

Interview with Amanda Wright September 24, 2006

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Name of person interviewed: Amanda Wright (AW)

Facts about this person:

Age: 55

Sex: Female

Occupation: lobster sternman

Home ports: Wickford, RI, Newport, RI

Residence: unknown

Ethnic background: unknown

Interviewer: Janice Fleuriel (JF)

Transcriber: Sarah Smith

Place interview took place: Working Waterfront Festival

Date and time of interview: September 24, 2006

INDEX / KEYWORDS**KEYWORDS**

Lobstering; Rhode Island; woman fisherman; bycatch; trap limits; health care; poetry; bait; privatization; scalloping

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[00:00] Done everything on a fishing boat, but primarily lobstering; been fishing for twenty-two years; work out of Newport; worked out of Wickford and all over Rhode Island; lobstering fits her lifestyle best; born in Princeton, NJ and then moved down south; no one in her family fished; moved to Provincetown as a potter, had trouble making ends meet in winter; worked one day opening scallops

[03:04] Made a lot of money shucking scallops; went out as a cook on a dragger; had a great time and didn't get sick; sense of humor is important in fishing

[05:52] Lobstering has good times and bad times but it evens out at the end of the year; goes lobstering all year long; worked in scalloping for two or three years and then went out to Alaska on a boat; got into lobstering when she moved to Rhode Island; worked as shellfish predator coordinator in Wellfleet; built traps for crabs and conchs and other predators; developed markets for the predators; sold green crabs as bait; sold conchs and whelks to local restaurants; loved working out on the flats

[10:00] Started lobstering in Wickford, Rhode Island; worked for Bruce Barr; did all the work preparing for the season and then he fired her; after eighteen years he hired her back as deckhand; she was then diagnosed with breast cancer at forty-eight, and he was the only boat with health insurance; fired her because he didn't want to work with a woman;

[12:47] Lobstering is like a dance, because the deckhand and captain have to know each other well for things to go smoothly; many captains keep their boats very clean; learned to string bait and stack gear in the beginning; started off with wooden pots; wire pots much lighter, but many lobstermen didn't want to change

[16:06] Pots now weigh 35-40 pounds a piece; learn tricks to handling them; become very strong; allotted 800 pots each, but they are changing the regulations based on fishing history; usually fish 275-300 pots a day, with fifteen in a string; fish in Area 2; Addendum 7 is coming up which would privatize lobstering industry, and people would have to buy a license to get into the industry

[19:08] In favor of privatizing because she thinks those who have hung in there deserve to make money from their licenses; some guys would get fewer pots if they fished fewer; they would also have to prove their landings; always been happy to be sternman because she can get off the boat whenever she wants, and the day is done when they get to the dock; strings the bait while they steam out and while traveling between trawls; use skate, flounder, and cod for bait; bait has become very expensive

[23:14] Everyone has their own place where they sell lobster; many guys go to Aquidneck Lobster; she likes lobster fritters but won't eat a whole lobster; story about a boat being covered with maggots after someone left some bait in the barrel on a hot day;

[26:27] Wrote a poem; poem is inspired by working on a gillnetter and having to untangle all the fish and cut off skate wings; picking nets like dressing and undressing dolls; lobstermen want to eat the tomcods that come up in the pots because they eat the lobsters, but she insists on releasing all the bycatch

[30:13] Reads poem about catching a tomcod in a trap and releasing him;

[33:24] Read poem to an audience in Astoria; has a love-hate relationship with fishing – always said she would get out of it soon; the job gets better; keeps her healthy; gets to see things other people don't; sometimes doesn't want to be there, like any job; likes the routine

[36:31] Go out fishing all year long; gives details of her daily routine; works about four days a week because of weather; some seasons are slower than others; winter isn't bad if you dress properly;

[40:21] Wants festival visitors to understand that fishermen are literate, not all drug users; that they respect the environment, this is their livelihood, and that a fish bought in the market comes from somewhere; understand the personal histories of fishing, people have made a living and put their kids through school; fishing isn't all fun and games; any education people can get about the industry is good; there are a few bad seeds who use drugs, but there are also corporate executives who use drugs and it's no different

[44:02]

[end recording]

TRANSCRIPT

[00:00]

[Start of Audio]

JF: ...Fleuriel, its Sunday, September 24, 2006, at the Working Waterfront Festival, and I'm interviewing Amanda Wright. And, um, I know that briefly when I met you last night, Amanda, I think it was Sharon Cumming said you've done anything and everything on a fishing boat there is to do...

AW: Yes, I've, uh, I've dabbled in it all, but lobstering is my forte.

JF: Oh, okay.

AW: And that's what, um, I've been involved in for the past twenty-odd years.

JF: Oh, okay...

AW: ...twenty-two.

JF: ...so what I'd actually like to just – we always like to just start is asking people if they can tell us where and when they were born and a little bit about your family background or how you ended up in New Bedford, if that...

AW: Okay. Um, I work out of Newport...

JF: Okay.

AW: Rhode Island...

JF: Okay.

AW: ...uh, State Pier Nine, I – I've worked out of Wickford, Rhode – I've worked all over Rhode Island as far as lobstering is concerned, and, when I landed in Rhode Island I looked into all the different fisheries, and, uh, trying to decide what I was going to do when I was coming from Cape Cod, where I'd lived for eleven years, and lobstering seemed to be the one that suited me, or fit me, or fit my lifestyle, so...

JF: Huh. Interesting...

AW: And I wasn't interested in really going offshore so much anymore, so, uh, lobstering that I'm involved in, I'm home every night in my own mouse bed, so....

JF: Yeah, ha ha.

AW: ...that's a good thing.

JF: Yeah! Yeah... So where did you actually grow up, on the Cape or somewhere else?

AW: No, um, I grew up – I was born in Princeton, New Jersey...

JF: Okay.

AW: And my family relocated down south when I was eight.

JF: Okay

AW: And, uh, there is no fishing history in my entire background...

