Interview with Richard "Rob" Walz [RW]
Occupation: Fisherman
Port Community: Tiverton, RI
Interviewer: Azure Cygler [AC]
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Catch Share Oral Histories Project – NOAA Fisheries
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Coastal Roasters, Tiverton, RI

Interview

[00:00]

AC: Today is the 18th of July, 2012, and for the record, my name is Azure Dee Cygler. [I'm] here at the Coastal Roasters, in Tiverton, officially? Or Little Compton?

RW: Tiverton.

AC: Tiverton, Rhode Island. [And] I'm here with Richard Walz. Richard, if you could just say for the recording that you read and signed the release form?

RW: Yes, I did. [But] I didn't finish the second page here.

AC: Ok, no problem; we can do that after. And if you could just give me your full name and address?

RW: Richard Robert Walz, 2090 Main Road, Tiverton, Rhode Island. Most people don't know me as Richard; Rob, Robbie, Robert.

AC: Ok, Rob. You prefer Rob?

RW: Yeah.

AC: Ok. And your home port, Rob?

RW: Tiverton.

AC: Tiverton. And your boat's name?

RW: [There's] a couple of boats. I have *Finest Kind II,* and the *Amy Elizabeth*.

AC: And are you in a sector or the common pool?

RW: Common pool.

AC: And you fish mostly for groundfish?

RW: [No], not mostly for groundfish.

AC: Ok, we can get into all the things that you do. Ok, so different fisheries.

RW: Seasonally.

AC: Seasonally. And how old are you, if you don't mind my asking?

RW: Fifty.

AC: Fifty years young. And just to get a little background, could you tell me where you're from, how you came to be here, those sorts of details; your family structure, whether you're married?

RW: I originally grew up in Swansea, which, if you peak down here, is right down the river. [So I] was on the water my whole life, fishing as a little kid and all that stuff; sailing.

My mom and dad still live in Swansea, and I moved out this way to be a little closer to the ocean. Started fishing when I was thirteen [or] fourteen years old; for anything I could catch to make money.

AC: As crew on boats?

RW: No, on my own small boats. When I [was] seventeen years old or so, I started crewing on boats, offshore; crabbing, lobstering, that kind of stuff.

[I] always had my own boat; moved up a little bigger and bigger, until I had a boat big enough to fish myself.

AC: And it was always out of this area, Sakonnet Point, Tiverton?

RW: Yeah. And after going offshore, I realized I didn't want to be offshore for seven, ten, twelve day trips. You do two twelve day trips in a row, you come back, and you don't know [what's] been going on. Especially back then, because there were no satellite phones, or anything. So you wouldn't even know if the president was alive. [I'm] saying that because I think one of them was assassinated during that time. We came back, [and] were like, "Oh my God."

AC: [A] major event in the world happened.

RW: Yeah. So, I pretty much decided that I wanted to have my own boat, [and] not go out for twelve days at a time. [I] kept pursuing that, [and] went to school at URI.

After [a] year of fishing offshore after high school, I decided that would probably help me out [with] getting my own boats, and all that. Like I had mentioned, there were grants and loans available; guaranteed loans to pursue that kind of career, back at that time.

AC: So if you went to the fisheries school, upon graduation they would grant you some sort of money?

RW: Yeah, even during school, I was granted money to help. I was fishing during school, working full time, and I got some grant money so I could slow down and study. Actually, one particular professor put me in for that because he'd noticed that I came into class with my oilers on.

AC: It's a good indication.

RW: Yeah, I'd have to pull them down to my ankles with my boots on, to take my test. So, he figured that I needed a little time off. And I got a grant then, which helped me graduate.

Then, of course, [I] went back into. Actually, after I graduated, I went back offshore, just because I wanted to try out all different kinds of boats. I went dredging, lobstering, dragging…

AC: Dredging for clams?

RW: Yeah, offshore dredge boat. I was interested in that, but it was one of the first highly regulated things. So I stayed away from that, because at that time, they had quotas.

AC: Clamming was…?

RW: Yeah, there were quotas already; there were shut-downs. I didn't like the fact that, "Ok, suddenly we're out of work." That was the first experience I had with any regulation, because most of the fisheries were unregulated. We just got our licenses free, you know? [Just] signed up [for] multi-species, or whatever you wanted, and [went] to catch the fish.

AC: And that was a federally-regulated fishery; or was that the State?

RW: Yeah, federal.

AC: It was federal, ok.

RW: And, again, you say "regulated," [but] it wasn't very regulated.

AC: Probably compared to now.

RW: Yeah. I know there were more fish around. But even though you could go out and catch everything you [possibly] could, the fishermen almost regulated it. If a species wasn't doing well, we wouldn't work on them. We had the flexibility to move to something else. There were a few bad years of codfish, way back then, [so] we'd just fish for something else instead, because they're all cyclical.

AC: And that was sort of an understanding that everyone had, fishing here?

RW: He's another fisherman. I don't know if you interviewed him. [Referring to side conversation with passer-byer]

AC: No. Alright, cool. So then, how did you get from that to where you are now? Just an evolution in time?

RW: Yeah, it's almost [that] same exact thing. I mean, I stayed in that fishery, bought my first thirty-footer. I still have a thirty-footer, just a newer one. Then [I] got a bigger boat, to be versatile; especially [with] the lobstering. When I went into lobstering, [I] needed a big boat to carry a bunch of traps all over the place.

So yeah, [I] just kind of evolved into it. Again, fishing is cyclical, back then, and [today]. So, we always just changed. And you could change then. Now, you can't possibly go into another fishery, because you're regulated out of it, or you don't have a license for it, or that particular fishery is probably closed.

But back then, if one species wasn't doing well, because of its cycle, you could jump to another species. That made it fairly easy, and a lot of fishermen did that. If a species got a little low in abundance, some guys would continue the year lobstering, and other guys would go for different species inshore, or in a different area.

I've actually travelled, chasing fish all the way up and down the coast; fished out of ports [in] Maryland [and] Virginia. Some of those things you could do now, but a lot of them you can't.

AC: But you always came back home in the end?

RW: Yeah, of course.

AC: So now are you fishing inshore mostly?

RW: No.

AC: You're offshore.

RW: Yeah, a little bit. I guess you'd call it offshore; thirty, forty miles out.

AC: Not day trips then.

RW: Day trips, yeah.

AC: They're still day trips. Ok, so how many days?

RW: One day at a time.

AC: One day.

RW: The newer thirty-footer's a fairly quick boat. I custom-built [it] to get out there quick, and be able to come home that day. Again, the offshore experience had me always wanting to do that. I have three daughters, and wanted to be home.

AC: Now, tell me a little bit about that. Are you currently married?

RW: No.

AC: Ok. So three daughters; how old?

RW: My older two are twenty and twenty-two, and my youngest one is thirteen.

AC: Ok, so they're young girls now.

RW: I did get divorced a long time ago. And I think regulation had a big thing to do with that. I remember at one particular time, every fisherman that did what I did was getting divorced; all at the same time. Honestly.

The boat that fished over here next to me, the boat on this side of me, the boat inside of me; all of us were going through divorces. And, I mean, we shouldn't [have] brought it home. It's our own faults. But, sometimes you bring that home with you. "They closed this, what do I do now?" Then suddenly it's open, and all you can do is work. And your wife doesn't understand why you're never home. Even though [I was] day fishing, I'd be home [and] go back out. At one point, I worked ninety-one days in a row. And it still goes like that.

AC: Oh my. And you're not talking eight-hour days, you're talking huge days.

RW: Yeah. You'd just come home, sleep, and [then] get up before anybody [else was] even up.

AC: Right, so you're not even really getting to see them. So that's a huge strain on your family.

RW: And you lose a lot of sleep. I guess the trip limits may be good for some reasons, because you've got to go home. But on the other side, they're bad because you have to unload the boat.

Years ago, if the fishing was good, we'd stay out for a few days, [and just] bring a lot of ice. Or [to] make it easy on ourselves, [we'd] pull into the islands. [And we'd] get plenty of sleep, because we were in early, instead of steaming four hours all the way back to port.

AC: What year was this, when you were divorced; and seeing other people get divorced around you? Was it in the nineties?

