

Name of person Interviewed: Lou Legace

Facts about this person:

Age 54

Sex Male

Occupation Fisherman (clammer), New Bedford/Fall River

Residence Fall River, MA

Ethnic background Of French heritage

Interviewer: Millie Rahn [MR]

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- Allocation, quota shares
- Lost vessels
- Perspectives on captain
- Shore captain
- Mid-Atlantic
- SeaWatch International
- Consolidation
- Boat fire/ accidents at sea

TRANSCRIPT

[Start of File]

[00:00]

MR: Today is Sunday, September 25, 2005. My name is Millie Rahn, I'm a Folklorist working with the Working Waterfront Festival. We're here in the Harbor Development Commission Office with Lou Legace and Doug Cambell who is the writer from Philadelphia is also sitting in on the interview but he will not be speaking. Lou, could you tell me a little bit about yourself; where you were born, where you grew up, your connections to New Bedford and what you are currently doing now.

LL: I was born in Fall River, 1951. I grew up in Fall River. I went to Durfee High School. From there I went to UMass Amherst, majored in Civil Engineering but I didn't really get too far. I didn't really apply myself, I was there for 3 years, ended up with about 2 years with of credit and just kind of lost my motivation and came back to Fall River every summer, just stayed on my summer job. Without even consciously leaving school. I ended up working a 2nd and mostly 3rd shift for five years and when I became 27 I decided I wanted to go back to school and I was looking into where I was going to go and what I was going to do. Some friends of mine bought a small clam boat, 40-foot kind of an older boat. And it was their first time they got a boat and they were friends of mine so I asked if I could get a job on the boat. And as soon as there was an opening, they gave me an opportunity. So that's how ... at that point, I really, really, really enjoyed it. Didn't make much money; it was better than the Mill for a little while, but it got worse; it was just a day boat thing, it left out of Tiverton RI and steamed down the Sakonnet River, which is a branch of the Narragansett Bay. Near the mouth of the river was a bed of sea clams and a couple, three boats, all in the smaller boat range, were working that area and it was out in the morning and in in the afternoon. And I was like an alternate crew; there was one captain and one crew and then the next day a different guy would go out. So I was a deck hand for one of the guys, he was a friend of mine, we hit it off really well. His father was also a part owner, he was like the mentor, you know, and took me under his wing, I thought, had confidence in me, I felt that I was doing something, I got a little self-esteem about. It's essentially, I didn't think about going back to school, I don't know why, but I just didn't. Then, keep going....

MR: Keep going, doing fine. I noticed, is that your current boat?

[03:18]

LL: Yes. Do you want the whole history? Are you just going to ask me questions?

MR: Well, it's kind of a mix. But talk about what you're doing now, maybe describe a typical trip or a typical day, and then I have all sorts of other questions too.

LL: O.K. At this point I own a boat, it's the 2nd boat I've owned, the first one is not around anymore, but I, call me a truck captain now, or a slipper captain, I essentially do paperwork. I'm 54, not that that's really a factor, but I guess... to run a boat, usually you go through a progression, a crew guy gets the confidence of the captain and he becomes a mate so to speak, where he's given more responsibility, then after a period of time, what usually happens I suppose, in my experience, no experience scalloping, no experience lobstering, no experience dragging for groundfish, just clams.

MR: And you're the first clammer we've interviewed. This is really important.

LL: That's what I do. Clamming is a different industry all together. But what generally happens is the owner, if he has confidence in you and needs a captain, maybe there's nobody experienced he can hire, he may give you a chance to run the boat, now you're the captain and it's kind of heavy, you take more responsibility, more stress, but if you do it well, you do that for a number of years. Then usually if a person can see his way to buy a boat, he may. Some guys are more, I don't know what to call it, they just go right ahead, they're more aggressive or like myself, are more conservative, so after a number of years, in my situation, I skipped the boat... I'm getting off on a tangent, I forgot what I'm getting at here...

MR: Well, what clamming is like, what's a typical day...

[06:00]

LL: Oh, if you buy a boat, you can run your business more efficiently if you're not on the ocean all the time, some people, they're wives will do it or they'll hire someone to do the day-to-day paperwork which is very considerable. But if you've been working on the water, making your trips, you reach a point where you don't want to have to go all the time. You reach a point where you think I'll hire somebody to run the boat, and we'll alternate, you come with me, then he can take the boat, is essentially what I did. But then you have a guy, he's maybe younger, or he's good, he may be aggressive, and he don't want you to go anymore because he wants to go, more money for him. Which is a good thing. And then what happened with me is essentially I went less and less; you can run your business more efficiently, at this point I do my own paperwork, I send it all out to the accountant, so I just pretty much run the business, but I do go out occasionally, probably going to go out this week.