JF: Huh!

AW: ...although we used to spend summers on Nantucket.

JF: Okay.

AW: And, uh, so I really don't know where this came from except it just made sense for me when I got connected with it at the age of twenty-three.

JF: And how did that connection happen?

AW: Well, I landed in Provincetown, Mass, um, and I had studied art and I made pottery, and I had a studio and a shop...

JF: Okay.

AW: ...in Provincetown, and when I landed in Provincetown, it was like, I couldn't believe that this place existed, because it was so wide open and so free and so independent, and it was full of poets and writers and artists and fishermen, Portuguese fishermen, and... it was just every walk of life...

JF: Uh huh.

AW: ...and, I landed there in November with my potter's wheel in the back of my Volkswagen station wagon, and... I got there because I knew a glass blower that was living there, and she said, well, why don't you just stay, and it made sense to me. So I, uh, set up a studio, and, I got, um, did very well as far as making pots, had a shop with a couple of other women, but it was seasonal, and, uh, to make ends meet, in a year-round capacity, it wasn't happening. So these offshore scallopers were coming into Provincetown this particular winter, and hiring people off the dock to go beyond the breakwater and open scallops all day.

JF: Oh!

[03:04]

AW: And they were paying ten dollars a bucket.

JF: Wow.

AW: And I got to be pretty good and I was having hundred dollar days, and that was a lot of money back in the seventies.

JF: Yeah!

AW: And one thing led to another, and I was invited to go offshore as cook on the Gerter Riva (?), which I did, and my first trip I, uh, had a check that was worth fifteen hundred dollars.

JF: Wow. For how many days?

AW: For a ten day trip.

JF: Yeah.

AW: And I said, well, this might be for me. [laughs]

JF: [laughs] I love it! Yeah, yeah.

AW: And I was able to pay all of my debts and started living high on the hog...

JF: Yeah!

AW: ...so to speak, and, uh, there was a lot of camaraderie in terms of being on the boats, they would – they would feed you like a hot lunch and played rock and roll all day in the shucking boxes, and, uh, we, uh, we had a really good time, uh, in terms of the shucking end, and then I saw that I did actually have sea legs and I never got sick, and uh...

JF: That – I was going to ask you, so your first trip was – you – a good discovery for you that way.

AW: Yeah. It was, uh, it was phenomenal...

JF: Huh.

AW: That I managed to pull it off.

JF: Yeah!

AW: So...

JF: And how – what was the like sleep schedule then? Was it something...

AW: We worked six on, six off....

JF: Mmm hmmm.

AW: Around the clock.

JF: Yup.

AW: And, uh, being cook, you know, I got time in the galley, also... but I – I had to learn a lot of things about that too, um... I was always a good cook cause I love to entertain...

JF: Yeah...

AW: ...and I love people, and...

JF: Yeah...

AW: ...my favorite thing in life is to give dinner parties, and...

JF: Oh! Okay...

AW: ...bring a lot of people together, and food and drink and... seems to be a nice way to go about life.

JF: Yeah.

AW: And, uh, so I – I went out in my first trip and I froze this tuna noodle casserole in a clay pot. And when I took it out the whole pot just like, when it warmed up in the oven like split in two, and [laughs]

JF: [laughs] Oh! Ah!!

AW: So I had tuna noodle casserole everywhere.

JF: Oh, no! You...

AW: But, uh...

JF: Did you take a little ribbing for that, or...?

AW: Oh, yeah, I took a lot of ribbing. But I never took anything personally.

JF: Yeah, yeah. Well they – everyone does it to each other, as I understand, right?

AW: Oh, yeah. Yeah, you learn how to bust balls very quickly.

JF: Uh huh.

AW: And be on top of that.

JF: Yup.

AW: Cause a sense of humor is very important in the fishing industry...

JF: Yeah...

AW: ...because, uh, so many times you need to reach deep and find one.

JF: Ah! Yeah, yeah. Like when the fish aren't coming up, or... any number of kinds of things?

AW: Right. When you're changing water, and then, you know, in the lobster industry you're on a one on one basis with your captain all day long...

JF: Yeah...

AW: So it's just the two of you, but you – you may not talk a lot but the things that you do talk about can, you know...

JF: Ah...

AW: equate to humor.

[05:52]

JF: Yeah. Yeah... just like – you just used the phrase “changing water”.

AW: That’s when you’re, um, pulling up, um, pots that are empty.

JF: Okay.

AW: And you have those times of year where you’re, you know, you may get three lobsters out of an entire trawl...

JF: Yeah...

AW: ...so it’s basically doing a lot of work for, uh, nothing.

JF: Yeah, yeah. Huh. Interesting. So...

AW: But then you have the times of year where, you know, they’re abundant...

JF: Right...

AW: And you’re doing really well, so, it, you know, it pretty much works out at the end of the year that you make, you know, about the same every year...

JF: Right...

AW: ...in terms of the good times and the bad times, cause you’re paid a percentage...

JF: Yeah...

AW: ...in terms of the catch.

JF: Yeah. Now, I’m just trying to sort of get a sense. You - you spent most of your years lobstering. How many, like, offshore trips – were - they weren’t for lobster, then, your offshore...

AW: No. They were, uh, scalloping.

JF: And how many of those did you do – a lot, or for how long?

AW: Uh, I did that for about two years, three years.

JF: Yeah.

AW: I traveled out to Alaska and I also did it out there. There was a big scallop boom in Alaska in about 1978-79, and a lot of boats from the East Coast traveled out to Alaska for this.

JF: Huh! Wow...

AW: And, uh... I took the boat from Seattle, and we went through the inside passage, and we worked off a little town called Yakitat (?).

JF: Hmm...

AW: Where you could see the glaciers and everything, and, uh, then I traveled across, um... the Gulf and uh, we went to Kodiak...

JF: Mmm hmmm....

AW: And, then when they switched over to black cod fishing is when I flew back...

JF: Okay.

