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Sommers, Laurie ~ Oral History Interview

Amanda Holmes

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Interview with Laurie Sommers by Amanda Holmes

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Sommers, Laurie

Interviewer

Holmes, Amanda

Date

January 27, 2014

Place

Leland, Michigan

ID Number

VWWF_LS_010

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Biographical Note

Laurie Kay Sommers is a freelance folklorist and historic preservation consultant based in Okemos, Michigan. She has been writing about Michigan history and culture since the 1970's.

Scope and Content Note

Laurie Sommers was interviewed to document the experience of Fishtown, Michigan, in establishing the Fishtown Preservation Society. Bringing together local expertise, the Fishtown Preservation Society has combined historic preservation efforts along with folklore to promote stewardship of the historic Fishtown waterfront. Ms. Sommers also shares historic preservation challenges, such as identifying the next steps after property acquisition.

Indexed Names

Kathryn Bishop Eckert, Terry Buckler, Bill Carlson, Nels Carlson, Pete Carlson, Michael Ciarappa, Gene Hopkins, Mark Johnson, Ned Kaufman, Ross Lang, Allen Northcutt, Deena Sanford, Dan Stewart

Transcript—LS_010

1 **[Begin Laurie Sommers Interview]**

2

3 **00:00:01**

4 **Interviewer:** This is Amanda Holmes and I am working on a project for the NOAA Voices
5 from the Working Waterfront Oral History Project. I am the Executive Director for the Fishtown
6 Preservation Society in Leland, Michigan and I am in Okemos, Michigan which is just outside of
7 Lansing, a little bit to the east. And I am interviewing Laurie Sommers as a part of the project.

8 **00:00:30**

9 The project is about Fishtown and Fishtown Preservation Society and the day is the 17th
10 of January going on 3 o'clock in the afternoon. We are actually sitting in Laurie's--today is the
11 16th of January; she just corrected me. We could have just kept it all wrong there and that would
12 have been fine, but since it's just an ID portion, it's the middle of winter in Michigan. That's all
13 we need to know. And we're actually in her--her office at the basement of her home and it's a
14 family home for her, where she's been for a long, long time. And so it's just good to be in the
15 space where she's been working long and hard for Fishtown and other projects.

16 **00:01:17**

17 So Laurie if you could please introduce yourself?

18

19 **00:01:20**

20 **Laurie Sommers:** This is Laurie Sommers. I'm a folklorist and historic preservationist who has
21 worked on Fishtown since 2010.

22

23 **00:01:33**

Key:
Laurie Sommers=Answer
[Inaudible] = Inaudible
[Word] = Attempt at Word
[Gesture/Action] = Gesture/Action

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Laurie Sommers

January 27, 2015

24 **Interviewer:** And if you could please for the -- for the record give your date of birth?

25

26 **00:01:37**

27 **Laurie Sommers:** January 18, 1955.

28

29 **00:01:42**

30 **Interviewer:** All right; thanks very much. We are here today also to discuss Fishtown in a way
31 that's a bit different than what we've customarily talked about it. Both of us are folklorists and
32 have a fondness for the stories of Fishtown but apparently the work that we've been doing and
33 for the organization has another point of reference and that's as a preservation tool. And so today
34 that's the basis of what we'll be talking about but also being folklorists I know that there will be
35 other peripheral matters that are important to us that we'll be bringing in; so just as a frame of
36 reference that's part of what this discussion is also about. We're going to be discussing
37 preservation policy and the preservation of Fishtown and folklore will become a part of this as
38 well as something integral to the preservation of Fishtown.

39 **00:02:35**

40 So Laurie, you're the point of reference for us; you are the expert here and I'll be joining
41 as well because we're both partners in this. And what I would like for you to describe--a lot of
42 this will be from your point of view and the work that you've been doing and the expertise that
43 you've brought--is first describe a little bit about what Fishtown Preservation Society is.

44

45 **00:03:02**

46 **Laurie Sommers:** Fishtown Preservation Society is an organization with the backing of a Board
47 and an Executive Director and I think the unique thing about it in terms of its role of it, a
48 custodian of Fishtown in terms of its interpretation, its--the historical preservation, its
49 preservation into the future; what I think is most unique about Fishtown Preservation Society in
50 terms of this particular discussion and policy is the particular types of expertise that they've
51 brought together to facilitate the stewardship of Fishtown.

52 **00:03:50**

53 I think what's particularly notable is the fact that the--at least at the time that I became
54 involved, the--the President or the Chair of the Board was a former State Historic Preservation
55 Officer, Kathryn, Kathryn Bishop Eckert, who I've known through Historic Preservation circles
56 for a long time, but she had retired after she left the State Historic Preservation Office to Leland
57 and became involved in Fishtown and then the other key piece is you Amanda, who--who bring
58 to the project your expertise in folklore with a PhD in folklore. I used to joke that I thought we
59 were the only two folklorists with a historic preservation background in Michigan. I actually
60 don't think that's true now; there was also Michael Ciarappa who also became involved in
61 Fishtown but--and--and someone who had an interest in historic preservation and--and I don't
62 know if you realized this before you became involved in Fishtown but--have developed into a--a
63 true advocate and someone with a passion for the commercial fishery and the--the living history
64 of the working waterfront as well as the--of the past history which--which has sustained it since
65 its beginnings in the mid-19th--yeah mid-19th century.

66 **00:05:20**

67 So and then because Fishtown Preservation Society is in Leland and you're a--a nonprofit
68 and you have a Board--a Board-driven organization and Leland has this long history of--as does-

69 -as do other communities in this part of the Lake Michigan Shore of having wealthy well-
70 connected families who have come up for generations and we have talked about have these
71 attachments to Leland and to Fishtown in particular and multi-generation. You have--you have
72 this Board of people who have extraordinarily -- what's the word that I used--gifted in terms of
73 the range of expertise that they--they bring to the--to Fishtown. Not only is there wealth, but
74 there's people who are you know connected to the auto industry. There's attorneys. There's all
75 sorts of people who--who have just a richness of expertise and connections that they can bring to
76 use in Fishtown's behalf.

77 **00:06:36**

78 But lots of organizations have a well-healed and well-connected Board. So I really think
79 it goes back to you and Kathryn as sort of the--the two key pieces that come together and--and
80 because of this combination of folklore and historic preservation have shaped a direction to
81 Fishtown Preservation Society which I think has made it pretty unique nationwide in--in terms of
82 the approach that it's been able to take.

83 **00:07:10**

84 And because of Kathryn being the former State Historic Preservation Officer she has
85 these connections with the preservation architects, the landscape architects. She's been working
86 in the State at least when I met her it was in the late 1970s so there's a--a deep connection with
87 the resources in--in Michigan and a deep understanding of the preservation infrastructure both in
88 the State and Nationally and what's kind of needed to move an organization forward and take
89 advantage of all the planning tools and policy tools that the preservation infrastructure, the
90 National Register and so forth provides. And then that combined with the folklore piece which --
91 I guess the best way I'd describe it is it's an understanding of the role of tradition and story and

92 place in creating a sense of attachment and a sense of--of meaning to this place that gets people
93 really excited about preserving it and in a job which you well know is not an easy one. But--but
94 those two pieces I think are what to me what Fishtown Preservation Society is. I mean obviously
95 you have to do fund-raising and do the newsletter. You do it all; you do you know work with the
96 Board, you write grants, you deal with the nuts and bolts of you know--a freezer that dies in you
97 know the middle of the summer and all these other things and you know the nuts and bolts also
98 of keeping the place going literally the pieces of it, so that it doesn't fall apart and you know just
99 all the--the tenants now of the Adaptive Reuse that you have in the place, which also provide
100 income and--and revenue.

101 **00:09:07**

102 I mean there's all sorts of pieces, but again I go back to what--what I think is distinctive
103 about the policies that have shaped and what--what this project is trying to get at; it's that
104 combination of folklore and historic preservation that makes Fishtown Preservation Society what
105 it is.

106

107 **00:09:25**

108 **Interviewer:** Could you describe the setting of Fishtown for--for me?

109

110 **00:09:35**

111 **Laurie Sommers:** The setting, the physical setting?

112

113 **00:09:37**

114 **Interviewer:** Uh-hm.

115

116 **00:09:38**

117 **Laurie Sommers:** Fishtown is in an incredibly beautiful natural setting, one that's also very
118 vulnerable to the--the environment. It's on a short-stretch of the Leland River which was
119 dammed many years ago in the 19th century. And what is it something like 400-feet long; tell
120 me? I can't think of the actual but the physical setting--it's short, so you have the dam, you have
121 the river, confluence with Lake Michigan and you have on either side of this river which is really
122 not very wide at this point lined along the edge these historic fishing shanties which were built
123 from the early 1900s to the late 1950s and then some other buildings that have been built since
124 then.