RW: Yeah, the late nineties. I mean, right when regulation was really coming into place on everything; '95, '96.

AC: So, before Amendment 13 then. This was way before. Ok, I see. That's a part of what we want to understand with this study; how things have affected your family, your home, your community. Because obviously you can't isolate it; it does come home with you, for better or for worse.

RW: Yeah. It always seemed like you just didn't have enough time for your family during a particular time of year; during the spring run, or the fall run, or the winter.

Even to this day, [when] we put in a big spring run, we don't spend any time with our families. But we have to. We used to be able to fish year-round, without [having to worry] as much about making all the money [at once]. It's turned into more of that; you have to take an opportunity to make money on a particular species when you can, because they might close it tomorrow.

AC: Ok. So how does being in the common pool affect how you fish, in terms of making those kinds of decisions; or does it at all?

RW: Well, yeah it does. For instance, I try to spend a little more time at home during the fall run, not working so hard. I've always fallen back on cod fishing in the winter. Well, last year was the first year that, because of the change in regulations, which I believe was a big mistake…

AC: [Do] you mean the start of sectors, as the "change in regulations?"

RW: No, [I mean] the way they've been regulating the cod fisheries here in southern New England. Now this is suddenly Georges' Bank cod. Georges' Bank flounder is Georges' Bank flounder, and southern New England flounder is southern New England flounder, but southern New England cod is [now] Georges' Bank cod. I don't know, I think they just make it up as they go along.

They left the fishery open last year at the beginning of the season. [They] changed the regulations, and left the cod fishery with a 1,000 pound limit in southern New England. [Then] they opened it up to 3,000 pounds at the end of last year, because the quota wasn't caught. So, at the very end of the year, they opened it up to 3,000 pounds a day to try to catch the whole quota.

Well, after May 1st rolled around, it was the new [fishing] year. [But] the fisheries service didn't think about that, and the cod fishing was open to 3,000 pounds; here's a fish that they're claiming is in trouble. So most of the boats that could go offshore at that time in the summer, did. [The] draggers were able to go out for ten days, and bring in 30,000 pounds of cod. [They were] going offshore in eastern Georges' Bank area, which somehow affected our fish, and they caught up the whole quota early.

Unfortunately, I didn't follow that. I was in monkfish fishing; trying to spend a little more time at home, counting on my cod fishing for the winter. [That] always brings me a big part of my year's pay.

[But] the whole quota was caught early, and I was in the common pool. [This was] right at the beginning of the season; after buying the nets, commissioning the boat, hauling it, putting a bunch of money into it, getting ready for the season, and even saving my days.

We have a limited number of days to fish, so I saved [some]. Our cod fishing mostly happens at the end of the fishing year, so I saved my days through the whole year, with this one particular boat, so I could go cod fishing. To make a long story short, they closed the fishery on us. Or put the limit down to 300 pounds, which made it almost like, just fuel money.

AC: So what did you? Could you use those days for something else?

RW: Nope.

AC: Because you had already rigged the boat for [groundfishing]?

RW: Yeah. A few years ago they closed the flounder fishing in this area; I used to participate in that fishery, but that got closed.

So right, there was nothing I could do. They also put in an interim rule that [prevented us from using] a particular kind of open net that we [used] to

catch other flounder. So the fishery was open, but they wouldn't allow us to use the [other] nets to catch the fish.

They covered every base to pretty much make sure we couldn't go for anything. [So] I had a tough winter; a really tough winter. That was another thing I counted on.

I should be getting used to it, because prior to that I fished for flounder every single winter, [and] they shut that on us, [after having] no limit at all. My average catch was anywhere from 1,000 to 1,400 pounds a day. Every year I did that, for almost twenty years. [So] it was pretty stable.

AC: Wow, so there was no big drop that you saw that would indicate them needing to regulate it more?

RW: Right. And they just closed the fishery. From unregulated to complete closure; not a single fish on board.

AC: Winter flounder or summer flounder?

RW: Right, winter flounder.

AC: Winter flounder, ok. So that's federal, ok, got it. Wow.

RW: Right. So cod and flounder, our staples for the winter here, were just taken away from us totally. And then you get forced into another fishery that you have a license for. A lot of times, those are over-crowded, but you have no choice.

AC: And this other fishery was monkfishing?

RW: Yeah.

AC: Is that different fishing in terms of [using] entirely different gear?

RW: Yeah, different size nets, different style of fishing.

AC: Different size nets. [And] it's just a different way of fishing the gillnet?

RW: Yeah, the nets stay in a longer period of time.

AC: Did that translate to you having to spend more time on the water than you would have in the past? In terms of hours, were you out [longer]?

RW: Yeah, we'd have to fish further offshore.

AC: Further offshore, ok.

RW: Which would definitely amount to way more hours.

AC: Was safety ever a factor, in terms of that switch to monkfishing?

RW: Oh yeah, definitely.

AC: You felt it was less safe, more safe, or just not a factor?

RW: Well, it was a factor for me, because I have a thirty-foot boat; taking that sixty to a hundred miles offshore was out of the question. [So] I actually ran somebody else's boat; a bigger steel boat. I ran somebody else's boat, [so] I'd give up half the catch to the owners. It took a big toll on my pay, [and] what I could bring home for the winter. I had to work a lot more to try to bring in almost the same amount of money.

AC: Right. So what happened with your two boats in the meantime?

RW: I just had to tie them up.

AC: But you still had to pay boat insurance?

RW: Yeah, and that's where it gets tough; when you're running another boat, not getting the full amount of money, but still have to pay maintenance, boat insurance, dockage, all that stuff. So there's a huge swing there; it's not just, "Ok, I'm going to go work at this other job for awhile."

AC: You have to maintain [everything], I see. Now, were you always the captain on both of your boats?

RW: Usually.

AC: You would just take one?

RW: Years ago, I used to hire captains to run one of them or the other. But now that the regulations are so tight, I pretty much run them all myself.

AC: And how do you decide which one to run at the time?

RW: It depends on the season, the proximity to the fish; if they're close, if they're far. One boat's fifty foot, the other's thirty foot. The thirty-footer I go far out [with] in the summer, because the weather's usually better. I fish the bigger

boat in November [and] December, when the weather's rough a lot, [and there's] a lot of gales. That's just [a] safety and comfort factor.

AC: Now that you're running another boat, have you thought of selling yours?

[21:15]

RW: No. Well, I run the boat seasonally. I did think about selling it, at times, but I don't know. Boats aren't worth what they used to be, [with] the current regulations. Here's a multispecies groundfish boat, in southern New England, that can't fish for groundfish. Flounder's closed, and you can't fish for cod either, [so] how do you sell that boat? Maybe somebody up north would buy it. But they experience the same problems. The only other way to go is [to] join a sector, which you had talked about.

AC: Yeah. Now, why did you choose the common pool versus the sector?

RW: My sector allocations were too low, and I'm not sure if that was a factor of the data. They used dealer information [from] years ago. The dealer-permitting process was open-access, [so] if a dealer lost his license, he could go under a different name, [and] get another license. A lot of the dealers didn't report accurately, so it affected our allocation in the fisheries.

AC: I see.

RW: So if you caught a certain amount of fish every year, and that particular dealer didn't report the accurate amount, your allocation was real low.

My allocation was a lot lower than what I could survive on, so I chose the common pool. I think my allocation was somewhere around five or 6,000 pounds of cod. That's what I was given to fish for.

AC: So the common pool seemed like a better option, versus leasing that 5,000 pounds? You said you couldn't fish it, because it's nothing; that's like a few trips, right?

RW: Right.

AC: Ok. Part of this is trying to understand why people choose one over the other, the common pool versus the sector.

RW: My allocation might've also been low because of the cyclical nature of fish, too. During the allocation years, there was a period of time when we had warm weather here, [and] the codfish didn't really come down from the north.

We chose to pursue other species during that time, because I think there were two or three years in a row when the summer species hung around a long time here. We were actually fishing for things like Spanish mackerel, and [other] different things, because the water was warm here. The codfish didn't really come into this area, so we skipped a few years.

AC: So for your allocation, they never factored in anything else besides what your landings were for cod during that ten-year period? They didn't think of seasonal [fishing] shifts that you might've done? That was never factored into the equation?

RW: Right. No, I don't believe so.