AW: ...to Seattle and then I drove back cross-country.

JF: Wow... wow... that's neat. And then after that did you get back into the - did you switch into the lobster when you got back?

AW: Um, when I got back is when I pretty much moved to Rhode Island.

JF: Yup.

AW: I was also hired as a shellfish predator controller in Wellfleet.

JF: Mmm hmm.

AW: And that's how I got involved in this whole thing with traps and bait, because my job was, they gave me a little sixteen-foot skiff...

JF: Yeah.

AW: ...the Shellfish Department, and my job was to trap and find a market for the predators of the oysters and, um, clams.

JF: Huh!

AW: So I was trapping green crabs and, uh, channel whelks, and uh, horseshoe crabs, and moon snails, and so I set up a market for the green crabs for, um, local fishermen to use to catch, you know, bass, striped bass...

JF: Yeah.

AW: And I would sell those by the bushel in Hyannis, and then the channel whelks I set up a market to restaurants for, uh, snail salad, conch salad.

JF: Hmm!

AW: Salas' Restaurant which is one of the best restaurants in Provincetown...

JF: Uh huh.

AW: Um, he used to give, uh, my husband and I when we came back to the Cape, a free meal and all the wine we could drink for a bushel of conchs.

JF: Ah ha! There you go!

AW: Which was great.

JF: Yeah!

AW: Cause the food was just outrageous.

JF: Wow. Now that's neat. So, was it tricky finding those markets, or did you have enough sense of the whole...

AW: I, you know, I've always never been a shy person, and so...

JF: Okay... it was not hard.

AW: ...I just went out there and did it, but, in Wellfleet was the first time they gave me a little sixteen foot skiff.

JF: Yeah...

AW: Uh, with a little davit and a little block on it, and uh, pretty much taught me how to run the skiff...

JF: Yeah?

AW: And then I was just sort of sent out on my own.

JF: Ha ha.

AW: And then a lot of the work I did was at low tide where I had my traps set for green crabs, where I would just walk out and bait them, at low tide...

JF: Oh, okay.

AW: And just put my catch into, you know, onion bags...

JF: Yeah... yeah...

AW: ...and just walk back. I got a lot of exercise.

JF: I bet!

AW: And, uh, I loved just being out in the flats, and I was also connected with dredging for oysters there, and... worked on a lot of small boats out of Wellfleet. But when I moved to Rhode Island was... because I dealt with bait concerning the predator situation I was not afraid to get involved with, you know, all that smelly fish and stuff.

JF: Yeah... yeah...

AW: ... and just...

[10:00]

JF: Huh, and so then that's when you made the switch to lobstering, too.

AW: Yeah.

JF: Yeah. Okay. Was that like, did you have to pound the pavement to... did you have your own...?

AW: I did pound the pavement... and, uh, I started off in Wickford and, uh, there was this character Bruce Barr, and, uh, he actually saved my life which I'll tell you about...

JF: Okay.

AW: ...in, in more than one way and, uh, he was the first person that I broke in with concerning lobstering, and I had to really bug him a lot. And I said well, you know, I make good sandwich and give me the opportunity and he hired me and...I worked with him and I did all the gear work all spring and, you know, all the – the labor that one does for like practically nothing...

JF: Yeah...

AW: ...and then right when we were starting to catch lobsters, he fired me. And... never told me why, and I was just like devastated, but I said, well, I'm not going to let me get this down and I just found another job on the dock, and, uh, continued on with my life. Well during the course of eighteen years, um, Bruce and I and his wife became friends, and, uh, he came to my house and after eighteen years he goes, Well, I would like you to be my deckhand. So I went back with him, but the irony of it all is that I was on the only boat in all of Rhode Island that offered health insurance.

JF: His boat...?

AW: His boat. And he was incredibly fair as far as pay and, uh, uh, phenomenally fair guy concerning money. And I got health insurance and I was forty-eight years old at the time, and a year later I was diagnosed with breast cancer.

JF: Oh my goodness...

AW: And the irony is is I'll always believe he saved my life by asking me to come back aboard that boat, because had I been on any other boat, I'd never had health insurance in my life, I would not have been taken care of properly.

JF: Wow!...

AW: So I felt like the stars are, you know, in the sky taking care of me.

JF: Yeah! Yeah... That's – wow- that's great.

AW: Eighteen years ago I made full circle and...

JF: Oh you... did you ever find out why he fired you, or were you able to just let that go?

AW: Yeah... well he, um, he said that he really – he told me eighteen years later, he fessed up and he said, you know, I really didn't feel like I could work with a woman, at that time.

JF: Interesting.

AW: But he never said anything about it.

JF: No... no...

AW: And, uh... then he told me eighteen years later, we were friends then, and...

JF: Yeah...

AW: We socialized and stuff, but, uh... he said I never felt that I could do that, but then I - eighteen years later he approached me and asked me to come aboard and... it was quite a compliment to me...

JF: That's nice...

AW: Because he's a very good fisherman.

JF: Yeah... well, and by then he'd certainly seen that you could do the work, and wanted to...

[12:47]

AW: Oh yeah. But he, uh, he trained me well, he did. And, uh, he's one of, uh, the few people that I've worked with that I really feel like, uh, it was uh... I compare lobstering to sort of a dance, because when you're working with a captain... you know exactly what's going to happen before it happens, because you know that person so well...

JF: Yeah...

AW: You know what they want you to do, you don't have to discuss it.

JF: Yeah...

AW: You just do it. And, uh, the day goes smoothly and the gear goes out properly, and...

JF: Yeah... yeah...

AW: It's just a nice rhythm, which is, uh, created.

JF: I get – I have two questions around this – I don't know if you can answer them all in one or what. One is what – what did the training involve and the other is sort of how does a typical day go lobstering...

