

Name of person interviewed: Joe Kaknes

Facts about this person:

Age: 59 (b. 1950)

Sex: Male

Occupation:

If a fisherman (if retired, list the ports used when fishing),

Home port: Gloucester

Hail Ports: Gloucester, New Bedford

Residence (Town where lives): Gloucester, Massachusetts

Ethnic Background: Greek/Irish

Interviewer: Marilyn Belmore

Transcriber:

Place interview took place: Working Waterfront Festival

Date and time of interview: September 26, 2009

M.B.: What is your name?

J.K.: My name is Joe Kaknes. I'm from Gloucester, Massachusetts.

M.B.: When and where were you born?

J.K.: I was born in El Paso, Texas, in September, 1950, can't you tell by my accent?

M.B.: Tell me a little about your neighborhood.

J.K.: Well, my neighborhood in Gloucester is a section called Bay View, it's on the northern tip of Cape Ann, between Annisquam and Lanesville, and uh... it's famous for the Granite industry. Gloucester had two big industries back in the old days fishing, which everybody knows about. And then granite quarrying and I live in one part of the island, which is just one slab of granite. As a matter of fact the house that I live in was built in the 1800's as a dormitory for quarry workers. It used to be owned by the Cape Ann granite company, and they owned all the property up there, and they owned Hodgkin's Cove and they built Lane's Cove as places to ship granite. A lot of the granite that's used in the Boston Custom's House was Lanesville Granite. The paving stones in New Orleans are Lanesville Granite. A lot of the federal buildings throughout the country, the granite was quarried right in my neighborhood, and sold to the government because we had a very effective member of the House of Representative, Ben Butler, who owned quarries and sold granite to the federal government. Highly illegal today, but just good business back then.

M.B.: When did you move to Gloucester, MA?

J.K.: When I was about 6 months old.

M.B.: Who were your role models when you were a child when you were younger?

J.K.: Well, I'd have to say my father. My father was a small town obstetrician, gynecologist, and a great amateur historian. He became a pretty good recreational fisherman after he retired, he liked to fish. I always have a soft spot for Ulysses S. Grant.

M.B.: Why is that?

J.K.: Because he was an abject failure until he was 41 years old, and when he died, he was the most popular man on the face of the earth. After his tour of his presidency, after his years at the presidency, he went on a tour of Europe and the crowds that went out to see him, have never been equaled. Over a million people had come out to see Ulysses S. Grant and pretty much a forgotten president.

M.B.: What is your ethnicity or are you a child of immigrants are you...?

J.K.: I'm the grandchild of Greek immigrants on my father's side and of Irish immigrants on my mother's side. My Greek relatives came to this country at the turn of the last century. The Irish came at the turn of the previous century. My mother's family were from Cork and they were pre-famine Irish. They came and got in the fishing business in Salem and they had a china boat. A china clipper, and the ship went

down. In one night, my mother's great, great aunt lost the family business, her husband, and three sons in one night. She was living in Salem and wanted to move as far away from the ocean as possible so she moved to Woburn. [laughter]

M.B.: Tell me about your family that worked in the fishing industry.

J.K.: None, I was the first and only.

M.B.: O.K. but your dad did do some fishing, you said?

J.K.: Recreational fishing, my father was the only man I've ever seen who could catch a lobster on hook and line. On a rod and reel, he could catch a lobster. And he could do it all day long.

M.B.: How and when did you get involved in the fishing industry?

J.K.: Well, I was a summer brat in Gloucester, growing up. I was always fascinated by watching the fishing boats coming in and out. I spent a lot of time sailing and messing around in boats as a kid. When I got out of college, it was really sort of one of the hay days, one of the last hoorahs of the Gloucester fishing industry. And guys that I knew were making real good money in the sword fish business. I went out of a desire to share the excitement and the adventure. It was certainly nothing that was in my family, it was certainly nothing that my parents had wish I chose after spending 4 years in college and having a fresh college degree. I went sword fishing immediately and loved it.

M.B.: What was your college degree in?

J.K.: History.

M.B.: So your first job in the industry you were how old?