AC: It didn't sound like it, from what I've heard elsewhere, as well. It was strictly what you caught, between these ten years.

RW: And then, whatever's missing from dealer reporting is omitted from what you have. They take an average; so if you took three years, and fished for different species during that time, you lost all that.

In southern New England, it's a bit tougher [with] groundfish, because we're on the southern border of them. [In] warm years, you get southern fish here; [in] real cold years, the northern fish come down.

AC: It sounds like this is a port where you guys recognize that shift; according to what the ecosystem is saying, essentially.

RW: Right. It's a warm year this year, so we don't know what's in store for us; we might be fishing for warmer water southern species.

AC: Yeah, ok. And Rob, how about crew members? Have you had many crew members on the boat?

RW: Well, I usually take either two or three guys.

AC: Has that changed over the last couple years since sectors started?

[25:40]

RW: Well, yeah, it's kind of tough to keep a guy around, especially [with] the nature of the business: a bunch of money at once, and then no fishing for awhile. And then this is closed, that's closed, [and] a lot of the younger guys don't see any future in it. You used to get college students during the summer, or you'd have somebody who wanted a career in the business.

I actually had one guy, years ago, that made every trip; he never missed a trip. He worked for me for years, ran one of my boats, and then went on to buy his own boat. But you don't get that anymore. My last decent crew member said, "Why am I going to do this? I'd have to come up with a whole bunch of money to buy a boat and a license, to maybe go fishing; or maybe be shut down and do what you do: pay for your boat to be at the dock, and insurance, and all that stuff."

AC: So you went from a total of how many crew [members] before sectors to how many now?

RW: Well I still have almost the same number of crew members.

AC: [So] it's just a shift in the people, themselves?

RW: Yeah. I really don't have a steady crew right now. We used to be able to maintain crew pay for a whole year, but now it's make a bunch of money, [and then nothing]. Usually the crew doesn't put it away, so they have to move to another job. And I've tried to tell them for years, "When we're making some money, put that away," [especially] now with all the regulations.

AC: It's important, now more than ever.

RW: Yeah, because we're not going to be working when they close this, or when the quota's caught; whatever happens.

AC: And they don't take your advice.

RW: No.

AC: [It] may be the nature of the business, in some ways, too.

RW: I mean, one guy went out during the fishing season, and rented a house beyond his means. [He] rented everything he could from Aaron's Rent-a-Center: TV, couch; living like a king. And then as soon as the season was over, he lost everything.

AC: Oh my goodness. And he comes to you asking for more work, "I can't do much about that."

Could you tell me a little bit about your neighborhood? Do you consider it to be a fishing community? Are people pretty in touch with what's going on in fisheries, or not?

RW: Well, it used to be more of a fishing community; not so much anymore. A lot of the fishermen that live here in Tiverton are forced to fish from other ports, because a lot of the fish dealers here closed.

Right across the street, behind this building, was a big ice place. The town used to be a little more centered on fishing. There'd be dockage right down the street here, [but] that's all closed up; dockage under the bridge, dockage where I'm tied up, which is now private property. The commercial docks here in town [have] pretty much [all been] sold.

AC: And who are they sold to?

RW: Private property.

AC: Private property. For developments, or you don't know yet?

RW: Yeah, condos. Down here was going to be a marina.

There [used to be] two fish dealers up the road. This little building here was a fish store, [and] down the road were another two [or] three fish dealers. [And there were] commercial boats tied up at every dealers' place; people bringing in all kinds of different species, whatever we could catch back then. The limits were reasonable.

It was kind of like a thriving little fishing town. But again, not so much anymore. Everything's closed; the ice companies left, all the fish dealers left.

AC: When did that start to change, roughly?

RW: Probably been about seven [or] eight years [ago]. I mean, it was a slow squeeze; one guy would go, [then] another guy would go. It happened in a period of probably three or four years.

Most of the folks that ran boats or fished have moved to either Point Judith or New Bedford. I'm kind of lucky that I have a spot to tie up now on private property; but if that property sells, I'm out of town, too.

AC: Did sectors play a role in it, or was it something beyond that? You said it was sort of gradual, but did sectors play any role [in] accelerating that process of change, or not?

RW: I don't know if they actually did. I mean, I think part of it was the allocation process. A lot of the boats right here in Tiverton didn't join sectors, like me. The low allocation, or the common pool not getting enough of any species, had something to do with it, because the fish just weren't coming into the area anymore.

AC: Right. And did you change where you offload and get supplies? How has that changed for you, personally? Do you now go to Point Judith yourself?

RW: Well, again, I'm kind of lucky. Because I know the property owners, I've tied up there; so I've maintained my place. I used to sell fish there, but the fish dealer's gone. Now I have trucks that come in from New Bedford, or Point Judith, or Newport, or something, to pick up my fish.

AC: So you just call them when you're landing, and they'll come meet you?

RW: Yeah.

AC: Has that always been an option?

RW: Yeah.

AC: That sounds like a nice [option].

RW: There was a little more opportunity [before]. [You could] pull into port and sell one species down the road, because that guy specialized in that kind of fish, and paid the highest price. Summer flounder, for instance; the limits were fairly low, so it was ok for one dealer to get a hundred pounds of fish from each boat, and [just] specialize in summer flounder. But now that most of the dealers are gone, you're limited to where you can sell it.

AC: So you just have to sell all the fish that you have on board to one particular dealer?

RW: Well, if I bring in skate and monkfish to a dealer [who] doesn't handle much summer flounder, he'll give me a $1.00, $1.50 a pound, [when] the price could be $4.00 a pound. He'll just pass it off to another guy.

AC: He doesn't want to deal with it, I see.

RW: [And] because you only have a hundred pounds, his truck's [just] going to pack it, and bring it to another place. [Back] when there was a little competition in the area, you could bring it right down the street, to this guy or that guy, and get $4.00-4.50 a pound for that same box of fish. So, that's affected the price of fish for us.

I can still come to the dock, put a box of summer flounder in my pick-up truck, and drive it to Point Judith. [That's] an hour and twenty minutes away, [but I might] get top dollar over there.

AC: It just depends on how eager you are in terms of finances.

RW: But that's probably four hours of [travel], plus gas.

AC: So, unless you have other business down there, that's kind of a big trip.

Rob, how about your social groups; do you feel like the people you hang out with are mostly fishermen? Or are your friendships outside of fisheries mostly?

RW: Well, most of my high school friends and peers aren't fishermen. I'd say [out of] everybody I grew up with, went to school with, [and] keep in touch with, one of them is a fisherman; the rest aren't.

And then a lot of fishermen used to kind of hang around together, but that doesn't happen anymore.

AC: And why is that?

RW: I think it was just the nature of the business. When all the guys were making money, you had a lot more crew around. And the crews were good people, so you'd invite their families over. A lot of guys would be married and have kids, so you'd have a little more interaction with your crew and other fishermen. Whereas now, the way regulations are, [there aren't] many good guys. You know, you don't have a Rhodes Scholar walking down the dock looking for a job anymore. The first one that does come by, I'll hire him.

AC: I'm sure you will, you'll scoop that guy right up!

RW: But you used to get guys that had families and stuff like that. It's just not there anymore, [with] the uncertainty of the job.

AC: Are there people hitting the docks, asking for work? Even though they may not be the most desirable people, do you get a lot of that flow; or has that changed?

RW: Well, there are parts I don't know should even be in an interview. But within the last year, I think I've had every form of substance abuse addict on my boat. I've had to fire a junkie, a crack-head, alcoholics, pill-users. I mean, you name it.

A lot of these guys come down the dock, [and] you don't know them. One guy had four kids, seemed like the nicest guy in the world; until we caught him using heroin on the boat. Once we got to know him we said, "This guy's up and down. He's like the best worker, then all of the sudden he's terrible." He wouldn't wake up one day for work, and then he was there, all gung-ho.

I guess you could have some kind of screening.

AC: But that's a whole other process for you to have to go through; a whole other stress for you, to worry about who's on your boat, doing whatever.

RW: A lot of times when they come down for the job, they've got their kids in their car, [because] they want to impress you. You say, "Ok, this guy's got a family. He wants to make some money." A few weeks go by, and you notice that his habits. One day he's Dr. Jekyll, another day he's Mr. Hyde; depends on whatever he has.

