

Name of person Interviewed: Robert Britto (RB)

Facts about this person:

Age: ?

Sex: Male

Occupation: Boat owner

Home ports: New Bedford/Fairhaven

Residence: Fairhaven

Ethnic background:

Interviewer: Millie Rahn (MR)

Transcriber: Sarah Smith

Place interview took place: New Bedford Harbor Development Commission

Date and time of interview: September 24, 2006

INDEX / KEYWORDS

KEYWORDS: Fairhaven; vessel owner; scalloper; bad weather; technology; regulations; superstitions; cycles; Christmas trip

[00:00] Live in Fairhaven; lived there forever; got involved in fishing because his father-in-law was a fisherman; spent 21 years at sea as deckhand, cook, engineer, mate, captain, and owner; started out scalloping on father-in-law's boat; mate on bigger boats; became captain of Rianda; bought Poseidon with John Isaacson; bought Rianda; sold both boats; built the Hustler; owns the Hustler; never fished after he was 39

[03:25] Drive makes good fishermen; son makes lots of money for them; work hard – you'll make money; scalloping is good right now

[04:48 - 08:36 – recording skips]

[08:36] Story about a close call in bad weather; waves did a lot of damage to the boat; lost all their electronics except for the depth sounder; he didn't know where they were; his father-in-law had plotted their course precisely without equipment because he knew the area; was his first trip; they survived; worst weather he's ever seen; everyone thought they would die; waves were huge; was at the end of November

[12:37] Another story about catching a Russian trawler in their net; only his second trip; their gear survived it

[15:15] Technology today is very sophisticated

[15:58] They had Latvians on their crew – very hard workers; father-in-law was Norwegian; today only young kids can survive in the industry for the amount of work they need to do; seven men crews; they used to have eleven men; today's crews bring in more scallops; they work harder and stay out longer; couldn't do that in earlier days because of union rules

[18:00] People stay in the fishery because it gets in their blood; he spent almost 21 years at sea; never goes on a boat anymore; passing it on to his son

[19:00] People had superstitions but he didn't buy into them; couldn't turn hatch covers over; couldn't say pig; crew would put a pig on a boat if they didn't want to go out; story about a wild night in Nantucket; a crew member dressed up as Santa Claus the next day

[21:44] Boat would pull into Nantucket for the Christmas trip; used to celebrate in Nantucket, New York, Cape May, Atlantic City; lots of boats did this

[22:42] Scallop industry had a bonanza when scallop beds were discovered off Cape May; lots of scallops then; Canadians came down; things go in cycles; got down to just

27 boats; last five to ten years is biggest bonanza for scallop industry; hundreds of scallop boats now; everyone who can get a permit is joining the fleet

[24:12] Would tell someone thinking about joining the industry to save their money - it's not going to last

[24:52] Regulations are good for the industry; if the fishery is managed properly it will last a long time; not sure with all the new boats entering fishery; shouldn't have closed areas where there are scallops dying and not being harvested; not being able to harvest them is not good management; with good management the industry will survive

[26:42] Loves to eat scallops; wife has lots of recipes; not interested in going back to fishing at this age; that's why they build new boats

[27:52 – end of interview]

TRANSCRIPT

[00:00]

MR: ...history with Bob Britto. Why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself... um, name, where you live, um, your connection to the working waterfront, and we'll take it from there.

RB: Okay. I'm Bob Britto and I live in Fairhaven – Hamlet Homes. I've been living there... forever. I got involved in the fishing industry 'cause I married my wife who... dad was a fisherman. I spent twenty-one years at sea, starting out as a deckhand, going as a cook, and as an engineer, and as a mate, and as a captain, and then as an owner. And here I am.

MR: So you've seen... a lot of... different perspectives and...

RB: Yes I have.

MR: ...different stories – can you talk a little bit about some of the changes over time and...

RB: Well, I started out on a 87 foot wooden scalloper. Spent eleven years on the fishing vessel Florence B, which my father-in-law owned. And, uh, from there, after eleven years I...left that vessel, uh... I made a couple of trips on bigger boats and that kind of changed my attitude as to where I wanted to go. I then went on the... fishing vessel Oceanic, a brand new one. It was skippered by Leo Tuttle, I was mate. I was there for approximately a couple of years. Then I went on another vessel with Eddie Carter. And then I went Captain on the fishing vessel Rianda. Which was owned by Bob Breeze.

And it was many years I was there. And then I met a guy that I lived alongside of – John Isaacson. And we both decided that it was time that we bought a boat, so we bought the fishing vessel Poseidon off of Blake Jacobson. We owned that for... I don't know – many, many years. And then I bought the Rianda, off of Bob Breeze. And I owned that for many years. Sold them both to the present – to the captains that we had for 'em, and we built the fishing vessel Hustler, which we presently own. And I went ashore at age 39 and never went back to sea.