J.K.: Well, I was 22 years old, but previous to that I had worked at shore side at Empire Fish on the whiting line, that was fishing related, ya know? Cutting the heads off whiting day after day. But the first time I was ever out on a boat was '72, '73 as far as a commercial fisherman.

M.B.: What types of fishing have you done and where?

J.K.: Well, first type of fishing was sword fishing, we were harpooning for sword fish. This was before long lining and then most of the sword fishing boats in New England converted from stick boats to long lining and we took a vessel out of Gloucester, the Ruth Mary, she was a converted sardine carrier and we took her south to the Gulf of Mexico to fish for sword fish down there. In the winter I'd go tub trawling. Out of New Bedford here, we went off shore red crabbing out of this wharf. I went draggin for a week, I didn't like, I really didn't like it. I thought it was just, even back then I could see that it was environmentally irresponsible.

M.B.: How so?

J.K.: It destroys the bottom and nature has taken a million years to make the bottom of George's bank the perfect breeding ground for fish and Gloucester men and New Bedford fishermen, and Nova

Scotians and fishermen from around the world have taken maybe twenty years to make it look like the surface of the moon. Until we get off the bottom, the real problems in the fish stocks will not be solved. They have to have a place to breed and they have to have a place to be left alone to get to a mature size so that they can reproduce. When I was a kid, not, when I was a young man, when I was tub trawling, we used to bait the tubs in a shack on shore, ice them down, and take them with us. The fellow who owned the boat that I was fishing on, hired two old timers, Reggie Snow, and Ernie Tarr. One was from Nova Scotia, one was from Newfoundland, but these guys were already in their 80's and they were dory fisherman, out of Gloucester, in the schooner days. I can remember them saying, after we baited tub after tub, "if man never stopped fishing with hook and line, we'd never run outta fish." It's dragging that's destroyed the stocks 'cause the fish don't have a chance!

M.B.: What types of boats have you fished on?

J.K.: Buckets, every one of them, buckets! [laughter] I've fished on boats that I wouldn't feel safe going across the harbor in. But I fished on; well the Ruth Mary was a converted sardine carrier, built in Owl's Head, Maine. The Naval Susan, I think she was built in Plymouth; she was a 60 foot wooden boat. The only vessel that I ever fished on that's still afloat that I know is the Weston Wave. She was a big steel boat that we used outta here for North Atlantic red crabbing. I saw her back in Gloucester a summer ago; she's been converted to seining. But it was nice to see that she's still afloat.

M.B.: What positions have you held?

J.K.: I did just about everything onboard, Mate, dressing fish, ice hole, I cooked, I didn't, never was an engineer, 'cause the guys wanted to get home. But you found yourself doing just about everything on a small boat.

M.B.: Can you describe a typical trip?

J.K.: No. You can't describe it. I remember when the "Perfect Storm" was being shot in Gloucester. They were doing all sorts of interviews with people. I saw an interview by a sword fishing captain, I forget the guy's name, but the name of his boat was the Mary. I don't remember the boat, 'cause it was past my time, but I remember the moderator asked him pretty much the same question. He got this very serene, very tranquil look and he said, "The things I've seen, the people I've met, the experiences I've had, are just beyond description." And I said, ya know? That's pretty much it, you can't, I can't tell you about a typical fishing trip any more than a guy who's been in combat can tell me what it was like. All he can say was it was beyond description.

M.B.: Who decided where you would fish? And how did that person decide where you fished?

J.K.: All those decisions were made by the captain.

M.B.: Did you ever pull anything up that was unusual from your net?

J.K.: Well, like I said, I didn't do much dragging. But on occasion, when we would get a nice size swordfish, the skipper would cut stomach open to see what he would be eating. I remember one time

when we were in Mexico, we cut this good size fish's belly open and there were all these semi, digested pieces of squid. He took the pieces out and laid them on deck, as if the squid was whole, and the thing had to be 30 feet long. It was the most amazing thing that we ever saw. The flukes were 3 feet across and the tentacles, some of the tentacles were running 8 or 10 feet. And these were only part, we were very interested to see if we could ever see one of these things live. Because nobody had seen a squid that size. But I know they exist so now when people talk about giant squids I'm not convinced that they don't exist.

M.B.: What kinds of close calls did you have at sea?