AC: And are they people from out of town, like you'd never seen them before, or are they a mix?

RW: Well, actually, this one guy was in the fishing business years ago. Then he kind of disappeared, went out of town, and then came back and said he wanted to get [back] into fishing. So they're all over, there are local guys.

One of the last crew members I had, just a few weeks ago, is in his first week of thirty-day rehab. He seemed like the nicest guy in the world. He has a daughter, but he's divorced, and he just got out of the Army. He came on board, never been fishing before, made a few trips, did great, and then disappeared. We didn't know where he was for a week. I still owe him a paycheck. And finally his dad told one of my other crewmembers that he's in rehab for thirty days.

AC: So this is something you never used to have to deal with, back in the nineties, or it was the same?

RW: Well, no, it was always there. Guys like that would always be around, but there'd be good guys; you'd have stable guys for years.

AC: I don't know how you manage all the details of what you do, day-to-day; it's pretty immense.

And Rob, how about your families' long-term life-plans? Have you had to shift that, [things like] retirement or moving? Has that been something you've thought about, and has that changed specifically in the last couple of years since sectors?

RW: Well, yeah. I thought I was going to retire, but now I think I'm just going to work until I die.

AC: You'll be ninety-five out there.

RW: That's pretty much it.

AC: Because before you felt like you had something of value that you could sell, and use as retirement, or…?

RW: Well, part of that, but also just seasonally trying to put away money. You'd say, "Ok, here's the good time of year. We're going to put some money away, and we're going to do that every year."

My mom and dad live in Florida six months of the year, [and] I was going to try to spend a little time down [there]. You know, maybe a couple months of the year. I was involved in charter fishing; I was going to do that down there.

AC: What was it called?

RW: "Charter fishing."

AC: "Charter." Oh, right. I thought you said "chowder" at first. I was like, "That sounds wonderful."

RW: I spent five years running a charter boat. I picked that up as a side-job, during the summer, instead of using up my Days at Sea fishing. I decided to try that a bit.

With the economy the way it is, it hasn't been good. You know, the charter fishing in the last few years just kind of went to hell. People just don't have the money to hire a captain and a boat [to] go out there. They've actually kind of changed to the party boat kind of thing, instead of the private charters. So maybe the party boats are doing better, because they only charge seventy dollars a person or something like that.

AC: I've got you. And could you just do that instead? Or you'd have to be a captain on a boat, or someone else's boat?

[41:00]

RW: Well yeah, you could. Or buy your own, which is a pretty big investment. I was considering that, [but] again, that's another big investment. [And] you're in the same thing; you're caught jumping out of the frying pan into the fire, [because] you're still regulated by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS).

A friend of mine is running a party boat, and that's one reason I decided to quit. He's out of South Carolina, Myrtle Beach. He has a twenty-eight passenger boat, was making great [money in the] summer. Boat would be filled up all the time, catching sea bass, grouper, and stuff like that. Now the sea bass fishing is closed, and he's starving. He can't take people out there to catch grouper, because you can't get past the sea bass, there's so many of them. You put your line down, [and] every time you get a sea bass.

So I said, "I'm not going to jump from the frying pan to the fire."

AC: Gotcha. If you got out, would you want to get off the water completely?

RW: Well no, that's what I mean. Once you've got that in your blood, you can't get off the water. I saw a few fishermen sell their boats and get off the water. But then, they wanted to get back on the water. It becomes a substantial investment to get back onto the water, into uncertainty, [so] they couldn't buy a boat. And one guy died; he just died, fifty-two years old. I don't know how, it might not be the reason, but he was really depressed.

AC: Wow. Was that here, out of this port?

RW: Yeah. So you can't get off the water totally, if you've been doing it all your life.

AC: Right. And on that kind of note, have you seen other health issues like that, in your circle of friends, or your community, that you think are attributable to fisheries issues? Are there things you've seen, more substance abuse? Or physical health issues, peoples' health deteriorating?

RW: Yeah. I mean, the uncertainty in management: closed down, then open, does have an effect on your health.

AC: For yourself as well? Has your health changed, mental and physical?

RW: Yeah. When you're leaving at one o'clock in the morning [to go] fishing, and you work until night, you can't go out for a jog.

AC: Right. The last thing you want to do is a work-out routine.

RW: On the boat, sometimes you might get a lot of cardiovascular activity, but then sometimes you don't. If you're the captain of the boat, you're running valves and levers, and pulling nets with haulers, and stuff. [Then] you get home, unload the boat, and you have time to eat, I mean, you can't go out for a jog. It's almost physically impossible.

AC: Is that something you would like to do? Were you a runner, or are you a runner?

RW: Well, not a runner; I used ride my bike a lot. Now [that] the season has slowed down, I can a little bit [more]. [But] I'm going to take a little time off; it's hot to do any of that stuff. Maybe [I'll do some] swimming.

But definitely the uncertainty of it, and the schedule, makes it tough to maintain a schedule of exercise, and stuff like that.

AC: Ok, yeah. And would you say your quality of life has changed since sectors began; since you joined the commonpool, specifically? So in the last three years, has that changed for better or worse?

RW: Well again, my family doesn't really understand that Mother Nature runs my life; and the Fisheries Service. I mean, it used to just be Mother Nature, but now it's Mother Nature and NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) that run your life. [But] they don't understand why suddenly you have to just fish all the time, or re-rig your boat.

AC: Or why you're so busy all the time.

RW: Yeah, and then other times you're not. Sometimes you're lucky, you have a good run, [then] you get a little time to re-do your boat, or a little time off. It's kind of what I have right now. But my daughters are all working on the weekends, [and] my girlfriend works every weekend.

AC: So your free-time isn't necessarily spent with your family, loved ones?

RW: Right, it's tough to plan. You can plan it because things are seasonal; I usually take off hurricane season. That's when I get vacation, because it's not the best time of year to fish.

AC: Now, do any of your daughters live with you?

RW: No. Well, the older one was kind of moving in, so she's back and forth. My younger one stays with me for a couple of weeks at a time in the summer, here and there. She was here last week, but this week she's at her mom's; that kind of thing.

AC: Is her mom's far away?

RW: No, you can almost see her mom's house from here; right across the river.

AC: Is that Swansea?

RW: No, not Swansea. This is Portsmouth.

AC: Portsmouth, ok. So you're able to be somewhat close to them geographically. [So you can take] quick trips over to say hi? Is that something you feel like you can [do]?

RW: Yeah. My older daughters now live right across the border in Fall River, because it's a little cheaper. One lives with her mom, [and] the other is kind of in and out of her mom's house. She's the one who was in my house for a little bit, so she's back and forth. You know that age: twenty-two, doesn't want to live with mom, doesn't want to live with dad, [but] can't afford to live on her own.

AC: I'm not looking forward to my son being twenty-two, ever. I'm just thinking I can delay it somehow.

RW: How old is he?

AC: He's two.

RW: Oh, two?!

AC: I know I have a ways, but they say it goes faster than you think.

RW: Well, my youngest one is thirteen going on twenty-one.

AC: My condolences.

RW: Her first year of high school [is] next year.

AC: The world is her oyster.

RW: Yeah.

AC: Now, do they ever go on day trips with you on the boat? [Or did they] when they were little?

RW: Yeah, a little bit here and there; but mostly on the clean charter boat. When you pull up tons of fish on commercial boats, there's always blood and guts around, and seaweed on the boat. It's a little messy for them.

AC: Ok, so they never really got into it too much?

RW: No, not many girls really do. You said you fished a bit?

AC: Yes, but there weren't many others. There was actually a Tongan boat, called the *Excalibur,* I worked on; had an all-female captain and crew. There's one in Point Judith as well.

RW: A what boat?

AC: *Excalibur*. It was a long-lining boat.

RW: Oh, a long-lining boat.

AC: An all-female crew and female captain. It was quite the boat, and they did very well. But that was very, very, very rare; I don't think there's anything like that in the world.

RW: Years ago, my daughters would come down to the boat, when we used to do inshore fishing a lot. I'd be in early. I remember one day, I had a load of tautog on the boat. They were all blackfish, and alive, because they just don't die. You catch them, and then they live for like two more hours. They were on the deck, and my daughter came down. She was looking at them, they were blinking and stuff, and she was like "Oh my God, I'm looking at all these faces. They're so cute, I can't handle it!"