125 **00:10:50**

126 But which are primarily wood with--so the river, you have the--the fish boats and the fish
127 tugs and the commercial charters, dock, the--the shanties themselves and behind that you have
128 what were the ancillary structures, the net sheds and the ice houses and--and then Fishtown itself
129 is part of the community of Leland which is a historic resort community which is on--on borders
130 also on Lake Leelanau which is an incredibly popular and longstanding tourist destination for
131 this part of the State. And then you have the vista from Fishtown out to the Manitou Passage and
132 the Manitou Island which is a historic shipping channel, so it's one of the few places on the Lake
133 Michigan Shore where you can actually see islands on the horizon. So I think it's also a place
134 where you have still a surviving working fishery. Perhaps the most important thing about what
135 makes Fishtown distinctive because there used to be lots of Fishtowns as we know and this
136 particular one was not the--the largest or the most important in terms of its history but it's
137 become very important because not only is it still there; it's still you know--has some of the

138 original buildings in their original locations. You have working fish tugs and the trap net boats
139 still you know coming out of the harbor and going out into the fishing grounds which are
140 traditional locations that Leland fishermen have used for generations now.

141 **00:12:54**

142 So it's a working waterfront of incredible beauty that has long-been exposed to the--the
143 elements of Lake Michigan where you can have you know ice shoves, terrific gales and storms,
144 incredibly calm days with just gorgeous, gorgeous colors of the Lake, so I think to me it's the
145 combination of the working fishery and the incredible beauty and that location right on Lake
146 Michigan that make the location what it is.

147

148 **00:13:33**

149 **Interviewer:** And can you describe as well the structures? I mean often preservation it becomes
150 associated with buildings yet we know as well that having a good working waterfront involves a
151 lot of other elements? But what--describe the buildings as well.

152

153 **00:13:51**

154 **Laurie Sommers:** Well the buildings are wood; some of them have been at least the--the ones
155 that have been historically used for fishing shanties are small, gabled structures with the door --at
156 least on the north side facing the river and on the--you know they have a different layout on the
157 south side of the river and the north side of the river; the north side of course is what Fishtown
158 Preservation now owns--at least part of it.

159 **00:14:25**

160 Some of them have shingled roofs, some of them have--I mean shingled--what are the
161 **[Laughs]**--the shake roofs, the cedar shake roofs, some of them have sort of the tar paper roofs
162 but they're utilitarian buildings but they have a great deal of character because of this weathered
163 wood and the fact that fishermen have been sort of patching together these structures to keep
164 them going for well over a century now, at least the surviving structures.

165 **00:15:00**

166 There are also now former shanties would be used for retail purposes in Fishtown so you
167 have particularly as a result of recent grants you have--well you've always had some sort of
168 signage that's been added to the site that indicates what you know the retail purpose is. You
169 know now they've--there are interpretive signs that are up as part of Fishtown that have been an
170 outgrowth of recent grants and the--and the research originally that I was part of with Fishtown.
171 There's creative ways because the space is very small and very intimate. The space between the
172 buildings is not large. There might be a smokehouse behind some of them and smoking racks or
173 fish boxes, former you know--there's a lot of pieces and objects of--of the fishing past of the
174 place like net buoys and other kinds of things that are strewn around the site that help create the--
175 the sense of--of a historic as well as a working fishery. And--and you've also added I think
176 creatively things like the picnic tables that have the--the types of fish that are--that are fished in
177 Fishtown or fish that are found in the Great Lakes, little what do you call those things--little--
178 little small boards that indicate who was the original owner of a particular shanty and then you
179 can lift it up and see some fact or something about the--the place. So--so the buildings are
180 interpreted but there's also--I think when preservationists think about a place they think about as
181 you say about buildings, but I think with Fishtown it's--it's the fact that the buildings are right
182 there on the water next to the boats. You can see where the fishing grounds are as you look out in

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183 the horizon, when the you know the fishermen are working. You can smell the--as you've talked
184 about--it's a place where you can you know smell the smells of a working waterfront and you
185 can smell the--the maple on the--and the delicious of fish smoking. You can smell fish guts if
186 you want to you know talk about it or something fishy. I mean it's not--it's beautiful but it's real.
187 You know I think that's what makes it special even though in order to keep Fishtown going you
188 know since the late '50s there's been this gradual retail adaptive reuse of the structures.

189 **00:17:46**

190 So as--you know as you've pointed out that's now part of the fishing--the history of
191 Fishtown but it doesn't take away from the feel of the place because the place has been--the
192 custodians of the place past and present kind of wanted to keep the feel of the original place so
193 that people can still get a sense of what a 1930s fishing village as--as Bill Carlson would say you
194 know looked like. And I think that's--that's still a goal coming into the future because it's not
195 like you've put a--you don't--haven't pickled the place. It's always been working and evolving
196 yet it's--it--you know the texture of those boards just seemed like they could talk. It reminds me
197 of a--a violin I once saw of an--an octogenarian Hungarian gypsy fiddle player from--from
198 Detroit and this--this case was battered and had a hole in it and you just looked at that case and
199 knew that it had these incredible stories to tell. It was just this atmosphere that has character to it.
200 Fishtown is like that in terms of a--a building. They're simple vernacular buildings but they're
201 just so rich.

202

203 **00:19:10**

204 **Interviewer:** You mentioned the name Bill--Bill Carlson. Could you describe his role in the
205 origins of the Fishtown Preservation Society?

Key:
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January 27, 2015

206

207 **00:19:21**

208 **Laurie Sommers:** Um, well Bill Carlson is a fourth generation fisherman; although he's now
209 retired from actually fishing but he's in the fourth generation of a--of a family that has been
210 involved in commercial fishing in--in Fishtown since the early 1900s and as a matter of face, the
211 oldest shanty in the north side of the river was built by Bill's whatever the first generation would
212 be--whatever great, great that is. I'm not computing right now, great, great grandfather Nels
213 Carlson.

214 **00:20:05**

215 So Bill I think it's fair to say in terms of the--the--the folks that are still around Fishtown
216 that were actively involved in--in commercial fishing--if I'm not mistaken he's the senior guy
217 right now, born in 1943 if I recall properly and--and grew up like many commercial fishermen
218 did, you know working with his father in the fishery and was actually going to leave and he had
219 gone away to college and was going to pursue another career -- modeling and acting as I recall.
220 And his great uncle became ill and he came back to help in the fishery in the '60s and he never
221 left. And he was the one that kind of I think brought the fishery into some of its *more modern*
222 practices; you know in all honesty it's hard to know how many things Bill was actually an
223 innovator with--of you know--or Bill says he was an innovator of but I think it's clear that he
224 was an immensely important figure in terms of keeping Fishtown together along with his--his
225 brothers during a rough period when you know older fishermen were dying, families of the
226 fishermen themselves were holding up the property and there was this move you know in other
227 communities nearby when--when things would disappear in terms of an active fishing presence
228 you know those buildings would disappear and condos would go up. And you know in Leland

229 there was this I think watershed moment when they built these two mid-century modern
230 structures in the 19--mid-1960s called the Cove and Falling Water which are right next to the
231 dam at the eastern most edge of Fishtown and they were enormous in terms of scale, concrete
232 structures, architecture designed you know. The intent was to be you know mid-century modern
233 was--now it's trendy but you know then it was you know the cutting edge in terms of
234 architectural design. And they were very controversial. And I think Bill saw those as--as a--it
235 was a bellwether thing for him that--that something really needed to be done to preserve
236 Fishtown as he had known it growing up and as his family had been part of for those four
237 generations.

238 **00:22:48**

239 And so they began buying up the--the buildings as they became available and introducing
240 our retail use both you know they would do it and then they would you know rent it out to other
241 people and it was sort of the beginning of taking advantage of the tourist market which was right
242 then really starting to take off in Fishtown in the 1960s. It had always been tourism here but I
243 think Bill was one of the people that you know recognized that you know this was really a way
244 to keep Fishtown afloat in a time when the fishery itself was really having difficulties with--from
245 a whole number of things. Botulism scare, PCBs, so chemicals in the Lake, regulations from--
246 from the DNR; just a--a whole slew of things that you know made it difficult so that the numbers
247 of boat which at their height was eight you know it was reduced to three and then reduced to two.
248 And then so Bill was the one who founded Fishtown Preservation Society as kind of an
249 organization of you know volunteers to try and keep the place going and you know eventually he
250 turned the organization over but he himself still owned the majority of the property in Fishtown.
251 By that time even one of the other longstanding families had you know--had left by the 1970s,

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January 27, 2015

252 the Stephens and if you want to fast-forward to the--. I mean I think the Fishtown Preservation
253 Society--help me Amanda; when was that founded, 2001?

254

255 **00:24:38**

256 **Interviewer:** Two thousand one and I'm just going to interject one other piece here is one of the
257 reasons why he formed it in my recollection was because of treaty changes, the--the fishing
258 rights issues. Fishtown, Leland is in tribal waters and the allocation of the fishing quotas, the
259 numbers were changing. He was advocating to not have--we have a very small quota and it's
260 hard for a fishing family to survive and so I think he saw the amount of fish that he--that could
261 be caught as linked to the livelihood of the fishermen. And when his quota was cut so much he
262 said that there would be no way he could continue to fish.

263 **00:25:20**

264 So it was at first an advocacy organization for fishing itself and--

265

266 **00:25:25**

267 **Laurie Sommers:** Right; that's right.