AW: Um... every boat is different in terms of what the captain wants and how they – they like things done. They – they're very Type A personality, and, uh, people think, you know, because you have bait and this and that, you know, everything is – but they are clean, clean, clean, clean, clean. Everything is done in, you know, and the boat is just kept impeccably clean. And which brings me up to another story which is very humorous, but, um... he, uh, trained me in terms of teaching me, you know, how to string bait, uh, different varieties of bait, how to stack the gear properly, um... how to tie knots, um, how to lay

the ground line so that it – it went off without like in a big bunch, or whatever, uh... things of that nature.

JF: Now, so...

AW: And what he did as far as like... he liked to have the bait barrels like set in a certain way so that you – and to work out of one and to keep it high so you weren't wasting any time in terms of digging down...

JF: Yup...

AW: ...things of that nature...

JF: Very similar to fishing...

AW: Yeah...

JF: And so he... the whole thing about the lines, I mean, you would obviously have to know the depth you're in for how much line to let out for traps, or what...

AW: No, no. Because all the gear is connected with sixteen feet of line between each pot...

JF: Okay.

AW: ...so you have a string of pots...

JF: Okay.

AW: But in terms of, uh, kicking them next to the pots when you lay them on the deck...

JF: I see.

AW: ...and then the last pot you don't kick the line, so, because sometimes it gets caught in the corner...

JF: Oh...

AW: I mean, there- there's just different things that hap-

JF: Little tricks that...

AW: Little tricks.

JF: Yeah. And how much does each like lobster pot weigh, empty and full?

AW: Well, I started off interesting enough, uh, fishing wooden gear.

JF: Mmm!

AW: The oak pots...

JF: Yeah?

AW: ...which had to be dipped every spring in this really carcinogenic stuff, and...

JF: Oh!...

AW: And, uh... but then they came out with the wire and it – it took a couple of years to get these guys, uh, you know, sort of like interested in using this wire...

JF: Mmm...

AW: Cause they don't like a lot of change in their lives...

JF: Yeah, right.

AW: And for them to trust it... but the wire gear weighs probably twenty pounds less than what the wooden gear weighed.

JF: Ah...

AW: Wooden gear soaked, probably some of those traps weighed about fifty pounds, sixty pounds...

JF: Wow...

AW: ...a piece...

JF: Wow...

[16:06]

AW: But I was younger, I was in my thirties then.

JF: Yeah!

AW: Now the gear that we set weigh- weighs anywhere from thirty-five to forty pounds a piece.

JF: Mmm hmm.

AW: But you have tricks... where you don't overwork yourself by sliding things down the rail...

JF: Mmm hmm.

AW: ...properly.

JF: Okay...

AW: As a particular, swaying in terms of putting that pot on the deck and sliding it...

JF: Yeah...

AW: Which makes it easier for you too.

JF: Mmm hmm...

AW: So as – as – a good thing to know, and they say the best lobstermen as far as deckhands are the short lobstermen.

JF: Oh!

AW: Because we're so low to the deck that...

JF: Yeah.

AW: We don't hurt our backs.

JF: Trying to do – yeah.

AW: Yeah.

JF: Interesting.

AW: And, I'm a small girl but it's amazing how – how strong...

JF: Yeah.

AW: I – I've become, and...

JF: Yeah...

AW: Over the years...

JF: Yeah!

AW: In terms of...

JF: Huh. And how many lobster pots would... a lobsterman, say, have so many pots and they'd all go out each day and come back each day, or is he putting some out and then another out the next..?

AW: No, no. The strings stay out there.

JF: Mmm hmm.

AW: So you have a group of gear that's in one area...

JF: Yeah...

AW: ...that you work on.

JF: Yeah.

AW: And, um, so we generally – we're allotted 800 pots now. When I first started in this industry you could fish 2,000 pots if you wanted.

JF: Oh! So you guys have limits...

AW: So we – we're limited to 800 and each particular boat, they're making regulations now as to how much gear that these boats have fished over the past five years, and...

JF: Yeah...

AW: They – they'll be allotted X amount of pots...

JF: Wow...

AW: ...but 800 is the most pots in Rhode Island...

JF: Hmm...

AW: ...that you're allowed to put out. So we fish generally anywhere from 275 to 300 pots a day.

JF: Wow... wow.

AW: Total.

JF: Yeah.

AW: And our strings consist of fifteen pots.

JF: I see.

AW: Some guys fish twenties. Uh, some guys fish twelves, tens, depending on where you are.

JF: Hmm. Yeah. So you're checking each of them each day, and if there's nothing then – no...

AW: No. We, uh, we – we check probably three hundred – two – two fifty to three hundred each day.

JF: Okay. But he has eight hundred out there somewhere.

AW: Yes.

JF: I see. I see. Yeah.

AW: And they're in different areas of Area 2. That's the area that we fish in.

JF: Okay. Is that something that's licensed or by choice on his part.

AW: It's licensed.

JF: It's licensed...

AW: It's federal waters, so...

JF: Oh, okay.

AW: You have to have a license for that.

JF: Huh. And as lobstering these days – do you all have the sort of day limits that the other...

AW: No, we don't.

JF: You can do it all year round every day of the year?

AW: No, but, um... there is addendum 7 that's coming up where they want to privatize the industry and, uh, that seems to be the thing that's gone on everywhere like Alaska and all over the country, meaning that if you're a young person and you want to get into this industry, you have to buy a boat that has a license for that particular...

JF: Ah... just like...

AW: ...area.

JF: ...what the scallopers and draggers are doing now?

AW: Yeah... that's what I'm talking about in terms of privatizing.

JF: I see. Okay. Wow. So limiting the number of boats that can be doing it and...

AW: Yup.

[19:08]

JF: Yeah... what do you think about that?

AW: I'm for it because the people that hung in there when things were really lean...

JF: Uh huh...

AW: Okay, I think deserve to be able to sell those licenses.

JF: Okay.

AW: And that's how I feel about it.

JF: Yeah.

AW: I feel very strongly about it. As opposed to anyone just being able to come in and out of the industry.

JF: Yeah.

AW: Because they've paid their dues.

JF: Right.