MR: And where do you go out to?

LL: Ok. Clamming... this is offshore, I call surf clamming or sea clamming. It's an industry that's much larger in the Mid-Atlantic area is essentially where the business really took off and grew. They are large clams that are found from say the low tide mark on ocean beaches out to... they are out on Georges Bank, 150 miles offshore. Nantucket Shoals is an area of very shoally water, south east of Nantucket, there's some clam beds there that is essentially where I fished most of the time. Clams are harvested with a dredge actually called a hydraulic dredge. It's dragged along the bottom, it's essentially a big cage with water jets in the front of the cage. Water is pumped out through a very long hose, high capacity volume hose, down to the front of the dredge where it's jetted into the bottom and the front of the dredge as the dredge is being towed forward. What the water pressure does is essentially disperse the sand and route the clam out, and the clams then float towards the back of the dredge as the sand disperses. That is towed for a period of time, 10, 15, 20 minutes depending, periodically hauled back into the boat and emptied and then done all over again. And while it's being towed, subsequently the crew is on deck sorting through the catch and stowing. And this is done over and over and over again until the boat is loaded.

[09:33]

MR: How large is the crew?

LL: My boat has a captain and three men.

MR: And how long do they usually go out for?

LL: It's what I call a short trip boat; by short it might be 24, 36, 48 hours. It's overnight, it's not morning and evening, it's driven by the weather and market, it's a market-driven fishery. Whereas in other fisheries, the boats go fishing and come in and sell their catch and get whatever price is available or try to get the best price. In clamming, it's driven by the market, the price is relatively stable, but you go on orders from the processing plant, they need a certain amount of product for a certain day or time, and you time your trip accordingly to supply them with the shell stock, what you call shell stock, is the clam in the shell. We land the whole clam, and they take the meat out of the shell and wash it and chop it or strip it and do whatever they do and package it in their own way. They may freeze it, they may can it; they may deal in a fresh market. Quite possibly you could land your load at 4 in the morning, it could get into a truck, make a short trip to a clam plant and by 10 in the morning, their trucks are on the road to their customers with finished product.

MR: And is clamming as regulated as groundfishing and scalloping?

LL: It's very much regulated. It was the first ITQ system that was institute din the United States. ITQ stands for Individual Transferable Quota. It was where they give a portion of the resource to individuals who are involved in the fishery. The scientists and the government, National Marine Fisheries, determine, every year, a total allowable catch, how many millions of bushels they would allow to be harvested in waters of their jurisdiction, which is, I'm talking about Federal jurisdiction which is 3 miles and outward. Then each person involved in the fishery who has an allocation, is given a portion, that he owns the right to catch, he can catch them himself and sell the product or he can sell his right to catch to another boat permanently or essentially lease it out for a year to someone else, have someone else catch his clams that year, and he'll get a good hunk of change for that. Or he can try to buy some more so he can catch more with his boat. It's kind of a controversial type management scheme. It's gaining more and more acceptance. All the fisheries may lean in that direction eventually, but with different provisions, may try to tailor, they probably will tailor it differently to suit their fisheries. This has been in affect in clamming since 1990. The allocation was given to boat owners based on the history, kind of a complicated formula, based on the size of the boat that he owned and the history of his catch, which, before it was instituted, owners were required to report every week the amount of catch they had to the Federal government. So it was kind of all based on that.

[13:52]

MR: And what's the season, the clamming season?

LL: It's a year round thing, but allocation starts in January and ends in December. And for example if you're at 50,000 bushels of clams that are allocated to you, you have that 12 month period to catch them or lease them out to someone else. If you don't, you can't, you don't catch them, next year you'll get the same amount, you don't get any less or more based on what you do the year before, but you have that calendar year to do the catch. It makes for a very stable fishery in certain ways. Before the... it's pretty complex, I can go on and on about it as far as the history, but before the 1990, surf clamming had what they called a limited effort system, where boats had a certain amount of time to fish and it got to the point where, boats were allowed to fish 6 hours every two weeks, period. If they missed their day, they were assigned days, they were chose days, but once they were assigned and if the weather was bad, they

had one chance for a make-up, if the weather was bad that day, they lost 1/24th of their year. Consequently boats over-loaded, went out in bad weather, there was a large amount of lost boats and wrecks. It wasn't really efficient or safe way to manage the fishery. So the ITQ fishery at the time seemed to be the best alternative. At that point in time, too, the mid-Atlantic, from Montauk, NY was governed under than system, but New England and Nantucket Shoals and Georges banks were under a different system which was essentially, go fish until the quota was caught up. In 1990 they included the whole range of the resource under the ITQ management scheme.