268

269 **00:25:26**

270 **Interviewer:** --so he had to fight for that piece of it, so you get the fishing--the rights to fish,
271 how much you can fish linked with the buildings themselves. So when we're talking preservation
272 head--you know without the preservation of some sort of fishing there that also then put the
273 buildings at risk. So there's a lot of the--I don't know how many other working waterfronts have
274 that kind of dynamic; there may be more. But his fight started over the fishing.

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275

276 **00:25:53**

277 **Laurie Sommers:** Right.

278

279 **00:25:54**

280 **Interviewer:** And so it just made things a little bit more complex. And then when he realized I
281 think it was 2004 that he was going to step back; he wanted maybe just to sell the property it then
282 shifted into preservation organization of a more classic sense that we think of it and he wanted to
283 sell the property and the organization stepped up and it kind of--it changed its nature to become a
284 fund-raising organization to try to save the property. And he stepped aside from the organization
285 then. But by then he had done a lot to preserve the site and raise awareness of this other issue
286 which most people wouldn't--even though they enjoy the fishing and they enjoy eating fish, they
287 don't think anything about the dynamics of what it takes and that Great Lakes resource that we
288 all depend upon and enjoy having wonderful whitefish or chub to eat and that's when it shifted
289 into the--more of the historic preservation element.

290

291 **00:26:50**

292 **Laurie Sommers:** Right; right, excellent point to my--to my memory of that. I guess I was
293 tracked into the preservation piece of it but you're absolutely right that these two pieces are two
294 sides of a coin and it would have been very easy to preserve Fishtown just as a shell of what it
295 once was but various people including Bill Carlson and others have fought to keep the--the
296 commercial fishing going. Terry Buckler and I'm--and um, Lang--Ross Lang and so were the
297 last three fishermen to be--to be working in Fishtown. And then it was basically down to the

298 Carlson(s) due to various reasons which are probably beyond what we need to talk about here.
299 But and so the issue was that you had this preservation organization run by volunteers, Fishtown
300 Preservation Society but Bill and his brothers still owned most of the property. And he had
301 decided that he wanted to look for a buyer and I think it fair to say it's fortunate that Fishtown
302 Preservation Society was able to go on this extraordinary fund-raising campaign in 2007--'06
303 and '07 and--and raise \$1.9 million--\$1.7 million.

304

305 **00:28:34**

306 **Interviewer:** Actually it took a couple years I think to kind of come up with a number. The
307 organization wanted to spend about \$1.7 million but they ended up spending almost \$3 million
308 because it included the vessels and a lot of historic value.

309

310 **00:28:47**

311 **Laurie Sommers:** But there was that short period of time where they raised the \$1.7 million in
312 order to actually purchase the property; is that correct? You better stop me 'cause I should be
313 looking at my notes rather than doing this all from memory.

314

315 **00:28:59**

316 **Interviewer:** It was--they had to raise \$2.5 million I believe it was in cash and pledges--the
317 pledges--.

318

319 **00:29:07**

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320 **Laurie Sommers:** Okay but I guess the--the key is one could look up the details in the financial
321 records and the written records but the--the key was that it was fortunate that--that Fishtown
322 Preservation Society had the motivation and was able to marshal the resources of all these people
323 we discussed earlier, these you know wealthy families that had come to Fishtown you know
324 who, you know had multiple generations now that were you know that there were--it just still
325 seems to me amazing that this amount of money was--was pledged and raised you know in order
326 to purchase the property in a fairly short period of time.

327 **00:29:51**

328 And so you know we've spoken over the time I've been involved in Fishtown about the
329 Fishtown being the survivor and all the sort of miracles that have occurred. I think you know in
330 all honesty you know a--a buyer could have stepped up who might have just wanted to you know
331 take down those structures like has happened other places and put up condos and have it all be a
332 nice pretty yachter's paradise like South Haven is. And you know which is a port on the Lake
333 Michigan Shore in the southern part of the Lake and I mean it's a beautiful river coming in and
334 used to have you know fishing buildings as well and you know now it's just ringed primarily by
335 you know by pleasure craft and--and charters.

336 **00:30:49**

337 So you know Fishtown Preservation Society was able to step in and do this and I think
338 one of the things that--I don't--the--the strategy of combining historic preservation and folklore
339 hadn't yet been formalized at that point because you hadn't come on and you know become
340 Executive Director with your particular expertise Amanda, but I think what was marshaled there
341 was these deep seated attachments and these personal stories and these personal histories that--
342 that people had--personal stories people had about Fishtown and connections they had with

343 Fishtown. Fishtown for--for so many people local and summer resort(ers) and visitors alike was
344 what you know Ned Kaufman in his book has called a story scape. It was a place that people had
345 these attachments to. It was personal. It was longstanding and it was powerful. And I--I think
346 people realized without it being articulated the way it's been articulated in publications and grant
347 reports since that this was you know this was such a place that was real, whether or not people
348 you know--you know we talked about the Boards having character and the--and the smells and
349 you know the fact that you could buy fish. Maybe people took it for granted for a while but when
350 the place was threatened they--they came out of the woodwork and--and you know there was this
351 understanding that this was really a place worth fighting for because it had these generations of
352 stories and memories associated with it. That's my sense.

353

354 **00:32:43**

355 **Interviewer:** So it sounds as though there was a confluence of events; you had this passionate
356 Board, most of which--had associations there going way back to childhood, the community itself
357 which would mean more the local community, the fishermen who are also vital, and this moment
358 where it was threatened. So how is that then a historic preservation effort?

359

360 **00:33:13**

361 **Laurie Sommers:** Well I think doesn't any historic preservation effort have to start with
362 people--people who care enough you know to make sure that a place is preserved and that it's
363 preserved--you know and then you have to make the decisions about how a place is preserved. I
364 mean if a place has lost its original means of--of being, if it's no longer what it once was, if it's
365 just you know it's like the big house in town which becomes the funeral home invariably and it

Key:
Laurie Sommers=Answer
[Inaudible] = Inaudible
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Laurie Sommers

January 27, 2015

366 used to be--belong to you know whoever the big--the big man literally. It was owned by the big
367 man in town even though I'm sure he had a good woman behind the scenes. But anyway you
368 know a lot of places--and if we're talking about waterfronts, let alone the working waterfronts if
369 they're just you know waterfronts that once were working, they don't have you know--then the
370 decisions of what you preserve are completely different.

371 **00:34:12**

372 So when it becomes a preservation effort you first have to--you have to have these people
373 and then the people have to be galvanized in order to you know--and decide what it is and how
374 they are going to preserve this place. And I think with Fishtown and I may have lost track, tell
375 me the original question because I--I'm--I'm--it was when does it become a preservation effort?

376

377 **00:34:38**

378 **Interviewer:** Yeah.

379

380 **00:34:39**

381 **Laurie Sommers:** I think the question is when and then how does it become a preservation
382 effort, perhaps, and is that you know then you've--you've got the place, you've purchased it and
383 as you know a lot of the PR and fund-raising pieces that have come out of Fishtown Preservation
384 as you say, well you know it's like you know we're not done. You know you--you know
385 everyone thinks oh we saved Fishtown because we've you know we've purchased the property
386 and Fishtown Preservation Society has taken custody of it and therefore you know--. But no;
387 that's just the beginning and then that's when the--you know saving is only the first step of
388 preservation, you know and then you have this you know the--the long and important job of you

389 know what--what's next? How do you keep these buildings in working order? What's your
390 philosophy of--of physically rehabilitating and keeping the properties you know from falling into
391 the--the river and as some of them almost did in the 1950s?

392 **00:35:53**

393 And--and then how do you tell its story? I mean is it--is it you know--it's not just about
394 the buildings; it's about the place, the place--and the place has a site. There's a landscape.
395 There's--there's a geographic physical well you know site that the properties sit on so all of that
396 has to be taken into consideration and so Fishtown Preservation had to come up with their
397 philosophy for how they were going to preserve the place. And that's kind of where although
398 there were certainly pieces and ideas in place you--you know you did the Master Plan and this is
399 where Kathryn's role as the former State Historic Preservation Officer comes in 'cause she knew
400 the--sort of the planning pieces that are always so helpful in an organization's efforts to--to come
401 up with its template and its philosophy for how it's going to move forward with--with historic
402 preservation.

403 **00:36:57**

404 But in Fishtown's case you had this fact that it was still a working waterfront. So when--
405 where I was going with that is that after there was the Preservation Master Plan that was done
406 which was you know started to set the--the template for how to move forward, the--the next big
407 piece if I recall and you'll stop me I'm sure was the Historic Structures Report which I was part
408 of, which had a team of you know landscape architects, preservation architects, both people--or
409 both organizations/firms that--that Kathryn had known through her long work in the State and I
410 think what made--and me as--as a folklorist who had a background in preservation--historic
411 preservation, as you do. So we spoke the same language and I think--and this is where we go

412 back to you know what makes Fishtown Preservation Society what it is; you and Kathryn
413 worked together on the Request for Proposal for how this Historic Structures Report was going
414 to take place or how it was going to--what you were looking for in the Historic Structures
415 Report.

