Oral History and Folklife Research, Inc.

AN INTERVIEW WITH ALTON ‘AL’ WEST

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

KEITH LUDDEN

STEUBEN, MAINE
SEPTEMBER 10, 2012

TRANSCRIBER: KEITH LUDDEN AND SHANNON HARRINGTON

KL: Let me start with a little housekeeping. We Are at Milbridge, and we are talking with Al West about the Stinson cannery. Al, do you mind if I ask what year you were born?

AW: 1950.

KL: 19 5-0?

AW: 5-0.

KL: We are sitting on a piece of land that you just told me has been in your family for a long time?

AW: Yes, 125 years.

KL: And were you born here?

AW: I was born in… Actually born at the Ellsworth hospital, but have lived here off and on most of my life.

KL: Your family is anchored here, and rooted here pretty well.

AW: Our family has been here for a long time, both my father and my mother's side. As a matter of fact, on my mother's side, everyone in the family except for two sons packed sardines.

KL: Oh my! You worked at the sardine plant as well?

AW: I did. I started there in 1986.

KL: 1986, okay. What was your first job there?

AW: My first job was running a cutting machine with a group of people to cut fish. I was originally hired to be a quality assurance person because I have a bachelor's degree in biology from the University of Maine, with a minor in marine biology, but I took an hourly job to get started at the plant, and the owner said that he thought he'd move me into quality assurance at some point.

KL: The first hourly job was what? I am sorry.

AW: Working on a cutting machine.

KL: Oh, working on a cutting machine, yes. Can you explain what that was, how that worked?

AW: Well, it was a machine designed by the owner to cut fish steaks, which took the larger herring, that really were, he felt, too large to make a sardine out of, and it would cut the fish into steaks. It was simply a continuous belt, with half a dozen people pulling fish into pockets; the fish would go through circular blades, and be cut into fish steaks. A boring job, but it gave me a paycheck.

KL: You worked on the fish steaks when you first started?

AW: I worked on the cutting machine making fish steaks when I first--very first job there. As I progressed, I actually did nearly every job in the plant, and when the plant was upgraded with more machinery, the owner decided that they needed a second shift plant manager, so by having me do every job in the plant, or nearly every job, I was groomed for the position.

KL: Were you the second shift plant manager?

AW: I was the second shift plant manager. I did it all from soup to nuts. I actually learned all the positions. I hired all my employees and trained them, and put them to work. We ran two shifts prior to the Stinson family selling the plant. We ran two shifts for about three or four years.

KL: That must have increased production quite a bit.

AW: It doubled production, or certainly increased it by seventy-five to eighty percent more than what they were producing on one shift.

KL: What was the plant like in the '80's? This would have been after the original was burnt, and…

AW: Well, it was your traditional, old style fish plant. The fish were brought in by carrier, or a boat or a truck, simply flumed into tanks, and then the fish were flumed out of the tanks to the cutting line where the girls picked them up with--by hand and cut them with scissors, and packed them in the cans, and then placed the cans on trays and pickup men came around with carts, picked the trays up, punched tags. The trays were rolled into steam boxes, inverted, cooked, very, very old style when I started there.

KL: Now one thing I do not understand very will is the retort process. Can you tell me about that?

AW: Actually, I ran the retorts. That was one of my jobs early on in the company. The retort process is designed to put your final seal on the can. The fish get the initial cook in the steam boxes, and the reason that they do that is it cooks all the excess water and oil out of the fish, so that when you're ready to add the sauce, there's room for uptake of the sauce to flavor the fish. You steam-box your fish, you add your sauce, you put on your cover, seal it, and then the cans

are retorted, then that gives you your hermetic seal and our final cook. That final cook also softens the bone to make the entire product edible.

KL: Can you describe the machinery?

AW: Well, basically retorts are nothing but a large pressure cooker, and we would flood the retort with water to the top of the retort. The aluminum cans would then come along a belt and fall into the retort, displacing the water until the retort, in the evaluation of the retort person, the retort would be full. At that point, you put the lid on the top, because you drain the water off the bottom, until the retort was full of nothing but aluminum cans, no water, then you flood it with steam and cook it. Usually most of the cooks amounted to about an hour.

You would steam the cans for about an hour. I forget the temperature, but it was all pre-determined. At the end of that hour, you would then cool those cans down and the way you would shut the retort off is you would shut the steam off, and then you would have to turn on air compressors, and have overriding air pressure as you introduce water back into the retort, so that the cans wouldn't implode or explode.