[16:19]

MR: I'm curious, what do you think makes a good fisherman, or a good clammer?

LL: Wow. You know, drive, I think... that's a good question. Well, I always said, in my mind, a good captain that would take your boat out or his own boat out and make a lot of money with it, bring everybody home safely. And take care of the boat. A good captain is not just a boat... some people say some guys are boat drivers, they drive the boat out there and fish it, which takes considerable amount of skill in itself. But a better rounded captain, in my mind, is somebody that knows the systems on the boat, has a good working knowledge of what's going on, so that if something happens, he knows where to look to try and rectify the problem; it might be a just a mechanical thing that would cause the boat to lose part of a trip and come in without their load, or it could be a safety issue. Some of the bigger boats and bigger crews will have a captain and an engineer, and it will be the engineer's responsibility to take care of all the mechanical things. In every fishery, it different, and even within each fishery, things are done differently, you know, different boats and different fleets, or different owners. Me personally, my experience, I used to like to do everything so to speak, and not have to take an extra guy to take care of the engines. You'd make more money and consequently... I learned on a boat that broke down a lot, the first boat, it was actually a very good experience because you had to deal with all this stuff, so later on when I got a job on a better boat... of course you're nervous and everything, but you gain more and more experience. The good captain is experienced, he's cautious, he's not reckless... well experience is everything. Not that a new guys couldn't do it, because they go all the time, it's just that I respect somebody who's... the more experienced, the better you are, because you've run into more things because things you never would expect happen. Year and year, all of a sudden, this never happened! But it happened now... they deal with it. I respect that captain. I feel, myself, I haven't really put a lot of time in the ocean, myself, I don't even consider myself a fisherman now, in a way, compared to these guys who are in the ocean all the time, they are true fishermen.

[19:31]

MR: Is there a new generation coming up?

LL: Yes and no. Stuck in my paperwork, I'm an old guy, I'm not around the docks as much as I should be, or used to be. But what I do know, say the clam industry, locally, my boat, the boats I've owned have fished the range from Atlantic City , NJ to New Bedford area, Nantucket Shoals, Cape Cod Bay. But most of the time I spent on the water was fishing off of Nantucket Shoals which was real kind of a horrible place to work, very difficult. At that point in time, when I was out there, there were guys from the Cape, who had smaller boats, I'm just leading to something here, and

we were all about the same age, we were the captains and became the owners. Then everybody kind of went different ways. It's like there's a whole other crop of captains out there, younger guys. I don't really know much of these guys, but I always saw... they fished that area, they have to be good, because it's really hard to make money out there because it's very difficult conditions. But not everybody out there that's a captain is good either, it's all kind.

MR: You were saying earlier that your heritage is French. What's the ethnic make-up of the clammers?

LL: It's not primarily Norwegian or Portuguese or anything, it's anybody. Whatever ethnic... to my knowledge, no concentration. A lot of the fishermen, the industry was... the big boats, the big companies, essentially come from the mid-Atlantic area, New Jersey, Point Pleasant, Atlantic City area, to Cape May, to Ocean City, Maryland. And years ago, Chincoteague VA, Cape Charles, all down that way. To us, they all sound southern. Even New Jersey.

MR: I come from Maryland, but I think crab... crabs, crabs, crabs.

LL: Ocean City, MD big fleet. Well, they did, I don't know how big it is now. You see the boats with the big stern ramps, ramps going up the back, heading out the inlet, those are clam boats.

[22:29]

MR: You said you haven't been on the water a whole lot, have you had any close calls, or incidents that ... ?

LL: I think I've been lucky. As far as accidents, well, my boats haven't. Up to this point in time, when I've been on the boat, I haven't had anybody have a serious injury. There have been injuries. Part of that is being careful and part of that is luck too. A clam boat makes essentially quick trips. We're not out 150 miles from shore and the breeze is up and rather than come home just ride it out. We don't do that, we try to go out when the weather is getting a little better and try to come in before it gets too bad. It's very heavy gear and equipment to haul around, and we're working in relatively shallow water so it gets pretty rough and the gear doesn't tend bottom all that good and you don't catch good. But you do get caught with your pants down so to speak, occasionally come in in a bad blow. I guess the worst for me was working Nantucket Shoals and having my rudder break or having some of my gear get caught up in the wheel which is the propeller. Just being dead in the water and wait for someone to come and get you, then having the wind and tide move you around these shoals. Very easily, if you hit one in bad weather or you're just aground on them, you are done, the boat will break up, Especially a wood boat. I guess one time it was a real flat day and I was steaming around looking for new spots and I was following a chart very closely, I was very much alert, it was day time, and I had to cross a ... it was enough water for my boat to get through, but there was a shoal a little to the west, but the Loran, a lot of the shoals on Nantucket Shoals are not where they say they are sometime. Next thing you know, [makes a noise] *eeerrrtt*. I stopped. I'm on a shoal and they had 30 knots of wind forecast for that night, and I had a decision; try to back off it, try to keep going forward. My knees are knocking. And a clam boat, as you're steaming from spot to spot, you have gear in the back, hose and a rope, you can't really back down because you get it all in the propeller. So I just gunned it, it came