416 **00:38:13**

417 And in addition to coming up with a strategy for the preservation architects, to--to come
418 up with their approach for how you were going to physically preserve the--the structures on the
419 site and the landscape architects and what their recommendations would be for maintaining a
420 viable site plan for--for Fishtown you had this piece where you wanted basically I think it's a
421 combination of ethnography and the traditional historic preservation approach with sort of
422 archival research about buildings and its history and its use in terms of who lived there, what
423 they did. But--but what you were looking for, what a folklorist would be looking for would be a
424 much richer notion of use, both past and present that takes into consideration the lives of the
425 fishermen you know in this place, the work that was done both you know on--on the boats and in
426 the shanties and on the site and--and so it's those--it's those traditions, those practices and the
427 stories and the oral histories about them that--that flesh out what makes this a story scape, what
428 makes it meaningful. And I think that in terms of policy is a real model. As best I know this is
429 the--the first time that folklore has been folded into historic structure support, you know this
430 kind--there may be others but I suspect this is--this is unique in that regard at this point and as
431 you know I've been involved with my professional association, the American Folklore Society in
432 a working group on folklore and historic preservation where we got some funding from the
433 American Folklore Society to come up with a white paper and look at models in--in places across
434 the country where folklore had been integrated with historic preservation and where it worked

435 well, where it hadn't worked so well, where it had been successful, where it hadn't been
436 successful or you know why it hadn't been employed in as many places where it might have
437 been. And I became involved with that and because of this work with Fishtown Preservation and
438 realizing how powerful it was to have this--this folklore piece, so--and it wasn't just the past that
439 you were interested in, this RFP; it was this understanding that a working waterfront has a past
440 but it has a present. And the present is what leads to the future and that's where the preservation
441 of these two pieces, the--the working waterfront and the buildings and the places where they--
442 and the boats and the resource out in the Lake where they--you know all of this has to be
443 preserved and present. You don't have power over the resources out in the Lake. There's only
444 you know so much that's--but--but you do now as an organization have power over you know
445 maintaining the boats, maintaining the site and making sure that--that you know that you create
446 a--an environment where the working waterfront can be sustained and--and continued into the
447 future.

448 **00:41:45**

449 So I was doing ethnography as I might do the folklore, not--not full-fledged but paying
450 attention to the practices of the fishermen there today. It wasn't just--and how those reflect a
451 continuity or discontinuity with the past, how--how change occurs. And so the other piece then
452 of--of coming up with you know this preservation strategy and philosophy for Fishtown
453 Preservation Society is I remember we sat down as a team and met with you and Kathryn and
454 some of the Board Members throughout the process of crafting this Historic Structures Report
455 and one of the first things that we--I remember grappling with was this notion of period of
456 significance which is a big historic preservation term. And--and Gene Hopkins of HopkinsBurns
457 was you know you're used to picking in a lot of historic preservation projects a year, a few years,

458 a decade maybe that's the period when--when historically this was the you know the peak or the
459 most you know significant period, hence the period of significance and then that begs the
460 question of what do you do with change? What do you do with changes to the site that have
461 occurred since this period of significance if you--if you--if you think that there was one decade
462 or a cluster of years when this is what we you know restore our property back to? Is this when it-
463 -how it looked at this time? Is this you know anything that's--excretions that have happened on a
464 site or a structure you know? Do we tear those off? What do you do?

465 **00:43:37**

466 And you and I as folklorists we're arguing for the fact that this whole notion of period of
467 significance was--was kind of irrelevant to--to a working waterfront that had been active you
468 know since the 1860s as best we know but at least in Fishtown you know the first structures are
469 the early 1900s so if we're going to you know look at structures we're talking you know early
470 1900s, you know basically the present because you still have working--a working waterfront and
471 we batted this around and we finally as I recall you were still arguing for right up to the present
472 day and you know I kind of eventually tried to strike a balance point between the architects who
473 we were working on to bring them around to our point of view but we--we looked at the decade
474 where the greatest change occurred, you know and a lot of these--these mid-century modern
475 structures were built in Fishtown in the '60s, so I think we--our period of significance ended at
476 1960 eventually. But we--we hammered ahead on the point that one of the key character defining
477 features of Fishtown was what I ended up calling the constant sea of change.

478 **00:44:58**

479 And so that change itself was good and change was built into the fact that this was a
480 working waterfront and fishermen had to adapt with both the structures and their technology and

481 their techniques and their boats, all the way along just like anybody does in--in an occupation. If
482 you don't--if you don't keep up with the times you know you're--it--it dies. And they were--
483 miraculously they were able to sort of patch up these--these wooden structures right on the edge
484 of Lake Michigan through all this weather and--and keep them going and they were not built to
485 be long-lasting structures, but fishermen like farmers are masters of you know patching things up
486 and moving on. It was this--I think that's what you said was the metaphor for Fishtown
487 Preservation in one of your newsletters--isn't it--patch and we move on. So--so the--the--the
488 preservation architect's template for how you move forward with physically *preserving* if you
489 can use that word or *rehabilitating* the structures was a light--touch lightly--is that right--light
490 touch approach I guess where you wouldn't be you know you would--you would make sure that
491 they don't fall down. Their roofs maybe were sagging so you'd sure things up but you aren't
492 going to make it pretty. You aren't going to move back and try and recreate what something
493 looked like in 1930. You're going to just keep these structures in working order and keep the--
494 allow the fishermen to keep working and to keep changing you know with the times. And--and
495 that whole notion of change was a controversial one I remember because you said you know
496 people come and say oh don't change a thing, you know when--when Fishtown Preservation
497 acquired the property, everyone had such an investment in the place that they all had views about
498 what you should do with it and so you had kind of a PR issue on your hands to--and I think the
499 Historic Structures Report was an important tool in helping you, you know say oh look; we've--
500 we've got you know these pieces that we've done that are part of you know a planning
501 infrastructure that is part of a larger preservation world. We're not just making these things up.
502 We're bringing in people who have expertise. We're--so that you--you didn't pickle Fishtown

503 into a particular you know--it allowed it to breathe and--and that's what a working waterfront is.

504 A historic working waterfront has to be allowed to breathe and to move forward.

505 **00:47:35**

506 So you know in terms of policy I think you did some very smart things and some
507 innovative things in terms of using Kathryn's expertise again to sum up with this historic
508 preservation tools, the--the Master Plan, the Historic Structures Report and this was follows by
509 an interpretative plan. And the--you're about to embark on work on the--even the landscape and
510 site which was incorporated as the historic structure support and that was another piece that you
511 know we--structure reports typically aren't infused or combined with a cultural landscape report
512 and in Fishtown we realized and you know through your guidance I think in you know being
513 down on the site every day and you know living and breathing it and become so in love with it
514 that it--it's not just the buildings; it's--it's the--it's the whole complex. It's the site. It's the
515 geography. It's the folklore. It's the traditions. It's the stories. It's the story scape.

516 **00:48:40**

517 And so one of the challenges that you had was that you have this whole movement not
518 unique to Leland up and down the shorelines in Lake Michigan of prettifying these historic
519 waterfronts. You know the first step is condos and then you know you've got the flour baskets
520 and you've got you know the lilies and the--you know the little potted plants and you want to
521 make it attractive for tourists to come down and what--what Fishtown is--is you know it--in a
522 way it sorts of sets itself up for a little bit of a conflict because you have--its life-blood is tourism
523 now and it has been you know for what 50 years at least or more. I mean it's from the beginning
524 it's been tourism but really driven by tourism since the 1960s with the conversion of the shanties

525 into adaptive reuse for tourism, gift shops and--and food and ice-cream and fudge and candy and
526 that sort of thing.

527 **00:49:46**

528 So you have this--this tourist side of it yet you've got the working waterfront and
529 working waterfronts are never pretty and one of the things we've pointed out in Historic
530 Structures Report is that there's long been this history in Leland of--of an industrial past in a
531 commercial fishing site is really you know a type of extractive industry if you will even though
532 it's a natural resource. Before that there was an iron furnace on--on this slide; there's slag you
533 know in the Leland blue stone, still to be found around there. And people don't think of
534 Fishtown as an industrial landscape. They think of it--you know I think a lot of people would like
535 to have sort of this sanitized pretty on one-hand without really thinking about it, maybe that's a
536 kneejerk reaction because you--you go across the bridge, an M22 over the Leland River in
537 Fishtown and you know during the growing season there are these pretty baskets of flowers and
538 you have flowers all along in--you know in the downtown of Fishtown and everywhere in the
539 Leland Peninsula it's pretty, pretty, pretty. It's you know it's a gorgeous landscape and it's made
540 more pretty and attractive for tourists by these things and you have tenants who will remained
541 unnamed who you know sneak in lilies and plant flowers after dark and--and what they--we
542 came up with in the Historic Structures Report is--is a way to--to what--depridify--that's not a
543 word but I mean you know to--to make the site you know maybe you have some natural grasses
544 and you have certain types of pebble stone or whatever that you want to create the sense that this
545 is a working waterfront by how the site is--is interpreted and restored. And it's not going to be
546 flowers everywhere. You have these objects that have been scattered around the site that we--I
547 spoke of earlier you know. It is still a working waterfront and I think that's--has been a conflict

548 and it may be a conflict as you go ahead and implement this--this site plan now in this next phase
549 of your stewardship of Fishtown. But--but this again is all part of the Historic Structures Report
550 and understanding that--that it is a working waterfront and working waterfronts are not places
551 where you plant lilies. I mean and--and that it's not a space where tourists are the primary
552 occupants and audience if you will. I mean they're essential the survival of--of Fishtown but you
553 have come up with a philosophy and a preservation plan of--of trying to give visitors a sense of a
554 real maritime experience in Michigan still. There are plenty of places where they can go where
555 it's pretty and flowers and where the fishermen are gone and the boats are gone. Fishtown is not
556 one of those and that's where your--your approach, your policy, your preservation strategy of--of
557 understanding the past and bringing it into the present and using all these tools I think is a smart
558 one--monologue over.