It was a very delicate job, you had to control your air pressure with one hand, and your water coming in with the other hand and just watch your gauges and maintain a certain level of pressure in that retort. You couldn't--if you went too low, one thing would happen; if you went too high, something else would happen. You very carefully did that. It took about twenty minutes to do what they called "bringing down" a retort. When you were done if you were successful, the retort was again full of water, and you shut the air off, uncap it, and let it sit for a while. Then you would drain the water off and let the cans out of the bottom door, onto another belt where they'd go to a cooling bin.

KL: The cans are sealed at this point?

AW: At that stage of the game, the cans are hermetically sealed. If they're not, then later on, two weeks later the cans may swell. But, that would be due more so to imperfect sealing material on the lid as opposed to the cooking process.

KL: Sounds like a pretty exacting job.

AW: A very exacting job, I mean basically a retort will hold about 16,000 cans. You, basically, with one hand on the air and one hand on the water, you held the fate of a third, or--at that time the cannery produced probably--I'm going to say a thousand cases a day, a hundred cans to a case, so you had about almost twenty percent of the production in one retort. So, you had to be very careful. The fire drill came if the power went out and you were cooking. Because if the power went out, you lost your steam pressure and you couldn't allow the cans to cool down naturally. So, you'd have to try to bring each retort down, maintaining the pressure that they were at until the power came back on and then you had to start the process all over again. But

the problem was you could have four retorts cooking all at the same time. It was an interesting challenge.

KL: You did not have backup power?

AW: No, there's never been backup power in the cannery.

KL: Can you tell me about how the fish would be pumped out of the carriers?

AW: Well, there's a--on the wharf, there's a pump commonly known as a trans-vac, or a Ryan Pump. It's a suction pump. It's normally an eight-inch or a ten-inch suction hose, and you simply lower it into the hold of the boat, turn on the pump, and when the pump has created enough vacuum it basically sucks the fish out of the hold. But you have to apply lots of water to the hold, because the fish mover better in the water. If you don't have enough water in your hold, sometimes the fish go dry into the pipe and it will compact and then you have a mess. Maintenance crews (are) never happy when they have to come take--knock apart a pipe and unplug it with fish.

KL: [Laughter] Yes, that sounds like a mess.

AW: Yes, it sometimes can take half a day because from the wharf to the tanks at the cannery is a couple hundred feet, and the plug can happen anywhere in that couple hundred feet.

KL: And you have to find it.

AW: Yes. So, you start with one section, normally closest to the boat, and you work your way back.

KL: Did that happen very often?

AW: Twice a year--by someone not paying attention.

KL: [Laughter] Yes, I imagine they got chewed out pretty well when that happened.

AW: Yes, I've seen very unhappy maintenance managers.

KL: Did you see a lot of technological changes in the time you worked at the plant?

AW: I have seen--and maybe it's the fact that I'm a child of the '50's, but the change in the sardine business was much like the change in the whole world in that when I first started there, everything was done the traditional way with scissors cutting the fish. When I became the second shift plant manager was right after they industrialized, or mechanized the plant to the point where the ladies no longer cut the fish with scissors. The fish were all cut by machines and

the ladies were simply needed to pick up the fish that were cut, put 'em in the cans, and the cans were all taken away from the packing stations by individual belts where they came together at the end of the packing station and put onto trays automatically. So, it was quite a change from each person being an individual piecework person to a team concept with two or three ladies-- two or three ladies would work together and share the day's production.

One of the biggest challenges when we first started the new line was to take sixty women and find teams that could work together; that had the right personalities, the right packing speed, and so forth and so on, that could work as a team. You couldn't have a fast one and a slow one because the fast person would feel slighted. They would make less money. You had to match them up and that was the biggest challenge as a plant manager.

KL: Okay, you said, "When we started the new line," you changed systems? You went from a system in which the women picked up the fish, snipped off the heads and tails with scissors, to a system in which they picked up the fish and fed them into a machine?

AW: Oh, no. The machines were all fed automatically.

KL: I see.

AW: By a device called a fish feeding device, it would feed the fish onto the belts. We had one machine operator that simply made sure all the fish were lined up going into the blades. When I started, there were six of us on the machine, feeding the machine. When I became a plant manager, there were individual machines with individual machine operators, and ten machines feeding twenty packing stations. Would get the same production as a hundred women with scissors.