AW: And they have hung in there through everything.

JF: Right. So it's like... like the equivalent of anyone else selling their business, so to speak.

AW: Right. They've hung in there through the bad times, and the good times.

JF: Right... right.

AW: So...

JF: Huh. Interesting. Now who would set the price of the license? Is that like a regulated thing or could a person charge whatever they feel it's worth for the business of (something)?

AW: They – they could charge whatever they...

JF: Aha...

AW: ...feel it's worth for the business, depending on how many pots that you got with the boat, and...

JF: Yeah.

AW: ...some pots would only be allotted four hundred pots...

JF: Right.

AW: ...for that boat, because they've only fished that many over X amount of time.

JF: Right... I see. Yeah...

AW: But the – the guys that have fished the eight hundred... and...

JF: Yeah.

AW: And then the have to prove their landings also.

JF: Mmm hmm... And I guess that way, too, if somebody wanted they could a – a child could inherit a license, if they chose to do it that way?

AW: Yes.

JF: Yeah... Interesting. Had you ever given any thought to having your own boat, or have you always been happy to be the...

AW: I was always happy to be the sternman...

JF: Yeah...

AW: Because I can get off that boat, and live a life.

JF: Right.

AW: And, it's not breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

JF: Yeah.

AW: And, uh, my day is done...

JF: Yeah.

AW: ...the minute I step on that dock, and... we have those bugs put in the box, or we've sold them at the market...

JF: Uh huh.

AW: It is over. Because I – I do all the bait on the board.

JF: Yeah.

AW: There were many years where I used to string all the bait on the dock the day before we would get in, and I would string the bait and make sure everything was ready for the next day...

JF: Mmm... right.

AW: Um, and then it would be put on the boat, but we steam for about an hour and a half to two hours to the grounds that we're in...

JF: Mmm hmm...

AW: So I'm able to get at least a hundred baits done before we even reach the grounds...

JF: Yeah...

AW: And then during the course of the day, between setting the gear, and banding the lobsters, I'm able to get the rest of the bait done.

JF: Mmm hmm...

AW: While the pots are going off and we're steaming between different trawls.

JF: Yeah...

AW: So, uh, when we hit the dock I'm finished.

JF: Okay. So I'm still – I'm just a little – okay, so if you have pulled up, let's say, the three hundred pots that day...

AW: Yup.

JF: You bring those back in with...

AW: No.

JF: No...

AW: We set them back out there.

JF: Okay, so then you...

AW: Everything is left out there.

JF: When you bait the pots, you're actually having to pull them up again to put the bait in?

AW: Yes.

JF: Okay.

AW: So that, you know, we do that every day.

JF: So I'm sure you're pretty strong! Like you said...

AW: Oh yeah. I know how to use a pitchfork very well.

JF: Is that... for the bait or for getting the pots up?

AW: For getting the bait out of the barrels.

JF: Oh, okay.

AW: Seen these big blue barrels...

JF: Yeah!

AW: ...around the waterfront? Well that's...

JF: That's what those are?

AW: Yeah, those are bait barrels.

JF: And what kind of bait is it?

AW: Uh, we use anywhere from – anything from skates, which is considered hard bait, uh... to, um, flounder racks, which are filleted flounders...

JF: Okay...

AW: ...that come out of, uh... uh, the fillet houses here....

JF: Uh huh...

AW: Uh, cod fish, haddock, uh...

JF: Is it like the not restaurant quality stuff or what?

AW: No, it's stuff that's been cut.

JF: Oh...

AW: So it's just the head.

JF: Oh, okay.

AW: And the... the body...

JF: The remnants...

AW: With... with... with no fillet on it.

JF: I see.

AW: The remnants.

JF: Okay.

AW: And, uh, they used to practically give the bait away, but not bait is – is very expensive.

JF: Wow.

AW: It is not cheap. One of those drums of skates can cost you anywhere from fifty to fifty-five dollars.

JF: Wow...

AW: Per drum.

JF: Wow... And how many... so that would be about how many pots worth?

AW: Uh, depending on if you were doing straight skates or whether you were mixing it.

JF: Oh, okay.

AW: You can get, uh, straight skates if you were stringing, you can get eighty baits, or seventy baits, out of that drum.

JF: Yeah.

AW: But that's it.

JF: Yeah.

AW: So you've already spent, you know, quite a bit of money before you've even thrown the dock lines.

[23:14]

JF: Yeah. And then when you bring the lobster back in, there's no auction, for the lobsters...

AW: No. No.

JF: Yeah. How does it get sold...

AW: But there is a price, a precedent. Some people – it fluctuates between fifty cents a pound.

JF: Is – is he having to bring it to the restaurants or is there a place he brings it?

AW: No, he's got a seafood market.

JF: Oh!...

AW: Everybody has their own private place where they sell, or...

JF: I see.

AW: And then there's Aquidneck Lobster in Newport which a lot of guys just, uh, just go there.

JF: So do you like lobster?

AW: Uh, you know, I like it on occasion, I mean, I like lob- I like to make lobster fritter, which I did at the cooking demonstration last year.

JF: Okay.

AW: Um, I like lobster sort of like pick- the meat picked and chopped up and sort of like tossed in pasta or something, but for me to sit down and rip a lobster apart and like just chewing on it...

JF: Yeah?

AW: I wouldn't do it.

JF: No? It's not worth it for you, yeah. Interesting. Interesting... Well, I know that you said you had your poem.

AW: Yeah.

JF: So I'm trying to think it – well I kinda had that... oh, you had that humorous story that...

AW: Oh yeah, um... this guy I know Bob Bradfield, he had this deckhand and it was a very, very, very, very hot, like, July, you know, season. And, uh... he, uh, took the weekend off, and his deckhand left this very innocent basket. Like one of those little fish baskets with a couple of skates in it on the deck.

JF: Yeah...

AW: And Bob went off for the weekend, he went to Maine or did something or something of that nature. And when he came back down to his boat, on Monday, his entire boat was encased in maggots.