AC: So that was it for her? She never got near the boat again?

RW: No, my youngest, she likes to fish. She's incredible with a rod and reel. She doesn't realize that dad's baiting the hook every time. So I don't have time to fish myself, because I'm baiting her hook all the time.

AC: Right. So she takes pride in beating dad, catching more fish than you; but you're sacrificing.

RW: Yeah, she always lucks out; catches the biggest fish, I don't know how. Fluke, sea bass, stuff like that; she's just great at it. But that's not commercial. I guess it could be, we've commercially rod and reeled before. [But] that's about the extent of the girls' fishing.

AC: Now, what about someone else starting out today? Maybe not your own kids necessarily, but what advice would you give someone who wanted to get into fishing? What would you say to them?

RW: Well, one of my daughters' friends is eighteen [or] nineteen years old. He needed some work this summer. I didn't really want to discourage him, but I just didn't want to take him. I don't want him to get hooked on fishing. Maybe if it's a sport fishing kind of thing, as a hobby. But I'm not sure I want to see him go down the same path.

Like I said, it was nice when Mother Nature [controlled things]. I mean, it was still a battle that Mother Nature made our whole schedule, but you could make decisions as a fisherman. This year's warm, [so] it's going to be a bad cycle. You see cycles come through. Bluefish were around for a certain

number of years, and then they wouldn't be. Even hundreds of years ago, they thought they were extinct, and then they'd come back.

You could make a decision based on the cycle of fish, what's going on. But then you throw in a regulation factor, NMFS, and the fact that they might just close this entire fishery, because they're going through a bad cycle; well, I don't want to see any kid go through that.

[It's] kind of a tough thing that affects your whole family. I mean, it affects your at-home relationship with everybody.

AC: How so? Tell me more about that.

RW: Because there's no stability. It's not like you're getting up and going to work. I know there's no stability in a lot of livelihoods; you could lose any job. But with this kind of thing, when you get wrapped up in it, [there's a lot at stake]. You've got boats, you've got a lot of gear, and you've got a big investment. I can't even get out of fishing right now if I wanted to. What do I do? I guess I could sell my boats, [but] I don't think there's a big market for them right now. And [since] I've been doing it all my life, I wouldn't even know what else to do.

AC: And you don't want to get rid your permits? Are they worth anything? I mean, would that be a nest egg, for you to sell your permits?

RW: Well, I guess we'd always hoped that the Fisheries Service would straighten up. Maybe they'll have accurate data, realize about fish cycles, and be a little more lenient with fishermen; almost like sectors are doing with some boats. I mean, they are better for some particular boats.

For a lot of us, we got penalized for laying off a certain species. Ok, there aren't many of this fish around, so let's not fish for them. And because of that, we lost allocation.

AC: That was sort of a conservation tactic you chose?

RW: Right, and that's the way we used to fish. Most guys, not all, but most, would just say, "Let's lay off this fish for awhile, and go for something else." And you'd see a big shift in effort. This port, Point Judith, New Bedford, everybody would shift their effort to a different thing, and fish a little bit for different species.

It used to be really neat, we'd be able to go out, and bring in seventy different species at a time. And if one species wasn't doing well, we'd just catch a little bit of that particular species, while we'd really be going for something else. Whereas now, you have to pretty much concentrate on almost one thing at a time.

AC: And what does that do for the resource, in your opinion?

RW: Well, it basically puts all the effort into one fishery, over-capitalizes that fishery, beats it up to the point that it's a disaster, and then it's closed. When they closed flounder fishing and cod fishing, suddenly there were a million nets out there for one species, monkfish. Everybody on the southeast coast is fishing for that one thing, and it affects that, because it's not in an over-fished condition right now. Fortunately they're pretty good growers [and] reproducers. But there's heavy fishing pressure on them right now, because of all the other closed fisheries. It's kind of scary [that] if it keeps going that way, that'll possibly close, too.

AC: Right now you're relying on that for income?

RW: Yeah. Well, you can't rely on anything else anymore; you can't jump into a fishery like I used to do. There's too much bycatch, being that all the other species are closed. You know, if you want to go fish for bonitas, you'll catch blackfish, sea bass, and (winter) flounder, which are closed. Summer flounder's open, but the limits are small. So, it's really tough to fish for certain species.

AC: When you say "flounder" you always mean winter, and then you'll say "fluke" for summer flounder?

RW: Yeah.

AC: Sorry, just to make sure. That's my ignorance.

RW: I said at one point, I fished ninety-one days in a row. During that time, I think I brought in ten or twelve different species every day; a little bit of everything. I think it would be a good thing if everybody did that.

AC: You get a paycheck out of it that's decent, you're not pounding one particular stock, [and it] gives you some options.

Now, would you join a sector if the opportunity was made available to you? Or have you thought of joining a sector at this point?

RW: Well, the opportunity is available, but my allocations are too low for me to consider it.

AC: Ok.

RW: You have to designate whether you're going to be in a sector way ahead of time. So last year, for instance, I said, "No, I'm going to stay in the common pool, save my Days at Sea for the end of the year, and fish for cod like I always

do." Well, they left the cod allocation too high in the beginning of the year, [when] we didn't have fish here. They were out on Georges' Bank, and the big draggers went out, [and] sucked up the whole quota on us. The year before, when I had to make a decision to be in a sector or not, I didn't take that kind of stuff into consideration.

At that point, the limit wasn't even 3,000 pounds; it was only 1,000. So at 1,000 pounds a day, it wasn't feasible for the big draggers to steam 130 miles out to eastern Georges' Bank in the summer to get 10,000 pounds of cod. The whole thing just didn't work; the fuel bill, all that stuff.

I chose not to be in the sector this year again, because I heard through the grapevine that the Fisheries Service cut the pie up for cod, in the common pool, into three trimesters. And this did happen. So now it won't be all eaten up in the beginning of the year. We have an opportunity; if there's too much caught, it'll be closed during that trimester. The fish will be able to be saved for the third trimester, which is the one that we fish in here. So I'm thinking, maybe I have an opportunity.

AC: So they recognized that when the bigger boats swallowed everything up right away, that was a detriment to everybody else.

RW: Yeah. But there's always a mistake, and they [don't] realize it [until] after it rips people apart.

AC: [Now,] just describe what a typical day looks like for you; a fishing day, from waking up to the end.

RW: Well, we'd always have to leave early. The farther out we fish, the earlier we'd have to leave, of course. My average steam is four hours. You want to be out there when the sun comes up in the morning, for a lot of reasons: see what the tide is doing, see how much life is out there. And you usually see that at first light.

Just the other day, somebody wanted some bluefish. You don't really catch them in the afternoon that often. So you have to be out there early anyway.

The typical day [starts with] getting up at midnight, which is tough.

AC: That's just an ungodly hour.

RW: And then, we steam to be out there [at] 4:30, 5:00 in the morning. The steam is kind of nice, if you're awake enough. You can read a little bit. We usually set up watches, where you split off and I steam out. I usually take the longest watch, because I'm the captain, but you want to get a couple hours rest. You can have the mates stay up a little bit.

Some days, if there's no boat traffic, you can get a little bit of sleep. On the majority of days, you usually have to get up in between because there's a boat coming at you.

AC: There's something happening.

RW: Yeah. And I tell the crew, "If anybody comes within one mile [of us], wake me up." I don't want them to make a decision, with the nature of the crew, especially nowadays. When we used to have better crew members, of course you could trust a guy on watch. But now, you get up, and the guy's chopping something up, hiding something on you. Or on the back deck, and you smell funny things. So, it's tough to trust the guys on watch. [But] I have one of the nicest guys in the world working for me right now; he's not a drug addict or anything.

AC: And you're holding onto him, like, "Don't go anywhere, please!"

RW: Well, he's older; he's fifty-two years old, from Honduras. He's been here fishing for years, saved a lot of money, and shipped it back home. He owns trucks and a grocery store out there. So he's getting ready to move.

He told me a long time ago, he was going to make a couple more trips with me, and as soon as a few more paychecks came through, he was planning on leaving. He knows I quit during hurricane season, so he's planning on going down there and retiring. He might change his mind, but he says that every dollar goes a long way down there.

