



Oral History and Folklife Research, Inc.

AN INTERVIEW WITH DIANA YOUNG  
INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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PROSPECT HARBOR, ME  
SEPTEMBER 10, 2011

TRANSCRIBER: KEITH LUDDEN

Notes: Interview conducted at the former Stinson Cannery at Prospect Harbor

KJL I need to do a little housekeeping first. We're at the Stinson Cannery in Prospect Point (sic) and we're talking to Diana young, and we're talking about the Stinson Cannery, and Diana, would you mind if I asked what year you were born?

DY I was born in Bremerton Washington in 1945.

KJL 1945, huh? So you were born in the middle of World War II

DY Yes,

KJL Just trying to put things into context here. So I imagine you grew up with things like gas stamps and...

DY Well, not that I was aware that that was all happening. My father was in the military, with the Navy. And being a baby boomer, and coming along after the hardships and [living in ] various parts of the world, my father came to Winter Harbor, Maine, and decided to retire here. So that's how I came to this neck of the woods, from a family background from Massachussetts, and from Washington state. Both families have a history of the fishing industry, which is very ironic.

My folks in Massachussetts were instrumental in the clam flats and reseeded clams and making that area, Essex, Mass, very well know for its clams. My great uncle was the inventor of the fried clam. My grandparents on the west coast came from Norway, and they had their own salmon fishing boat, and did all their catching and canning right on their vessel, and would bring that in for their food for the winter, what have you. So I think I fell in to the fishing industry naturally, and growing up in the little town of Winter Harbor, quite a few of the older ladies--at that time I thought were elder--they weren't much younger than I am now--would always be abuzz about waiting for the bus to come and pick them up and bring them to the factory.

The Stinson bus came and picked up the ladies at various locations, and they came in those days with a fresh product that they stayed and packed and produced until the whistle blew that they were done. There was no minimum hours of working in those days, you earned your living by a piecework salary and the more that one did, the more pay one got. But there was a family sense of everyone from the first worker that appeared in the morning to the last cleanup person at night; everybody knew everybody and I thought that was really unique that nobody had any secrets in the factory and that was fun.

But backing up as a young person and out of high school, I was offered a position with the family. I had known them through taking care of their children, babysitting when I was in high school. My father was associated with one of the owners through being on a school board together, and they were talking about the need of someone to come in and

work with the bookkeeper, who at that time--Annie Tracy--was well noted for her meticulous bookkeeping system. And in those days, they paid cash on the payroll

KJL I'm going to stop you for just a moment. Would you mind if I turned this off?

DY It is off

KJL Oh, it is off?

DY Yes.

KJL OK, I'm sorry. You were talking about the bookkeeper

DY Yeah, and so when I came in and started working with Annie Tracy, I was given the job at a dollar twenty-five an hour. That was the minimum wage--to get me started. Mr Stinson Sr. was still here at the time and everyday he came in to the office and he'd walk by me and he'd say "Girlie, how's the job going?" and I said, "Fine." and so forth. And working with his son, Charlie, and his son in laws, Dick and Dana, it became quite apparent that it was a family much like my own, very diverse, very argumentative, very interested in the surroundings of what was going on. And everybody had their own turf, so to speak, and it was fun to watch the different personalities together create what i was very fortunate to be a part of. It was from ground zero to becoming one of the world's largest sardine suppliers and brand names known world wide.

So it was amusing to me that at my young age, and offered a raise, Mr. Stinson asked me to come in to his office, and he sat in his rocking chair with his pipe and rocked, and he said, "Well," said, "The boys told me that you're working out well, and they recommended that you get a raise." and I said, "Oh, that's good." He said, "Do you think you're worth it?" And I was so taken aback by that, because I came from a family that anything one wanted to do, one did. I looked at him, and I'll never forget, and I said, "Well I'm worth that and a lot more, Mr. Stinson." And he just leaned back in his rocking chair and said. "That's what I wanted to know." He was just of that age where women were a supplement. Men [deserved] higher pay because they were head of households.

KJL This would have been in the 50's?

DY No, this was in the early '60's

KJL Oh, in the '60's

DY ...but Mr. Stinson was still back in the '40's, of that kind of mentality. I think he was in his late 80's at that time. So that was my first experience. My next experience was driving in a car. Oh my word, I don't know if I can work here, that car smelled so bad. Well, one of the older gentlemen in the factory had put a strip fish up under my car seat, and of course, as the car got warmer and warmer, the smell of strip fish was, needless to say, overwhelming, but they all got a big kick out of that.

KJL Okay, explain to this Nebraska boy what a strip fish is.