JF: Huh!

AW: It looked like it was alive. I've never witnessed anything like that in my entire life.

JF: Oh my God!

AW: Nor had anybody else. It was in his engine.

JF: Ah!

AW: It was all over everywhere. The boat was actually moving, there were so many maggots.

JF: Aah!!

AW: And he had – his deckhand saw that and just disappeared, and he had to go rent a shop vac...

JF: Ahh!

AW: And shop vac everything.

JF: Ohh! Eeww!

AW: Off the boat, it was – I wanted to get a photograph for it because I always wanted to write a – a book called Better Home or Better Boats and Bait. And I thought Oh, God, this – if I had a picture of this...

JF: Oh my God... boy, what an image though, yeah.

AW: I know. It was phenom- I've never seen anything – just this – and just a couple.

JF: Yeah?

AW: But they just, like, just flourished and grew and grew and grew. It was amazing.

JF: Uh! That's like what nightmares are made of, it just... you know...

AW: It was... it was. [laughs]

JF: Ohh!!!

AW: It was pretty bad. Pretty bad.

JF: Then, like, finding maggots here and there for a few days...

AW: Oh yeah!

JF: I can imagine...

AW: Oh yeah! [laughs]

[26:27]

JF: [laughs] Okay, so your poem. This is the first poem you've ever written, you said?

AW: Yes.

JF: Okay.

AW: This is the first poem, uh, that I've ever written and, uh, I was just ove- so overwhelmed about being out in Astoria. Um, I had this rule, um... which sort of came about during gillnetting, because I felt I was living that painting The Scream... um, my job – one of them on the boat – was to take these, uh, large raja skates, and I had to hang them alive by the eyeball into this hook on the back deck. And I had to cut their wings off.

JF: For the skate wing market I've heard of...

AW: For the skate wing market. And they had these, like, little mouths that look like little hearts, and little eyes, and I felt like I was living that painting The Scream.

JF: Yeah!...

AW: Because their, like, mouths would just like... so I became very, very sensitized during this gillnetting, uh, period, because everything was like, it was a bloodbath.

JF: Wow...

AW: Between the monkfish and cutting out monkfish livers and... picking the net, and, you know, cutting these skate wings, like eight hundred pounds of skate wings...

JF: Wow...

AW: ...a day.

JF: Wow...

AW: ...I was doing, I didn't even have an arm...

JF: Yeah!...

AW: You know? and uh...

JF: Was it very hard to cut those skate wings?

AW: Yeah, you had to hold the top and then you just had to – but you always, you know, made sure that your knife was, uh, really sharp. But, um, I hated that gillnetting...

JF: Oh...

AW: Because it just was like caught everything in the ocean and you were picking these nets of, you know...

JF: Right. Of course they were sort of tangled in by the gills, if I understand...

AW: Yeah. But I – I – it – I told the captain, I said, You know I'm very good at picking these nets and it came so easily to me and he goes, Why is that Amanda? And I said, Well, it's a little bit like dressing and undressing dolls.

JF: Ah!

AW: Which I did as a child.

JF: Oh, that's so funny!

AW: Cause you take their like little, uh, flippers and sort of flip them out and...

JF: Yeah!

AW: He laughed. [laughs]

JF: [laughs] And they – think they never used to want women on boats. That's hilarious.

AW: Oh yeah. But, uh... [laughs]

JF: Okay, so this poem came out of that?

AW: Well, it's because, um, there's lots of different things that come up in the, uh, pots, besides just lobsters and crabs and... there's all kinds of fish. And, uh, these little tomcods in the fall, we see a lot of them. And, uh, I think they're so beautiful.

JF: Yeah...

AW: And lobstermen sort of have this attitude about the codfish because they eat their...

JF: The bait...

AW: No, they eat lobster.

JF: Oh! Okay...

AW: So, uh, and there's nothing better than like a nice small, you know, cod fillet...

JF: Yeah...

AW: ...to take home for dinner.

JF: Yeah...

AW: But, I just love these tomcods and I take them out and I kiss them and... I won't allow anyone to take anything from a sea robin to a sea raven to... anything, and just kill it for bait. I go, Look, we have all this bait here, I mean, you don't need this beautiful fish.

JF: Yeah...

AW: And I'm always tossing them overboard, and, so... I've been in the industry for so long that they allow me to do it.

JF: Uh huh.

AW: And, uh... they don't really bother me with it. They always pretend like they're gonna kill it or something, but...

JF: [laughs]

AW: But then they – they throw it overboard, you know.

JF: Uh huh. Uh huh...

AW: And, you know, when you're running the deck, you pretty much have, you know, your say in terms of –if there is somebody else in my place, some other guy...

JF: Right...

AW: If he wanted to kill it, then, you know, the captain would, you know, if he wanted to take it home for dinner, or if he...

JF: Right... so if...

AW: Or if they wanted to use it for bait, but with me, I just, I don't want to kill things that's a bycatch.

JF: Yeah...

AW: I can't see any reason for it, so...

[30:13]

JF: So this is on the lobster boats and I just want to cla- the running the deck, so there's more than you and the one boat owner guy...

AW: No, it's just me and the boat owner.

JF: Oh, okay.

AW: But I'm running the deck.

JF: I see what you're saying.

AW: Because he's at the hauler, so its my deck, you know...

JF: Ah!...

AW: This is my, uh... my home back here.

JF: Okay, great.

AW: So leave me to my own devices and if I don't want anything killed, that's my rule.

JF: Okay.

AW: But, you know, I'm fifty-five, so I can, you know, save that...

JF: Yeah, they've heard your...

AW: I've earned my – my thing, I mean, I'm always telling these young guys that don't know anything about me, I'm old enough to be your mother.

JF: Ha ha...

AW: So shut up! [laughs]

JF: [laughs] Ah!... and do they?

AW: Oh yeah!

JF: Great! Okay...

AW: Okay.