KL: Okay. At that point, you had to go from individual packers working individually, to teams?

AW: The team concept.

KL: Okay. About when did that happen?

AW: That was in the... I'm going to say the late eighties, eighty-nine, ninety, somewhere along there. That was shortly before the Stinson family… I think we did that for a couple of years. Probably eighty-eight, eighty-nine. Then the Stinson family sold the company in the early nineties to Dick Klingaman and Woody Harris.

KL: Okay. What were some of the other jobs you did?

AW: Well, I worked under the Stinson regime, well the interesting thing, and they may say that this is not the case. But if you weren't a relative, you never got past a supervisory or foreman

type position. I think theres two reasons I became plant manager on second shift. One, nobody in the family wanted to work nights. Number two my mother's aunt had been Cal Stinson's private secretary for sixty years, so in a sense I was tied to the family. But I did all the jobs with the exception of the sealing machine mechanic. I did all the hobs in the factory. I ran cutting machines. I let fish out of the tanks. I even packed for a little just for the fun of it. I was a packing line supervisor. I was a casing supervisor. I ran forklifts. I unloaded fish. Until they felt I was trained, I knew the jobs well enough to be the plant manager.

KL: Were you a very fast packer?

AW: No. [Laughter] Absolutely not. But, you needed to know the correct way to do it in order to teach a new person. There is an art to what those gals would do. I always believed that women were the best fish packers because they had the dexterity that they needed and also they did not carry as much in the upper body as men do, so it was easier for them to work with their hands all day long standing up. A man's shoulders and arms are bigger and it would kill his back to do anything like that for length of time.

KL: Were the hours pretty long?

AW: Well, the Stinson family where they ran two shifts, normally held it to an eight-hour shift, but if we spilled over to the weekend we could have extra-long days. Sometimes we were asked to stay for a couple of hours at the end of the shift to finish up what was left since there was nothing coming in the next day. But for the most part they were eight, ten hour shifts.

KL: You had to work when you had the fish though, is that right?

That's correct. Most of the production was fresh fish. But at one point they decided that they needed more production of small fish so they would but whole frozen small fish and work those into the equation at times of the year when fresh fish were difficult to get. The beauty of small fish is you get a good yield because you use most of the fish. Production is lower, so (in) a day you would pack a thousand cases of the right sized fish, on small fish you would only pack six-hundred, but you got more value from those small fish.

KL: When did they start moving away from the small fish to the steaks?

AW: Just a minute (I need to) get my breath back. There I'll try again.

KL: When did you start moving from the small fish to the steaks?

AW: Well, we never really--those were just different products. There were different times a year that you would acquire large fish. The fish steaks were a product they developed to get a better yield on those fish. Prior to that, they'd simply cut the tail off and throw the rest away or put it in the baked product. But by taking the steaks you are able to utilize eighty percent of the

fish as opposed to thirty percent of the fish. They always had a certain requirement of small fish. They had to be a certain percentage of that entire pack that they needed to do to satisfy that market.

KL: How much could the plant put out in a day, during the '80's?

AW: Well again it all depended, the ideal four count sardine, they could pack 1600 cases in a day. If it was 8-10 count fish per can, about 600 cases a day.

KL: Okay. I do not quite understand that. Four count fish though, that is four…

AW: Four fish to a can.

KL: Eight count fish there were eight fish?

AW: Eight fish.

KL: But the cans with four fish the fish were larger?

AW: Right.

KL: Okay.

AW: Yes, I mean basically you dovetailed the fish. Head to tail, head to tail, head to tail. Four fish I mean, are very quick to pack, eight fish are smaller, more time consuming. Every can basically looked the same because of the care they took to lay the fish in the can.

KL: I see, yes. I understand that a little better now. Thank you.

AW: The fish steaks, they would lay dovetailed normally eight to ten a can, but they would lay them on their side, alternating the steaks with the pockets or the cut cavity facing the inside of the can, side to side, all the way the length of the can.

KL: What was the reason for that?

AW: That's the best fit plus it's the nicest looking product. Appearance.

KL: They used a lot of different kind of sauces, didn't they

AW: Yes they did. I couldn't begin to name them all. To name a few there were chilis and jalapenos, and hot sauces, tomato sauce, mustard sauce, soybean oil, spring water, Louisiana hot sauce, just to name a few. Smoked oil.

KL: The machines would drop the sauce into the cans?