559

560 **00:53:10**

561 **Interviewer:** I think it might be the primacy of the fishery in both the sense of the catching of
562 the fish, the process of the fish, as well as the locations of all those fishing operations in
563 Fishtown and by thinking what is it going to take to maintain all those dynamics--guides your
564 decisions, because as you mentioned it's an extracted industry and it's really hard on the place.

565 **00:53:35**

566 Right; and I don't--do you remember during our initial meetings and we were pursuing
567 the idea of the National Landmark Status?

568

569 **00:53:43**

570 **Laurie Sommers:** Oh yeah.

Key:
Laurie Sommers=Answer
[Inaudible] = Inaudible
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[Gesture/Action] = Gesture/Action

WWF/NOAA
Laurie Sommers

January 27, 2015

571

572 **00:53:44**

573 **Interviewer:** Now describe what happened with that.

574

575 **00:53:46**

576 **Laurie Sommers:** Well when I say it's a working waterfront, to me that's code for what you
577 just said; it's the primary of the fishery 'cause how could it be working if--if the—

578

579 **Interviewer:** Look at the sport fishermen as well. There's the harbor. There's all these different
580 economic factors and that's where the tourism in a way is an economic factor.

581

582 **00:54:02**

583 **Laurie Sommers:** True but for me when I say working waterfront I--I had glossed over in my
584 mind the--even the charter fishermen which have been there you know since the late '60s, early
585 '70s and the--just the fishermen who fish off the dock you know for I mean those are all there,
586 but and I guess you know those are--the latter are recreational fishermen. The--the Charter
587 Captains are working fishermen but--but you know it's all part of the tourist industry. So to me
588 when I say working waterfront even though it's true, I guess I should say that it's a, you know
589 about the fishery and the--the commercial fishery in particular. But that's what I had been when I
590 said working waterfront that's what I think of is--is the fact that there's a commercial fishing
591 presence continuing that makes Fishtown so special.

592 **00:54:59**

593 And one of the key moments in--in the planning process and sort of the understanding of
594 the conflict between--potential conflict between historic preservation as a concept and this notion
595 of a working waterfront in which the commercial fishery is the primary engine, historically and--
596 and in what makes it real, you know the fact that yes there are--there's all sorts of sports fishery
597 elsewhere in Michigan but it's the commercial fishing piece of it that's so special--is that we had
598 during the--the time that the Historic Structures Report was being prepared and researched, our
599 team along with Kathryn and you and maybe there was some--a Board Member or somebody
600 there met with Deena Sanford from the Midwest Office of the National Historic Landmarks
601 Program which somebody said was you know the--the more conservative. I think she said it
602 herself of the--of the entities within the--the National Park Service. And part of the thinking was
603 what sorts of tools can we continue to bring to bear on--on Fishtown through the efforts of
604 Fishtown Preservation, in terms of grant writing or whatever? And Kathryn had posed the issue
605 of what if Fishtown were a national historical landmark? It is part of a National Register Historic
606 District, the Leland National Registered Historic District which was established in 1975 as I
607 recall. You know one piece of that--that was before we had these you know differences between
608 Local, State, and National significance within the National Register. It's an early and older
609 nomination which at the time was used as part of preservation strategy itself, part of the you
610 know pre-Fishtown preservation strategy to try and preserve Fishtown.

611 **00:57:16**

612 But anyway so Deena Sanford comes and we're walking through the site and basically I--
613 I can't recall her exact words but the--the idea was that--that what was really important about
614 Fishtown from the point of view and national landmarks as she was interpreting it were the
615 buildings and that if the commercial fishing operation, the working nature of the commercial

616 fishery got in the way of *preserving those buildings*, well then you know **[Laughs]** tough; the--
617 the fishing had to go and because what needed to be preserved was the buildings. The--the
618 buildings were primary and--and I remember locking glances with Mark Johnson who was the
619 Landscape Architect on our team and we had just spent weeks talking about how important the
620 fishery was and when we made our list of contributing and non-contributing buildings or pivotal
621 buildings on the site that the most pivotal building even though in many ways it's the most
622 cobbled together building in terms of all sorts of things on the site was--was the--the current
623 Carlson's Fishery Building, the--the historic Maleski Kaapke Firestone shanties that were
624 merged in the 1960s into one building that--that it was the most pivotal building because it was
625 the one where the active commercial fishery was still housed. And I mean we were talking about
626 this building in particular and--and Fishtown in general and you know the--the entire team by
627 this point was on the same page. And Deena comes in and talks about well, you know what's
628 more important is the building you know. You got to preserve the building basically not the
629 place and what happens there and we just looked at each other and it was like do you believe
630 what you just heard because again, what--what this place is built on and what its preservation
631 strategy and its interpretive plan and the whole lotus operandi and policies of Fishtown
632 Preservation Society are--are grounded on the primacy of commercial fishing and the fact that
633 the most pivotal structure in the site which is full of wonderful, wonderful buildings is you know
634 the current Carlson's Fishery but the building that houses the active ongoing commercial fishing
635 operation in Fishtown.

636 **00:59:52**

637 And so it--it seemed like we were--we have not yet or you have not yet chosen to pursue
638 National Landmark status and I think if you did our job would be to--to make the opposite case

639 that you know from what we were told that afternoon in Fishtown and sort of try and do some re-
640 education that there's you know that historic preservation is not all about the buildings; it's about
641 the place. And the place is defined by what happens in a place and it's a richer notion than youth
642 than one typically has found in you know the National Registry Process and so you know and
643 writing up the Historic Structures Support we--we talked about the you know it was based on
644 oral histories, it was based on traditional practice, it was based on customary behaviors, it was
645 based on even things that were not buildings or--or associated with buildings. It was you know
646 we talked about the fishing grounds. We talked about this--this dual world of fishing grounds and
647 lake work and shore work and the Fishtown site itself. I mean it was--it was a much, much
648 broader and more far-reaching notion of preservation in place than I think is used many other
649 places.

650

651 **01:01:31**

652 **Interviewer:** Another early thing I remember at those meetings was--'cause we owned a quarter
653 acre and on each side of the Leland River there are eight different property owners on both sides
654 of the river. And to come in--and so the idea of doing a Historic Structure Report that is--you
655 know you're doing it for the buildings you own and when we broached the subject of broadening
656 to do the entirety and to not limit ourselves to just what we own that--that I think struck terror in
657 a lot of people. Do you remember that transition?

658

659 **01:02:05**

660 **Laurie Sommers:** I do and and I remember being somewhat daunted by looking at the RFP and
661 all the things you were asking for because what we're really talking about is a--is I think a--the

662 preservation equivalent of holistic medicine that you're not just you know you're not just treating
663 the symptom or you're just not looking at the building or the structure; you're looking at the
664 whole person and you're looking at the whole place to talk about these two--. And in your--in
665 your case it was the whole place; it wasn't just folklore and historic preservation. It wasn't just
666 tradition and structure. It wasn't just story scape and landscape and physical place. It was the
667 properties that you had purchased, the other properties that you were on the site--both on the
668 same side of the river, the north side and all the buildings on the opposite side of the river and
669 not just that but I really thought you were nuts when--when I first saw that you wanted to--to re-
670 construct the historic footprints of Fishtown from its earliest points to the present day. And I
671 thought before I really got involved in the mindset even as a folklorist I mean I should say that
672 this is the first project that I had been encouraged to wear both of my hats. You know I had
673 started in historic preservation where you just looked at buildings. You wouldn't have--and I was
674 **[Phone Rings]**--that is a folklorist ring tone, right.