MR: Hmm...

RB: All I did was work on the vessels when they were ashore.

MR: In what, um, fishery?

[03:00]

RB: Sea scalloping

MR: Sea scalloping... okay. I also do the food weigh stage and we had a lot of scallops yesterday.

RB: Oh-ho!

MR: Everybody was raving about them... yeah. So you're – you're working on shore now, you've been on shore for awhile.

RB: I have been on shore for a long while now, yeah.

MR: Yeah, yeah... what do you think makes a good fisherman?

[03:25]

RB: Drive. I think I had one of the best fishermen in the waterfront as far as captains – I had, uh... Dougie Mackie was captain on the Poseidon, he did very well for us. And my son was captain on the Rianda. He did exceptionally well for us. And then he went captain on the new vessel, the Hustler, which he was also a part owner in. And he was above and beyond anyone.

MR: Hmm...

RB: Made money, I mean it was just... that's all he did was make money. And more money – he was a good fisherman, he was always where they are, he worked hard that... I – I believe in working the hardest you can – you'll make money. And you'll succeed.

MR: Yeah, and scallopers are doing pretty well right now I think, yeah?

RB: They're doing *very* well right now. We don't have that many... I mean we've got enough regulations on us but the abundance of scallops is making it a lot better.

[04:39]

MR: When you were on... the boats, what were some of your experiences? Did you have any close calls...

RB: Mmmm...

[04:48 - 08:36 – recording skips]

[08:36]

RB: ...bs had jammed the doors shut. The front pilot house window was blown out. I took a knife and put it in my mouth, climbed out through the pilot house window, went up on the pilot house roof, and when the dory swung out, I took a ripper and cut the rope off and the dory left us. Or it would have beat the pilot house right off the boat. I climbed back in the window again... and then I decided that... I like to live. So I went down the engine room and I started the main engine – myself and a Latvian... stayed in the pilot house and jogged into the sea. We took *all* of the pilot house windows out, from the big seas rolling over the bow. I was standing at the helm, and I saw the sea come over the pilot house, over the bow. It hit the pilot house windows in the front. I ducked down. It took both windows out – went over my head. Took the after stateroom door off and the engine room door off. I come back up again, the windows were gone, and continued jogging... I'm home. We made it.

MR: After that, you could probably go through anything then...yeah...

RB: The most amazing part about this whole adventure was that we lost all electronics – everything was gone. Except one piece of equipment – we had an old flasher, sounding machine, and me as a green kid, I didn't – I didn't know what that meant. So, after three days, I had no idea where we were, other than we were out in a thousand fathoms. So we were going home, jogging slowly, getting home, and six o'clock in the evening on the... fourth night... we ran across the boat called the Wamsutta. And I went down in the galley and I went to Hants and I asked Hants if he wanted me to go over and get a bearing from them. He said no. I was steaming Northwest, and I did go get a bearing. And when the course I made out to what they called Davis Shoal, the old man's course was one quarter of a point off. And I never could figure out at that time how he did it. But with the sounding machine he found the thirty-eight – thirty-eight to forty fathom edge on George's, followed that edge down from Nantucket Lightship, from Nantucket Lightship he knew how to get to Davis Shoal.

MR: Wow...

RB: If it had been left up to me, I'd probably be out on... George's Bank still floating around out there trying to figure out how to get home, but... that was how these old timers navigated.

MR: Wow...

RB: And we made it home with... lots of damage.

MR: Yeah...

RB: But we came back alive. That was my worst weather-wise experience. And I never hope to see it ever again but... we never did.

MR: Mmm...

RB: So...

MR: That's amazing...

RB: That was my first trip...

MR: Yeah!...

RB: ...in the pilot house.

[11:50]

MR: That was truly... a trial by... water.

RB: Oh yeah, that was as... the crew was in the – in the, uh... the crew were in the, uh... captain's stateroom and nobody figured we were going to make it alive, I mean, it was just impossible with the seas – they were... if I – if I told you they would dwarf telephone poles... that would not be a lie.

MR: Ahhh...

RB: But that was really, really a...

MR: What time of year was that?

RB: I believe it was the end of November, something on that... that time of the year. Yeah...

MR: My gosh...

[12:37]

RB: But I've had a... lot of close calls, but nothing – nothing as weather-wise as bad as that. I had a very good, uh, experience that is – it's – it's not a... it's not a bad experience, it was just a funny experience – this was on my second trip, by the way. [laughs] With my father-in-law... I was towing back in forth out on George's going east

and west, and two Russian trawlers came by. They were towing... northeast and southwest, something of that nature. And me being a greenhorn or green kid, didn't have any idea of what these Russian nets were – were like. Cause they were new on George's, but these were big boats. And the two went by this way, and I figured that I had plenty of room to go between them, which I did. And then I figured, well now it was time to haul back – well when I started hauling back, the boat started going sideways, towards the first Russian trawler. Well it didn't take me long to realize that I had hooked the Russian trawler.

