--it looks like a mash inside. So you have to leave the fish inside of a weir for 24 hours to get the feed out, out of their system. And then you

KJL Ah.

RP And then you can take them for sardines and get good quality out of them. Mid water trawling and [somewhat] seining, you can't do that, so that hurt a lot. So it wasn't overfishing, it was the type of fishing that had more to do with that issue. The real reason is subsidies in Canada, government regulations, particularly Maine and the way people got treated, you just after a while felt like, "Well, why do this, I could do something else." It's psychological, you know. So that's why she went down, I'll tell you; in my case, I know everybody in Maine, it's the same in all of them.

Interview ends with a few closing comments:

RP It was a great food for unrefrigerated food. and that was one of the prime reasons why it was--particularly during the war, it was great because they could use them in areas both for the troops and, more importantly for the refugees or the residents of the countries they took over. How do you feed them? You've got no refrigeration, [] the protein, and that's why sardines were so important in the war effort. And I knew that because you look at photographs during the war of the plant and see young men in there; sealing machine technicians and stuff and they didn't get drafted. They were deferred. And I mean they were told, "You aren't going anywhere, we need you here more importantly than we need you on the end of a rifle."

KJL Are you talking about Vietnam?

RP No, no, World War II. And a lot of guys told me; I asked them if they were in the war, and they said, "No I worked in the plant, they wouldn't take me." particularly the sealing machine people. That was very hard to learn, and it takes years to learn how to operate--seal a square can basically--or a rectangular can, and do it right. So if they got good sealing machine people, they didn't go anywhere.

When I started talking to them I was probably eleven, twelve, thirteen years old when I started realizing why these guys hadn't served in the war and how important it was, because when you look at the production during the war it was--It happened to match the highest level of catching the fish in a cycle with the biggest need for the product. So anyway, year round, twenty-four hours a day, they had fish, they'd pack. They could hire anybody, and the government paid big money, so it was no problem paying the workers to get them in if they had a lot of people working. I think in one night my father said there was over a thousand people working at midnight, just in our company. We were one of fifty companies.

KJL At one plant?

RP No, at four different plants. Portland had five, six hundred, and Lubec probably had two hundred, and then Machiasport probably had a hundred, and then [they had] all the boatmen working the weirs, the weirmen--the supply side. Then you had the truckers and the trains, you know, it was a lot of people involved in that industry

End of interview