AC: That's right.

RW: But anyway, back with my typical day; he's pretty good at taking watch.

AC: So you can trust him, a bit.

RW: Yeah, but he has woken me up last minute, with a boat coming at us, and I didn't know what was going on.

AC: Yeah. Oh my goodness, and you're in a haze; you have to snap to it right away.

RW: Right. So anyway, we get out there for first light, and you never know what's going to happen.

The last trip, the engine light went off and the engine overheated. I was in the dark, at four o'clock in the morning, down in the engine compartment, trying to put boiling hot water in the engine. That was just a factor of marine growth; the barnacles set-up on the boat too quick. That's why it's hauled out now, and the engine was working a little too hard.

So we get out there. And [since] we're monkfishing right now, we just commence hauling the gear. We look at what the tide's doing; get an idea of which way the fish might be moving, or where they could be at the beginning of the day. A lot of times, you move from one area to the other. You have to think about what's going on with the fish, right away.

AC: And it takes all day to haul the nets?

RW: Well, right now we're hauling "fixed gear." The nets are in strings of anywhere from a half mile, to two miles. I think one mile is the length limit; my strings are a little under a half mile. And we haul anywhere between six and ten different sets of nets. Each one takes an average of about forty-five minutes to haul.

You pick up the end of the gear. It comes up, the crew members take out the fish, whatever there is, [and] separate it into different boxes to store. At the end of the haul, they gut them down, cut the fish, whatever has to be done, [and] pack them in ice.

And it's like a little repetitive thing for eight or nine sets. Usually we try to figure out a plan to move some nets, [based on] whatever I figure is going on: the tides [are] moving this way, the fish were over there, and today they're over here. They'll congregate in different areas depending on what the tide's doing.

AC: So you can shift how you do your work?

RW: Yeah. So in the middle of the day, we try to take a little steam, and move some of our gear. That's a little break-up of the monotony. And, of course, everybody's running for sandwiches.

AC: That's right, some deck steaks.

RW: Yeah. Usually when you get the guys that have substance abuse problems, you can tell, because they don't really ever bring food, water, or anything.

AC: They don't eat or drink.

RW: Well, they do. But they kind of forget that, because I guess the other things are more important.

I always bring extra water, because there's always that factor; they forget things. I mean they'll forget their boots, a lot of things.

AC: Wow. So that's something you have to worry about, in addition to your own self, and your boat?

RW: My day usually starts the night before. Making coffee, making lunch; because we have to try to get sleep by seven-thirty, eight o'clock to get just four hours [of] sleep that night.

During the spring run, you unload the boat. You're done at six-thirty or seven, and you have to get all your stuff together, and go to sleep as soon as you can. [Then] get up and go out again.

AC: Do you just sleep on the boat often? Or no, you always come home?

RW: (*Cell phone rings*) that's loud, because I usually put the ringer loud for the boat. I'll get that later.

AC: Just a few more questions. I'm looking at the time; I've taken a bunch of your morning already. It's been really, very interesting, and very informative.

How about health insurance for yourself? Do you have health insurance?

RW: Yeah.

AC: And is it a direct pay type of thing?

RW: Yeah, it's expensive.

AC: And has that always been the case? Have you always had it, one way or another?

RW: I've had insurance my whole life. I've never not had health insurance; I don't know why, I guess I've just always had it.

AC: And is that the same [with] boat insurance?

RW: Yeah. When I'm at home, my phone rings and it's always salespeople, unfortunately. I think that was a matter of joining the Chamber of Commerce in Newport. My number got put out there; next thing you know, I'm getting calls from everywhere.

And I love the insurance calls, because I just tell them I'm insurance poor. I pay over $30-40,000 a year in insurance, between boat, health, homeowner, automobile, [and] truck insurance.

AC: Wow. And that's just a cost that you accept as a part of life?

RW: Yeah. Well, a big chunk of it is business, [with the] boat insurance. And yeah, it's a cost you have to accept.

Health insurance isn't the business part. It's a little expensive for me because my daughters are on it, too.

AC: Ok, so you keep them on your insurance.

RW: Yeah.

AC: Could you give me a little bit more on your opinions about sectors versus the common pool? What are the pros [and] cons of each of those? Are there pros and cons?

RW: There are, but I don't know enough to be accurate, not being in the sector. I know that they have a way more flexible way to fish. They're exempt from a lot of the Days at Sea regulations, and they can almost plan their life if they have a decent allocation. They can say, "Alright, I'm going to wait and catch my fish during the season."

So I believe there are pros, as far as that part. But then [there are] the cons. For somebody like myself that has a low allocation, if I got into a sector, I'd have to buy quota. I don't know if that's available yet.

It seems like a lot of the boats that made out with it kept hammering on the fish when they were in decline anyway. They just kept working on them.

AC: Do you think it was a fair process?

RW: I don't think it was a fair process, because anybody that was conservative, and left the fish alone when the stocks were in trouble, got penalized for it. That's the way I feel. I get penalized [for] a few different things like that.

The lobster fishery has been in decline here, [so] I took a few years off from that. [Then I] lost my whole lobster allocation, because they set a quota during that time frame.

I [also] don't feel like I got a fair allocation for the sectors. I did switch into the monk fishery, back during that period of time when the monk fishery was wide open. Here in southern New England, there was better opportunity for us. And the cod stocks weren't good here. I think it had something to do with the weather those few years, because even in the winter, the water didn't get that cold. And there was a lot of growth in the water, like algae and stuff, which usually dies off with the cold weather.

AC: That makes sense.

RW: So I switched off from that; therefore, I'm in the common pool.

But as far as pros, I do know that it's a lot more flexible. They [can] fish different gear, [so] the gear flexibility is there. I believe if you get your quota or your limit, you can actually have other boats in the sector finish hauling your nets for you. I'm pretty sure you can do something like that; but you can't do that in this fishery. If you have too many fish in your nets, and you hit your

limit, you've got to let them go. Hopefully they're alive, [but] sometimes they're not.

AC: You can't give them to another boat?

RW: No. So, as far as that kind of flexibility, I think it's kind of a good thing. But again, I don't know really enough about it. I haven't been involved in a sector.

AC: Ok. And [in] your groundfishing experience prior to this, codfish wasn't a huge part of what you did, traditionally?

RW: Excuse me?

AC: Did you say codfish wasn't really a big part of what you did traditionally?

RW: Well, it always was.

AC: It always was.

RW: Yeah. It's about a quarter of our year; maybe a third.

AC: So not over a yearly period, it's just a portion of [the year]?

RW: We only get codfish here in southern New England in the winter, [which] is at the end of the fishing year. The fishing year is May 1st through April 30th. So it's kind of a tough call for us, because we have to save our days all year long to the end. I imagine that I may be better off in the sector situation, if I was able to buy quota.

AC: And leasing is not an option because you're working from Days now, in the common pool? You can't lease anything?

RW: You can lease Days.

AC: You can lease Days?

RW: Yeah, I lease Days every year.

AC: You do? Ok. And how does that work? [Is] it just open to anyone who fishes?

RW: The boat has to fit the criteria. So you have to lease from a boat that is the same size as you, or bigger; you can lease down, but not up. So you find boats that fit your criteria, and you lease Days from them.

AC: Ok. And how do you find these boats? Just word of mouth?

RW: Well, there's a system on the internet, through Fisheries Service, that can find boat matches. And then you contact the owners. If you find a boat to lease Days from, you want to do it as soon possible, before they change their mind.

Last year, I leased twenty Days. The cod fishery was closed, so that was just a huge loss. Well, they didn't close it, but they put the limit down to 300 pounds, which hardly paid for fuel.

AC: Right. And is it the same person that you generally lease to? Or [does] it change every time?

RW: No, it's the same boat.

AC: The same boat?

RW: Yeah. There [have also been] other people that I've gotten letters from, looking to lease Days from me. So there's a few different ways to go about it.

AC: This is all up to you; it's all private exchanges with people. So it's up to you to find them; or up to them to contact you, asking for Days?

RW: Yeah. Like I said, some people send out little postcards to all the boats that match.

AC: Really? Interesting.