AW: Yes. The guys running the machines would mix up whatever was called for that day. One change that came about while I was there, (is) the person in procuring the aluminum and the covers, we used to use a lithograph cover. To get a lithograph cover, you required three month's lead time. So, you would have to guess what, what are we going to be packing three months from now. (You have to guess) what sauces we are going to be using. What is the fish size going to be? Are we going to have steaks? What's the market going to be? So it was always a crap shoot. The guy would call up and place his order and hope like heck that he had ordered the right stuff. Well when the Klingaman regime took over, they brought in an ink process whereby we made our own plain covers and printed our own covers. So, you only needed a day's lead time. You can change your cover to whatever you wanted, so that was a wonderful [change].

KL: That happened in the '80's?

AW: That happened in the early '90's.

KL: The early '90's. Okay. You went form from cans that had labels that were printed on the can?

AW: They were lithographs. Yes, they were painted right on the cover.

KL: The new process, they were pasted on the can?

AW: No. The new process they used fast drying inks that if you had the correct template, and the inks, you could just print whatever cover you wanted yourself the day before you needed.

KL: That must have made things a lot easier.

AW: That made life somewhat easier. See, originally, just prior before I started with the Stinson family, they had their own truck fleet, they owned their own boat fleet. They made all their own cans and covers. They had their own trucks dispersing product to the markets. They were totally integrated. About the time I started, they gave up on the trucking portion of it, both bringing fish to the plant and taking finished goods away. They sub contracted all of that out. But prior to that, at that time they did still own their own fishing boats, all their cans and cover making equipment, everything they needed to be totally self-sufficient.

They even built huge warehouses so that when times were good, they had no problem putting up excess inventory. Because a family business they'd made millions doing it. They also never liked to short the market. So, if they had a (inaudible)— and fishing is very cyclical as other people down the line discovered, but the Stinson family recognized that, so they would put up inventory for times when fishing was poor, they would have the inventory to keep supplying their markets.

KL: When you say, “Fishing was cyclical,” you mean one year we might have a lot of fish and another year you might not?

AW: That’s right, that’s right they were firm believers of when the sun shines, make hay. They had no problem inventorying it, because they owned the business. They had been in it so long that they owned the business. As a matter of fact, I don’t believe Charlie Stinson ever believed in insuring his boats. He took the money that he saved on insurance and banked it then if something happened and they needed a new boat, they went and bought a new boat.

KL: I understand that that is what happened when the plant burned.

AW: Yes. Yes. They you know, insurance is very expensive if you self-insure and have the will and all for doing it, it’s a great way to do it and they were very interesting family to work for.

KL: Yes, Cal sounded like kind of a character.

AW: In fact, when I first started one of my duties was to take his paper to him every day and also the production of the plant from the day before, and he was in his nineties at that point.

KL: What was he like in his ‘90’s?

AW: He was very congenial, old fella. I didn’t really get to have a lot of conversation with him.

KL: I understand you could hear him coming down the hall.

AW: Yes.

KL: [Laughter]

AW: But, talk about my roles in the nineties when the Klingamans took over. They ended the second shift. They also became the regime of the “just-in-time” production. Because cash was tight, they had purchased the plant, did a few more upgrades, and were at the point where they didn’t feel like they could carry two years’ worth of inventory so they took the inventory down to six months. On some items, the way they did this red flag deal where some items they wanted three months’ worth of inventory because they felt they could get it. Some items they wanted six months. Some items they only wanted two months of inventory.

At that stage of the game, without a second shift I wasn’t sure what my position was going to be and they came to me and said, “Well you seem to know your way around boats fairly well, we’d like you to become the boat procure man, the boat guy, run the boat fleet and take charge of

acquiring all the fish for the canneries." Now, prior to that, each plant manager had been responsible for getting the fish for the next day's production for his cannery, which wasn't too difficult because the company owned four dozen fishing boats and half a dozen carriers. So generally, one boat and a carrier would be assigned to like each plant. But when Klingaman came aboard, he consolidated all of that under my umbrella and I was in charge of the boat fleet as well as acquiring all the fish for all the canneries. So, my job changed significantly.

KL: So you worked a lot with the captains of the carriers?