675 **01:03:59**

676 Turn off the--it didn't work. So--so back to your question; so we were--so in your RFP
677 we're talking about the--the footprint of Fishtown and I was talking about my background where
678 I think my early years in folklore never integrated with my even earlier work experience in
679 historic preservation. So when I was finishing my advanced degrees in folklore and working in
680 historic preservation to make money to fund my--my graduate education there was never any
681 overlap. And so this notion sort of that the--the National Historic Landmarks approach that the
682 building was primary was kind of what my experience of historic preservation was. And I hadn't
683 really started to think through this whole thing. I mean I know I was hired because I had the
684 experience in folklore and historic preservation. And I was thrilled to be able to bring these

685 worlds together. You know there were a few tantalizing glimpses of it throughout my career but
686 you know I--I even before I got involved in--in Fishtown, when I saw this bit about
687 reconstructing the historic footprints I though you know what is that? Don't we just want to
688 concern ourselves with what's there now? And but I came to realize that you know you were
689 hearing as an organization you know don't change a thing, number one. And this whole notion of
690 change and the notion of--as we talked about before, a period of significance in this kind of thing
691 it's all informed by understanding how much change there has been in the history of--of
692 Fishtown. And by looking at the very rich photographic record that is available for the history of
693 this place, combined with you know tax records and deed records and so forth, you can--you
694 really could--. I think I have a pretty good understanding; nothing ever will be but of how
695 Fishtown developed and you really do see how much change and how many shanties didn't
696 make it you know. For various reasons, they were torn down by fishermen, they--you know
697 somebody built something new or they were just you know blown away by the--the wear and
698 tear of the location right there by the mouth of the river right along Lake Michigan which is an
699 extremely powerful natural force.

700 **01:06:47**

701 So that I think this--this whole thing of the footprint and what you were asking to do
702 ultimately was very useful to the organization you know to have that and I know that piece that
703 we worked on, the--the timeline that shows the footprints from the--the 19th century to the
704 present is a piece that you've been able to use in a number of different ways now. And you're the
705 one that could speak mores on the way that you could use them but I think it was key in--in
706 hammering home this point about the constancy of change you know as the theme and that you
707 want to do this touch lightly approach to rehabilitation of the structures that you're--and that you

708 want to support the working commercial fishing operation that's you know in the place and not
709 just you know pickle it in a jar, you know in a particular straight jacket of time.

710

711 **01:07:56**

712 **Interviewer:** Yeah; having you come into the picture was the perfect formula because when I
713 started, brought these interests, would look at these historic photos and I found them very, very
714 frustrating. So my motivation early on in early grants and I don't know if this would be
715 considered a tool or not in the preservation effort was to make certain no matter I was applying
716 for whether it be a planning grant, anything I would add in oral histories and having to go out
717 and get more information because I wanted to really populate the past to understand it and that is
718 something that you brought in. So it wasn't just this dry history. I mean I love history but I think
719 in the way that it needed to be is to feel these personalities, the impact, the people in the present
720 as well because you know as well as I do they all have relatives who are still around. And it was
721 a way of bringing everybody around into the life of what we're doing in ways that people were
722 sometimes doing themselves, they'd walk around, but we weren't even seeing them until you
723 became immersed in this people and place and building you know to--to see what was basically
724 arriving on our doorstep sometimes and helping us--sorry; that was the recorder--helping us
725 frame what this was all going to be. And--and so to start--from when I started and it was this
726 opaque yet appealing place to one that for those who wanted to take the time to look into the
727 research or just appreciate the richness of the HSR, something phenomenal happened and it's
728 because of the impulse of preservation and linking those stories, but also getting the right people
729 to do it and--.

730

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731 **01:09:46**

732 **Laurie Sommers:** Right; but I think you need to--I need to give a plug for you because long
733 before--not long but--'cause you only came in what 2007? And you know so it was three years
734 before the HSR started and you and I met, but you had already established this template of doing
735 oral histories as you were just speaking of and you had done the NOAA project and your
736 husband Dan Stewart had done oral interviews along with other people you know and you were
737 talking about you know the importance of the oral interviews, so you as a folklorist understood
738 this as you've just--just spoken of. And you know and I think what that did--I mean my coming
739 in had another voice. You know I was--you know so that I could you know say things that
740 perhaps you couldn't because we were on you know sort of the same wave length as people who
741 are folklorists with interest in historic preservation or you know backgrounds in historic
742 preservation. But I think what you were just alluding to but didn't quite say in so many words
743 was that what these oral interviews did and what I think--and this is not unique to Fishtown, I
744 think this is what the power of them wherever they can be applied is that it brought all sorts of
745 constituencies into the process.

746 **01:11:09**

747 So you know this Board is made up of mostly people who were not of the sort of rank
748 and file working class, middle class people of Fishtown. They were the--the elite, you know who
749 have--who have these long family histories of coming with summer places or you know they've
750 come here more recently. They tend to be moneyed people; there are some exceptions to that so
751 there--there are real differences between the Board and the community of Fishtown that for
752 whatever--locals for whatever--however you want to call it and then you've got the--the

753 fishermen and the families that have been involved in--in Fishtown historically who are locals
754 but are a sub-group and you know an essential sub-group of that.

755 **01:12:03**

756 And as you well know as a folklorist if you--if you go into somebody's home or their
757 environment or you seek them out and you really want to hear their story and that's the gift that
758 you know a good oral historian, a folklorist has you can--you can listen, you--you make people
759 feel that what their experience is--is valued. So whatever stories you were getting from
760 fishermen who were trying to deal with the fact that there was a woman in charge of Fishtown
761 Preservation Society and this had been a man's world down there for the most part for
762 generations, you, Dan, you know other people were seeking them out and wanting to hear their
763 stories. And I think this is a very powerful thing because you know to try and--and balance as--as
764 you know you have been perceived as an outsider to the community even though you know you--
765 you know live in Omena, you're a Northern Michigan person, you know being in Northwest
766 Michigan but you're not from Leland. You know and this can be--places can be very provincial
767 so the power of story, the power of recorded interviews, the power of oral histories is that you
768 make people feel part of the process, you make their experience feel valued. And so I think our
769 tendency might have been just to focus on the fishermen and maybe their families, but I think
770 what you had already set the template for this is you know the understanding through the Board
771 and through the people who had helped make you know the--the fund-raising easier by virtue of
772 you know the resources that they've had and the family money and you know being corporate
773 successes who had retired to Leland, you brought in those pieces of the story, too.

774 **01:14:11**

775 And I might have been more of a populist about it initially you know and just been more
776 interested in the fishermen but you know here were all these people who had scrapbooks and--
777 and photographs and you know so a whole range of people who have an interest in Fishtown and
778 that should--a vested interest are being included in the process now either through--you know
779 just like you were describing this Allen Northcutt that you just wrote about in the latest
780 newsletter and then you share these share these stories in ways. The stories are on the site,
781 they're in the newsletter; there may be other kinds of ways. They're part of the interpretive plan.
782 But they're also a way of--of lessening the divide between Fishtown Preservation Society and the
783 constituents who are necessary to you know to keep it vital. You have to have a good working
784 relationship with the community. And I think understanding the power of--of these interviews to
785 enhance that is one of the key policy pieces if you will of how Fishtown Preservation Society has
786 operated and that's not to say it's perfect and not to say that you still don't have issues in that
787 regard. But I think had you not done that whatever difficulties you might have encompassed--
788 encountered would have been far more difficult to deal with.

789

790 **01:15:36**

791 **Interviewer:** Yeah; very much so. Another interesting piece is who we brought in. You listed
792 who came in. But not think that pulling together your team is something that you can scrimp on;
793 bring in the best that you can and when I think of what we did--we brought in the best that we
794 could--and raised the money to--to pay that and I don't think it's necessarily something that a
795 community is going to be able to get as a volunteer, like to pull together some of the best of what
796 you need to pull--our HSR is not like anything I've seen anywhere else. And it didn't just come
797 out of nowhere and it was a multi-year effort that we raised a lot of money and so that we could

798 get the people we needed committed to it, long-term, recognizing that every piece of it has that
799 expertise. Everybody is making a living and you want the best that you can get and everybody
800 then at the same time went overboard and gave far more than was even being expected of them.
801 So I mean in that what we contracted to do, the amount of time, it's a place that needed all that
802 attention, and I don't think we would have gotten the final product and I hate even calling it a
803 product, but this--this compilation of all of these extra--the wings if we weren't willing to raise
804 the money and say we want the best and we want the best to do the work and we want to pay
805 them for it.

806

807 **01:17:12**

808 **Interviewer:** Well that's a nice compliment; thank you. But I mean I--I think you're right,
809 maybe not about getting the best 'cause that sounds self-serving but about you know being
810 willing to--to pay for a really good product. You know if you believe in your place then you
811 believe in its future, you know you need to make a policy of--of not you know not scrimping on
812 it and--and you know you've been able to use this HSR you know in a number of ways and it
813 hopefully you know the whole idea of them is to sort of set the--the template for how you're
814 moving forward with you know the--the preservation of the site. It sets your--your policy goals
815 basically. I mean you've got something that you can go back to and--and the fact that you've--
816 you know that you've got people that have good credentials, you know if you come up to any
817 rough patches you--you know you've got--you've got a document that has some teeth in it. But--
818 but I also think it goes back to your very first question about what is Fishtown Preservation
819 Society that you have again put--in a way I think it's serendipity but it's also really smart that
820 you have somebody with great expertise in historic preservation in the State, you know and if

821 you didn't have a Kathryn, not every Board can have a State Historic Preservation Officer, but
822 you can have somebody who is knowledgeable about the culture of the historic preservation in
823 the State. It could have been a preservation architect, it could have been--but there--there are
824 people that you can--you could bring in but you happen to have you know a former State
825 Historic Preservation Officer who lived in the community; that may be an unusual circumstance,
826 but you--you need the historic preservation expertise. You have you as a folklorist and there's
827 more than one folklorist out there but--but you are also somebody and it wouldn't have to be the
828 same person but you are a very gifted grant writer. You know so you need somebody who has
829 those skills you know to be able to put together a competitive you know proposal.