MR: Huh! Mmm.

RB: We're in an 87 foot boat, this is a 175 foot side trawler. So I kept getting closer and closer, as I was hauling back, and then I... finally stopped hauling the gear back 'cause there was... fifty feet from 'em. And I went in the after stateroom and I called Hants. And I said "Hants, you gotta get up, because you'll never believe the tow that I've just hauled back." And he came up out of the [laughs]... out of the cabin, and we were laying alongside the Russian. I said "that's what I got!" [laughs] And they were hollering and yelling at us and we were... Russian here and us here. We had come from over here and gone right around...

MR: Mmm!

RB: ... and was laying bow to bow with them. And then, uh... Hants looked at me and they were hollering and yelling and, he said, "Bubby? I tink they're swearing at me..." [laughs]... We... we backed around in the waist, and maybe five – ten minutes later, we looked over and we saw our dredges coming up in the galluses (?) of the Russian trawler hanging on their doors. And maybe about twenty minutes later the Russians steamed away, and we figured we had no more gear left. We pulled the dredges back safe and sound with no problem [laughs]

MR: Oh my gosh...

RB: And that was my experience with the Russians. I never got another one after that. [laughs]

MR: [laughs] So...

RB: Well that was a fun day.

[15:15]

MR: You've really need... you know, I'm just thinking... you talk about the old timers and the... you know, the... the gear was different, the electronics were different – what... what do these newer folks do, you know, if they don't have that... experience? That, you know, wealth of experience that the combined knowledge of everybody on the crew, you're in tough shape!

RB: Well, the technology is so terrific today it's... I mean...

MR: Yeah, if they don't lose it.

RB: These... these – these guys, I mean, the equipment we have on board the boat right now if we lose the dredge I think the next tow I think we can put a... put a hook through the bullring of the dredge. We have such sophisticated equipment.

[15:58]

MR: Now one of the things - you mentioned a Latvian on – on the crew... where were the crews... what were the crews' kind of nationalities, their backgrounds?

RB: We had a lot of Latvians on board us... on board the Florence B – they were hard workers and they had been with Hants for years and years. Very hard workers.

MR: Was Hants Latvian?

RB: No, he was Norwegian.

MR: Norwegian, okay. I wondered what... And... what are your crews today? Are they still...?

RB: Young kids. And in today's standard, with the work that they have to put out, they can only be young. Because a person of my age, I don't think I would make it with twenty-four hours. They'd have to survive me. Give me life support system.

MR: Mmmm... And what size are the crews... today?

RB: Seven men today.

MR: Seven today...

[16:54]

RB: That's government regulations. And that's... for conservation methods. But those seven men, today... the largest trip I ever brought in was thirty-three thousand with eleven men. These crews today are bringing in forty or fifty thousand, with seven men.

MR: Wow...

RB: And the only thing I ask is "how do you do it?" and they just keep telling me with a lot of hard work.

MR: And how long are those trips to get... forty to fifty thousand?

RB: Well... they're mostly fourteen, fifteen days... our trips were eight days fishing. That was union organized then.

MR: Yeah... And there's no union now, right?

RB: No union – there hasn't been union for many years.

[18:00]

MR: So besides... the money that's in the fishing why do you think people stay with it?

RB: I think it gets in your blood.

MR: Mmm hmm.

RB: I... it's just... it's yesterday, today, or (?) – and I guess you just keep going and going and going. I mean I put... I put twenty-one – not quite twenty-one years at sea... and after that... the only time I think I went to sea was on a cruise ship.

MR: Mmm!... And you're passing it onto your son...

RB: Yes.

MR: ...so you're keeping the tradition going... did you have any superstitions, when you were... at sea? Or things that you did for luck, or...?

[19:00]

RB: There were superstitions, but... I didn't really pay a lot of attention to 'em, but I mean there was... foolishness.

MR: Yeah.

RB: You couldn't turn the hatch covers over - that was bad luck – and all this other stuff, but... it really didn't... I didn't... go by it and... I observed a lot of it but I didn't... go by much of it.

MR: Yeah, well, I'm a folklorist so I have to ask that one. [laughs] Yeah, some people – some of the old timers... had a lot of things that they did or said or whatever...

RB: Oh yeah. You could never say the word "pig" on board a boat – that was...

MR: Right...

RB: ... that was very bad, and... and if you were a crew member and you really didn't want to go out you snuck a pig on board the boat and... when you were going out if he came out of the whaleback or the bow of the boat you usually turned around and went back! [laughs] But that was very seldom, that... foolishness.