off, so that's just something that could have been a disaster but it wasn't. So, there was another point but I lost my thought.

[25:57]

MR: That's O.K. Where do you see the industry going?

LL: There's been a lot of consolidation in clamming with the ITQ system. There were some big players. It's a relatively small industry, it's kind of a small community. Almost everybody knows each other. And there are some very big players who owned processing plants as well as boats as well as a lot of allocation. And since this began in 1990 all along these past 15 years has been consolidation. A lot of "small independent guys" have sold their quota and their boats and have kind of gotten out. Or arranged long-term leases for their quota to other.... I chose just to stay in the industry, not as a speculation or as a gamble, but just because I just didn't want to... I don't know. So I always kept a boat and a crew. So there's not many single boat owners with some allocation left in this industry anymore. There are some but there's been a lot of consolidation and it's still going on. That was a big fear when ITQ system began; the big guys would get all the allocation and power and squeeze the little guys out, but it hasn't happened yet. Even though the big guys are a lot more powerful than they were before, as far as what they own, there seem to be so far a place for the little guy. Right now I think there's a large volume of imported clams coming in from Canada and Asia. It's depressed the price somewhat, and the market has decreased. Our orders for clams here in 2005, within the past year, have dropped significantly, but it seems like most of the blame can be put on imported product rather than any kind of shenanigans. Everybody, I feel I have a good relationship with the small processors and the big processors have always treated me right; I've never been treated bad in this industry.

[28:48]

MR: Do you work with processors here or elsewhere?

LL: I sold, for a couple of years, I sold ocean quahogs which are harvested like sea clams, it's a different product – I sold to SeaWatch International here in New Bedford which is a company based in the Mid-Atlantic; one of the biggest company if not the biggest. I've sold to them on a regular basis and still have a good relationship with them but right now I sell sea clams to a company in Bristol, RI called Galilee Seafood. They have a good niche market, they're a good company; they are small but I've had the relationship with them since day one and have fished to them all the time I've had a boat. Currently I'm also selling a few loads here and there to another processor in New Bedford, a smaller processor, and that's going along pretty well right now too. As far, getting back to that other question about if there's anything that happened, I've had two disasters on boats, there were no injuries. I've lost one boat twice. After I left that little boat, I got a job on a 65-foot boat, which was a wooden, very nice boat, knew the owner. I was his captain for 7 years and then he sold me the boat for a very reasonable price and he went on to other things, bigger boat. I had that boat for a year and it burned up with an engine room fire. And it was totally gutted forward. You could look at the outside of the boat and wouldn't think nothing was wrong with it; paint didn't even peel. But the wood was half way through on the inside. I had to cut the wheelhouse off, gut the old..., take all the machinery out. It was totaled by the insurance company and I did the boat, the repairs I subcontracted

out certain amount of the work and me and my crew did most of the rest. I rebuilt that boat and it took 7 months. So that was a disaster; they were coming in from a clam trip, almost at the dock, smoke started coming out of the engine room. My captain at the time had his diving gear on the boat. He strapped on his tank real quick, put his regulator in his mouth and went down with a fire extinguisher and tried to put it out. But he couldn't. Eventually had to abandon the ship, it drifted around; another fishing boat got a line around it, kept it off the rocks and eventually they let the crew back on and got the fire out with the Coast Guard and what not.