DY A strip fish is a piece of fish that has been split and salted heavily and dried in the sun, and the fish becomes very hard, and it's considered a delicacy by most. It's called "strip," because as the flesh dries, when one eats it, you pull it and it comes off as a strip, and it's a very dried, salty, fishy, fishy, fishy taste (laughs). So anyway, if one had it in their car, without any windows open, one would know what strip fish was. So that started my career with the company.

KJL How old were you when you came to work here?

DY I was, let me see, 20, and the time, and it was interesting that I moved from payroll into sales, and into the logistics of things. So I would work with the sales people and their force of outside warehouses, supplying all the stores and getting the product to them. And in those days, we were coming up against the limits on the catch of herring and the supply, so that we would go overseas and to Europe and buy the frozen [ ] so that we could continue with a year-round job market supply.

And in between all of that and learning that, the factory caught on fire and burnt to the ground and that next day, everybody, every worker that worked here--all of the office people, the owners, we were all here, trying to paw through the rubble to save what we could for documentation and what have you. And Mr. Stinson just said right at that time, "I never believed in insurance," and he had his own wherewithal to start, he'd always put his own money away, with the interest accumulated. And that next day, they started clearing and making plans for the new building. So that was interesting

We all got moved into the basement of Mr. Stinson's home, and there was, fortunately, a bathroom in his home, in the basement, and he had a wood fireplace, so we had heat, and we spent the next winter trying to--my job was to reconstruct all the accounts receivable from burnt, sodden papers, and hanging them up on clotheslines and things, trying to dry out every document, every invoice, every inventory, and phone numbers, and just everything that you can imagine that one has, that you take for granted, was completely gone, so it was a rebuild of that whole time, which we all did, and we accomplished, and never missed a beat.

KJL So were you packing fish in Mr. Stinson's basement?

DY No, that was just the office part, trying to get the business base back together, all the payrolls, all the W2's, all the accounts payable, receivables, everything had to be recreated, so that was interesting. Through all of that, working with the folks, especially the women downstairs, I grew so to admire their work ethic, their family interest, and most of all their duty to the company and to their loyalty. Not only was it just a place to make money there was something beyond it in today's world people don't understand. There was a kinship, It was very interesting.

KJL That's something that seems to--a recurrent theme that I keep hearing is the theme of loyalty and cohesion in the plant

DY Yes. It would amaze me. I would go in--that was in the days when they were packing what we call raw fish, the raw fish came down the line, and women had scissors that would do the manual snipping, and the laughter and the joking and the going back and forth. Some of the ladies were very salty in their humor, and some of the younger men, especially sons of the owners, or son in laws had quite a challenge to overcome with a hundred and twenty ladies. And that was quite funny, really because the younger people did not know how to take that kind of ribbing, which was, to say the least on the very bawdy side.

KJL I've heard one story about a tie being nailed to the floor.

DY Yes, and there was another time when a young person had a fish tail slapped to his forehead and was told that was the first piece of tail he would receive and that type of humor was very much on display, and it took a while for the student to understand. All the small things that would happen still were overshadowed by the complete sense of productivity and the pride that people would take, whether they were in the fish processing part, or whether they were in the casing up part, or the smithing part, or the loading the truck part, it was a nice environment to grow up in, and I was very fortunate to be able to have a job that was within a three mile commute, and yet where else would I have been able to export and import and work a financial market. The knowledge that we gained on the people that we met, it was just unbelievable.

And the other thing that I remember is we had--when we had the first Japanese group that came in to tour, I of course, being taller than anyone--most people in this area had met, had--this wonderful Japanese man kept bending over my hand, and he was very complimentary, an very "Ah, so," this and that and me not speaking Japanese did not know what he was saying and after he left, my boss, Charlie, said, "He was just saying he'd never met anyone with legs as long as yours." (Laughs) So when we sold a container of sardines to them I said, "Well, see, it all worked out well." (Laughs)

But [ ] our truck drivers were a group of people all to themselves. Their nicknames were painted on the doors of their tractor trailers, "Willie Coyote," "Papa Bear," "Roadrunner." There was another one, and I can't remember that right this moment. But they were unique to say the least, and [I] thoroughly enjoyed them also.

I think over all, what is sad is that this is just a very small reflection of what's gone on throughout our total country, in my opinion. The United States was such a leader in production and manufacturing and how it turned around that we became only end users is, I think, sad because everyone in the world copied whatever we in the United States produced, whether its in machinery or computers or medicine or education, we're copied world wide, and yet we're losing that point of giving that to our children so that they have a sense of ownership in our country. Now that I'm older and watching my

grandson grow up, I think it's very difficult to teach someone those ideals without seeing it being lived, And I'm sad that they're not going to have a part of that.