[reading poem]

I begged my captain for tomcod's life
We are lobstering after all
For most of the morning we've been changing water in every trawl
And you appear.

Mr. Tomcod, you are so small
Your streamline torso is a silver canvas
So lightly speckled like a child's freckled sun-kissed face.
There are shades of yellows and pale greens painted on a variety of places on your wet scales
So shiny and clean
You entered our trap on a gold, sandy floor
Once a prisoner behind wire, I watch you in dance in a voodoo frenzy
On our textured glass deck

The cold crisp air burns like a smoldering fire in your tiny fish lungs
You're an alien in a desert with no oasis to shade you
Oh tomcod with your gray, slate face
You may have traveled into the wrong place
Although you entered our wire pot, it's clear
You should have avoided this lobster gear.

For my captain sees you at his table
Not as his guest, but as his fable
He believes you eat his daily bread
For his fortune is lobsters, alive, not dead.

I will not tolerate the act of your sad fate
I beg him mercifully to throw you back with haste
He looks at me with a sarcastic frown,
Picks up the ground line, revs the hauler, and turns around.
For in my heart I know you're young
And are deserving to swim and run
Amongst your ocean kin.

To grow large and multiply, so you can be caught
In a draggerman's net, by and by

For future generations of fishing folk
Tomorrow, rather than this day
It tears my heartstrings to look in your clear eyes
As deep as a millpond in July

So while my captain cleans out the next trap
I flip you airborne over the rail
I never look back
And feel my soul sail

So until my next purchase at the fish market on the pier
I will think of you fondly, Mr. Tomcod, dear.

[33:24]

JF: Oh, that's a wonderful...

AW: So... it was from the heart.

JF: You – you can tell, I mean, the images are just so vivid. The part I wasn't expecting which I thought was neat too was the fact that until one day you'll be caught, to bring back in the larger fishes.

AW: Right.

JF: Wow... wow... oh that was great.

AW: Cause I...

JF: Have you had a chance to do it on like the stages yet or anything?

AW: I did it, um, in Astoria.

JF: Oh good!

AW: And I'm writing other poetry now, and so I'm really excited about going back for the, uh, the tenth anniversary.

JF: Yeah, so maybe your book about... Better Home – Better Boats and Bait will be a book of poems.

AW: Right. Maybe...

JF: Ah! Yeah... Well, that's great. Oh, that was beautiful. Wow...

AW: Thank you.

JF: That's so fun because, I mean, well, as poetry will, right, I mean, the whole thing probably took a matter of a moment or minute or – or less, and – and you just built it up into all of this layers of... cool. Well, I don't know if there's anything else – I sort of have two general questions I generally like to ask

people, um, and the first is, is there anything I haven't asked you that you would have wanted to share, about your – your experience in the industry.

AW: Um, just that, um, I've had a love-hate relationship with it and, every year since I got into it it's like, Oh, well I'll be out of this in my thirties. And its like, no, I'll be out of this in my forties. And, uh, oh, I'll be out of this definitely in my fifties. And, uh, I actually – it gets better, I mean, I feel very, very blessed to have stumbled into this, and it's worked for me, um, on many, many different levels. I mean, I would never pay to exercise.

JF: Okay.

AW: And, uh, it's sort of like, it's kept the old heart pumping.

JF: Yeah?

AW: Um, and it's a very healthy industry in that respect and, uh, I've met wonderful people and I've - I've seen beautiful things that other people haven't seen. I've seen, uh, sunrises that were just spectacular, and I'm not a morning person.

JF: Mmm!

AW: But I'm forced to become one.

JF: Right.

AW: Because of the industry.

JF: Yeah.

AW: And, uh, it's been good.

JF: Yeah... what would be the hate part do you figure?

AW: Well... sometimes you just don't want to be there, and you have to be, and...

JF: Like every job... kind of, yeah...

AW: Yeah. Just, you know, it's a job. I mean, that's why they call it work.

JF: Right!

AW: But, uh, you know, every job has its silver linings and its non-silver linings.

JF: Yeah.

AW: But its – I think I'm a little ADD, and, uh, because everything has been so synchronized in the industry, it – it's, uh, its worked for me in that respect because everything – I know exactly what needs to be done, I'm very familiar with it, and...

JF: Okay, so your routine's in place.

AW: My routine is in place, and so, that's good.

[36:31]

JF: Yeah. Now, um, so you go out all year long...

AW: Yup.

JF: What are your hours daily, like, four am to something, or...

AW: Well, I get up at, uh, anywhere between three-thirty and four...

JF: Mmm hmm...

AW: And, uh, we throw the docklines at five.

JF: Mmm hmm...

AW: And, so the first thing I do when I get on the boat is I put my lunch away, my food away, and stuff, and make sure what I want, or need, is like on the back deck so I'm not always asking, you know, Ian to get out of the way to go into the wheel house...

JF: Okay...

AW: ...to get this or to get that, so, if I want water I, you know, make sure my bottled water is back there and my juice or my orange or my apple or whatever. And, uh, then we throw the docklines and – well, we sometimes load bait when I arrive...

JF: Okay.

AW: And, you know, Ian will check the oil and – and things of that sort, but, um... then I get my, uh, my whole like set up. I've got three fish boxes – I don't like to use a table 'cause it's too high.

JF: Uh huh...

AW: Uh, the three boxes, like, set on top of one another makes a nice table for me, and I can just work out of that...

JF: Yeah...

AW: I cut my strings – I like to know how many baits I do, so... I can gauge what I need out of what we have on the boat, and I can gauge that by my strings. And I put them in the fish box and get my bait needle and get my oil gear on and I start stringing all the way to the grounds.

JF: Yup.

AW: And, uh, then once we get to the grounds I've got that much ahead, and then as I've said, you know, I can work that way.

JF: Yeah. And what time are you usually pulling back in?

AW: We, uh, finish hauling anywhere between twelve-thirty and one...

JF: Mmm hmm...