MR: Yeah, actually, some of the foolishness - I interviewed somebody yesterday and he was... talking about some of the things he would do to... amuse the crew or, you know, different foods he'd bring on, or plants, or Halloween masks, you know, just to kind of keep the morale up and... do funny things, and...

RB: Mmm hmm. Well we had a – we had a Santa Claus on board the boat.

MR: [laughs]

RB: We went into Nantucket, going out myself and another captain, Eddie Carter – I was on the Rianda, he was on the Jupiter, and we went into Nantucket. This was Christmas trip, cause you have to celebrate Christmas trip by going into Nantucket...

MR: Aah! I've never heard that before...

RB: I mean, that has to be – there has to be something, I mean in a case like bad weather or, something of that nature. And we had a few too many drinks... and, uh... got kinda sick going down the boat, but... going out the following day... uh, a Santa Claus walked across the deck. And I was talking with Eddie Carter at the time and I said, "you'll never believe this but I've got a Santa Claus". This guy went up with his back to us, walked across the deck, with this case and up on the bow... and was waving to the Jupiter, which was laying alongside of us. And I thought, "Oh my god, how have I done this?" And when he turned around it was one of my crew! [laughs]

MR: Ah! [laughs]

RB: [laughs] So... it was just a joke. Cause he knew that we weren't feeling that well going out. [laughs] So...

[21:44]

MR: So... this going into – celebrating the Christmas trip by going into Nantucket...

RB: Well, we celebrated a lot – Nantucket, New York, Cape May... we did these things... it took a little bit of the...

MR: So that was your... your boat, or was this everybody?... Everybody...

RB: No, no, no, this was – this – it was mostly – a lot of the boats.

MR: Wow!

RB: We went in and out of Nantucket, out of New York, out of Atlantic City, out of Cape May...

MR: That's great... I have never heard that before!... Uh... here's one of the questions we like to ask: In your opinion, what years were the best for the fishing industry?... or maybe what *are* the best for the fishing industry?

[22:42]

RB: Uhh... we had – we had a major... uh, bonanza many, many years ago when they discovered... a lot of – a large sea scallop bed down off of Cape May. That was a tremendous, tremendous amount of scallops in volume that... and we had a very big year that year. That's when the Canadian fleet came down and... we - we – it was just... abundance of scallops like you've never seen... And then you go through cycles, where it will go downhill, and we went through a cycle where we were down to - I believe... I think it was twenty-seven boats. Cause it just was very scarce. And I would say probably the biggest bonanza is in the last five to ten years.

MR: What's the size of the scallop fleet down here?

RB: This... right now there's hundreds – everyone – everyone that can get a permit will go scalloping. If he can get a permit. And they're coming out of the walls.

[24:12]

MR: Hmmm... So what advice would you give to someone starting out today – a fisherman starting out today?

RB: I would say save your money because this is not gonna last... would be the best advice.

[24:52]

MR: ... Um... wh... when you look at the regulations now, and how they've changed over time... are they working? Are they not working? Are they good? I know that's a... touchy subject for people...

RB: I would say... I would say... with the regulations, they're – they're very beneficial for us. If they're managed properly, we'll go on for quite a while. With the volume of boats that's being put into the industry, I don't know how long. But I think the regulations are good for the industry.... The trick to that is... is – is knowledge as to how to run them.

MR: Mmm hmmm.

RB: I mean with these opened and closed areas... if they manage properly, we'll go on for a long while.... I absolute - I absolutely don't believe in the fact that you can have a closed area like what was taking place on George's and Nantucket Lightship and you have... tons and tons of scallops that sit idly and die... because of *not* being able to go after 'em... that's... not very good management, and...

MR: Mmm hmmm.

RB: ... that's the kind of stuff that I don't... particularly think is wise. But good management, they'll go on for a long while.

[26:42]

MR: Do you eat scallops?

RB: I love scallops.

MR: Somebody... I interviewed, um... I... over the last day or two was saying, "oh no, these fishermen, they don't eat any fish!" You know, saying "meat, meat, meat..."

RB: No, that's not... that's not true...

MR: Good! 'Cause I love scallops too.

RB: My wife has all kinds of recipes for... scallops. And we have them a lot.

MR: Oh, we might have to get her on the food weigh stage! In fact, we should do a working waterfront cookbook.... Well, is there anything that you want to add... that we haven't mentioned? I mean, I'm sure there's lots of stuff but... something...

RB: No, I mean, we pretty much covered me for twenty years. [laughs] I'm not that interested in ever going back at my stage in life, but...

MR: Yeah.

RB: That's what we built new boats for.

MR: Right. Somebody's got to stay on shore and...

RB: That's correct.

MR: ...manage the shore stuff, yes. Okay, well I'll say thank you very much and I'll turn this off...

[27:52]