Everyone in this area, from high school age up--children and kids worked in the sardine plant summers, earning their money for school--clothes and a car, or whatever, much like blueberry pickers, potato pickers. Then all the laws changed and kids cannot be allowed in where equipment and machinery and this type of thing, so that closed a lot of job opportunities to kids to be able to get them to see and have choices to make. I think some kids would have benefited by the hard work that was done for very little money to encourage them to stay in school and further their horizons. But on the other hand, the Stinson canning company and family were truly a family type organization, and I was very, very fortunate to be a part of it.

KJL I understand when Cal Stinson would come down the hall you could hear him coming.

DY Yes,

KJL Can you tell me about that?

DY Yes. Cal hummed, and he was very hard of hearing, so his humming through the years got very loud. My best recollection of him was in the old office, we had a partition, and I would be facing toward the public, and he would be walking in back of me to go into his office. It was along the wall in the back. And at that time he was mastering ten pin bowling, and he had weighed a handful of sardine cans that would match the weight of the bowling ball. And he would practice holding this group of cans and getting the movement. Well, one day, his movement, he let loose the cans of sardines and they hit me in the back of the chair and on the seat. And I, of course, startled let out a yelp and spun around to look at him, and he just went "HMMMMMMMM" and turned around and walked away like nothing had happened (laughs). So it was things like that.

My first week on the job, and I had never even known people did things like that. In his office, with his big roll top desk, and his chair--leather padded swivel chair--the window was open. Well, I knew from people's talk that he was a marksman, he was a skeet shooter. Well, kabaaam! The gun goes off, and he's shooting at a sea duck out the window (laughs). And I went in and I said, "What on earth was that? And he said, "That was dinner" (laughs).

So he was a character and aside from all of that, me meeting him so late in his life, I admired him because he was the typical Alger story of a small person making good, so to speak. And he would tell me about he worked on a smack boat with his father, and they would run lobsters up and down the coast and how he came about to be in the sardine business--he and a partner--[Wass] with absolutely no money started a business on good faith, handshakes and promises.

And I asked him how that happened and he was very hesitant at first and then he was trying to explain to me that during the war the canned sardines were a very important part of the mess kit for the servicemen, and that he and his partner put in a bid for a trainload of canned sardines. Now, mind you, they had never paid the women for working to pack them, they had never paid--everybody did it on an IOU basis. These sardines were taken to Sullivan, where the rail head was, loaded into, I think he told me four boxcars, it was that many sardines, shipped to New York, and when he got the check from the government for those, he paid back every single IOU.

And I just thought, number one, remarkable because in my day and age, you'd never--you'd have to sign away your first born to--but the banks worked with him. But just think that women at ten cents a hundred can case worked and did that on a promise. I just find that that kind of loyalty unbelievable.

KJL Now, this was in World War II or World War I?

DY One, when he was first starting out.

KJL That's an amazing story.

DY Well, it's a true story, and I just find it, you know--people don't--you don't meet real people like that anymore. You think of it maybe as a story tale, but... I so enjoyed listening to him and when he would tell me different things--going to Florida and buying swampland that turned into Coral Gables--things like that, he was just so advanced, so before his time that--like I said, for a young kid in her twenties to meet someone in their eighties, you know--sometimes have that feel, "What can that old guy know?" You know what I mean? But the respect he had from everyone, every coastal village, the state of Maine, the awards, the honors. And he raised a beautiful family. They all carried that tradition of values, and instilled that in each other and I think it's just a nice Maine story [     ].

KJL Now, at one point there were something like seventy five canneries up and down the coast of Maine. This one was the last sardine cannery. Why do you think the business declined?

DY Well, number one, the reason for so many was the transportation. In those days, everything came in by boat, so naturally every port had its own place, because people weren't running up and down the coast and that all of the sudden changed that you could pump from a boat into a truck, so you didn't have that logistic problem making it where your plant was supposed to be. You could do it differently.

But as the overfishing of the raw material occurred and things weren't--people didn't bring their factories up to snuff, you got into the icing, the ice machines, the icing on the boats. They had to stay out longer to catch more. It became a very expensive venture. And I think he was one of the few that understood the expense, the modernization of equipment, et cetera to stay up with the tide. But then in the latter years from even the

last owner, Bumblebee, it becomes a problem in that your overhead is beyond your control, because our labor cannot stay as inexpensive as overseas. So your competition of where you're doing and what you're doing becomes the make or break. It's all bottom line.

KJL Now, you used a term a little while ago that I want to make sure I understand. You used the word "sea duck." Did you mean seagull?

DY No, a sea duck.

KJL Oh, OK, I just wanted to make sure I understood.

DY Not a very good eating bird (laughs).

KJL What did you like about the job?