AW: ...in the afternoon and then we're usually at the latest at the dock, you know, we can be back depending on what area we're in, between, uh, one – one-thirty and two.

JF: Uh huh.

AW: In the afternoon.

JF: So that's a good long day.

AW: Yeah. So...

JF: And is it – how many days a week is it?

AW: Um... four?

JF: Yeah? Oh, okay.

AW: Cause you have other days that - you get weather days that you can't get out...

JF: Right.

AW: I mean you can, you know, when things are slow right now, so you could get out on those days, but why beat yourself up...?

JF: Okay...

AW: Over nothing.

JF: Yeah. So there's seasonally slower times than others.

AW: Yes.

JF: Okay.

AW: And right now it's – it's slow.

JF: And what about right in the middle of bitter winter, is that a good time, is it – how is it out there?

AW: You know, you can have good winters, but you learn how to dress properly and they've got great stuff on the market now in terms of wearing.

JF: So you don't feel like it...

AW: Well, you're moving...

JF: That's true... that's true too...

AW: You're constantly moving, I mean, sometimes you're just peeling the clothes off...

JF: Oh, 'cause you're moving so much...

AW: Cause you're in a sweat... yeah.

JF: Is it very windy, though, as far out as you go?

AW: Yeah, I have a face mask, though.

JF: Oh, okay.

AW: Uh, you know, neoprene, you know, like, I look like I could hold up a couple of banks. [laughs]

JF: Ah! [laughs] Yeah!

AW: It was very funny, I was in the bank and, uh, I couldn't believe it last week – there was a sign that said, No transactions done if wearing sunglasses, a hat, or a hood.

JF: Yeah...

AW: And it's like, what's this all about.

JF: Yeah, I...

AW: I mean, the paranoia of 2006 is just phenomenal.

JF: It is, but you know out where I live there've been several bank hold-ups where kids in like a baseball cap...

AW: Right.

JF: ...are coming in and saying I have a gun, give me money.

AW: Right. It...

JF: And it – I mean, it's sad.

AW: Yeah...

JF: But you can understand sort of where the paranoia comes from.

AW: Yeah, but who wouldn't with Bush in charge...

JF: Oh, right.

AW: I mean, he's robbed all of our pockets.

JF: Yeah.

AW: [laughs] But I won't get into politics...

JF: Yeah, no, I don't think that's [something]...

AW: I can become a junkie or a dog when I talk about politics.

JF: I know, and we don't have enough – me too – and I think we don't have enough tape, but...

AW: Yeah.

[40:21]

JF: So my only other question would be then, um, what would you want the average festival vi-festival visitor to come away understanding about the industry?

AW: That we are literate.

JF: That's a good one...

AW: That we aren't all drug users, um...

JF: Yup.

AW: That, uh, this is our livelihood and our life, that we have respect for the environment, that we embrace the environment, that we are part of the environment every day. And for them to realize, when they buy a piece of fish in the market place, that was hard earned.

JF: Mmm...

AW: And, just, not somebody out there like...

JF: Yeah, right, there's a whole...

AW: Fun and games.

JF: There's a whole process behind it that we don't think about.

AW: Right. I mean, there, you know, there are people that have like, you know, raised families on this fish, and put children through school, and...

JF: Yeah... yeah.

AW: There's whole histories behind...

JF: Right...

AW: ...where this fish came from, and stories, and men's lives lost.

JF: Right. And the fun and games thing is interesting that you mention that, because I don't know if you've noticed now up in, like, Perkins Cove, if you ever go up there in Maine, near Ogunquit, and...

AW: Yup.

JF: There's at least one person now that you can pay to go on their lobster boat and watch the captain haul his traps, and I'm just like wow...

AW: Yeah, we have that in Newport also.

JF: You do? Yeah...

AW: But, you know, I personally, um, this guy that does this takes a family of like six...

JF: Uh huh...

AW: Or like six people on board, and I think it's nice for people to see what happens.

JF: But – ye-yeah, well certainly it's funny because I would think people might go on thinking the fun and games aspect and then realize Wow, not really, you know?

AW: Well, you know...

JF: It's not all glory...

AW: They – they get a taste, and every little bit of education that...

JF: Uh huh.

AW: That people can get is, um, is a good thing.

JF: Yeah... yeah.

AW: I mean, it's not – it's not a good thing to go through life being naïve, so...

JF: Right, right... and I just wonder, I mean, I would think maybe when people go on and maybe they don't, but – that they're going on and they think, This will be a cute fun thing to do and then come off probably with a very different perspective which is a good thing.

AW: Right, but they're not really out in the elements, I mean, these guys are in the bay, and uh...

JF: Right, so it's giving them a slight idea...

AW: Yeah, river fishing. [laughs]

JF: What – and you brought this up and I don't know if you want to address it, um, when I left the festival last year, the impression I had was that that whole drug issue was big for awhile and was now pretty much a thing of the past. This year, I've had people mention it to me over and over. And I wonder what your se- is your sense that there's a problem in some – among some fishermen, but not everybody, or do you have...

AW: Oh, well of course. I mean, you know, you could go to, uh, the biggest white collar corporation, I mean, we have people in, uh, corporations that are robbing people...

JF: Right.

AW: ...of their money...

JF: Right.

AW: ...and lying, I mean, there is nothing perfect, it – we don't live in a perfect world...

JF: Yeah...

AW: Of course, you know, there's going to be some bad apples. But it...

JF: Yeah, no, but not more fishing than anywhere else today...

AW: No more fishing than anywhere else.

JF: Yup. Okay, interesting.

AW: I mean, cocaine is like the drug of choice amongst, uh, a lot of these corporate guys.

JF: Right, exactly.

AW: Hello?!

JF: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. True. That's...

AW: I mean, a drug is a drug is a drug.

JF: Yeah... yeah... that's true. Alright, well thank you very much, it was fascinating...

AW: Thank you.

JF: And I look forward to reading your book.

[44:02]

[end recording]