J.K.: Hundreds. Um... I remember one time, we had been in Nantucket, sitting out a blow, and it had passed. We left Nantucket and we're steaming back for Gloucester and the storm turned around and came back. And it was around Halloween, and we were in the wheel house, and we could hear on the radio, other guys that were caught in the blow. Guys had their windshields smashed out of their wheelhouses. Other guys saying that everything on deck had been washed overboard. One guy's wheelhouse was breaking up and on the radio, he was telling anybody who heard him, to tell his wife that he loved her. And um...we were in bad weather. We didn't have the damage that those other boats were, that were further to the east. But it got so bad that the skipper said to go aloft where we didn't have a life raft, we had a dory, strapped to the overhead. We went up, he said get the dory and put it on deck in case we need it. I went up with a shipmate and the dory had been nailed to the overhead, so it was just there for looks. So ah, that was probably one of the worst weather storms.

I remember here when we fished red crabbing out of here, we had a hydraulic lifter that the crab gear, was set like lobster gear, we had 60 traps on a string and we were fishing virgin crab grounds so that when the traps came up and the traps were bare traps, 6' x 4' x 3'. They would come up on deck as if they were packed by hand, you couldn't get any more crabs in them. We'd fish deep water so if I have one trap on deck, I've got 59 more on the string, and many of those traps are suspended from the bottom to the boat so there's tremendous strain on that line. The hauler we had was about the size of a car tire. It was held to the vessel, to the bulkhead, lug nuts, just like a car. But when we'd haul back and there'd be so much strain on that line and if the boat rolled, those lug nuts would have come flying out of there like they'd been shot out of a cannon. I remember standing at the stern one time, and I heard a snap and then a "fswееew", as a lug nut went by my head maybe by about 6 inches, and came out with such tremendous torque and power that it would have gone right through ya'. And we just, ya know, shut it down, put another lug nut on, and kept on fishing. 'Cause the work takes precedent over everything. If somebody's hurt, you stop. If somebody almost gets hurt, you don't stop.

M.B.: How has the industry changed over the years?

J.K.: Not for the good. Um...When I was fishing it was before the 200 mile limit was in effect. And we had everybody out there, the Germans, the Russians, the East Germans, the Chinese, the Portuguese, the Japanese, Italians, Spaniards, in big factory boats. They were just cleaning up, they were taking everything they could get. So we passed the 200 mile limit, kicked those guys out. What happened in particularly in Gloucester, is that men, from families in the business, with nice eastern rigged, wooden

draggers, all went out and bought big steel boats. The net power that the new Gloucester fleet represented was even more damaging than what the foreigners were doing because ya know, a net is a net, a roller on the bottom is a roller on the bottom. The bottom doesn't care what nationality. The Russians and the Japanese and the Germans had started to do to the decline of the George's Bank fisheries, the Gloucester men finished. Much of it is the fishermen's fault, in a time when they were asked to regulate, since the mid 70's and 80's, they avoided any type of regulation. And now the regulations have come back so strongly that these guys can't make a living. I think that Reggie Snow and Ernie Tow were right, that you've got to go back to killing a fish one at a time. With a hook and a piece of bait, and stay off the bottom, if they ever want to come back. I also think that we ought a revisit schooner fishing with dories. It's environmentally pure, the quality of the fishes would be excellent. They can pinpoint the type of fish they're going after, there would be no by-catch, and I think you could make a damn good profit.

M.B.: What advice would you give for someone starting out today?

J.K.: Stay in school. Go fishing as a recreation and as a lark because it's a hard way to make a living. And it's also a young man's business. I see guys that I used to fish with, now that are still fishing, and they're old men. They're beat, the human body wasn't meant to take that type of punishment past the youthful age of 30. I'm considerably older than that now, and I couldn't do it. I couldn't do physically, what I did normally when I was 25. And I'm very concerned about what the government's regulations are going to mean for the industry. I'd hate to see a young kid get involved in an industry that he's gonna have to leave in five years 'cause the industry just died. But it's funny 'cause I run across guys that I used to fish with and most of them don't fish at all or don't make any attempt to make their living off shore anymore but I'll say to 'em, uh, if you knew then what you know now, would you still of gone? And everyone says the same thing, abosa-freeking-lutely.