AW: The captains of the boats, the captains of the carriers, and these guys were… ahhhh… Very hard to work with in the sense that, they are very independent, they had their own way of doing things, and they did not like change. But, after a fashion we got a long reasonably well. They came to understand, you know, my role in the whole thing and after a while they understood and made sense. Because when you've got people in the same company competing for fish when fish are tight, plant managers would make offers to these guys to get fish for their plant where another one would suffer. But I was able to see what the needs were for any plant any given day and distribute it more evenly. So, it worked out okay.

KL: Yes. A lot of late night phone calls and radio calls?

AW: Twenty-four hours a day seven days a week. When I first started, cell phones weren't even invented, I guess, or if they were, you couldn't afford one. We did a lot of ship to shore. Camden marine operator. At one point, I had a… I forget what type of radio is was, radio right in the truck and I could call the Camden marine operator and work off towers and the boats had the same radio. But the worst part for me was I could never leave anywhere out of range. I always had to be near a phone or near a radio so it was very difficult to do anything. But with the advent of cell phones my life changed, significantly.

KL: How would that work? You would use ship to shore and called a boat captain and say, "What do you got for me?"

AW: Yes. "What was your catch for the night?" You see, back then the boats fished every night unless there was no market. With the cannery, if the cannery was going well, we'd generally work Monday through, well, with the cutting machines, we had to cut a day ahead to have production. We cut Sundays for Monday's production. We cut Monday for Tuesday's production, and so forth and so on.

So, I always had to time it with the boats so they would land fish all on Saturday night. Which we got delivered to the plant Sunday morning, which was then cut so that production would start Monday morning. Timing was always an issue especially working around the weather or if the boats were fishing in New Bedford vs New Prospect Harbor, then you had a sixteen-hour trucking issue. Logistically for me it was fun. It was a nightmare, but it was fun.

KL: So sometimes they would land the fish a pretty fair distance away like in Massachusetts or something?

AW: Well, herring are highly migratory. Okay, and just very quickly, in January they are below cape cod. Off Long Island, off New Jersey. In February, they are just starting to leave that area and migrate around Cape Cod. In March, they are sometimes on the northern end of Georgia's bank coming streaming around the cape towards Gloucester. In April, they are generally around Gloucester. In May they'e in Gloucester and off Portland and Rockland. In June, they pretty much made it to the Bay of Fundy, all along the coast of Maine, and they will stay here until about October. When the weather starts to get a little bit sour, all the fish in the Bay of Fundy, and along the coast, will drop in Ipswich Bay back off Gloucester.

By November, they're down off Cape Cod streaming around the cape again. By December they are pretty much around the cape back down around Rhode Island , Narragansett Bay and then in January, New York and New Jersey. These are generalities, but the fisherman that follow the fish will land to according where the fish are, seasonally, and if you are trying to do production twelve months of the year, you follow the fish, so consequentially, you follow the boats.

KL: Now I understand why the trucks were used.

AW: Yes. I mean, see prior to purse seiners and when you only had carriers, that's why the canneries worked like hell from June till September and they buttoned them up from the rest of the year. That is why there were one hundred canneries along the coast because that is when the fish were here and they would go like heck. When my mother was packing fish, same deal, my mother, her mother, her two sisters, in Wyman, Maine, they'd blow the whistle, everybody would go to work and they would stay at work until all the fish were packed. They would come home and wait for the whistle to blow again.

KL: You said a lot of your family worked in the packing plant.

AW: Yes. They all worked at the Wyman's plant in Wyman, which is now Inland Lobster. Matter of fact my first job at age twelve was sweeping the floor in the Wyman's sardine cannery for some ungodly amount of money like forty-five cents an hour or so. Ridiculous thing.

KL: Did they tell you very many stories about the canneries?

AW: No, no. Not really. I never asked. I'm sure my mother cold tell you some stories.

KL: Is your mother still living?

AW: Yes, she lives across the street.

KL: Oh. I wonder if that is who pointed me in the right direction. Right next to the red barn there?

AW: Yes.

KL: Okay. That was your mother?

AW: White haired lady?

KL: Yes. Oh, okay, and she worked in the cannery too?

AW: She didn't work—well, she actually did work at Stinson's for a short while. As a matter of fact, you may find this interesting or not, but Stinson's used to have housing, little tiny houses along the waterfront, that packers stayed in to live close to the cannery so that when the whistle blew, they could just, for the summer, they could just walk over and go to work. Well when my mom and dad got married and after Stinson's changed their way of doing things, they bought one of those little houses, moved it over across the street, and that's what we lived in while my father built the house that my mother lives in today. They then sold that house to Lela Anderson.