DY I liked everything about it because it was always changing, it was always intense, and whatever challenge I was given, I enjoyed that. It was like--I don't know, I took great pleasure in balancing things and making things equal and putting out fires and tending to the emergencies of every day. I just found that challenging.

KJL What kind of emergencies did you run into?

DY Well, I had one load of--we were buying fish out of Chile, canned--they called them canned tall. And pirates overtook the ship. So there I am with a containment cargo of tall sardines in brine being confiscated by pirates in international waters and trying to fight the insurance people for the claim, saying that that was an act of war and it wouldn't be covered and that was interesting. Those kinds of things. Having one of our managers in Ireland Christmas Eve on a boat that was icing up, and then a terrible storm, wondering if his Christmas card had come through (laughs).

And having my boss call me from--I can't remember exactly where he was in Europe, but he wanted some money wired to him so that her could purchase a watch and when he told me how much the watch was I said he didn't need it, and he said, "I didn't ask you your opinion on the purchase, I asked you to wire me the money" (laughs).

KJL Now, did you deal with the carriers very much?

DY Yes,

KJL Can you tell me much about that?

DY Well, the carriers, the sardine carriers, the boat captains--[ ] Ray, Ernest Woodman--They were a breed unto themselves. They were very much like truck drivers, except they were on the ocean. They every now and then would run aground or run into



another boat or take in too much twine or whatever, and that was always interesting when they came in.

KJL What did you mean by “take in too much twine?”

DY Well, that is the net, when they’re pulling up the net with the sardines in it and then they would be hosing out the sardines into the boat to carry them in. And sometimes the smaller boats would take in too much netting, so then the boat would tip the dory and start filling up. So then you’d have to lose the back end, and you lose fish so that you don’t sink.

KJL Yeah, I got to talk to Cary Lewis

DY Yes, he was one of them, too, yeah, yeah. So it was a fun kind of environment. We were informal, but yet we were formal in knowing the structure of things. And each one of us had our place, and without the other one doing their thing, the other one didn’t have a job.

KJL Was it long hours sometimes?

DY Oh, yes, yes, I worked many hours, yeah.

KJL Now sometimes the women got called in early in the morning or something like that didn’t they?

DY Yeah, whenever the fish arrived, you know, came on the dock and the--before the ice and the ability to hold, the boat would come in and the whistle would go off and everybody through word of mouth, or the whistles would know. And that could be five o’clock in the morning, four o’clock in the morning, or it could be nine o’clock at night, whenever the fish came to the dock, people were brought in.

KJL OK, now one thing I’m not clear on--They used the whistle up to a certain point and then they started using a phone tree, a phone kind of system. Can you tell me how that transition happened?

DY Well, the transition happened when they started and got phones. Before there were phones in this area, the whistle was the one that did it and as far as you could hear for the whistle, that person would be responsible to contact the next group, whether they had to walk to their house or ride.

But phones weren’t--they were very sparse when we came to this area in 1950, phones still were quite a novelty. They were mostly--there were no private lines at the time. It was a ring system. Your phone was so many rings, and you could pick it up, and anybody could be on it, or you could listen in or... It took a while for this neck of the woods to get modern, to say the least.

KJL Yeah, I can just barely remember party lines.

DY Yeah, see and that was the norm here. Even our fire line system, what they called the red phone was a party line kind of thing and she would pick up and start tapping for the different numbers, you know, to run the firehouse whistle, so people would know right away where it was, who it was and--'cause the party line would go to that group.

KJL Now, was there any particular catalyst that brought in the phones, like rural electrification brought in electricity to the farms?

DY I don't know how that all came about. All I know is that the Navy base at the end of Schoodic had its own power brought in, and that was top of the art, because that was one of the North Atlantic's tracking stations for information, the security system. So when that swath of power and lights and electrical got brought in, I think that boosted up all of this area to do that. But Winter Harbor had its own town telephone operators with the plugs and the switchboard and that type of thing that did this area, but it was still very manual, no automatic dial, no--in fact, my in laws still have a rotary phone, so, I mean, isn't that interesting (laughs).

KJL Well, you've been very generous with your time. I don't want to take advantage, but I do want to ask if there's anything that you want to point out that I might be overlooking.

DY No, I just think it's hard to capture a past, and I think it's difficult to try to verbally explain it, and I'm sure it's the same whether it was in the garment industry, or whether it was in the automotive industry, or--I think that same type, whether you do sardines, whether you do food, whether you do a manufactured product, I think it's a thing of the past. Because now what's done are sweatshops across the world and no regard for the health of the worker. I just think it's strange how we promote the care of human beings and yet we buy products that support just the opposite. But those are all very personal comments, so...

KJL No, that's what it's all about, is a ground level perspective on history, and I really appreciate your time.

DY Well, thank you.

[INTERVIEW ENDS]