M.B.: Do you have children in the industry?

J.K.: No.

M.B.: What makes a good fisherman?

J.K.: Every good fisherman I know is a smart guy. He can figure things out. They're very resourceful and they honor work. Work within itself has merit. It's an incredible work ethic where work takes place over everything. You don't eat if there's fish on the deck. The work comes first. Everything has to be done and then you can climb into your bunk for a few hours. Um...and you gotta have luck. You gotta be smart and you gotta be lucky.

M.B.: Who were the people that you have worked with that you most respect?

J.K.: Jeez, I could run off some names that, George Moss was one of my good friends who was just until recently, made his living off shore. Most recently running tug boats, but Jack Flarrity, and the Pommeroys, Johnny Murray, and Philly Brown, and on and on and on. Every one of the guys that I fished with, I have undying respect for. A lot of them I didn't like. Ya know? I didn't have a lot in common with,

but you know on deck, their lives depended on me doing my job and my life depended on them doing theirs. And watching out for each other and you build a type of bond that only, maybe guys who have been in the service together have. I really wouldn't trade much of my experience in fishing for anything else. It's given me a good grounding and what's important.

M.B.: How did you learn the skills you needed for the job?

J.K.: Just doing it.

M.B.: And how did you get paid?

J.K.: We had Gloucester way which is, expenses come off the top. What's left, 50/50 is shared up, between the owner and the crew's shares. Usually in Gloucester way, the Captain gets two shares, one as a crew member and then one from the owner.

M.B.: In your opinion, what years were the best for the fishing industry?

J.K.: Well, I would say, 1978, 'cause that was the first year after the two hundred mile limit, when the fleet hadn't been modernized, and it was just the Eastern rig Gloucester dragger on the Grand Banks by themselves. Everybody was making money and there was no need to go out and get big steel boats. But ya' can't blame a hunter for hunting.

M.B.: What kind of effect do you think the present regulations are having on the industry? And how are families in the industry being affected?

J.K.: It's killing' the guys in Gloucester. The prices are so high they're actually making money but it's very few. The Gloucester fleet, when I was fishing, was over 300 boats. There's maybe 40 or 50 boats now over 60-80 feet. The offshore fleet is no longer in existence in Gloucester. The regulations as to how many days they can fish has made it more dangerous 'cause guys are taking bigger risks and it's made guys skirt the rules. They try to buy days and extend days and buy a permit from a guy who's going outta business so that they can get his days. There's this Machiavellian way of doing business that they're forced into, it's degrading to them. Let a guy go fishing or not. If you go back to Reggie Tar and Ernie Snow and come down to, cut all the doors off all the draggers on the east coast and then tell the guys to go fishing. It would be fine. They can fish with harpoons, they can fish with drift nets, they can fish with pear trawling. They can do anything but just stay off the bottom. And in a few years the fishing would come back.

M.B.: When and why did you leave fishing?

J.K.: I had a tremendous bicycling accident in between trips. Dead drunk and steaming on a bicycle that I just bought. I went ass over tea kettle on Rocky Neck in Gloucester and crushed my shoulder. It was the end of it. It was funny because at that period of time I was thinking, I either have to get outta fishing or I have to go to the bank and borrow a half a million bucks and buy a boat and get into the business of fishing 'cause I didn't wanna turn around and see myself as a 40-year old deck hand 'cause I didn't want to...I had seen 40 year old deck hands and they didn't look good.

M.B.: How old were you at the time?

J.K.: I was 27.

M.B.: When you finished?

J.K.: I had my accident at 27.

M.B.: Did you ever consider going back to fishing?

J.K.: I'd love to go.

M.B.: Would you want to be fishing today with the current regulations?

J.K.: No.

M.B.: What are the impacts of tourism on your community?

J.K.: Well, it's a good industry in Gloucester. Gloucester, unfortunately, has a very short season. Ah...Gloucester is the world's capital of whale watching now.

M.B.: Can you describe the port? How many boats, how many fishermen. Talk about the whaling.