KL: Okay and that is the house Lela lives in now.

AW: That's part of the house that Lela lives in now.

KL: Okay, let me see if I understand this. Stinson built small houses for the packers…

AW: For the workers.

KL: For the workers, and later started selling them. Your parents bought one of them…

AW: To live in, and they moved it over here, and we lived in that little house until my father built the house that my mother lives in today. They then sold that house to Lela Anderson.

KL: And it was moved to Corea?

AW: Yes.

KL: That is wild.

AW: Yes. Just a little tidbit.

KL: So, I am getting a little bit of a picture of a company town to some extent, was it like that?

AW: Not so much when I was there but I think perhaps in the forties and fifties these were definitely, like Wyman's, the whole being of Wyman was a sardine cannery. That was like a company town, and I think Prospect Harbor with the Stinson cannery was pretty much the same. I mean they had the company store out front, you know?

KL: I think it was Mytress Harrington that was telling me about working in the company store. That was in the sixties, she said. It must have been gone by the time you got there.

AW: It was still there but it wasn't… It wasn't operable. I mean it wasn't being run as a store. We were using it for storage.

KL: Okay. What did your parents tell you about the cannery? Did they tell you anything about it?

AW: My father was a mechanic, he didn't work at the cannery, but my mother was... she really didn't tell me much about it. I mean she went to work and came home. I could always smell that particular smell that comes out of sardine canneries.

KL: [Laughter] Yes. One person was telling me about her mother, would sometimes stop and get cookies on the way home, and by the time she got home, the cookies would smell like sardines. [Laughter]

AW: Yes.

KL: Were there any of the packers who were especially fast or especially talented?

AW: Well, I mean, at Stinson's there was Nancy Harrington and Leela Anderson who were always competing. Nancy was a very good packer. I think that she and Leela on any given day would have done near the same number of cases. I think Nancy packed a neater can, but Lela might have been just a little bit faster because she wasn't quite as neat. Quality Assurance would generally fix about anything and put a little sauce and the cover on it and nobody would know the difference.

KL: [Laughter] I do not know if this happened when you were there but I heard a story about somebodies tie getting nailed to the floor.

AW: What was nailed to the floor?

KL: A tie.

AW: Oh, no. That was before me.

KL: Oh, okay. It sounds like sometimes they had a pretty good time.

AW: Oh yes, they liked to get around. It was in the sense even when we were done the cannery was a community. The girls would come to work, they'd go to work an hour and a half before they had to go to work just so they could sit and visit.

KL: What do you think made it such a community?

AW: Well, they were all good friends and they had all been there forever, or what seemed like forever. So, out of that core group they just, as people came in as they were accepted into the core group the community grew and then prior to closing, we had a hundred and thirty workers there but I believe that probably eighty to a hundred of them were just all close friends, first name basis, and the others were what I refer to as the revolving door group. We always could hire twenty people in any given day. People could come in for a paycheck, make a couple of paychecks, and leave and you would have to hire someone else. That's not the kind of work that today's kids are looking for or were looking for. I put all but one of my children to work in the sardine cannery made them work there

KL: You made them work there?

AW: Yes. They wanted money they needed this they needed that I got them a job and made them work there and after a little while I'd go to each kid and said, "I want you to realize that this is what you can look forward to if you don't go get a college education." And guess what, all but one got a college education. The other son that did not work there I put on the blueberry barrens with the blueberry rake. He still talks about it. He went to Gettysburg college and got his degree in computer science and now works for Nike. He has been there for twelve years and is very happy.

KL: Some of these packers worked for as much as fifty years packing fish. I can't imagine packing fish for fifty years.

AW: Well, again, to them it's a community. It's a job. Most of them really had no other training to do anything else other than being a housewife or mother, a second income. They liked the sense of community where they could go and visit with all their friends, and tell stories, tell jokes, have fun, make some money. The good packers, those that enjoyed it, they made darn good money. There's not a lot in this area that you can do to make darn good money.

KL: Was that part of the equation? That the packing companies were pretty much it?

AW: I believe so. Trust me, you open the paper and try to find a job right now, and Washington county still is, Washington, eastern Hancock still is a very hard area to get work. Especially for someone who has not training. High-school education, no training.

KL: One time, there was I think about seventy-five canneries up and down the coast of Maine and the gradually started dropping off until the Stinson Cannery was the last one.

AW: Yes.