[31:53]

LL: So after that boat got rebuilt, did everything real good, built it up real good and it was a real money-making machine. Good looking boat too. Let me see... that was... got it '87 I bought it, '88 it burned, '89 we had it done and in '99 it had an accident in New Jersey coming in after a trip and hit the breakwater. Just sank right there but it wasn't deep, half the boat was sticking out. The next day a storm blew in and broke it up into a million pieces and that's how we met Doug because Doug was a journalist, a reporter for the Philadelphia Enquire and he was covering... well he wasn't covering that story as much as the larger story. In that period of time, January 1999, in 13 days four clam boats went down and 10 men lost their lives. It was kind of like really bizarre you know, in one industry. This slew of accidents in this short period of time... everybody knows the Perfect Storm, and they're a million miles from home and they got caught in a very bad situation, but there boats are all very close, you know, and one was out here, outside of New Bedford, coming up Buzzards Bay and they got caught... a number of things went wrong I guess, and two men died on that one. One down in part of Point Pleasant, NJ and four men on that one, and my boat was out of Point Pleasant, NJ at the time and nobody on that one, but the day after, another boat out of the same harbor disappeared with all men. And he was covering that larger story. That's how I met him.

[34:21]

MR: Well one of the themes this year is safety, of this festival, because of some of the things that have happened out of New Bedford this last year. I interviewed a fishermen yesterday who does groundfishing and scallops and he was saying the worst thing that ever happens on a boat is a fire, that's been his experience. Talking about the experience of the captain and he was saying that some days you have to be the doctor and some days you have to be the fireman. Everything... cook, psychologist.

LL: Yeah, psychologist for sure. That's a big one. They had large crews but even small crews. Even if some of the boats have 3 guys or 2... me, the captain, and 2 guys or if you have three.... It's always like 2... and this guy don't like that guy... it's hard sometimes keeping the peace so to speak. Or you don't really see... sometimes they will kiss up to the captain or owner ... and someone will blah blah blah... it happens too, but that's just human stuff that happens in everything. I think a captain, a good captain has to be an everything guy. And you have to pay attention to paperwork, even as a captain now. In the old days, they went fishing, that's all. But you have to dot your "I's" and cross your "t's. Paperwork and filling out log books, and like in our fishery you have to call in before we go and tell them where we are. You say, this is stupid, but you know why it's not stupid, because if you screw up, they will take

your load, or there will be a loss of money somehow, or time and a lot of aggravation. So a guy just pointed out to me the other day, and this is true; your captain is the general manager of your company and he wears a lot of hats. They have to keep track of the maintenance, when do the filters need to be changed, the gear, the running gear, all the shackles and chains on the outriggers and on the booms, they have to have an eye for that... what's wearing out, what needs to be checked because any one of those things breaks, somebody is going to get hurt really bad. So he has to be conscious of a lot of stuff and he has to be very organized. That's a biggy. And an owner who doesn't go out all the time will keep the boat supplied with... what do you need, tell me what you need and I'll give it to you. A good owner will do that, have tools, and shackles and chain, and whatever you need, but it's the captain's job to be organized enough to keep a good list of not just stuff to do but stuff we need. Because what sets me off, as the owner, and I am involved with the boat a lot, I'm not just in the office, I know the boat better than anybody because on this boat I have now, I redid the whole thing... retrofitted a lot of it, I'm blowing my own horn and I know boats damn well, damn good. I see stuff... what gets me is, I really have no tolerance for a blasé attitude for something left undone that could actually sink the boat or hurt somebody. Thinking that it's not my job or it's his job, or it's ok, it's time to go... that kind of stuff will set me right off because... not that it's done a lot on my boat but that stuff just ticks me off because I'll be home, all I have to do is the insurance claim, you're the one that's going in the water. For example, the pumps are not fixed or clogged up or there's junk in the bilge so much that... oh that pump has been broken for the last month, well why didn't you tell me. We have other pumps, but still, what puts a boat down is, and I've always said this and it's true or course, its what people are saying puts planes down; it's not one thing, it's a bunch of little stuff come together in uncanny coincidence and the end result is a loss of light or loss of property. It could be a dirty bilge, or junk in the bilge that clogs up a bilge pump strainer say, maybe another pump, the motor died on it, or that wasn't working but you still have two more, or you might have had a bad shackle somewhere and then while they are fishing it got rough, but they were making one or two more tows just to finish up, maybe the dredge hung up and maybe while hauling back the shackle broke, something shifted and water came in, and one pump didn't work, the other was clogged, try the other, that one don't work... it could be something like that, these are all hypothetical, dollars to doughnuts, but those stories probably have happened so many times, similar stories to boats, and you never know the story, It could be very heroic deeds done out there done by crewmen, trying to save other crewmen, but you never know, they never made it, it happens all the time.

MR: Is there anybody else in your family that is in the industry?

LL: No, just me.

MR: Is there anything else you want to add? I know we can go on... but you know, I joke, but once people get in our database they don't get out. So we know where to find you. Well if that's it, then I think I will say thank you and turn this off.

[41:17]

[End of Interview]