830 **01:19:31**

831 And I know that there are people out there who are *professional grant writers*, and I can
832 remember when I lived elsewhere somebody who was doing one of those for another agency
833 called me and was sort of picking my brain. And I could tell that she wasn't going to have a
834 snowball's chance of being successful with her grant because she just didn't know enough you
835 know about the whole situation and--and the language that was required and--and there may have
836 been a learning curve for you obviously with all of these things but I think folklorists have the
837 skill that's essential to any smart grant writers. You have to understand the culture of the
838 organization that you're applying to.

839 **01:20:19**

840 You know we are people who--who make our livings, our professional expertise is
841 understanding culture. And if we apply that in all sorts of different ways you--you, you know the
842 terminology, you know the culture of the--you make a point of learning the culture of the
843 granting organization and then you have to communicate in a language that makes sense to them

844 what is important about your particular place and your particular project. And you have
845 developed such a passion for the place; I think at the expense sometimes of your own personal
846 life. I mean it's become--but it's sort of taken you over because it can be that way. It just sort of
847 you know sucks you in but you, like you have described the HSR team, have gone above and
848 beyond. And I think that's made you an extremely effective grant writer because you're--you're
849 a gifted writer to start with, you know a creative writer but you--you can--you can really express
850 things well when you have time and sit down. And I think that is such an advantage. But that--
851 you could be a gifted writer and not necessarily be a gifted grant writer, and I think putting a
852 plug in for our discipline again understanding you know the culture and what sort of you know
853 terminology--every occupation, every culture has its--its language, its customs, its--its--its way
854 of understanding the world. And you have to be able to put yourself in that place and
855 communicate your world to that world in order to be effective. I think that's another thing a
856 folklorist can do.

857

858 **01:22:14**

859 **Interviewer:** So how would you say then that Fishtown Preservation Society in a nutshell has
860 preserved this working waterfront?

861

862 **01:22:28**

863 **Laurie Sommers:** You want with motor mouth here to be in nutshell? Is that what you're
864 asking me to do? **[Laughs]** In a nutshell how I would say Fishtown Preservation Society has
865 preserved this working waterfront; okay I think they have started out with an exceptional
866 leadership to the organization that has combined expertise and historic preservation and folklore

867 to very compatible and important partners but ones that have not been put together in a whole lot
868 of other projects. And again I think that's one of the policy lessons of this success of Fishtown
869 Preservation Society.

870 **01:23:18**

871 I think you have followed or you have established a pattern of taking advantage of the
872 infrastructure of historic preservation planning and policy tools that are out there, written
873 successful grants you know to raise the money to do a quality job and used expertise of your
874 Board in--in identifying you know really top-notch people and being willing to pay for them as
875 you were just describing, you know to have a product that has real value and real teeth in terms
876 of moving forward with the--the template for preservation, planning, and implementation for
877 Fishtown Preservation Society.

878 **01:24:15**

879 You have been pioneering I think in using oral history and folklore as a partner in the
880 preservation--as a key piece really of--an integral piece of the preservation strategy that you're
881 using for Fishtown. I think this is a pioneering use of folklore in a Historic Structure Report and I
882 can take credit for writing the report but you have to take credit as for understanding that this is
883 what was needed and writing the RFP and understanding that--that a working waterfront with an
884 active commercial fishery cannot successfully really be interpreted and preserved without
885 recognizing the primacy of the fishermen themselves. So--so early on and continuing as an
886 integral part of the preservation strategy is--is the power of story in creating meaning for place,
887 the power of tradition and use in its fullest sense, active practice, historic practice in
888 understanding what it means to really be a working waterfront past and present. And--and
889 understand that you need to take seriously the responsibility of preserving not just the buildings

890 but what happens in them and who is--is [*Laughs*] working in them and who has been
891 responsible for you know caring for and working in this place long before Fishtown Preservation
892 Society got here and hopefully will continue to--to do it into the future--that you're just the latest
893 piece of a long history of sustaining a working waterfront in Fishtown that you started a new
894 chapter but that new chapter is built on the same premise that it's about--it's about--it's all about
895 the fishermen and that--that approach has led you to an undergirding concept of the constancy of
896 change and that so you're not about preserving to a particular time period, you're not about
897 preserving it the way it was precisely; you're about sustaining a place that has been changing and
898 evolving throughout its history and will continue to change but that throughout that process has
899 maintained its essential character even with the loss of so many active commercial fishermen
900 over time even with the fact that you've got this low impact retail that you still have
901 miraculously as we've talked about--boats that go out, fish that come in, and fishermen that work
902 them and that you know the visitors who are so essential to the life blood of Fishtown can see
903 that, feel it, taste it, smell it as--as you've written about.

904 **01:27:39**

905 And you've also taken seriously the relationship with the community in engaging all
906 aspects of the community in the process and--and oral interviews, oral histories have really
907 helped you do that. So that in your interpretation which is the piece that you're doing now you're
908 interpreting--you're interpreting the working waterfront through the eyes of the fishermen but
909 you're also in your larger efforts to document the place you're--you're really engaging
910 everyone's story and by being interested in people's stories they become interested in your
911 organization and that you--you broadened your base of support. So again it's that integration of
912 folklore and historic preservation moving forward. And--and finally I would say the--the

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January 27, 2015

913 realization through this historic research that this has been an industrial site for most of its
914 history. And that--that you know this notion of working waterfront means that working it's at the
915 place--it's not a place, a pretty place for tourists; it's a place of great character that I think that
916 character can draw tourists in, so as you move forward in this next phase of--of the landscape site
917 based on the Historic Structures Report, the landscape work that you're about to do, you're
918 taking that piece of it, that notion that it's a working waterfront that the fishery is primary--the
919 commercial fishermen are what's making this place special that--that it's always been a site for
920 work for much of its history until maybe the past you know since the--the rise of more and more
921 tourism. But still, this is what's the life blood of the place. I think all those pieces you know
922 come down to understanding that preservation is about sustaining the commercial fishery to the
923 best of your ability.

924

925 **01:29:49**

926 **Interviewer:** So Fishtown for the purposes of this Working Waterfront's effort we are a great
927 preservation effort and as I mentioned or we gladly we share with anyone who ever wants to
928 know some of the challenges that we have had which are kind of its own piece, if it had just been
929 us following historic preservation principals would we be at the same place as we are now? What
930 --what--this is meant to be a model--

931

932 **01:30:21**

933 **Laurie Sommers:** Right.

934

935 **01:30:21**

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January 27, 2015

936 **Interviewer:** --and yet we're talking the whole time about the importance of this other element
937 that we've brought in. If a community though is going to have good success somewhere else and
938 look at us do they have to look at both pieces? Do they have to try to replicate both pieces?

939

940 **01:30:38**

941 **Laurie Sommers:** Both pieces meaning the--the historic preservation piece and the folklore
942 piece?

943

944 **01:30:42**

945 **Interviewer:** Uh-hm.

946

947 **01:30:44**

948 **Laurie Sommers:** I think if you're a working waterfront that's essential because as we were
949 talking about with the case of--of the conversation with the representative of the National
950 Historic Landmark Program if you did not have these two pieces as part of your undergirding
951 approach to the stewardship of Fishtown, Fishtown might you know be looking very different
952 than it does. You might have just--you might never have restored the boats. You might have
953 focused just on the buildings. You might have tried to restore it to a particular period. You might
954 have decided that the commercial fishermen had too much wear and tear on the building as you
955 know--and that they needed to be phased out or moved elsewhere and that Fishtown needed to be
956 about just the buildings. It's a completely different model, a completely different approach if you
957 bring in this more holistic integrative approach. And I think really the best way to sustain a
958 working waterfront if--if you're going to value the people who work there and--and what they

959 represent is that you create this holistic model that honors the full richness of the past of the work
960 in that place and the present of the work in that place because the place isn't the same without it.
961 It becomes just a waterfront and then maybe it becomes a pretty place with condos where there
962 used to be a Fishtown you know.

963 **01:32:23**

964 If you want to have a Fishtown, you know as--as you yourself know by going around to
965 all these places in--in the region and not just in Michigan looking at you know a present and you
966 know past commercial fishing locations there are fewer and fewer of them. There are fewer and
967 fewer commercial fishermen. You know and at least in Michigan and wherever--whatever coast
968 you're on these are historically places that were so crucial to shaping you know who we are and
969 they're just kind of hanging on and but when they're gone you no longer have a working
970 waterfront. You no longer have the same richness and I think it would be a lot more difficult to
971 raise money because a lot of what connects people to the place is going down and buying those
972 fish. It's seeing those boats go in and out; it's those generations of--of history that you know
973 even if you're a child and you haven't experienced it yourself, you know your parents and
974 grandparents will talk about it. But now you can still experience it; it's one of the few places that
975 you can.