RW: [They list] their criteria, and ask if you would like to lease any of your Days at Sea.

AC: Does it ever become a bidding war? Have you ever had ten boats wanting [Days]; something like that?

RW: It hasn't been that much.

AC: It's been manageable?

RW: Yeah.

AC: Ok. It's interesting, this whole subunit of what you do. You have this separate business transaction, beyond running your boat.

RW: What I've done in the past is lease Days at Sea, [and] give them a percentage [of what I catch]. Fortunately, I did that last year. I leased the Days at Sea, and

the fellow was going to get ten percent of what I caught using those Days. [But since] the fishery closed and I got nothing, he got nothing. But he was okay with it.

AC: Because you entered into the agreement?

RW: Yeah. He realized that if he leased them to anybody in southern New England, that would have happened.

AC: Yeah. You weren't reneging on a deal with him, you were stuck.

RW: Right. A prior year we did the same deal with a different boat, and we had a good season. Every day we went out, he made ten percent, [usually] between $200 and $500.

The percentage thing was a good deal for me, too. Because if you just lease a Day for $400, and set for codfish, you [might] only catch 400 pounds.

AC: So you could lose? You could actually lose, depending on the price?

RW: Yeah. You have your fuel bill, and your lease, and you try to explain to the crew member, "Well, you didn't make anything today."

AC: "I know you worked and that seems very counter-intuitive, but…"

So you don't have a business manager or someone to help you with this? I mean, it sounds like you need a secretary. But you don't have anyone to do that for you; you do all of this yourself?

RW: Right. I tried to have bookkeepers and a secretary, [but] it was really complicated, because the laws change all the time. And they're not out there seeing what the fish are doing.

AC: Yeah. You'd have to educate them, which is even more effort than probably you just doing it.

RW: Yeah, it's tough. I had one girl that did a great job. [But] I knew I was going to lose her, because she was going to college to be a nurse. She did the best job, as far as bookkeeping, and calling the Fisheries Service. She helped out with a lot of stuff. But she's a really smart person, and I knew that once she got her RN degree, [she'd be done]. And now she's a nurse, working night-shift.

AC: You're like, "I should sabotage your degree somehow. I don't want to lose you!"

RW: No. But she did great, and she's a nurse now, making great pay. I'm glad I got to help her out.

I've tried that with other people, and there are just too many things. It's not like you're running an ice business, and you have to keep tally of what comes in and what goes out; the electric bill, and this and that.

There are a lot of variables, and everything changes. You never know when you're going to get the rug pulled out from under you. That's why that's the way it is [now].

AC: Gotcha.

[19:34]

RW: I heard a radio program on GBH the other day about a human syndrome that comes from monkeys falling from trees. [In] the past, a mother would let go of her baby monkey, and it would fall from the tree, and get this overwhelmed feeling.

AC: Oh my gosh, [is] that what you have?

RW: What?

AC: Are you saying that's the feeling you have?

RW: Well, that's what you get when NOAA runs your life this way. You never know when you're going to be just falling from the trees. It wasn't like that before.

AC: Gotcha. That's not a good feeling. It was a bit more secure feeling [before]?

RW: Yeah, of course. You always knew you could switch to a different fishery, and it was exciting. If a species wasn't doing badly, it was exciting to switch and make the nets for that species.

AC: Got it.

RW: You can still do that, to a degree, but not very much right now. I think the sectors possibly have a little more chance to do that.

AC: Ok. And do you think that will probably always be the case? Sectors will remain in business the way they are? There's no chance of them changing the way they function?

RW: Well, I don't know about that.

AC: That's right, because you're not following those politics.

RW: And I've heard there's the threat of sectors not continuing. So you're going to [have to] fight for your allocation, and get it corrected the best you can, which is a very tough, long process, I've heard. You have to try to prove all this stuff, and you need every piece of information from fifteen years ago. My dad's like, "Why don't you throw all this stuff out? What business makes you keep records for twenty years?"

AC: You're like, "You never know, trust me."

RW: I heard of fishermen going into the allocation process, had one piece of information missing, and they got pushed back to the end of the line again.

AC: So you're very wary about throwing anything out?

RW: Well, right. So you go through this big process, your allocation gets corrected, and [you] possibly go into the sector fishery. I heard there was a little [bit] of a battle about the way the sector fishery was brought in, [without] a correct referendum being done. And so [the question is], is that going to stay or is it going to be gone?

AC: I see.

RW: So it's like, you've got to do a lot of work to get there, and then there's the possibility of "falling from the tree!"

AC: A million things [to worry about]. It's true!

RW: I just thought it was so funny when I heard it on GBH. It was this lady, and was really funny.

AC: It's a good analogy, I have to say. You have to hang onto those branches and leaves, whatever you can, oh my goodness.

RW: Yeah, I just thought it was funny.

AC: Well, it's about ninety-five degrees out right now. I'm sorry to be keeping you here in the hot sun. Luckily, we have an umbrella, but it's getting warm. There's just so much that I would love to ask you.

RW: Yeah, it's getting hot.

AC: More about your social interactions? You touched on it a little bit. You do socialize and interact with other fishermen?

RW: Yeah.

AC: Now, has management affected your interactions with other fishermen, in your opinion? Specifically since this new sector management started?

RW: Well, yeah, it has. I think especially in Rhode Island. I've heard this even from environmental management, that this State is kind of separated, because the Bay's in the middle. Guys to the east usually fish for different species than guys to the west part of the Bay.

And right now, groups are in the State House every day, lobbying for what their best interests are. So Rhode Island is kind of split like that.

AC: So you feel like that has affected your personal friendships?

RW: Yeah. I have friends that I used to be more involved with that kind of split, [and] went the other way; so we don't really talk. They don't want to let on what they know is going on over there, because we're a different side of the Bay. So there's been a bit of a split that's happened; you don't socialize with everybody quite so much. And, of course, there are different organizations. I belong to one of them.

AC: Which is that?

RW: The Rhode Island Fishermen's Alliance (RIFA).

AC: Ok. Any other organizations you're a part of? You said you were on the Council?

RW: Well, not anymore.

AC: Not anymore, but you were. [So] what are the things you're involved in? Could you just rattle off a list of associations?

RW: Well, Rich Fuka, the president of the RIFA, keeps us abreast of everything that's going on with the wind farm situation, Ocean SAMP (Special Areas Management Plan), and a lot of the different projects that are going on throughout the State.

AC: And it's like a membership, you pay to be a member?

RW: Yeah, [I pay] dues.

AC: So that helps support the cost of him going to these meetings?

RW: Yeah, and he keeps us filled in. He has a nice website that has an update every single week, so we can stay involved with a little bit of that stuff without actually being at all the meetings. Because that's a little bit tough to do, especially during the seasons.

AC: So that's a good service for you, then?

RW: It seems [like] the time of year that southern New England guys get to choose to be in a sector is usually during our peak fishing season. So I just can't get involved with it; it's really tough to do. And it seems like when meetings come up where there are public hearings to voice our opinions, it's peak season for us.

AC: It's the worst timing.

RW: Yeah, it's tough. I don't know if they do that on purpose, or not.

AC: So [do] different association members have different opinions that create rifts? Since you're in Rich Fuka's association, you might not agree on the politics of things with someone else in a different association?

RW: Right. Some of the smaller associations have memberships down to one; like one person is the association. Some of them are two [or] three, and another one might be seven guys. They try to get their foot in the door, and get different bills done; and they want to keep it a secret.

One program recently got squashed [because] there was a group of guys that went in and fought for it. They got things done their way, they made out well from it, and they basically kept it a secret from everybody else. There was an open opportunity to actually join in with them, [but] there was a whole process that I found out about later. [It was] a small State sector, but they didn't want anybody to know about it, because that would cut into their profits. They just wanted to keep that for themselves. It was a pilot program, and I believe it's not continuing right now.

AC: Ok, so there are rifts between sector and non-sector as well?

RW: What do you mean?

AC: Rifts, like a divide. Would you say people don't get along?

RW: Right. People want to have the fishery done this way; somebody [else] wants it to be done another way. And again, a certain group of individuals out there will have the time.

AC: Right, ok.