KL: Why do you think that was? What caused the…

AW: There were a number of reasons. Decline in the sardine market. But also, companies like Stinson's that were fairly forward thinking, could increase their production with a little bit of mechanization. So, they were able to produce warehouse and have products during the times that other people ran out and gradually suppliers or buyers recognized the fact, "This company's going to have product when these other ones don't," so there was some attrition there.

Environmental regulations got tougher, and tougher, and tougher. That put out quite a few companies on the street that didn't want to make the change to the regulations. Waste water discharge and so forth and so on, I really believe the workforce the southernmost canneries like in the Portland area, more and better jobs came along. People got more sophisticated in the lines of work that was just gradually, if you look at the attrition of the canneries, it kept creeping east. The last remaining canneries in Prospect Harbor, the one just prior to that, that went down was Lubec. Actually, it was Bath, Belfast. It was Bath—Lubec and Belfast shut down at about the same time. Then the last one was Prospect, so it was partly, "What can I get for a workforce?"

KL: Did tastes change in terms of people not eating sardines as much?

AW: I think that sardines were a fairly acceptable food in the early fifties, early sixties, then after that it became more of a lunch box commodity with an exception some of the south American countries. Then in the eighties, it's still a lunchbox commodity, but it's more of the baby boomers and the older folks that will enjoy a can of sardines and more of the younger people saying, "Eww what's that smell?" Which is a shame because I always felt that sardines never got the type of hype in advertising they really should have because sardines are one of the richest sources of omega three and one of the healthiest things that you can actually eat. Theres just never been anyone out there pushing this fact; touting the fact that, "Hey, this is one of the best health foods you can eat. But it's just a smelly old can of fish as far as most people are concerned. But now I've gotten critical because if you walk in to a supermarket like Hannaford, and you look at Beach Cliff sardines packed in water, it says, "Product of Poland." Or if you look at Beach Cliff sardines packed in oil, it says, "Product of Canada." Pretty soon, I've been told that if you look at fish steaks it's going to say product of Taiwan. Now, I don't know about you but product of Maine suits me just fine; product of Canada I guess is acceptable, but product of Poland or product of Taiwan is not.

KL: So the Beach Cliff label doesn't necessarily mean that it was packed in Maine?

AW: You have to read the cover and it tells you where it was packed.

KL: Okay.

AW: Truth in labeling.

KL: Okay. I bought a can a while back just so I could photograph it. I will have to look closer at it. [Laughter]

AW: You'll find that unless you were lucky and got one of the older cans that may still be floating around none of them now say, "Packed in Maine," or "Product of Maine."

KL: What did you like about the job?

AW; What I liked about the job was the fact that I had a lot of freedom. Through the freedom that I gained I was able to work in the byproducts area. At the height of my career I was buying fish for five different canneries. I'd have eighteen tractor trailer trucks on the road at any one time, picking up and delivering fish, so I controlled all the fresh fish coming into the cannery but I also controlled all of the byproduct coming out of the back end of the cannery. This was during the Klingaman, late Klingaman era I will call it. My big year buying fish I bought 35,5000 metric ton of herring in one year. I distributed it all successfully to the canneries. We packed, I think one point six million cases that year.

KL: What year was that?

AW: I am not sure, ninety-seven somewhere between '96 and '99.

KL: Okay.

AW: Just prior to Klingaman selling the cannery to Connors Brothers, but he was a firm believer that you weren't shoved into a little box. If you were a free thinker, and could make money for the company, he would let you dabble in different things. When he bought the company, byproduct was so bad getting rid of it that we were giving it away on a Friday to bait dealers or we were taking it off shore and dumping it. Three years after—and then he said, "Can we do something with this?" So I took a look at it and I said, "Yeah I think so." Three years later we had a contract with Kal Kan Pet Food. We were selling every bit of our byproduct that wasn't going into pet food as lobster bait.

We were freezing bait for the times of years when fisherman had a hard time getting bait and at one point, I had the byproduct business making so much money he said, "You gotta stop doing, we can't do this anymore. It's making the cannery look bad." So they took the profit that I was making with the byproducts operation, changed the cost sheet around and gave it back to the cannery as a credit against their production costs and kind of hid the fact that the byproducts was carrying a large part of the canneries overhead.

KL: Why would they be upset about that? They are making money.