976 **01:33:38**

977 So it's this holistic approach; it's the integrative approach to preservation just like
978 integrative medicine looks at the whole person. You have to--you have to combine the two.

979

980 **01:33:55**

981 **Interviewer:** Is there anything you can think about though that Fishtown Preservation, a
982 community might not be paying attention to? Is there anything else we need to think about or--or
983 be concerned about? I'm just tossing this one at you; you were prepared for like--what remains to
984 be done to insure continued success or more success? Are there any fissures in what we've been
985 putting together that--that we you know--doing all this hard work for naught?

986

987 **01:34:29**

988 **Laurie Sommers:** Well this is off the top of my head and I think this is--I've often thought this
989 is true about universities as well that we're not you know--it's--it's a huge *nonprofit* as opposed
990 to a small nonprofit like you are, but the challenge is the same is that you have a small staff.
991 You--you know you're doing an amazing amount of things considering that when I first met you,
992 you had you know a full-time development officer which you don't have anymore. But I really
993 think that one of the pieces that would be helpful is to have somebody who is really devoted
994 towards nurturing and promoting community relations locally and kind of getting the word about
995 what you're doing and what you're about because again, there's this perception of you know
996 you've got--that we were talking about earlier about the--the sort of class divide between some
997 of the--the local people in the community who have--you know it's really that county for all the
998 wealth of the summer people is--is there's a lot of people who are not very wealthy at all that live
999 there, you know the--. And Fishtown is like one of the top tourist destinations but you know--you
1000 know you just have had some--some situations without going into specifics with some really
1001 awkward and downright difficult you know litigious relationships with some of the neighboring
1002 properties up there and other kinds of things and people--some people have somebody's ear and
1003 other people don't. And I think if you had--you know you've got all these great stories and you

1004 do this newsletter and stuff but it's you know somebody that could you know really have a full-
1005 time job of trying to sort of foster community relations would also ease that I think and probably
1006 help with fund-raising too because there's just other people you get the word out of--of all the
1007 really great things that you're doing.

1008 **01:36:37**

1009 You know I know that you've you know felt bereft at times because people don't
1010 understand about all of the community history that they're gathering and all the things that you
1011 perceive that you're doing on part--on behalf of--that would benefit the local community. I don't
1012 think you know--people don't often value that kind of thing sometimes 'til it's gone. But we
1013 have to find better ways to getting out the story of what we're doing that's good you know. And
1014 some bright young thing who--who was you know just hot off the press and interested in doing
1015 marketing or some savvy seasoned older thing you know just--I think that could be an important
1016 piece, you know in a perfect world.

1017

1018 **01:37:24**

1019 **Interviewer:** That's an interesting point to bring up is just often preservation is seen as
1020 something that comes in and is imposed in from the outside. And all those dynamics, all of these
1021 years of people not wanting to be told what to do, and making certain that they feel a part of it
1022 and despite a lot of the best efforts at that there is that--that outreach fissure and part of that is
1023 because you know needing to find either on the Board or through other means some other way of
1024 having that happen because I'm--you know sometimes painfully aware of how much more you
1025 need to be out there but you can only be so many places at once.

1026

1027 **01:37:59**

1028 **Laurie Sommers:** Well exactly. There needs to be other resources that the organization has to
1029 do that piece. And if you--and the power of that kind of thing is in terms of community outreach
1030 and liaison and the connectedness of the community to the place you know prior to Fishtown
1031 Preservation being--being you know the organization that comes in and you know *saves*
1032 *Fishtown* but for--and the generations in years before that you know what I've referred to as the
1033 master narrative of Fishtown where this is this disaster with Bill Carlson's father and grandfather
1034 you know on the lake, you know his father survives 20-plus hours you know in the lake. His
1035 grandfather drowns. Their boat goes down. And they--you know Pete Carlson, Bill's dad comes
1036 back and is going to end fishing. And you know the community gets together and it's not just the
1037 local community; it's some of these summer people and other people, people get together and
1038 raise the funds you know to build them a new boat so this community can go ahead or so this
1039 family can continue fishing.

1040 **01:39:09**

1041 And it was you know it was the--it was the connection of--of people, the Fishtown there
1042 in a really visceral immediate way, you know and I would say it's the great irony that of all the
1043 families that have been part of Fishtown over the years this is the one that has continued and now
1044 it's--it's the fifth generation of Carlson(s). It's one of the owners of the, you know present-day
1045 Carlson's Fishery.

1046

1047 **01:39:34**

1048 **Interviewer:** The business?

1049

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January 27, 2015

1050 **01:39:35**

1051 **Laurie Sommers:** The business, right; so there still is a Carlson you know working in Fishtown
1052 but that wouldn't have happened had it not been this connection. I mean and there it was you
1053 know immediate, you know part of the community. Now you're there as this--this middle man or
1054 woman so to speak; you know you've got Fishtown, Fishtown Preservation and the community.
1055 You're kind of--and I think it's easy to perceive of you as outsider sort of imposing things or
1056 people you know and there's certain language bandied about recently when things get
1057 misunderstood that--that reinforces that without going into specifics. And--and again, I think--I
1058 think part of what I spoke about before in terms of for lack of a better term PR but getting the
1059 positive word out about what the motivations really are and what Fishtown Preservation is all
1060 about and what you're really trying to do and you know what you know that you've become a
1061 custodian for a lot of community stories that intersect with Fishtown.

1062

1063 **01:40:46**

1064 **Interviewer:** And it's--what's exciting about this though is--is there's no lack of ideas and just
1065 the opportunities that await, for me, for others who are interested and so it can seem a bit
1066 daunting to look ahead and wonder how do you pull all those pieces together, but a part of that
1067 answer is within the community itself. And there's different levels of community just as we were
1068 talking about the fishery being the--the core of Fishtown and you were kind of speaking on the
1069 assumption but when I think of community it's Leland itself, it's Fishtown itself, and then it's
1070 these concentric circles that we've been building of people who love it and they don't even know
1071 that we exist. I mean it is a place that supporters come from all 50 states and multiple countries;
1072 they love it at a lot of different levels. And we barely even knew--really thought about how to

1073 tell our story to them or to have them feel even more involved. So I think the survival of the
1074 organization, the survival of the place, it lies within these kinds of fields that we're just
1075 beginning to get into focus.

1076

1077 **01:41:49**

1078 **Interviewer:** Right; so social media you know to engage in you know a younger audience and
1079 all kinds of you know different things that you yourself can't possibly do 'cause you're doing
1080 more than it seems to be humanly possible in keeping--you know so many small nonprofits have
1081 seen a few heroic people that you know kind of keep the organization going and they're always
1082 asked to do more than--far more than they're being paid for and you know and--and you know
1083 are willing to do that because they really care about what they're doing.

1084 **01:42:21**

1085 But you know at some point you're going to need to have other--other staff, other
1086 resources or other dedicated you know unpaid volunteers that are involved in some of these other
1087 pieces 'cause there's no--that's a challenge for any small nonprofit.

1088

1089 **01:42:36**

1090 **Interviewer:** And to pass on that just what's so important about the preservation and folklore
1091 piece, how that gets translated. I think people could accept the place is there but I don't know
1092 how much they realize that these elements are what are core to where we are now and--and
1093 building on the strength and helping--I mean there are folks who have worked down there all
1094 their lives but they had no idea about a lot of the things that we uncovered. And so there's this
1095 discovery for everyone, but how do you have that continue into the future without someone

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Laurie Sommers

January 27, 2015

1096 thinking oh that's just too much work or we're just going to change it all now in ways that would
1097 weaken the--the character that we've you know worked hard to--and get the information about?

1098 **01:43:17**

1099 I--I sometimes worry about the interviews themselves that I've been gathering and so I
1100 know that like this Voices effort a lot of what we've done it might not--you know the
1101 organization itself might not be the spot that becomes a long-term repository of that. And so
1102 what do you do that--that insures the continuance of the work that you've done and hope you
1103 know if I were to leave tomorrow I'm sure something good would happen but there may be some
1104 pieces that we haven't put enough of a structure in and it could be even policies, so that those
1105 who come along will see why those decisions were made and how--and how we came to make
1106 them?

1107

1108 **01:43:55**

1109 **Laurie Sommers:** Right; but you do have the pieces that we've spoken of at various points in
1110 this conversation. You have the--you know the Master Plan, you have the HSR, you have all the
1111 you know support documents to that; you have you know the--the history of Fishtown that I
1112 wrote that grew out of the HSR. You have some pieces that--that--that set out the--the template.
1113 You know whether or not someone else chooses to use those I guess you know we can't control
1114 the future but if--you know it ain't broke why fix it you know?

1115

1116 **01:44:36**

1117 **Interviewer:** Anything else you'd like to add at this point?

1118

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January 27, 2015

1119 **01:44:50**

1120 **Laurie Sommers:** I think we've covered it.

1121

1122 **01:44:53**

1123 **Interviewer:** Thank you very much.

1124

1125 **01:44:53**

1126 **Laurie Sommers:** You're welcome Amanda.

1127

1128 **01:44:56**

1129 **[End Laurie Sommers Interview]**