RW: Sometimes there will be some younger guys that don't have kids, or wives, or anything like that, [so] they have a lot of time. Or even older guys that don't have any family; they have time to go to the State House, bang their fist every single day, get what they want, and keep it a secret.

The guy who has kids, and a wife, and a lot of other things going on doesn't have the time to do that all the time. We spend a lot of time fishing, [but] you have to balance it and spend time with the family; like my thirteen year-old, going on twenty-one.

AC: Right, needs to go fishing with dad.

RW: No, like I said, she's going on twenty-one. My older two went through that stage, when they were like fourteen, fifteen to about eighteen. It's a tough transition time for girls, you know?

AC: They need a father. So you want to be present for her, and support her?

RW: Well, you kind of have to be. And it's important to be there when they're ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, you know?

AC: I'm going to make a mental note of that, although I have a boy. I don't know, I'm sure it's for similar and different reasons.

RW: I'm sure it works for boys, too. It's [just] really important to be there. I see some families where the dad is never there, or the mom.

AC: You don't want to be that way.

RW: Right. And then they kind of drift away from their family, and that's the time of their life when that happens.

AC: It's hard to get them back in, maybe?

RW: Yeah. I've seen it in the past, [they] go the wrong way, and turn into not good people; just hate their family, and have resentment towards them, because they weren't there.

AC: So you're trying to fit [in] as much time as you can, to be with your daughters. [That's] a good dad, right there.

RW: So it's tough to work the seasons, do what you have to do, [and] be at all the meetings. So the RIFA helps us out with that.

AC: Ok, representation.

And Rob, would you say your income has increased, decreased, or not changed at all since sectors started? You don't have to give me numbers.

RW: Well, it's probably the same; but I'm putting in a lot more time, a lot more work. [I'm] trying to be there for my daughters, but they don't understand it when they don't see dad for a month. And why dad goes to bed at seven-thirty every night. They don't understand that.

AC: [It's] like, "Do a full day with me, then you'll understand why."

And in terms of your well-being, your general outlook on life, your overall quality of life, your happiness; would you say that that has changed? And for better or worse?

RW: Well, I don't know.

AC: Is it hard to pinpoint?

RW: Yeah. I would say back before the regulations all came in, my outlook on life, and everything, was definitely really good.

AC: Let's say within the last three years, or since sectors specifically started. You can look in recent memory, if it's changed.

RW: It hasn't been so good.

AC: It hasn't been so good.

RW: I mean, they pull the rug out from under you all the time. [Before], you couldn't wait for flounder season or cod season; you'd be excited.

I'd be excited when the cold wind would blow. I'd say, "Alright, here comes some good fishing." And that would be when everybody was like, "Oh no, I don't want summer to end!"

AC: "I do!"

RW: I didn't mind [it].

But now, you don't have that, you're like everybody else, "I don't want summer to end, I guess."

AC: Ok. And then, just in closing, is there something I haven't asked that you would like to add; how your life has changed or been affected, any specifics that maybe I didn't touch on?

RW: No, I think we pretty much kind of covered it.

Like I said, [it's] the complication of not only having Mother Nature run my life, but NMFS [as well]. The way it's run right now, I have to call in two days before I make any trips, and get called by observers every day of the week. It's so hectic; there are tons of phone calls.

AC: You just want a little peace.

RW: Yeah. I mean, at one point there was just too much going on. I had one observer call me eight times. Not only one, quite a few of them.

You can't tell them you're not going fishing, because if you tell them [that], then you can't go fishing. So, with the weather changing all the time, and the fish moving in different directions, there's no flexibility there.

I say that my boat's going fishing seven days a week. So sometimes I get calls seven days a week from observers, and the calls start earlier in the day. They call you up; it's tough. I've got a whole thing about that. I don't know if I want to go into all that.

AC: It's up to you.

RW: Because if you answer the phone, they'll ask you where your boat is, and when we're going and all this stuff; and you don't even know if you're taking them. And the turnover rate of these observers is extremely high, so you're talking to a different person seven days a week. Tons of them don't have any experience. I don't know how they can get away with having these people go on the boats.

And [when] I was running a charter business, I'd have calls from people all over New England wanting to charter. So my phone would be ringing with different numbers on it constantly.

AC: None of which you've saved into your [phone], right? None of which you recognized?

RW: Right, so you answer the call. Again, you can't tell the observer that you're going or not, unless you're positive you're not going. I've had that backfire on me. I'd say, "No, we're not going tomorrow." Then all of a sudden, the

weather changed, and there's a gale of wind coming in the next day. [So] you have to get your nets out of the water, and you can't, because you said no.

AC: Really?

RW: So once you say no, they say your trip has been cancelled, [and] you can't leave the dock. Right now, I pretty much can't answer the phone. Or if I do, I have to tell them, "I don't know," and they have to call back later.

Again, I've had observers call eight times in a day. We were out fishing one day, and one just kept calling my phone constantly. I thought there was an emergency at home.

And again, most of them don't have much experience. I've had a lot of problems with the observers on the boat. One of them fell asleep on the stove and turned the propane on. If anybody smoked cigarettes that day and walked into the cabin, I probably wouldn't be here. The whole boat was asphyxiated with propane. It's a safety stove, [so] you have to push the button and hold it, for it to light. And she didn't know, I guess.

AC: Oh my God.

RW: I could go on and on with stories about that particular system, but that's just another complication added in to the whole pile of stuff we have to deal with. They're collecting data, [but] I don't know why. It's not used properly, because the Fisheries Service says they're years behind on the data. But they've got people going out on our boats, collecting data every day.

[01:38:30]

AC: Why not just incorporate that into the management?

RW: I'm not sure why it doesn't. That doesn't seem to work.

AC: Especially in this day and age, with everything being just, boom, boom, boom. We can fire off information in a second.

And is there any other sort of thing you would want to add? Is there a story or a particularly memorable event that you would want to sort of close out with? Or maybe a certain person in your life that influenced you? [It] could be any number of things that you'd want to close the oral history with.

RW: Yeah. I'm sorry, I can't think of anything for that.

I guess the only thing is if I go back [to] when we were [first] fishing. [We could] just sign a piece of paper, get a permit, and go out to fish for seven to ten different species. All the fisheries were open, [and] it didn't seem like regulation was needed back then. It seemed like all the fishermen would just

switch and lay off the species that were in decline, and jump into other fisheries.

That was one of my favorite times of fishing, because I didn't see the separation I see today, of not talking to other fishermen. Walking by a fisherman from another part of the State, not even saying hi, and not wanting to be in a conversation with him. It wasn't like that. It seemed like all the fisheries were united, and people had trust in the Fisheries Service, even back then. They did regulate some things, [but] didn't over-regulate. I think now they've gotten themselves so deep into regulation that they can't get out of it.

AC: If you could go back and re-do it all over it again, would you [still] pick being a fisherman?

RW: Well…

AC: In light of what you know now?

RW: Probably not. I mean, that's hard to say. I kind of love what I do, [but] not as much as I used to. So, in light of what I know now, I probably wish I'd taken a different path.

AC: Gotcha. But you've had a rich life. I like what you'd said, when you go out in the early morning to see what's alive on the water; how did you say it?

RW: See what kind of life is out there.

AC: "What kind of life is out there." I don't think there's any other trade in the entire world that could say they get to do that. Which may be small beans, compared to everything you're going through.

RW: [But] that's why we can't get out of it. It's kind of funny, this last guy that's in rehab right now, he got out of the Army and made a few trips on the boat. And in the morning there were dolphins jumping all over the place, and showers of bait coming up, and tuna fish.

AC: And that smell, that like cucumber-y?

RW: And he's just never experienced anything like that, and he loved it. I think that's one thing that made him go into rehab, because he heard the stories about me firing every form of substance abuse person I'd had on board within the last [few] months. I think he loved the job, and it might've convinced him to go clean up a little bit.

AC: You could've saved a life.

RW: Maybe, I hope. We'll see in twenty-two more days when he gets out, and he gets his paycheck.

AC: He'll be coming for that, I would think.

RW: I'm sure he will.

AC: He'll be ready to go, do something good with it.
Well Rob, thank you very, very much for your time. Again, this is July 18th, 2012. I'm here with Rob Walz in Tiverton, Rhode Island. Thank you.

END INTERVIEW

[01:43:27]