AW: Well, they're making money but I mean he didn't want the board of directors say, "Well hell, you should be running a bait business. Not a cannery. Why even bother in canning the fish if there is this much money in the bait business?" Well he wanted the cannery. His goal was to become sort of like what Bumble Bee is today. He wanted to can sardines. He wanted to can clams. He wanted to can muscles. He sold the King Oscar brand for the company out of Scotland that was packing it. He wanted to become a larger conglomerate type of operation and grow the business that way, as opposed to just packing more sardines. You know have more product, more shelf space in the supermarket.

KL: Now, Stinson sold to Klingaman in the '90's.

AW: In the late '90's.

KL: In the late '90's. Klingaman sold to Connors Brothers.?

AW: I believe it was early 2000.

KL: Early 2000.

AW: April Fool's day, matter of fact.

KL: [Laughter] Connors Brothers contracted or worked for Bumble Bee?

AW: Connors Brothers, well, it's something you would have to be a Philadelphia lawyer to understand, but Connors Brotheres'income fund supposedly bought Bumble Bee. But that really is not—there was some deal where Connors Bros.' income fund took over control of Bumble Bee but actually Bumble Bee controlled—I really can't explain it.

KL: Okay, but they were kind of interchangeable.

AW: Yes. But that happened in the mid to late 2000's and everything changed when I went to work for Connors Brothers, from being a free-lancing sort of individual, able to do whatever I could to help the company make money, I got put in a little box that says, "You are now fish acquiring for the canneries," and that was all I could do, so the fun kind of ended. But during that time, I weaseled my way on to an advisor for the New England Fisheries Management Council Herring Section. I became an advisor to the Atlantic State Marine Fisheries Herring Section. I became a member of the Department of Marine Resources Marine Advisory Committee. I picked up enough interesting outside stuff to do, that in addition to doing fish acquiring, they let me attend the meetings because it was important for what we were doing.

KL: Now did overfishing have an impact on the survival of the canneries?

AW: That's a hard question to answer because as I mentioned earlier in our conversation herring populations are very cyclical anyway, so we are not sure if opening up the fishery to all the different gear types and all the boats coming in. Yes, that might have some impact on it. It might have made the cycle go down quicker, but regardless I think it's cyclical and the fact that when the population dropped, the quota dropped, but the demand for lobster bait stayed the same.

We were in a untenable position in that the cannery could only offer so much money for the fish and the more expensive it was, the harder it was to make that can of sardines profitable. Whereas a lobster fisherman, if he had to pay twenty-five cents a pound for bait, or thirty cents a pound for bait he's not going to stay tied to the dock if it costs him a nickel more a pound for his fish, because he has the capability to going out there and catching a thousand pounds of lobsters. He's only got four or five months to do it in, so he's going to spend the money and go. But we couldn't get into a situation where I have a pocket full of cash, and I go down and start bidding on the fish, because I am going to lose. So, I had to go stand at the dock pull my pockets out and say, "Hey guys, help me out. Sell me some fish. I can only pay you twelve cents a pound," when bait is going at twenty. So, I would usually get, if they had good catches, I would get some extra. I always had a few boats that felt loyal to the canneries, they would sell us a percentage of their catch, and do cost averaging on their profit.

But when the quota got very small and very tight, the handwriting was on the wall. How can you run a cannery ten days a month during the height of the season and do it profitably? So, the consent decree that Bumble Bee, Connors Brothers. had with the state of Maine, there was an out in there that said if you could not get the labor force or the fish, that you could basically get out of the consent decree and close the cannery. Which is what they did. But the consent decree would have ended in 2010 anyway. The timeframe was up. But this just gave them impetus to do it a little bit earlier.

KL: Do you think the canneries will ever come back?

AW: No. It's a very expensive proposition. I doubt it. It would have to be a good rock solid population of herring. It would have to be a rock-solid market. There is a rock-solid market for sardines in South America. Were somebody that knew that they could sell a million cases a year, if they knew that they could get the fish, and they had the financial wherewithal to do it, they might do it. But, in general I think the answer is no. We will never see sardine canning again in the U.S. Certainly not on the scale it was done before.

KL: You ave been very generous with your time.

AW: Yes.

KL: I know you are not feeling quite one hundred percent, so I do not want to keep you. I do want to ask if there is anything that I overlooked that you might want to tell me about?

AW: No I think we have covered a lot.

KL: Okay great. One other thing I would like to do if I may. I would like to get a photo if that is alright?

AW: Sure.

-------------------------------------END OF INTERVIEW---