J.K.: Ah...Gloucester is a city, 35 miles northeast of Boston. Founded in 1623 by dissatisfied misfits from the Plymouth colony. At one time, in the 1800's, it had 600 schooners of a hundred feet or longer, had a fleet of 10,000 men over the 380 years, Gloucester has lost 10,000 men. Now, there's not 70 boats, a hundred feet or more, I don't think the fishing fleet numbers 1,200 men, most of the guys that I know, that are still involved in the maritime industries, are in the whale watching business which is a good business outta Gloucester. The whales are close and they're plentiful. And the tourists love it. Gloucester has to become more of a mixed used port 'cause I don't see the need for reserving the entire harbor to commercial fishing 'cause it's just not needed right now. The economy and the market always dictates development. If commercial fishing becomes a viable industry again, the fish houses will reappear on Gloucester waterfront. There's no need to allow docks to rot and to fall into the harbor, which is happening all over Gloucester.

M.B.: Who lives around the port?

J.K.: Gloucester is a very unique port. You come in the eastern port and there are mansions beyond belief. Beautiful stone mansions and then you can go into the harbor and walk up a few streets and there's the most modest homes in America and Gloucester has everything in between.

M.B.: Are the residents sympathetic to the needs of the industry?

J.K.: Yes. They feel badly for what these guys are up against, the people that pay any attention. Gloucester is very supportive of the fishing fleet. Sometimes too much so, that they're blinded by the romance and the mystique and the mythology. But they're very supportive of the fishing fleet and they wish the guys were getting a better break.

M.B.: Are there any newcomers to fishing in Gloucester?

J.K.: No.

M.B.: How do people perceive the sights, sounds and smells of the port?

J.K.: Sounds like money to me! [laughter]

M.B.: How is fishing viewed in Gloucester? Has it changed over time?

J.K.: Has it changed over time? Yes. Has the perception changed over time? Not necessarily. I served on a Gloucester City Council back in the 90's, uh...you would think the way some of my fellow councilors talked, it was 1955! And we were landing a million pounds of red fish a day at 50 cents a pound. The old catch numbers are never coming back and rightfully so. But there has to be a better way to manage the industry than the federal government is doing now.

M.B.: What do you think would be a good idea?

J.K.: Cut the doors of every freek'n dragger on the East coast. For five years. Let the bottom come back.

M.B.: What do you see in the future?

J.K.: I don't see very many independent fishermen left. I see a few big corporate trawlers doing the work of a hundred family boats because they're making it virtually impossible for the independent fishermen to make a living.

M.B.: What would you like festival visitors to understand about the commercial fishing industry and the working waterfront?

J.K.: I liked people to understand how that piece of codfish got on that restaurant plate because they don't understand the price that was paid for that fish in labor and in lifestyle. Ya know how many friends I had who's dad's were fisherman, that they never saw 'em. Just be a little more sympathetic to 'em.

M.B.: Is there something else I haven't asked you that you would want to add to the record?

J.K.: No, I think you picked my brain pretty clean.

Man: I actually kinda had a question. It was cool to learn that you studied history in college. That's what I kinda studied, ah, coming at it, maybe, sort of at a historian's angle, obviously this festival, sort of relates to the question just asked. Obviously this festival is...on of its goals probably to preserve and to educate and to keep alive certain things, that for whatever reason. Economically, socially or culturally, have started to die out or at least change. So I don't know if you could speak a little bit more about what you think is worth preserving or knowing from maybe a historical point of view. About the fishermen's culture, about this industry's culture. What lessons can generations still get from the people or the engineering's side or...

J.K.: Yeah. You know it's like... Have you ever read the book *Cod*?

Man: I actually haven't read it.

J.K.: Read it. Because it gives you an idea of just how important the fisheries is to the foundation of our nation. The treaty with England that ended the war of independence took 3 years longer than normal because there was so much negotiation on the Grand Banks because cod was the industry that fueled our nation's infancy. The fishing industry has been that important throughout our culture. Not as widespread as it was then but certainly that important to New Bedford, to Gloucester, to the other fishing ports on the east coast. The days where there were 600 schooners in the city of Gloucester are never coming back. It's important for organizations like, the festival here, the Maritime heritage center in Gloucester, the Lunenburg Fisheries Museum in Nova Scotia to try to keep a historical perspective because it's not coming back for the young people, but it's important for the young people to know from where they came.